

Richard Kingston

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Spice

By Richard Kingston

Prologue

The Blue Star merchant vessel pulled in to the Findon docks with a gentle bump of her wooden hull and a riotous cacophony of noise, as crew members swung like monkeys from the rigging on to the quay side and more crew emerged like fleeing rats from the below decks. The waft of musky, sweaty men's bodies accompanied the crew as they raced about, eager to off load their vast cargo as quickly as possible and hit the taverns for an evening of drinking and whenching and to do their utmost to spend their pay-packets all in one night.

Four months they had been on the seas, a long voyage half way around the continent of Vallilea, to the northern trade ports of Highdown and Falo and the return home south to Findon. The men were sick and tired of the sight of each other even though they were all friends. They acted now quite brilliantly, as one amorphous unit setting down planking and lifting and shifting all the crates up to the deck and off. Within a few moments, wagons were arriving to take the cargo to the safety of the ships proprietor's warehouse and put the treasures securely under lock and key.

No more than a half hour later the men were done, the vessel bobbed a good foot higher against the docks and the crew stood in line to receive their pay.

Captain Travish was a veteran of these journeys and sat with the ships bursar with strict orders to withhold a quarter of all the men's pay to ensure two things; firstly that they returned to continue their contracts and secondly to stop the dogs from drinking it all that night.

Jaspar and his best friend Evar waited in line with some patience. When finally they received their silver and coppers they shot off the ship faster than an elf's bowshot. The two young men, both of some twenty five years, knew the tavern district well. They both knew deep down that had it not been for the shipping business they may well have never escaped the districts pull and perhaps have even ended up as 'residents' of the slum district, alcoholics begging by day and drinking everything they earned.

They turned on to Brewers Street and entered their favourite tavern, the Red Dragon, a large and boisterous drinking house owned by a large red haired former adventurer called Run Wyrmsbane. There was some conjecture as to which name Run had lived up to when he was an adventurer, he swore blind he had defeated a mighty red wyrm in the Shuddering Peaks just to the north, though the incident was not remembered or chronicled by anyone else except his best friend, a bard who sang a song about the terrific battle most every night. Others jokingly implied

that his first name was more apt for his prowess in battle.

The friends found a table and drank the night away, taking periodic turns to catch the serving wenches eyes and pinch a few ample buttocks.

Jaspar even turned his attention to a half elf, sat alone at the bar, who gently chastised him about his level of drunkenness before, after making enquiries about his family history, informed him that he reminded her greatly of his grandfather who had also been a leech after a few ales. This was enough to send a slightly confused and embarrassed Jaspar back to the safety of his friend.

Another hour passed before the inebriated crewmen staggered out of the Red Dragon and tried to find their way back to ship.

As the volume of alcohol they had consumed started to take hold of the pair, they found themselves somewhat disorientated. They collapsed onto the street and crawled on hands and knees to the side of a building which they lent against for support.

'Eh, Ev, I'm smashed, evryfings spinnin'

'You're not kiddin Jash. Lesh jush shtay heer for bit.'

Ev duly turned his head to the side and vomited next to himself.

'Shbetter' he said.

Catching a wiff of the smell Jas duly followed suit.

'Hwwuuurrr'.

The pair sat back propped against the wall and closed their eyes. After a few moments Jaspar spoke

'We bedda move. Could ged picked up by the watch here.'

'Yesh' came the reply.

'Where are we Ev?'

'No'sure Jash'.

Slowly Jaspar opened his eyes to a spinning world and tried to focus. He didn't recognise his surroundings even in the state he was in.

'Fink we've gone the wrong way Ev. We'd bedda go, fink we're in the slums.'

Evars eyes popped open and he too didn't recognise where he was, but the tell tale signs were there. Derelict buildings surrounded them, there were shipping crates in the street as well as other piles of rubbish. Faintly just over the smell of their own fresh vomit they could smell alcohol in the air, and it wasn't coming from them.

'Ol right lads' the husky voice whispered in their ears from just behind them. They both jumped as best their drunken bodies could manage as the unshaven slum-dweller dropped out of the window just above them. They both staggered and turned to face him lifting their hands up in a pantomime of a boxing stance, both gently swaying left and right. The filthy slum-dweller

laughed a raucous hacking laugh, and was joined by several more.

Jaspar and Evar could handle themselves in a fight, under normal circumstances, but this was not looking good. Three more shambling wrecks of humanity began to close in and a hissing noise filled the air.

'We're being attacked by shnakesh' Evar said somewhat confused.

'Fink so' Jas replied.

They both had a brief moment of clarity and pulled daggers from their belts, ones they always kept there just in case of trouble.

'Naughty naughty' the man who had first interrupted them said.

'Ow bout you just give us you're money and you can go, no need for them daggers, you only goin to get hurt lads.'

'No, 's hard earned this cashh' Ev managed.

'Ssssspicccce' came another hiss from around them and the three shambling men closed in.

Daggers and knives rose and fell as Jaspar and Evar put up a valiant effort to defend themselves, but the strength of the men from the slums was too much. Bones began to break under the weight of the blows, first Jaspar's forearm then he fell to the floor with a man atop him. Evar looked to his friend and was punched hard in the back. He tried to turn but could only just move as his mouth let out a long wheeze. No it hadn't been a punch, it was a blade, straight through his lung. A second blow

landed to his temple and he fell heavily to the floor. Jaspar cried out for help as a flurry of blows landed. He managed to scream for nearly ten seconds before he was finally silenced for good.

In the tavern district the local watch, a squad of six, thought they heard a cry for help come from the slums nearby. They looked to their duty captain who merely shook his head. The slums were not a place for his boys at this time of night. Anyone fool enough to be there would have to accept the consequences.

Within moments the jubilant slum-dwellers stripped the two dead crewmen of the remainder of their possessions and money and sank back into the darkness, waiting for the next drunk wandering about their territory.

A Deal is Struck (4334 words)

A few days earlier

'Lord Nyrex grant me the power to smite my enemies with your Holy Flame, Strike!' A huge pillar of green-tinted flame some ten feet across shot up from the floor directly beneath Lazargass, the hovering eye-tyrant. Its face twisted in rage and horror as it tried for one last time to use its eye-stalk powers to obliterate the human, but to no avail. The flames roared and roiled for a few brief moments, fully engulfing the huge beholder. His mouth sagged, his eye-stalks went limp and his charred outer body wobbled and dropped the four feet to the floor with an almighty crash. A blast of blackened flesh flew in all directions as Djemmini took evasive action. The human High Priest of Nyrex, Lord of Death and Murder, took a quick pace back and covered his face with his black robe.

Repugnant creature, he thought. These dangers were always the biggest problem when working with the secretive shadow gnomes, you had to come down to the lightless and lethal underdark. Already today he had dispatched four huge and murderous spiders, a small clan of kobolds that tried to rob him as he

first entered the deeper tunnels, a couple of strange colourful oozes that had nearly got the better of him and now this beholder. Where would it end? Probably in the jaws of some great red or grey dragon, he thought; that would test the effectiveness of his contingency spells. He chuckled to himself for he was not a dour man, far from it. He had simply found his calling following the Lord of Death and Murder, with his green-tinged evocations, and he loved inflicting death, for the feeling of power it gave, to take life, to have that control over any living being, he revelled in it. Djemmini smoothed down his blond hair and pulled on the cuffs of his white silk shirt under his robe to straighten himself as he prepared to continue on his way.

First he stepped over to the remnants of the beholder. How many adventurers had this one snared, he wondered, probably many. He had hidden well, not in a cavern but high in a natural funnel that allowed him to see his prey first as they walked down the tunnel below him. This was the creature's undoing though, as the great orb's anti-magic ray had cut off Djemmini's spell of infravision, albeit very briefly. Ever alert, the High Priest had readied his best evocation battle spells and the flame strike had finished Lazargass off. He took a small vial from an inner pocket of his black robe, one of its many extra-

dimensional pockets, and collected some of the creature's blood. He replaced the vial and looked at what was left of the creature. He decided one eye-stalk was still salvageable and took out his ceremonial dagger.

'Praise be to Nyrex!' he said with a smile.

He swiftly cut off the eye-stalk, and tucked it away in another robe pocket.

'It may be of use to someone,' he muttered to himself. 'We may even be able to regenerate the whole thing and use it as a guardian at the Citadel.' This set off another brief chuckle before he rose and looked around.

'A pity there isn't enough time to look for his trinkets,' he whispered to himself.

'Still, ever onward, the Shadow gnomes aren't known for their patience when kept waiting, especially by a human!'

He continued silently on, down a dank, winding passage, which was wide enough for four humans abreast. This was one of the main routes down from the surface to the under-dark for anyone brave enough to venture this far underground, anyone foolish enough. The dampness came from an underground river some distance away but in the near silent tunnels it could be heard well. Clever, he thought, just enough background noise to cover movements. The Shadow gnomes were certainly not fools.

'Indeed!' came a voice from just behind him.

Not usually one to give anything away, Djemmini still visibly twitched; a lesser man would have jumped out of his skin. He turned to face the speaker, a shadow gnome. This was no ordinary shadow gnome either. Three feet in height, bald on the very top of his head and radiating strong magic, he was like many shadow gnomes but the two jagged knives at his hips and crossed bandoliers across his chest gave away his identity. It was the very lethal Darios, chief assassin of the Galavan Clan and one of the most feared creatures in all of Vallilea.

'Greetings, Darios!' Djemmini said in a soft, smooth voice.

'Follow me Priest, you are running late and the masters are not for waiting around, nor are they keen on excuses from their associates,' the wispy voice replied.

'A few of your underground colleagues tried to block my way and needed removing,' he began.

'I, we care not. Follow!'

The gnome walked several paces back up the passage and turned on a soft-booted heel. He held out his left arm indicating the rock wall.

'After you, Priest,' he whispered with a grin.

Djemmini had seen many things in his forty or so summers, but this most self-assured gnome in his home tunnels was truly

one of the scariest beings he had ever encountered. He was not about to disobey his order, so advanced to the point in the wall Darios was indicating. Strange, he thought, he could see nothing unusual. He had several detection spells active and yet this was simply a wall to his vision.

'Through you go, Priest,' Darios encouraged. 'I'll be right behind you, as always, heeth, heeth,' he chuckled.

Djemmini stepped up to, then, amazingly, through the wall. He felt his stomach lurch as he was teleported to another location and staggered out of another wall. Somewhat disorientated, he stumbled slightly and took several seconds to regain his poise. He then became aware of more, whispery chuckling, firstly from behind him, as Darios appeared from the wall, and then from just up ahead. He straightened himself, smoothing down his priest's robe with both hands, and looked towards those in front of him. Two elegantly dressed shadow gnomes stood ten yards ahead.

'Welcome Djemmini, Priest of the Murderer, I trust your journey was not too harsh. We are glad that you are skilled enough to make it this far. Please forgive us for sending out the escort but time is short and we have much to discuss.'

The gnome then brought forth a faint light from the end of the staff he was holding in his left hand. The light grew slowly

so that Djemmini could use his real vision and see colour rather than relying on infravision. The gnome was slightly taller than Darios, and had magnificent indigo-coloured skin. His eyes were as black as the underground tunnels themselves. He wore a fine black tunic and was adorned with numerous pieces of jewellery, all radiating magic. The staff was almost blinding in its magical radiance. Kymru Galavan, head of Clan Galavan, stepped forward,

'Let me introduce my partner and the head of Clan Puttnik, Braden Puttnik'.

'Greetings Clan Leader, may my Lord and Master allow you many successful murders,' said Djemmini as he half bowed to Braden Puttnik.

'Your Lord has been most accommodating in the passt' Braden whispered, 'I hope it may continue.'

Braden had a very different appearance from Kymru Galavan, while he was of a similar height and bald on top, his colouring was radically different. His skin was mauve, as was his hair and his eyes were also a purple colour.

'I ssee you study my colouring, human. Different is it not, but much like you humans we differ greatly too. Mauve is a feature of our Clan; you will always be able to sspot a Puttnik by his colourss.'

'My dealings with you are as ever an education, Clan Leaders.'

'Indeed, but enough formality, Djemmini. Follow us to our crop. Darios, you are dismissed, you may continue torturing the earth halfling we found yesterday.'

'With pleasure,' Darios replied and then simply vanished into thin air.

Djemmini maintained a blank, unreadable expression, but was starting to feel unnerved down here, a half mile or so underground. He wondered whether anyone on the surface was really aware of just how powerful the Shadow gnomes were. Were it not for their aversion to sunlight they would surely be able to rule the whole of Vallilea and enslave the surface races to do their bidding.

He followed the two gnome leaders out of the small cave they had been in and out into a vast cavern. This was the Shadow gnome city of Imar, home to Clans Galavan, Puttnik and possibly many more that Djemmini had no knowledge of. They skirted the edge of the cavern following a path that was slowly descending. The sound of running water was growing louder the further they travelled down the path, with the cavern wall becoming slightly damp here. Luminous mosses and lichens were attached to the walls making the most of the damp atmosphere. After several

minutes they arrived at a beach where the river meandered and the Clan Leaders stopped.

'There you are Priest. On the other side are the mushroom fields; our future, your future, death to the surface and more deaths for your Master,' said Kymru.

'Come let us take a closer look,' whispered Braden. He made a brief gesture and began to fly across the churning, pitch black river towards the mushroom fields.

'Do you have transport?' Kymru asked Djemmini.

'I can always send you over with this,' he indicated his staff. 'It's perfectly safe'. His grin was not one that inspired much confidence in Djemmini and he did not want appear either weak or in need of Kymru's help.

'I can make my own way, thank you Clan Leader,' he replied with a half smile.

He made a few gestures casting his spell and boldly stepped on to the thin air in front of him, proceeding to walk on the air to the other side as though a solid stone bridge were under his feet. It was far too powerful a spell to have used simply to save face but it set the right tone among such powerful allies. If he could waste such a spell on crossing a river then they would imagine him to be truly powerful, or so he hoped.

Kymru gave a whispery chuckle,

'I like your style, Priest,' he called, 'very impressive!'

Kymru simply lifted off and floated over to the other bank, using the power of his staff. He dropped down next to Braden and Djemmini and gestured to the mushrooms.

'We should be able to manufacture enough here to cripple half of Vallilea, maybe more.'

'Excellent' murmured Djemmini. 'So, let's get down to the details'.

'Yess, the details,' Braden butted in excitedly.

'Where shall we target, how can we infiltrate towns and cities, who will we use to peddle the spice and what safety measures do we have in place?' Kymru began. 'Speaking on behalf of the Shadow gnomes we would dearly love to bring down the city of Findon first, home to that pompous, pious Lord of all Sir Theobold. We could then move to the smaller outlying cities of Ingles and Abinger. If we succeed then we can move further afield to another large city such as Salvington and on from there,' Kymru said, outlining his initial ideas.

'You appear to have a very clear plan,' Djemmini replied, 'and it is a good one. Findon is a large enough city for us to infiltrate without being spotted. The mushroom powder will take hold in the poorer slum district there before anyone realises

and by the time they do that part of the city will be too far gone to recover.'

'And you would be able to operate there?' questioned Kymru.

'I am well connected. The Lord of Murder has aided us with a secret temple in the city. We have several High Priests and a coterie of thieves and rogues to help with distribution. It is an ideal place to start!'

'I knew there was a reason we had to do businesss with a human,' Braden muttered with half a grin.

'We work toward a common aim, removing those in power. When their cities have crumbled the common folk shall turn to the Lord of Death and Murder for salvation as they make their last journey and he shall gather up their souls and become ever more powerful. You will no longer be bothered by the do-gooders of the surface world and will be free to do as you please.'

'We will welcome the lack of interruption in our affairs,' Kymru said. 'Now let us show you more of the mushroom fields.'

The three made their way to the edge of the fields. The mushrooms stood some two feet in height and in amongst them could be seen the heads of several shadow gnomes as well as larger figures, mainly humans and elves, who were being forced to work.

'As you can see, the slaves are doing a fine job of tending the crop,' said Kymru. 'Though less strong, the elves are actually better workers than the humans. The humans seem to fatigue far too quickly for our liking.'

They approached a gnome standing next to two male humans who were busy digging around the mushrooms. He stood whip in hand with a scowl on his face.

'How do they fare?' asked Braden.

'Running out of energy,' replied the guard, 'as always.'

'Then show some initiative, gnome, give them a little of the Spice!' said Kymru.

'But it makes them near uncontrollable, master,' replied the guard.

'We will take care of any trouble, don't you worry,' said Braden.

The guard pulled a small leather pouch from his pocket. He loosened the top and held it open to the two humans.

'Stop work, slaves, and take some of this,' he hissed. 'You know you'll feel better for it!'

The two approached tentatively and reached for the pouch. The guard tipped a little fine powder into the palms of the two slave workers. They looked at it hungrily.

'Go ahead slaves, lick it up!' he ordered.

The slaves did as they were told, licking their palms with big hungry strokes of their tongues. They grimaced slightly after, the taste being somewhat bitter, and stood back.

'Now, Priest, you will see what we have created here,' whispered Kymru.

The slaves started to breathe more heavily, their nostrils began to flare as they drew deeper and deeper breaths. They could feel their hearts starting to pound in their chests and the sound of it beat strongly in their ears. The slaves instinctively took in huge breaths with wide open mouths and stretched their no longer tired and aching arms and shoulders. Their eyes started to widen and as their arms returned to their sides their fists started to clench. The slaves' jaws started to make a side to side motion as the Spice surged through their bodies.

'Now you two, back to work and no slacking!' the guard barked at the pair.

The slaves slowly turned their heads toward the guard with a half snarl, half rictus grin.

Djemmini started to ready his hold-person spell just in case; these two looked for all the world like they were about to cause trouble.

'I said "Back to work!", or do you want to feel my scourge

again?' the guard snapped.

The slaves gave him one last semi-psychotic, murderous look and moved back to pick up the small trowels they had been using to tend to the mushrooms. They began to dig and move soil like men possessed. Every now and then one of them would let out a guttural snarl and both were frequently rubbing the back of their necks and giving little shudders.

'Ssee priest, effective for this purpose, but they do sso seem to enjoy taking the SSpice,' said Braden.

'It certainly appears to have that effect, though they look almost possessed. Are they in control, do they know what is going on?'

'Let us ask them, shall we?' replied Kymru.

'Slave, stop digging and come here!' ordered Kymru.

The slightly taller of the two men looked up and then stood up. He was still breathing heavily and flaring his nostrils. He also appeared to be chewing as he stood before them.

'Do you like the Spice we so generously give you, slave?' asked Kymru, his fingers rhythmically tapping on his staff.

'Huh, huh, oh yeah. It's good alright.' He took in a deep breath. 'Makes you feel proper strong, like you can do anyfing. Even give you a little slap eh! Huh, huh.'

You are always welcome to try slave, I have a new spell that needs testing, so feel free,' chuckled Kymru.

The slave started to chew more vigorously and his breathing quickened. He started looking from side to side and sweat was beginning to trickle down his forehead.

'I can really try and give you a slap? You deserve it after what you've done to me. Yeah, why not, why not?'

He started to shift his feet, squeeze his fists into tight balls and then relax them. His breathing was now coming in great gasps.

'Yeah, why not?'

He let out a roar and lunged at Kymru who was standing only two feet away. His fist shot towards Kymru's head but was stopped short as he hit a protective spell - a stoneskin. But this was no usual defensive spell; this was Kymru Galavan's new personal protective spell.

Kymru turned his head to Djemmini and whispered 'Watch this!'

The slave's hand was stuck fast in mid air, to the point where he had tried to strike the Clan Leader. He tried to pull away but to no avail. He snarled and growled as he pulled with all his strength and then he started to cry out.

There was a loud ripping sound and a bloody line appeared

down the stuck and stricken slave's forearm. Then the skin on the hand started to peel back and slowly roll down the forearm. The slave stared at his hand as the muscle and tendons were slowly revealed to him. The skin continued to roll back up his arm all the way to the armpit. Bleeding muscles and bulging veins writhed and danced on his now skinless arm.

In the background Djemmini was aware of Braden laughing at what was happening.

'Excellent, Kymru, excellent!' he cried out.

There was another huge ripping noise as large red gashes appeared down the front and back of the slave's torso and another line around the neck appeared.

'Wait for it, Braden, Priest,' said Kymru excitedly.

The skin began to peel back from the centre of the spine, opening like curtains to expose the spinal column and muscles of the back. To the front, the abdominal muscles and the chest were now visible.

Djemmini was fascinated. This was one of the most horrific spells he had ever seen and he had invented a few grisly ones himself.

The skin continued to peel away till the whole torso was just muscle, vein and tendon. A pile of flayed skin lay at the slave's feet. The slave was still breathing furiously almost

unable to comprehend, or perhaps to feel, what was happening to him.

'And now friends, my favourite bit,' Kymru, barely able to contain himself, said.

He clicked the fingers of his right hand.

The skin on the neck rolled up an inch, stopped and then, as though yanked up by the hand of an unseen giant, was ripped off in one hard, fast movement, to leave the skinless face of the slave before them. The bloody 'bag' of skull skin plopped to the floor.

'Aaaaahhhhhhhhhhh!' The piercing scream was one of the most blood-curdling Djemmini had ever heard. He was truly horrified and massively impressed. The slave hyperventilated several more times before suddenly collapsing onto the floor.

Djemmini heard clapping coming from Braden and gently started to join in.

'A most impresssive defence, Kymru',' whispered Braden.

'My latest one, Kymru's Back Lash, it's called. It is essentially a fire shield with a few added extras as you saw. Particularly useful when dealing with a group as it tends to unsettle those you are fighting, somewhat,' he grinned.

'But is it not a little slow, if you were being attacked?' asked Djemmini.

'Ah, you are not familiar with the Spice are you?' replied Kymru. 'What did you try and do when he lunged for me?'

Djemmini thought and then realised that he had readied his hold-person spell and had set it off as the slave had lunged at Kymru. The nail component had been used but the spell had not worked. Djemmini had almost forgotten in the horror show that followed that his spell had been ineffective.

'You tried to hold him but it did not work,' uttered Braden. 'It never workss on those under the influence of SSpice. They become unstoppable, double in strength, feel almost nothing. It will cause chaoss in the cities of Vallilea, hahahaha!'. .

Djemmini was unsure what was most unsettling, that his spell failed or that these shadow gnomes seemed to know what he was doing all the time. Even if they had E.S.P he had defences to mind reading, yet they seemed to know just what he was thinking.

The flayed slave was still quivering on the floor; ragged rasping breaths escaping from the grotesque form.

'May I?' asked Djemmini.

'You may,' Kymru nodded.

Djemmini dropped to one knee next to the dying slave. He pulled out his ceremonial knife and said a prayer.

'Nyrex, Lord of Murder, please accept this offering, this soul, into your mighty army. I am ever your humble murdering servant!'

He plunged his knife into the space between the collarbone and trapezius muscle of the neck and wiggled the knife. He yanked it out and was rewarded by a fountain of bright scarlet blood shooting two feet from the body. The breathing stopped, the body finally went limp. A shadow slowly coalesced around the body like a dark blanket, growing ever more opaque. When the body was covered completely the shadow dissipated and the body was gone.

The guard who had been watching the proceedings raised an eyebrow to Kymru, who merely shrugged in return. The guard then turned his attention to the other slave who was working the soil furiously and completely oblivious to what had happened to his fellow slave. He was breathing hard rubbing his neck from time to time and arching his back at regular intervals. The guard pulled out his scourge and lashed the slave, yelling 'Faster, slave!'

The slave appeared not to notice and continued at the same frenzied pace as before.

'Sso,' Braden broke the silence, 'we will supply you with enough SSpice for the first city; we will send it by caravan

through the mountains and down. We can meet with your people anywhere you choose along the way for the hand-over, but the further from Findon the better for uss for now. You will distribute it as you see fit, drip feed it onto the streetss. The more people you have craving it the better. It takes about three dayss for the real cravingss to take hold, then the pitiful creatures will do anything to get hold of it. More murders for your Lord. More chaos for uss. You may keep any of the money you make, it has no relevance to uss, we can take what we want when we want should we require anything.'

'Any questions, Priest?' asked Kymru.

'I have no particular wish to return here, as welcome as you have made me,' he began.

'Ah yes,' butted in Kymru, 'take this.' He gave Djemmini a piece of platinum that he appeared to pluck from thin air. 'We will be able to locate you with it. We can communicate though scrying very easily when you have this with you.'

'Then that is all' said Djemmini, examining the coin. It had no visible markings on it, which in a way made it easily distinguishable from other coins. He slipped it into a pocket in his robe.

'Excellent, Priesst' whispered Braden. 'We will contact you in less than a tenday. Be ready for the first shipment, don't

disappoint uss!'

'You will not be disappointed Clan Leaders'.

The two Shadow gnomes approached Djemmini and looked hard at him. Djemmini breathed slowly to keep his calm. He held out his right hand.

Kymru and Braden grinned large.

'Are you sure you want to shake after what you just saw Priest?'

Djemmini looked into Kymru's eyes first, then Braden's and kept his hand out.

'Hah, we will be a good team with you, Priesst,' whispered Braden as he shook the offered hand.

'Deal done,' said Kymru as he too shook the hand. 'I can send you back to where you need to go now if you require.'

'I can manage of my own accord,' replied Djemmini, 'but thank you.'

The Priest of Nyrex whispered the words to a prayer to his Lord and promptly disappeared, recalled to a far safer place for himself.

Certain he was gone, the two gnome Clan Leaders turned to each other as another gnome appeared next to them.

'Greetings, Mentza, thank you for your help. Can he be trusted?' asked Kymru.

The Galavan Clan wizard, distinctive by the gold sigiled, black skull cap he wore on his bald pate, nodded.

'He has significant magics at his disposal and his mind wanders and plots, but he is enough in awe of us to not try anything. His magical defences were strong, but no match for me. He was never aware of my presence here.'

'Then let uss begin the manufacture,' hissed Braden.

'Guard! Guard! Spice up all the workers and get this crop cut and powdered. We need it out in two days!'

An Urgent Meeting

'Almost there, almost there,' the young lad Kaylin said to himself as he struggled up the last of the nearly three hundred steps he had taken on his errand across the castle. He couldn't stop now since Sir Theobold had stressed to him the importance and urgency of the summons. He was to bring Chief Court Advisor Argyll to the audience chamber as soon as he possibly could.

Up two more steps and he arrived on a landing and half dashed, half stumbled the last few steps to the Advisor's door. His legs were burning from the effort, sweat fairly poured off the end of his nose and his mouth was dry.

He rapped on the stout oak door in front of him, calling 'Mister..huh....huh....Argyll....huh, Sir. Huh....huh'.

The wall behind him opened and Kaylin nearly jumped out of his skin. That was the trouble with dealing with illusionists, nothing was as it seemed. A gnome, fair of skin, with snow white hair surrounding his bald crown and large blue eyes, looked out.

'Yes, Kaylin isn't it?' said a soft and soothing voice.

'Yessir..huh..huh.' he panted 'Sir..Theobold wants you in his...huh...huh...audience chamber as soon..huh...huh..as possible...huh..huh. Sir'.

'Then I shall come now. Don't hurry yourself though Kaylin,

you look like you need to take your time.'

The soft spoken gnome of gentle spirit patted the boy on the top of his head as Kaylin slid down the wall to sit. Argyll uttered a few words and vanished in a twinkle of lights. Kaylin sat there staring at where the trusted Advisor had been and wished he too had the ability to move around the castle like that.

'Maybe one day,' he muttered, and hung his head as he contemplated the route back through the castle to the servants' quarters.

Argyll appeared in Sir Theobold's main audience chamber. It was a vast, high-ceilinged hall, with both stained glass and clear glass windows rising fully twelve feet up the walls. The sun was strong today and poured through the windows, creating fabulous colour designs on the stone floor of the Great Hall. Sir Theobold often held public audiences in this room, as it could hold well over a thousand people, and Argyll often felt somewhat exposed when it was just Sir Theobold and himself. He stood in an aisle between wooden pews, some twenty feet from a dais upon which was a large raised throne. The throne, though, was not ornate, merely carved oak with a padded seat, because Sir Theobold was not an ostentatious man. He walked towards the dais and the man standing by it.

'Ah excellent, Argyll! Spot on with your timing. That messenger boy did well, may use him as a runner again.' Sir Theobold was as ever clipped in his language, invariably making several points at a time without the chance of a response.

'I came just after the summons, Sir, the swiftest way I could,' Argyll softly replied.

'Good, good, good. Now then, important issue this. Yes, we've got a real problem Argyll, a real problem. It's no good, no good at all,' Sir Theobold rattled off.

'A real problem, Sir?' Argyll replied, angling his bald head to the left as he asked.

'Yes, yes. The workers' district or rather that area between the workers' district and the docks. Were you aware we have a slum area within our city? Total mayhem. Total and utter chaos down there. The low lives of this city have all gone completely mad. Foaming at the mouth, so I'm told; violent crime at an all time high; daylight mugging; the city guard attacked. Unprecedented, Argyll, unprecedented!'

'And the cause for this is, Sir?' Argyll prompted.

'Is why your here, Argyll! There are, of course, rumours as there always are when anything sweeps through like this. Who can forget the month of burnings we had a few years back? Every darned warehouse by the docks burnt to the ground. Every fire

halfling from here to the Shuddering Peaks was rounded up for questioning. Turned out it was a specter, some ship's wizard who'd been murdered and was hell bent on revenge. What a fight that was to finish him off,..yeess. Where was I?'

'Rumours, Sir'

'Yes. Rumours. Good, Argyll, that's why I like you. Focus.'

Argyll did his best not to let out a sigh and roll his eyes. As goodly a creature as he was, and there were fewer purer in thought and deed than Argyll, these conversations did often take their time and test the patience of, well of a Light gnome.

'They say that it may be some sort of drink, certainly looks as though it could be imbibed. Nasty stuff though. Rumours of great strength increases and all that. But there's a crazed look about them. Desperation in the faces of those afflicted. There doesn't seem to be any sleeping it off either. That's unusual in stuff like this.' Sir Theobold, tall and broad-shouldered, started to pace around the dais with his hands clasped behind his back. He looked down and was frowning, a look of serious contemplation on his furrowed brow.

'Have we tried to scry the situation, Sir, if it is too dangerous to go there physically?' Argyll enquired.

'Loriana is trying that as we speak. I'm expecting her here to report at any moment. Trouble is we are only getting people

that have been affected, not when they are becoming affected. Do you see, Argyll?’

‘Yes Sir Theobold, I do. And the guards, they aren't strong enough to go in there and get to the bottom of this?’

‘It's resources, Argyll. It seems to be individuals and no one knows who will blow next or where. They've been to taverns to make enquiries but have either turned up nothing or started fights just by their mere presence. You know I didn't realise quite how unruly parts of this, my own city have become!’

‘It's a large city though, Sir, and has grown more so in the last few years. The rebuilding after the aforementioned month of burning brought in a lot of workers and those that thrive on a busy port city.’ Argyll tapped his top lip with his index finger. ‘Not all those come to contribute to our society, Sir.’ He added.

‘Of that I am becoming increasingly aware, Argyll!’ Sir Theobold stated. ‘I once had all black hair you know,’ he chuckled, ‘not this salt and pepper nonsense. Stress, Argyll, Stress. It'll be the end of me!!’

The pair, human and light gnome harumphed in unison and Sir Theobold continued his pacing. Just as Argyll mulled over the possibilities the doors to the chamber opened and a woman walked in. She was of medium height with bright orange hair and pale

yellow skin. Her hair had braids pulling the front back from her face to expose her distinctly elven features. She was wearing an orange sunset coloured dress to complement her hair and was adorned with jewelled rings and an amulet upon her skin above her breast. It was just possible to tell that her figure was too full for an elf. Argyll tried not to stare for too long at the half-elf as she strode down the aisle towards them.

'Loriana, excellent! Good. What have you found? Do you have answers? Have we caught anyone?' Sir Theobold enthusiastically greeted her as he stopped his pacing.

'My scrying has helped somewhat, though I will need more time. I definitely saw some sort of deal happen. Down a back alley a regular street urchin came up to a fairly nondescript man in dark clothing and gave him something silver or a silver coin in exchange for what I couldn't even guess at, and then he left. I followed the one that had given the silver. He left that alley and disappeared down another alley where he emptied some type of powder into his mouth. After a few moments he started to breathe really heavily, nostrils flaring, and he rubbed the back of his neck a lot. He then let out a huge sigh-come-roar and stretched. He then came out of the alley on to the main street but his whole manner had changed.'

'In what way?' Sir Theobold interrupted.

'Big striding, a real air of confidence' Lorianana replied.
'He looked as though he was invincible, or thought he was at any rate.'

'Intriguing,' pondered Argyll. 'It is as though they have had some sort of haste potion or strength potion, but they aren't easy to come by, and I've never heard of a mass manufacture of these things'.

'I would have continued on but he went in to one of the taverns, and as you know they seem to revel in the fact that they have anti-scrying magics these days. So who knows what is happening in some of them, or what happened after that. I'm sorry I could not do more, Sir Theobold, but I can scry again now I have a better idea of what is happening,' Lorianana apologised.

'My dear wizard you have done well,' Sir Theobold said comfortingly. 'We had very little idea of what was happening at all, so this is at least a beginning.'

'So what direction do we take now?' Argyll asked of the ruler and his wizard. 'We could formalise the guards and have a mass sweep of the worker and dock districts to try and drive out this stuff whatever it is,' he suggested.

'Pushing water I'm afraid, Argyll, like pushing water. The reports also suggest, as you commented, that this thing makes

the people afflicted very strong and energetic. Many of the city guards are not all that competent in a real fight. Oh, they're fine for every day stuff and a few drunks, but not enhanced, crazy people. The last thing I need is a host of angry mothers that have lost their dear sons because I sent them into danger. No, that won't do at all.' Sir Theobold walked a little down the aisle, hands clasped again, and left Argyll and Lorianana staring at each other.

It was not a stare Argyll could hold for long. He was a reasonably elderly gnome, impervious to outside influences. He could smell a lie at a thousand paces and could see the intent upon every face he ever saw. But..she was just incredible! The depth of knowledge, the intelligence, the mixing of worlds all in that stunning half-elven face, those slightly almond vermillion eyes that..that were looking right into his.

'I'm not sure where this is going do you?' she said quietly.

'Er, I'm not sure Lori,' he replied, then realised that he had used her familiar name. 'Er, Lorianana,' he blustered.

She looked at him and gave him a half smile. Argyll felt his knees turn to water.

Then it happened. Lori hadn't been expecting it, but suddenly, by Sir Theobold's manner, or change in it, she knew

what Sir Theobold was thinking and that he was going to ask a question she didn't want to hear.

'Loraaaana' said Sir Theobold, in that slightly lengthened, pleading voice that most people use when they want something they know the other person doesn't want to give.

'No!' she stated, quite clearly and quickly with all the polite strength she could muster.

'Loriana' he began again, 'would you by any chance be able to..'

She knew where this was going now. The pit of her stomach dropped through the floor. She began to sweat and could feel the blood draining from her pale yellow face to give her an almost ghost-like appearance.

'Perhaps,' he continued 'you would be able to get in touch with...'

'NO. En Owe. No! No no no no no no! Don't even say the name! Sir, Please!' She was desperate and nearly in tears.

'It's just he's the best qualified for this sort of thing, well, the Company of the Compass certainly are, and he is the founder member.'

'There are other adventuring bands, Sir,' she pleaded forcefully.

'But none as good, Loriana. Ethandril Thililisfarne..'

'Nnooo' she wailed. 'Please. Not him'.

'Is one of the finest adventuring mages around and one of the few with enough experience and backup for this sort of thing,' Sir Theobold finished.

Just the mention of her father's name nearly drove Loriana crazy. He was, with due respect to any that history has forgotten or missed out on, the most reckless being the world of Estrella had ever seen. They say there is a fine line between madness and genius, but never has anyone so willingly and deliberately straddled that line and thumbed their nose at the consequences.

'That elf' she began with a deep voice now rising in anger 'is the most irresponsible creature on this planet. That the Gods themselves ever decided to allow creation to produce him is a mystery.'

'But he is your father,' Argyll chimed in, in an effort to defuse the situation. For someone so skilled in diplomacy Argyll could not have said anything worse at that moment, even if he had said that the Gods had just landed on the castle lawn or the fires of the Abyss were in the castle itself.

Loriana turned, very slowly and deliberately around to face Argyll. He wished he could shrink. He wished the ground would open up and swallow him.

'Don't. You! Ever! Say! That! AGGAAAIIIN Argyll!!!!'

screamed Lorianana.

'Lorianana Thililifarne,' Sir Theobold was back in control again. 'Your emotions are unbecoming to your station. We need Ethandril and his band, and you must summon him. That is an order!'

She stared open-mouthed and wide-eyed at Sir Theobold. She was dumbstruck and slowly closed her mouth but continued to stare.

'You may use the crystal ball behind the dais; I wish to see him too,' Sir Theobold instructed with an air of total finality in his voice.

Lorianana felt numb and slightly dazed. Her feelings for her father were one part love and unadulterated admiration for his passion and genius and nine parts loathing for his attitude toward the rest of the world, especially her poor dead mother.

She followed Sir Theobold behind the dais where he pulled open a secret compartment from the main structure. From a cabinet built into it he brought forth a crystal ball sitting on a plush velvet cushion.

'Here, my dear, use the family heirloom, it gives such a clear scrying'.

Lorianana stood staring at the beautiful crystal ball and

cleared her mind of everything. She was well attuned to the court scrying device and started to go through the motions of her scrying spells. She opened her mind to the image of her father and focused on the centre of the ball. Soon she was away from the room and whizzing across an ocean.

A slender, bright yellow right hand held a pair of alchemist's tongs that were holding a delicate glass vial filled with a frothing, white vapour-producing, purple liquid. The left hand had a similar set of tongs and a vial only this one held a clear liquid with a silver coloured ball in the bottom of it. A melodic voice spoke in Elvish.

'Now Thelandril, if I'm right then the lead mercury compound ball in the bottom of the potion of flying here,' he said indicating the clear vial in his left hand, 'should stabilise the reaction long enough for the potion of fiery breathe to mix with it and hence allow flight and fire breathing and you can pretend to be a Dragon, son!'

'The secret is to go nice and steady with the fiery breath, because it's pretty unstable, even at the best of times.'

The small elf, with bright orange hair and vivid yellow skin, looked on in awe as his father, of similar colouring,

began to pour the purple liquid into the clear. Just at that moment, he felt a tickle. Not a big tickle, but one he knew well.

'Oooohh' he squealed 'I'm being watched.' His hands began to waver. The purple liquid began to flow a little faster. 'Who DARES to spy on Ethandril Thililisfarne, mage and inventor extraordinaire in his own home?' The Flame elf looked up and in his mind's eye he saw the face of his peeping tom.

'Why if it isn't my darling daughter, Lorikins, Darling! Sweetness! Apple of my almond eye,' he gushed. But as he gushed he completely forgot about what he was doing.

'Dad, Ethandril!' his offspring cried simultaneously.

'Oh!' was all Ethandril had time for.

The crystal ball was at once a roiling mass of flame as an almighty explosion rocked the laboratory. Sir Theobold, Lorianana and Argyll could see nothing. The crystal ball winked out.

'Oh, Lori,' said Argyll. 'I'm so sorry. I, I don't know what to say.'

'Lorianana. I can't help but feel partly responsible,' started Sir Theobold. But she held up a slender hand.

'It's OK. It's OK.' She said clearly and with finality. 'It was bound to happen sooner or later'.

'Exactly,' came an elven voice from behind them. With a

start the three turned and walked to the front of the dais. Standing before them, with a smoke-blackened face and a bit charred around the edges, was a Flame elf, Ethandril Thililifarne, Lorian's father.

'Which is why I have so many fabulous contingencies in place when these things do happen,' he said with a beaming smile, showing pearly white teeth against bright red gums.

'And what of my half-brother, Ethandril; what has happened to Thelandril?' demanded Lorian.

'Ah, I may need to check on, er, him. Or, er what's left of, him.'

'You see' she yelled turning to Sir Theobald 'he cares nothing for anyone else'. 'How many times Ethandril, Ethan, DAD?' she yelled, staring right into his almond eyes. How many times has poor Thelandril been resurrected? It's a wonder he came back last time or that the Gods will let him. They should keep him in the Elysian Fields for his own safety! Well,' she demanded, 'how many?'

'Erm, seven, maybe eight,' Ethandril whispered.

'You've accidentally killed your own son maybe eight times!' she said in bewilderment

'Actually, Ethandril you aren't telling the truth,' stated Argyll. 'I can tell, I'm sensing,' he paused, 'twelve'.

Ethandril hung his head in shame, but only briefly. He looked up and staring straight at Lorianana cried 'but it's character building! Ha ha ha'

The Flame elf continued to laugh and jig around the chamber shouting 'Character building!' as though he had an imaginary friend he kept telling.

'Now you see why I hate him so,' she said, glaring at Sir Theobold.

'But Lorianana, it's his friends, they calm him, get the best from him, he's a real asset when they are about.'

'Well let's get on with it then,' she said. 'Ethandril, you are summoned to the court of Sir Theobold in the city of Findon in order that you may reunite the Company of the Compass, for the sake of the Crown and the safety of the Kingdom of Castleford,' declared Lorianana.

Ethandril abruptly stopped his jigging and singing to imaginary friends and walked over to his daughter and Sir Theobold.

'Oooohh' he said as he pulled a silver compass from his robe,' you must really be in trouble then!'

Our Heroes

It was mid-morning and the sun was shining bright in the western sky. On the Eastern elf home island of Solaria, in the courtyard of one of the many military training compounds, a tall, stately Solar elf was preparing to give a lesson. He walked, almost glided up and down the courtyard, swishing his gleaming sword from side to side to loosen some very ancient muscles. He was almost impossible to look at for any length of time in the sunshine such was the gleam of his second skin like armour. The sword in his hand shone too, with a faint green light that appeared to pulse from time to time. He paused with his back to the door of the castle building behind him as he heard the group of trainees he was to instruct ever so quietly enter the courtyard. He swept his shoulder length golden hair back behind his finely pointed ears and looked with his deep indigo, almond shaped eyes at the sword in his hand.

'Here we go again, brother,' he said quietly, before sheathing the sword and turning to face the new batch of trainees standing before him.

'The secret to the rhythm dance fighting style,' he said to his group of wide-eyed young elves, 'is not to force the fight. You must settle into your level and speed, bring your opponent

to your pace and use his strength and uncontrolled aggression and power to your advantage'.

The line of beautiful golden faces stared on in awe. This was their third year of martial training with the long sword, the favoured weapon of the Solar elf army, and they finally got to meet and receive instruction from the legendary Apollo Shiningblade himself.

'This is just the most basic step today, which will allow you to have some idea of what it is you may be able to achieve should you show enough natural skill and potential to be trained fully in the rhythm dance style.' The tall elf stopped at an ornate marble stool, which stood in front of the class of eight, and which had a small, pyramid-shaped box placed upon it.

'Now who knows what this is?' he said as he faced the group. Eight sets of eyes stared up in unison, several gulps could be heard.'

'Is it, is it a metronome,' stuttered a young female.

'Indeed it is, young lady. Well done, Talliana, isn't it?'

'Yes Sir, it is,' she stammered in reply.

'At least someone has the nerve to make the suggestion.' He raised his voice as he addressed the others. 'Come now, you should all recognise it from your music studies, a simple metronome. This is the single most important thing to have when

starting out as a rhythm dance fighter. It will be your guide to the speed at which you must operate and an indicator of your improvement in the future!'

He turned to the metronome and opened the front, pulling the long counter out and placing the weight right at the very top. He pulled it over to one side and let go. It slowly swung over to the other side causing a very faint 'tick'. He turned back to his captive audience just as another tick was heard.

'Beginners level one! The speed is a tick every three seconds.' He murmured under his breath the command word to activate the latent magic and suddenly the ticking could be heard clearly by everyone.

Tick, two three, tick, two three.

'Talliana, as you correctly answered, please come forth and we shall spar,' he said as he drew his own blade.

Talliana's huge eyes grew wider still, her heart pounding within her tiny delicate chest. She walked forward and faced the grand master.

'Now,' Apollo began. 'Raise your sword in front of your face, draw your sword back, high and wide to the right, yes that's good.' The two elves mirrored each other. 'Now we swing together and meet in the middle.'

There was a resounding 'Ting' as the two fine elven swords

met in the middle at the same time as the seven other young elves heard the first tick from the metronome. As the swords connected Apollo reversed his direction, spinning back clockwise, all the time talking to the class.

'I use Talliana's momentum to bring me around and a backhanded slash,' he paused, as a suddenly fearful Talliana lifted her sword up again to stop the incoming blow from her right from decapitating her, 'can end your fight in one blow.' The swords tinged and the metronome ticked in unison. Apollo again reversed direction, spinning anti-clockwise and allowing the sword to dip and then rise as he swung around. As he came back to deliver the next blow it was coming from high over his right shoulder, the speed was too much for Talliana and Apollo stopped a few millimetres above her forehead as the metronome ticked again.

'A very brief introduction class, but you can see the effectiveness.' Talliana stared in awe at the sword that had moments before been so near to ending her life. The ease with which the grand master moved had been astonishing.

'Well young lady, your turn. Do you think you can manage this simple manoeuvre?'

She took a deep breath and replied 'I believe I can, Sir.'

'Then let us begin again, sword to the face and...'

They went through the manoeuvres and little Talliana began her second spin around the sword dipping low then coming back high. The slim blade whipped over her right shoulder and struck the waiting blade of the grand master. She looked slightly shocked remembering how hard she had found it to get into position.

'A very good start, young lady, well done! Now please return to your position with the class. Now class, I would like you to practice the manoeuvre you have just seen in pairs. Before you start, close your eyes and listen to the rhythm of the metronome; that is the speed you must go at, no faster. Faster may seem easier now, but you are learning to fight to a rhythm, you will be able to fight more efficiently with less effort and for longer should you master this technique!'

The young elves paired off and all eight closed their almond eyes and listened to the rhythm. Some began to sway a little, a good sign. They took their guard and began. Apollo walked around and liked what he saw. This appeared to be an able bunch, Talliana in particular was very adept, but most of the others showed signs they could grasp this even if only to a modest level. Briefly his mind drifted back to the time he and his brother had started to use the style, a freak fight with an ogre had made them look into the possibility of using their

opponent's momentum. As an act of self preservation, a very young Apollo had blocked the swing of an ogre's club, but so powerful was the blow that he spun a full three hundred and sixty degrees round and sliced halfway into the brute from the other side. It dropped instantly with a look of utter astonishment on its face.

'Sir, Sir,' an insistent voice was calling. 'Sir, how was that?'

Apollo looked at the expectant face, then looked around at the other youngsters.

'You are all doing very well,' he said in a clear voice. 'I see potential in all of you.'

The excited elves beamed at each other, when a small voice piped up. 'Sir, if we are at the top of the metronome, three seconds, how far down are you?'

Apollo let out a half smile and chuckled; it was a familiar question. His pupils always wanted to know how fast he was. He smiled at them and walked over to the metronome, reaching for it with his left hand.

Just then, the weirdest sensation went through his whole body; a vibration, coming from his left breast. His brow furrowed and then lifted in surprise. He reached into a concealed pocket over the left side of his chest and pulled out

a compass, a compass that was now glowing and vibrating. It had been so long since he had heard from the Company that he had almost forgotten it was there. He stared long and hard at it. What adventure would it bring this time, he wondered? After several moments and for the benefit of his pupils he turned to face them and spoke in a clear tone

'Class, my apologies. It would appear that a rather urgent matter needs attending to so our lesson is at a close. Well done today, I saw potential in all of you. You are dismissed.'

The young elves looked crestfallen as their question remained unanswered.

Apollo looked at the compass in the palm of his hand and at the sword in his other. He sent a telepathic message to the sword.

'Well brother, we had best go and see what they want!'

It had been another cool and windy day in the North West town of Highdown. Up here, even in summer temperatures never rose much above sixty five degrees and the north westerly wind made sure it was always a cloak and jacket kind of evening. Business was good, however, with shipments coming in from all around Vallilea; the local merchants were trading and dealing to their heart's content. Food from the harvest was arriving ready

to be stored for the winter and just about any goods anyone could want could be had at this time of year while ships were still prepared to come this far north.

A slightly-built, nondescript figure was out for an evening walk, cloak pulled close, with no obvious features showing. No one would be able to recall anything of such a person and that was how he wanted it. He paused in a shop doorway on the main trading street, perusing the myriad of items for sale: Flame elf-made crystal goblets that were constantly changing their swirling colours, dwarven blacksmith's tools supposedly so well balanced even a novice could create excellent work, and a host of cloths and silks from the east of the continent, ready to be made into the finest of garb. He pondered whether to return at a later date for some more silk for his suits, it was so good for silent night-time activity and strong too.

He continued along, stopping at irregular intervals, just to make sure he wasn't being followed, not even by a local cutpurse or such. He wasn't and he hadn't yet attracted any attention as he approached the main intersection of the merchants' boulevard. This was the main housing street for the wealthiest of Highdown's merchants, with large mansions, glorious gardens and high levels of security.

He turned right down the tree-lined road, and with no one watching began to disappear. The evening shadows were his friend, and when he wanted they and he became one. Even to a trained fellow elf he would have been virtually invisible; to human eyes, well, they saw what they wanted to see and that was never him.

He slipped from shadow to shadow like a will-o'-the-wisp, never a false move, never a noise. He stopped thirty yards short of the mansion he was after, the one he had been surveying all week, the one whose weaknesses he now knew so well. The front entrance was a large, well-guarded iron gate, magically locked and reinforced with spells, mostly electrical in nature. He knew there were usually four guards on duty.

The walls surrounding the mansion gave off an alarm if scaled or if anyone used magic to fly over them. They had magical blocks on passwall spells and teleporting was considered virtually impossible or far too risky. Dimension doors were similarly out, since it was alleged that a misdirection kicked in when that spell was cast, taking the caster to a whole different dimension, the Abyss. The merchant had paid wizards well to protect him, but you would expect a man that made his money from buying and selling the living to feel the need to protect himself. The shadowy figure smiled under his cloak. What

he really loved about wizards was their complete disregard for what was physically possible. As they spent most of their time poring over books and ancient tomes they lost touch with what the body was capable of. He had to admit, though, that he had been stumped for a long while until, purely by chance, a squirrel had run along the top of the wall of the merchant's house and jumped off into a tree in the garden. The top of the walls did not react to movement as the wizards obviously assumed they could not be reached through non-magical means; how wrong they were.

He turned and silently began to climb the tree next to him, twenty feet from the mansion's perimeter wall. Up he went, not a sound, stealthy as a leopard. He gained the height of the wall and continued on up, to the upper branches, his lightness of foot and body aiding him well. Thirty-five feet up and in the smaller branches he carefully made his way out toward the wall. Fifteen feet from the wall, fifteen feet down and a landing point of only nine inches across. To most this would have been impossible, but to Orion Lutin, the only known Snow elf assassin, it was like a game from his childhood, descending scree slopes as fast as possible and trying to chase the wild snow leopards of the Snow elf homelands. He leaped with the grace of a ballerina, barely moving the branch he launched

himself from and landing as softly as a snow flake on the top of the wall. He crouched down and looked slowly around, no sign he had been spotted. He quickly dropped the twenty feet down the other side, landing in a roll and slipped once again into the shadow of a large sycamore tree. He looked over to the gate where four guards, dressed in plate mail and carrying gleaming halberds, were staring out oblivious to his presence. He reached into his cloak for one of his favourite darts, a sleep poison-tipped one, and looked for the next obstacle to come his way. His pointed ears could just make out the faint sniffing coming from his left, for the guard dog was doing its rounds. He held up a slender white finger to feel for the wind direction. It was still the prevailing north westerly so he was down wind. He held very still as the dog moved into sight.

A blink dog! The merchant had paid some wizard very well indeed. The creature sniffed around the base of one tree, looked several yards away and blinked to another tree. It lifted its leg to mark its territory then blinked away again. Orion held still, this was an opportunity he thought. He didn't want to give his position away or miss with a dart throw, so drew his dagger with the wicked black blade that had been so helpful in bestowing new powers upon him. The idea of being able to blink was very appealing. He held still as the dog roamed the garden.

He had to draw it in. He made a noise, a little scratching noise the like of which a squirrel would make. The dog's ears pricked and it sniffed the air; still it could smell nothing but it listened intently. Orion made the scratching noise again. The blink dog reacted in an instant, suddenly it appeared at the tree right in front of Orion, but it was expecting a small rodent, not a highly skilled assassin. As soon as it appeared, the black dagger flashed down hard onto the back of its neck with the strength of a mighty fire giant. The spinal cord was severed in just one blow. The blink dog died instantly and the evil blade sucked the blinking power out of the dog, bestowing it upon its wielder. Orion shivered, he couldn't wait to start practising using the new power.

He was off and running in an instant. He had studied the maps of the mansion and knew exactly where he wanted to go. With no more disturbance than a strong breeze he rushed for the back of the mansion and the servants' entrance to the kitchens. It was always a weak point for nobles and merchants; they defended themselves up to the eyeballs then let the servants' areas slip. He approached the back door to the kitchens swiftly and stopped abruptly to listen at the door; just the usual sound of a working kitchen. He slowly eased the door open to see two fat cooks working hard, one kneading some dough and the other

chopping vegetables. They were far too engrossed in their work and banter to notice the lithe shadow slide through their kitchen to the stairwell on the far side. He wondered how the blinking would change his need to move like this as he silently passed them by. He lightly bounded up the stairs two at a time, keeping close to the wall as he went. At the top he gently eased open the heavy oak door and looked out into the main hallway, which was the artery of the first floor of the house and the main living quarters of his target.

Agnos Sapwith was in his library, sitting in his comfy chair with a small glass of exceptional single malt whiskey from the highlands of Vallilea. The room was one of his favourite in the whole mansion, finished in fruit woods and heavily carpeted with fine silk rugs. He felt every inch the success he was. How many bodies had he sold to pay for it, he wondered. Hundreds? Thousands? Probably more in the region of tens of thousands he thought to himself. He smiled and looked in to his crystal glass at the pure amber liquid it contained and rolled it from side to side and caught a reflection of something.

He froze.

His heart skipped two beats. A shadowy figure stood behind him. Feigning confidence he did not feel, while wondering how an intruder had got in here, he stood, turned and smiled. He

mentally ran through his defences, a protection ring and his bracers were about it, but he had a few real spells in the other ring if it was needed. He had no weapons to hand except the buckle knife in his belt, which was more than handy against most foes. This however was no novice before him, he could feel it. Only a highly trained assassin would be capable of entering this room with no alarm raised and no sound,.

'Good evening, intruder' he began, 'pray what brings you to my house?'

'You seem very at ease with my sudden appearance, Agnos, were you expecting me?'

Agnos slowly moved his hands together at the front of his body, nice and close to his buckle knife. He could still not see the intruder for his cloak and cowl but guessed by the accent and build that he was elven or half-elven. He began going through the command words for his ring. The only two he could remember were for the lightning bolt and the fireball, neither of which he really wanted to use in his library, unless he had to. No, he thought, I can take an assassin with my knife, as long as I play it cool.

'I am shocked to be so interrupted in my own home, but as a man of power and position I expect the occasional anomaly,' he replied to Orion.

'I am here for you, Agnos,' stated Orion in a clear and factual tone. 'You cannot continue your trade anymore, too many people have had their lives ruined by you, many want you dead and I am acting for the many. Vallilea and all the islands will be better off without you!'

Agnos gulped, this was a serious threat delivered with chilling certainty. It was him or this assassin.

With a flurry he drew the buckle knife, a powerful magical blade the size of a short sword. At the same instant he remembered the command for the spell he really wanted from his ring, he pointed at the assassin.

'Destructo!' he yelled.

He was too slow. Most creatures of Vallilea were too slow for Orion Lutin, master assassin.

As the slaver's hands came up, Orion pulled a baton from his left hip and with a flourish sent the magical whip out at Agnos. Agnos just managed to say the command and a green beam began as the whip of entanglement struck.

His arms were instantly wrapped to his sides, the disintegration beam scoring a huge hole in the floor and carpets of the library. He dropped the sword as the whip began to squeeze.

'Immobilize!' said Orion and the whip secreted a thick,

gooey poison onto Agnos. He could not move much anyway, but slowly he could feel the effects of the poison. His whole body went rigid, paralysed by the ichor. Holding the magical whip in front of him, Orion advanced upon Agnos.

'Too many have suffered because of you Agnos. Just be grateful that you will not suffer as they did. Immobilize!', he said again, and more thick poison was secreted. 'This will be enough. The first dose will paralyse you but the second will stop your heart and lungs from functioning.' Orion drew back his cowl revealing his shaggy white hair and pale almost translucent white skin. His hard, cold, pale pink eyes stared into the rapidly dimming brown orbs of Agnos. 'Your slaving days are over!'

The light went out in Agnos' eyes as his heart stopped beating and his lungs ceased to draw breath. Orion quickly retracted his magical whip and sheathed it back on his left hip. He said a brief rite for the dead, a much abbreviated version of that from his homeland to the north, but asking that the dead be judged with fairness for their life. He didn't hold out much hope for Agnos. He looked around the beautiful library, and thought that what he had to do was such a pity. He reached for the rings on the dead slaver's hands, as proof of the success of his mission, and popped them in a hidden hip pouch. He swiftly

drew his scimitar and said the command to make it ignite 'Torch!'. The scimitar burst into flame and Orion flitted round the library setting light to the whole place, books, silks, drapes and furniture.

He rushed out of the room and back the way he had come, carefully flitting through the kitchen where the two fat cooks were still oblivious to anything but food preparation. He slipped out through the back door in time to hear an alarm being raised and shouting from the guards on the front gate. He turned to see flames licking out of the library window and saw the guards rushing from their posts. Staying in the shadows and moving silently, Orion approached the now deserted front gates, gently opened them, and without a care in the world sauntered off down the boulevard, leaving chaos behind him.

As he approached the intersection with the main street he felt a buzzing sensation in his hip pouch.

'Uh-oh' he said in shock, thinking that this was one last surprise. He grabbed the contents of the pouch and flung them to the floor, the two new rings and a host of other trinkets. He was expecting to see one of the new rings glowing and ready to explode, or worse, but they just glinted in the street lights. He looked closer at the treasures on the floor and it was several moments before he found the cause of the buzzing. His

highly arched eyebrows arched even higher as this was possibly the last thing he ever expected. He picked up a small silver compass, that was buzzing and glowing gently, and held it up before his pale pink eyes.

'The time has come for a reunion then,' he said to no one in particular. 'There must be some real trouble somewhere if I'm needed by the Company again.'

He set off down the main street, jogging this time, in a hurry to hear the communication from the rest of his adventuring band, eager for a new adventure, something that would really test his skills!

Standing on the cliffs overlooking the great southern ocean, Quin-Helwig never felt more alive. The wind was strong and fresh in his face and his brown locks flowed out behind him revealing his pointed elven ears. It was around midday and he had to squint slightly into a watery sun moving across from the west. He could just make out Lomu isle as a black blob in the distance, some ten miles or so away. He smiled as he remembered the time he had made that swim, from his home isle of Zinzu over to Lomu.

It was a day much like this when he had felt, as he often

did, that he needed to test himself. He had dived off the cliff, keeping only his short sword attached, and decided to swim. He had had some help of course. His swim caused much mirth among the merfolk who ribbed him almost all the way, but were none the less impressed. Dolphins had come to see how he progressed and swim with him just to enjoy the ranger's company. He had also been watched by other denizens of the deep, though the presence of the merfolk had meant they kept their distance. Sahaguin were plentiful in the southern ocean and loved nothing more than elf meat, though even they were only too aware of who was making the swim and thought better of trying to attack.

He inhaled deeply through his nose, savouring the fresh salty sea air, and took one last look over the sea before turning round and looking at the forest that covered most of Zinzu. In there was how he would test himself today. Arian was waiting for him somewhere, not too far away, and all he had to do was find her and slap her rump. Arian was a tough target, a doe of some eight winters now and a close companion of the ranger. She could see, hear and smell better than almost any other creature and had become wise to Quin-Helwig's stalking technique. Getting within a hundred yards of her was nigh on impossible, but that was the challenge and that's what helped Quin to stay in such good condition. And what extraordinary

condition it was! The southern elves were known for their muscularity and, although they still seemed slight of stature compared with humans, they all moved with fluid grace and light steps, but Quin's physique was legendary even amongst his own people. His back flared up like that of a cobra from a tiny waist to his barn door shoulders; his sweeping thighs and bulging calves gave him the appearance of enormous strength and power. Even with all that muscle he was still fleet of foot and light as a feather, especially when stalking.

He followed a path some two hundred yards into the forest and stopped; the wind was behind him, so he had to get past where he thought Arian might be if he was to have any chance of getting her. He looked up at the trees and canopy above him.

'Best to get up there,' he thought. He took a short run up to the nearest tree, a horse chestnut, placed his right foot on the trunk and bounded up from there, catching branches and swinging and pulling as he went, making no more noise than a gentle breeze through the trees, till he was high in the branches. He then began to move swiftly from tree to tree. With the agility of a monkey he hopped and swung, leaped and vaulted, all the while on the lookout for his target. After several minutes and a good half-mile, he spotted a clearing up ahead; cautiously grazing in the middle of it was Arian. Her ears were

pricked as ever, keeping all her senses on full alert. He was confident that he was far enough away and she hadn't detected him yet. His old trick used to be to create a diversion, to make a noise on the opposite side of the clearing to where he was. Arian would then run the other way and he would ambush her as she came past. After a few times she had become wise to this and started to run to where the noise had come from, knowing that Quin-Helwig never made a noise and that it was safest to go to where she had heard the rustle. This time he hoped to make the noise himself and hope he was well hidden enough so that when she ran towards him he could whack her rump as she ran past and so win the game. As he was more likely to be seen approaching the clearing while up in the trees he gently dropped down onto the forest floor and began to work his way toward the clearing. Every footstep was a measured one. His heavily muscled, tattooed body, twisted and contorted around the foliage, so as to not to move a leaf. He kept to the shadows too for extra cover, blending in seamlessly to his surroundings, his tattoos helping with the dappled affect the sunlight caused. He was within ten yards of the grassy meadow now and the doe was fifteen on from that. He slowed his breathing and relaxed his muscles, less noise, less sweat, less smell. He inched ever closer, moving around twigs and branches like a puff of smoke, not disturbing

anything.

She bolted. Arian was off and he couldn't believe it, she was heading some twenty yards to his right though, what was going on? Quin-Helwig, ranger of the island elves, was not the only one out stalking this day. He heard an almighty roar come from his right and he knew Arian was in trouble.

He leaped the last few yards into the clearing in time to see Arian swerve violently to her left and make for the centre of the clearing. In hot pursuit was a bear, a huge brown grizzly creature. Ursula!

'Ursula, no!' yelled Quin. The gigantic grizzly slowed her run and turned to face Quin. She slowly lifted her upper body to stand on her back legs and stood a full twelve feet, towering over the advancing Quin. 'Not this doe, Ursula, not today!' Quin commanded.

'You dare to deny me, little elf?' she replied. 'I am the queen of this forest and I decide which meals I will take,' she continued.

'Then you are too late today,' stated Quin indicating the far side of the clearing where Arian had just vanished.

'Then perhaps it will be elf meat on the menu today' she growled.

'You know you can't beat me Ursula, leave while you can.'

Quin drew his short sword from under the leather cloth at his left hip.

'Prove your worth to me then Quin-Helwig, no weapons, just as nature intended!'

'No weapons, eh, no claws then,' he said as the two combatants began to circle each other, 'just wrestling.'

'Just wrestling,' she replied.

Quin threw his sword to one side and continued to circle the enormous bear. She almost appeared to be smiling and to the unknowing ear kept letting out howls and roars. But to the ranger they were taunts, she was goading him.

'Maybe I'll have a little doe after my elf today.'

'Perhaps I'll use deer bone as a toothpick to get the elf meat from between my teeth.'

Quin lunged for her left leg. He grabbed hold wrapping his arms around the furry pillar and attempted to lift. Ursula beat down with both paws and smacked Quin full on the back.

The thump of the paws sounded like the boom of a bass drum and blasted the air from Quin's lungs as he collapsed to his knees. To avoid a second hit he rolled forward through Ursula's legs and scrambled away behind her trying to catch his breath. She turned surprisingly quickly for such a huge creature and let out a snort of laughter.

'Was that it Quin, not very impressive for such a fabled warrior?'

Quin looked up, sweat dripping off his brow, panting hard and trying to refill his lungs. He leaped forward again, aiming for the same left leg but planted both feet as he landed in front of her and bounced into a forward roll going between the giant furry legs for a second time. This time though it was to attack. He sprang to his feet and grabbed the right leg and pulled with all his strength. Ursula fell to all fours, the more natural bear position, but at least her paws were out of the equation for a moment.

Now in a real rage at the indignity of being upended by Quin she turned with lightning speed to her left, all the way round and swiped Quin with her right paw, claws fully extended!! Inches long knife like claws ripped through the skin and flesh of Quin's chest as he jumped back to avoid the blow he thought would be heavy but blunt. He stared down in disbelief at the open wound.

'Ursula. What have you done' he cried. 'How could you, how could you cheat?'

'All is fair....' she began, but abruptly stopped. 'Me a cheat,' she said, lifting her right paw indicating his chest, 'you cheat too.'

They were both looking at his chest which was rapidly healing, not slowly, but resealing in very real time.

'Trust has to be earned Ursula, and now I know you a little better, I trust you less.'

Quin rushed the massive bear. He closed the ten yards between them in a heartbeat and began a tumbling manoeuvre, flipping, springing and rolling as he did so.

She let out a roar, startling the wildlife for miles around, and raised both paws to grab Quin as he approached. His tumbling put him just out of reach as he landed two footed and sprang in to the air for all he was worth. He sailed past the now clumsy looking paw swipes and half turned in the air, landing facing the way he had come and upon the back of the titanic Ursula. He immediately fell forward and wrapped his heavily muscled, heavily tattooed arms around her thick neck, and began to squeeze.

Suddenly aware that she was in real danger, Ursula roared again and stood up on her hind legs and began to shake to and fro. Quin held on for dear life and continued to squeeze. Ursula began to feel a little weaker and headed for the forest edge. As she approached a large oak tree she turned and fell back against it with her full weight, attempting to flatten the elf who was strangling the life out of her. For the second time in minutes

all the air was crushed from Quin's lungs in one go, but he held on and squeezed tighter. She crushed him a second time, but with less force, then dropped to all fours.

'Quin, you're killing me,' she rasped. 'I'm sorry, mighty warrior, release me.'

Her pleas were to no avail, the ranger held on, squeezing ever harder as her resistance dropped. Her back legs collapsed, then the front, and with an almighty thump she hit the ground, unconscious, but very far from dead.

After a few moments and just to make certain she wouldn't rouse too quickly, Quin let go and rolled off the slumbering behemoth. She would be fine he thought, though not immediately, and it would take a great deal for her to undo the damage she had just inflicted upon herself and her reputation. He walked over to pick up his short sword and resheathed it, lifting the leather cloth that hid from view the lion's paw scabbard, finished in finest gold, the envy of all, and the reason cuts were no real threat. He took a deep breath and felt a strange sensation come from the scabbard. He looked down, wondering if maybe its power was waning finally, only to see a small silver compass he had long forgotten glowing and buzzing.

He pulled it out from its safe pouch and held it before his eyes.

'This day is full of surprises' he said to himself 'old friends have come calling!'

Deep in the Daphinium forest in the southern part of Vallilea a late summer festival was taking place. Copper elves, or continentals as many humans preferred to call them, had gathered from across the continent to say farewell to the warm summer months and enjoy the end of long warm evenings in the forests before the coming of the autumn and winter.

A small pack of young elves had congregated around the archery competition and were laughing and joking with each other over who would win the target contest. After a knock out competition it was down to the final two, Lloriss Greenbow and Harlana Elmsleaf who were both archers of considerable skill. Harlana, a female with two children in attendance, had adventured in her youth and had many tales to tell and the odd scar to show for it. She was now a trainer of the youngsters and captain of the home guard should the forest ever come under attack. Lloriss was a young pup by comparison, eager to go adventuring in the near future and desperate to prove his worth to anyone watching, especially the elders. After three rounds they were level; the target had moved to four hundred feet away and was becoming harder to see. Lloriss shot first and scored a

nine. Harlana raised a copper eyebrow, nodded at her young opponent and advanced to the shooting line. She took a deep slow breath to relax herself and started to raise her bow when two cloaked figures appeared, as if from nowhere, at her shoulders. The one to her left lent forward and whispered:

'Surely you can still manage that, Harly!'

Her eyes widened at the name, only one person ever called her that, not even her husband. She lifted her polished bow, drew back, took aim and let fly, straight and true. Bull's-eye! The youngsters cheered and Lloriss looked down and kicked the dirt in front of him.

'Well done Harlana Elmsleaf,' he murmured.

The cloaked figures removed their hoods simultaneously and there was an audible gasp from the crowd.

'Don't be so down cast young Lloriss; you have shot well this day.'

Lloriss just stared, into the eyes, one green, one copper, of Elwood Farfadet, high Priest of Yllana the Elven goddess, and the greatest archer on Vallilea. His sister Catarina stood just behind, smiling at the poor, shocked boy.

Harlana broke the silence. 'It is good to see you again Elwood; Catarina it has been so long, too long!'

'I'm afraid state business has kept us away, we have been

travelling all across Vallilea helping the Copper elf nation with diplomacy with the outside world. Copper elves have travelled extensively, as you well know, and there have been many that have required our help.'

'Elwood,' a small voice from one of the youngsters piped up, 'can you give us a demonstration of your shooting?'

'Yes,' they shouted out in excited unison. 'Oh go on Elwood, show us your skill!'

'Do the magic missile shot! Do the magic missile shot!' they cried.

Catarina and Elwood smiled at each other. They had had several hard months locked in negotiations with Thunder and Chalk dwarves, not known for their sense of humour when dealing with elves, over mining rights and trade routes, and the festival was a welcome change for them.

Catarina raised her right hand to quieten the crowd of youngsters.

'OK, OK. We give in. We'll do the magic missile shot.'

Elwood pulled his bow out of the quiver on his back. The shining, highly polished willow positively radiated magic. It had no visible string. Catarina turned to her brother.

'OK. Ready?'

'Ready.'

Elwood pulled back an invisible string and an arrow appeared. He fired it high into the air as Catarina began a chant. A bright blue missile shot from Catarina's finger tip, chasing the arrow, its target.

Swiftly Elwood pulled back again and tracked the magic missile. He released his arrow and it chased the magic missile. A loud crackling bang was heard and an explosion like a firework going off happened as the magic arrow intercepted the blue magic missile just before it could hit the original arrow. There was a huge cheer from the crowd, and even the heads of the other revellers were now all looking skywards to see the remnants of the 'firework display'.

Lloriss raised a copper arched eyebrow at Elwood.

'Though very impressive,' he began, 'how much of it is just that bow of yours and Yllana's blessing?'

'If you have any doubts Lloriss, feel free to try,' responded Elwood, and he held his bow out to him. 'Let's swap bows!'

Lloriss was shocked. It was well known that Elwood's bow was a gift from the Goddess herself and he had thought only Elwood would be allowed to use it. Seeing the look of surprise on Lloriss' face Elwood encouraged him to take it. 'Yllana gives gifts to us all, not just the few. Try this bow Lloriss and I'll

take yours.'

'Why don't you shoot together' suggested Catarina. 'Both of you fire an arrow, I'll set a magic missile after each one and you can try to hit it before it hits your arrow, just as before. How's that?'

'Fine by me,' said Lloriss, feeling more than confident with the godly bow.

'No problem at all,' said Elwood, weighing up the bow in his hand. He placed three arrows on the floor in front of him and readied himself. It had been a while since he had used real arrows.

'In case you miss with the first?' enquired Lloriss. Elwood just smiled.

Elwood nocked the first arrow and they drew back together. Catarina began a chant. They released simultaneously and the arrows soared. Catarina released two bright blue missiles to give chase. Lloriss hastily drew back the invisible string and let fly. Elwood just watched him. The arrow passed just behind the magic missile as it rose, chasing the first arrow. In an instant Elwood bent, took one arrow and fired, bent again, whipped the second arrow onto his string and fired again. Elves all around gasped and looked skyward. Some two hundred feet up Elwood's arrows struck the two magic missiles. First, Lloriss'

then his own, with the original arrows disappearing on their arc to fall further away into the forest. Lloriss just stared open-mouthed, a position now being taken up by almost all at the festival. Catarina smiled and patted Lloriss on the shoulder.

'Your shot was excellent; most people don't get that close ever. Keep up the practice and maybe you will hit it next time!'

'Uh huh,' said Lloriss, still agape.

'Nice bow that, look after it,' Elwood told Lloriss. He turned to his sister and was about to say something when they both visibly flinched. A vibration tickled the pair of them, and a very faint buzz could be heard. They reached into tunic pockets simultaneously and each withdrew a small silver compass, glowing brightly and making a buzzing noise.

'I don't believe it,' Catarina stated.' I never thought we would hear from our friends again. There must be some serious trouble somewhere, that or Ethandril's blown apart half the world, again.'

'We should find a quiet tent and listen to our message. Let's go sister, more serious things await than blowing missiles from the sky.'

Life on the Street

'Mam, Mam! I'm just heading out to market. I've got the shopping list. Can you think of anything else we may need?'

'No Rollo, darling, it's all there; just get the best deals you can, especially on the tatties. We have six mouths to feed, remember!'

Rollo Redfearn headed out of the door of his family home, a simple five-roomed, two-storey town house in midtown, into a pleasantly sunny autumn morning in the City of Findon. He was the man of the house now, after his father had passed away a year back, victim of the respiratory disease that claimed so many during hot summers. Although only seventeen summers old, he was capable and enjoyed the responsibility of looking after his Mam and four siblings, three sisters and a little brother. The early morning fog had burnt off now. His blue eyes squinted into the rising sun as he headed out west along Coach Street, towards the farmers' market. Rollo thoroughly enjoyed the weekly shop, the challenge of bartering for the best deals he could get; he treated it like a game that let his sense of humour shine through as he played one farmer off against another. If truth be

told, some of the farmers knew of his father's passing and frequently gave him better than average deals on their produce, knowing there were several mouths to feed and only his mother, a talented seamstress, to earn any money.

Rollo continued on briskly, striding down the walkway of Coach Street, leather boots clacking on the stone, and gearing himself up for the battle of wits that was to come. He wondered to himself if his wits would be enough when he became an adventurer. He had seen several adventurers over the years as they came through the city, great warriors in plate mail armour accompanied by robed figures and non-humans. There were many other races in Findon, and they always fascinated him; short, wide dwarves, elegant and colourful elves, serious and neat light gnomes and jovial little halflings of every element. He loved them all and desperately wanted to adventure with them to learn their ways, to go forth and smite evil armies or hordes of the undead or dragons, to become wealthy and famous and...

'Aha! Rollo, you're back to steal my goods again are you?' a shout broke his reverie.

'Morning to you, Jathro! I shan't be needing any of your inferior fare this day,' he called back with a beaming grin.

'Why you cheeky pup! Don't come back to my stall looking for any deals, they won't come your way!' Jathro bellowed back.

Rollo ambled past Jathro's vast stall with the red and white striped awning, turning his nose up at all the fruit and vegetables feigning disgust, and continued on to the next stall.

'Greetings Hommit, Jathro appears to have nothing edible this day, so please, let me see your goods and let's strike a deal.'

'Ahrr, young Rrollo. The very best herre. What will you haave?' Hommit replied with his drawling tones.

'Tatties, sweet tatties, carrots, corn and whatever else you have in season, and I need it for six remember.'

'Verry weelll,' said Hommit, a hairy barrel of a man with black hair that was thinning on top, as he bagged up the vegetables for Rollo and gave him a selection of apples and pears too. He turned to tot up the cost and declared 'thaat'll be two silverr and eight copperr, please, young man.'

'How much?' shouted Rollo with mock incredulity. 'How can that be, it was only half that a month ago!'

Jathro started to chuckle in the background. Rollo's antics were becoming well known but they still entertained the stall holders. After all, he never stole from them, just played them for what he could, to get the best for his family. He called to Rollo. 'Perhaps if you don't like his prices, Rollo, you may want to take a look again over here.'

Hommit twisted his head to Jathro and gave him a withering

look and snarled like a cornered badger.

He looked back at Rollo. 'Fine, trry someone else if you don't like my prrices.' Hommit started to unbag the veg when Rollo interrupted.

'No, no. I was merely remarking that the prices had gone up somewhat. Perhaps a few less apples and pears if you please, as I only have two silver and six copper to spend on groceries.'

'I'll match his lot and throw in this melon too,' Jathro called, staring at Hommit not Rollo.

'Really, that's very kind Jathro, though perhaps as your produce looks inferior, two melons,' retorted Rollo.

Hommit's jaw was firmly clenched as he stared hard at first Jathro then Rollo. Business wasn't great at the moment, it had taken a downturn lately, and a sale was a sale in anyone's language.

'Two silverr, two copperr for yourr original orderr, I caan't go any lower,' Hommit bellowed. Just as Rollo was heading over to Jathro, he stopped, looked over his shoulder and grinned at Hommit.

'Done' he said in a conspiratorial tone.

'Bah!' roared Jathro, 'Conniving little whelp, you'll ruin us all.'

'Oh I doubt that, Jathro. Thank you for your assistance.'

Thank you Hommit, a very reasonable price.' Rollo reached over the stall and took the large hessian sack full of fresh fruit and vegetables, dropped the coins into Hommit's outstretched hand and headed away from the market.

'Thank you gentlemen,' he called over his shoulder as he went.

He decided not to go directly home but take a brief walk along the riverside. The river Fin meandered its way through the surrounding countryside, creating the famous interlocking spurs that could be seen from the northern city walls, and flowed down through the middle of Findon. It wound on through its muddy, sandy flood plain till it reached the sea only a mile away. It had a large bustling dock district, which Rollo decided to avoid as it had a reputation for being quite rough, and a more upmarket walkway in what was generally upwind of the docks. He strolled along this tree-lined promenade, a mix of poplar and willow trees, nodding to the occasional passerby, and trying hard not to stare when a group of continental elves passed by. There were five in all, two male, three female, and all dressed in soft green leathers. He nodded as they passed and received a broad smile from one of the females. He blushed. He tried not to, but he did. Fortunately or maybe not, she was well past him

as his youthful cheeks flushed.

'So beautiful,' he quietly whispered to himself, with a sigh.

He reached his right hand into his shirt pocket and felt for a coin. He knew he had done well today and smiled as he pulled the leftover silver coin from his pocket. He would be able to buy more groceries when they really needed it. He turned off the promenade down a narrow alley, one of many that led away from the river, to head back to midtown, Coach Street and home. He put the silver coin on his thumb nail and flicked it into the air and caught it. He opened his hand and there was the head, the shining face of Tuke, God of luck. Perhaps it would be his lucky day or year, he thought. He flipped his coin again but a hand shot from the shadows and grabbed it.

'Mine now, young man,' a gravelly voice said. A dark haired man, unshaven, and dressed in dark leathers, stepped from the shadows. There was nothing very remarkable about him. He had no obvious features to remember him by and wore no jewellery that Rollo could see.

'Day dreaming were you?' he enquired. 'I saw you looking at the elves. The girls are pretty aren't they? Probably older than your gran's gran though,' he chuckled, giving Rollo a nudge.

'Look, I don't want any trouble from you, but I really need

that coin back, please,' Rollo began trying to be polite to avoid trouble, his heart pounding in his chest. He had never been involved in a street fight and didn't want to start now, especially with a real man, one that looked very capable.

'Not sure about that,' the street man said, drawing air in between his teeth. 'Perhaps I can find a better use for it.'

'No, I, my family, we have very little money, we genuinely need it, we've been really s-struggling for coin s-since my Pap died,' Rollo stuttered.

The man held up his hand to silence Rollo. 'The way you looked at those elves all dreamy like. I bet you want to adventure don't you? Every young man wants to adventure. Think of the stories you would have to tell. Think of the adventures you could go on. You could lead a grand life, make your family proud and not want for anything again? Mix with pretty elves and burly dwarves?' The man chuckled again. 'Perhaps I can help'.

'You know someone?' Rollo asked excitedly. Of course he wanted to adventure. It was all he had ever thought about since he was young. There were many elves in Findon and Rollo found them fascinating and beautiful. He had even been lucky enough to have a talk at his school once from Sir Theobold's high wizard Lorian. The fact that she was a half-elf had made his imagination run riot for months. If he was an adventurer he

could meet elves and maybe...

'I have something that acts as a short cut for young men like you. You'll feel full of confidence; have the strength of an ogre and the constitution of a dwarf. Reflexes like a panther. You could go adventuring tomorrow!' he stated with a wink.

Rollo's eyes widened and his mouth went dry. This street man was putting his dreams there in front of him, just like that.

'How?' he asked simply.

The street man reached into a pocket and pulled something out, hidden in a closed fist.

'Take this,' he said presenting his closed fist to Rollo. When you are alone or about to go out, swallow the lot. It'll take a few minutes but you'll know when it takes effect.'

Rollo reached out and took the packet and quickly put it in his pocket.

'If you like it you can get more from me here. It'll help get you out adventuring soon.'

'And here,' he said flipping the silver coin back at Rollo, 'be a bit more careful with your money if it's that precious to you.'

Rollo dextrously caught the coin in his right hand while

managing not to drop the sack of vegetables and nodded to the man. 'Thank you' he said, slightly bewildered.

'Anytime?' the man said indicating he wanted Rollo's name.

'Rollo,' Rollo said, 'and you are?'

'Kollin,' the man replied. Kollin then turned on his heel and disappeared between two buildings, down a dark alley barely noticeable if you weren't looking for it, little more than a foot wide.

Rollo fiddled with the packet in his pocket; it felt like it had some sort of powder in it. 'Tuke, I hope it's not poison,' he murmured.

'Mam. I'm off out to see friends, I'll be on the promenade,' Rollo called.

He had swallowed the packet ten minutes before and had spent that time praying to Tuke that he wouldn't drop dead as it had indeed contained a powder. Then he felt a shiver. It coursed all down his spine, creating a tingling feeling in his back and up his neck. He felt the need to keep rubbing his neck. His breathing started to get a little faster and he could feel his heart rate increasing. He decided to go out.

As he was walking down Coach Street he could feel it, whatever it was, really start to take effect. It felt like waves

of excitement, his breathing was deep and exaggerated, and he was walking fast with real purpose. He let out a moan as a large shiver took hold. He felt fantastic! He felt alert, strong and powerful. He felt he could do anything. He puffed up his chest as he walked. He winked at a girl, a little younger than himself as he passed her. Yeah, he thought, I am the man!

He reached the promenade and turned towards the docks. 'Why not?' he thought. Shoulders back, head held high, he strode towards the dockside. It was around midday and the sun was high, with a soft breeze rustling through the poplar tree. The city was busy with market traders. Many boats from the north, which would soon be cut off for the winter, were arriving with their last stocks and goods from those regions.

Half way to the docks, Rollo saw the elves he had seen two days previously sitting outside a riverside inn. Five elves, no longer dressed in their leathers but casual clothes that only helped to accentuate the lithe and firm forms beneath. Rollo looked over at them, smiled and again thought, 'why not?'

'Hail, fair elves,' he called as he approached. All five looked up at him somewhat quizzically. A smirk crossed the face of the two males.

'Hail, young man, good afternoon,' replied a female, a broad grin across her delicate face. 'An unusual way to

introduce yourself, but come!' She indicated the end of the bench she was sitting on. The four others turned to each other and conversed quickly and with obvious amusement in elven.

'Thank you, fair maiden,' Rollo replied. 'I am Rollo and you are stunning.' Deep down Rollo knew what he had just said was not right but he was no longer able to control himself, nor did he care to.

Her copper eyebrows rose even higher than their usual steepness, shocked by his boldness, but somewhat flattered. 'Hello Rollo, I am Lishiana, these are my brothers and cousins. What a bold young man you are. We are not often approached so openly by young human men.'

'I am seventeen summers now, not so young,' he replied leaning in, a twinkle in his eye. 'I plan to start adventuring in the near future so I decided to gain more information from those that know more about it, namely you.'

All five elves stopped their tittering and stared at him. He had no idea how funny he was but they could tell he was deadly serious.

'Perhaps a few more summers of making these inquiries and doing some background work would be good for you, Rollo, before you head out. Adventuring is a harsh business and skill with a weapon is paramount,' one of the males responded.

'You think me incapable?' Rollo enquired turning a dark stare upon his questioner. 'I have many skills, not all of them obvious,' he emphatically finished.

Changing the mood, Lishiana asked 'Do you have any friends that have adventured, Rollo?'

'None as yet,' he replied, still staring at the male, Raimiss, and starting to grind his teeth.

Lishiana placed her slim elven right hand under his jaw and turned his head to face her. Her copper and gold flecked eyes stared into his. Rollo calmed immediately. By Lavinia, he thought, she was beautiful and only a foot away.

'Rollo relax, you seem tense,' Lishiana started. 'Adventuring is a dangerous business and should not be taken lightly; we have lost brothers and sisters to adventure, and have been close to death ourselves. We are virtually retired now, which is why we like it here, where we can enjoy a gorgeous day in a different city and meet new people, like you.'

His mind was racing, he was transfixed by her copper and gold almond eyes, old eyes that knew so much. He couldn't help himself.

Rollo lunged forward to kiss her. She pulled away just in time.

'Whoa, Rollo!' she exclaimed.

He dropped his head forward as if in shame, then looked up, a huge demented grin on his face. 'Worth a try, though!'

Rollo jumped up from the table and leant in towards the five of them. 'So long fairies. See you when I'm rich and famous. Then you'll want me,' he taunted, nodding to Lishiana.

Rollo strode off towards the docks, looking for more fun. Perhaps a tavern would be the place; his throat felt dry, he could use a drink.

The elves stared after him as he marched down the promenade, still in utter shock, bemused and saddened by Rollo's behaviour.

The following day Rollo woke to a banging on his bedroom door and on the inside of his skull. Sun was streaming in through a gap in his bedroom curtains and nearly blinding his overly sensitive eyes.

'Rollo, get up! There are jobs to do and you are running late,' his younger brother, Alic, called.

'Eurrgh' he groaned. His mouth was so dry and furry it felt like he had been licking an owl bear's armpit all night. He squinted at the light coming from between his curtains and rubbed his hand through his matted and dishevelled hair. He felt awful. After leaving the elves he had found a tavern and stopped

off for a drink. He felt amazing, especially after ale, and had had he didn't know how many more. He couldn't even remember how he had made it back home. He rolled out of bed and staggered to his wicker chair. He picked up his shirt from the night before; it smelled of ale, so he dropped it and picked up his breeches which were somewhat fresher. He slipped them on, and felt an unfamiliar bulge in the pocket. He vaguely recalled that he had spent most of the silver that he had but couldn't be sure exactly how much for ale was cheap. He reached into the pocket and was shocked to find a small velvet pouch. He opened it and emptied the contents onto his chest of drawers. Three silver pieces and six copper settled in front of him. His jaw fell open. He had no recollection of how it had arrived in his pocket, who it was from or how it had come to be there. He hurriedly scooped the coins back into the pouch and stuffed it back into his pocket. He couldn't possibly have stolen it, could he?

A memory briefly flashed through his mind. He was full of bravado, ultra confident, and when the group of well dressed men had entered the tavern he decided that perhaps they had some spare change about them. He had never done anything like it before; though he had played tricks on his siblings, picking their pockets and making coins disappear before their very eyes,

he had never actually stolen from anyone.

Rollo stood, emotionless and expressionless for a few moments. He walked over to his wall mirror and stared at himself; what had he done? Then a broad grin started across his face.

What had he done?

He had money in his pocket now and it had been easy. The man in the street, Kollin, was right. Maybe this powder would get him adventuring, and sometime soon. The pounding in his head suddenly became a little easier to cope with. Perhaps, he thought, he should avoid drinking quite so much in the taverns next time. But first, he should try and track down Kollin; he needed a little more of that powder before he went out again.

He pulled on a fresh shirt, a tunic, socks and his boots and headed out of his room and in to the family kitchen.

'Rollo, you look awful,' his mother declared. 'Your hair needs a good brush and you have big dark bags under your eyes. Have you been drinking all night? The groceries were all bruised and half spilled across the kitchen table when I came down this morn. What have you been up to?'

'Just a late night with friends, Mam. Doesn't happen often though does it?' he argued, as he crossed the kitchen towards the front door. He picked up an apple off the dining table and

put it in his pocket for later as he wasn't really feeling hungry now.

'I'm just off to meet them again, I'll do jobs later,' he gabbled as he dashed out the front door.

Rollo swiftly made his way to the side street off the promenade, 'Smugglers Way', he discovered it was called. He walked back and forth a few times, even peering down the dark alley where Kollin had disappeared, but no Kollin. There were, however, a few street urchins, real down and outs, that he hadn't noticed before. He knew Findon had a slum area on the other side of the dock district, between it and the workers' district and well away from midtown and the merchant areas of the city, but he didn't think the down and outs or homeless ever really left that area.

A man of medium build, with dark brown hair and unshaven but not unclean, appeared in the alley. It wasn't Kollin.

'Want Spice?' he simply enquired of Rollo.

'Err, Spice?'

'Yeah, Spice, I haven't got all day. Do you want some?'

Many thoughts raced through Rollo's mind at that point, almost as quickly as the many thoughts he had been able to conjure up the night before. So this powder had a name. Who was this man and how did he know that Rollo may want 'Spice'? Why

had he been offered it in the first place? But the one overriding memory was of his walk along the promenade and his overwhelming self-confidence when he had met the elves. That was what he wanted again.

'Yeah, two packets,' Rollo replied somewhat hesitantly and held out his hand.

'Money first! One silver for two packs,' the man said. 'No money, no Spice.'

Rollo was taken aback. That was a lot of money, he hadn't really thought that he would have to pay for it and certainly not that much. Still, he did have the money and that was thanks to the 'Spice' and his little escapade the previous night. As deftly as he could he pulled the velvet pouch from his pocket, opened it and pulled out a silver. The man took it roughly and thrust out a fist and nodded for Rollo to take it. He did.

At that moment, a shambling, rag-covered man rushed them. Rollo leaped back, staggered and fell on his rump. From his sitting position he saw the action unfold.

'Give me Spice,' the rag man screeched as he tried to grab the street man's lapels. 'Please, I must have it'.

'Shut up or regret it,' the street man growled back, clearly trying to keep his voice down.

'Please,' the urchin replied, 'I need it, I..'

He went silent, his mouth still open. Rollo frowned. Then he saw the bent right arm of the street man jerk back, and the urchin looked down. The street man pushed the urchin away from him and dashed for the narrow alley. He vanished. The urchin had a large crimson stain in the middle of his rags; he had been stabbed. He had a look of incredulity on his face. He staggered back to the side of the alley and collapsed. Rollo looked on dumbfounded; he had never seen a crime like that close up. Who was the street man, someone skilled enough to kill just like that? The Spice, what had he gotten himself into?

Rollo realised then his predicament and scrambled to his feet, all the while staring at the dying urchin. Soon a passerby would find the body and alert the city guards; he didn't want to be around for that. Rollo ran back up the alley and out, heading for home as fast as he could, heart pounding. The two packets of Spice securely stashed in his pocket.

A few days later, Rollo headed out the door to go to market to buy the week's family groceries, the fruits and vegetables like he had the previous week. He didn't, however, have the look of that young man. He had a wispy stubble and dishevelled hair and appeared to have forgotten all about washing. The most

striking thing however was his eyes. Instead of the sparkling, mirth-filled baby blues, they were a lifeless grey with large bags underneath. He looked awful, as though he hadn't slept in a week. As it happened, he barely had. Since the first night, when he had used the Spice, drunk excessively and passed out, he hadn't slept again. He found that the Spice kept him up most of the night, even if he had had a few drinks, and he didn't have time during the day to catch up as his Mam kept him far too busy. How he loathed her at the moment, always getting on at him, never leaving him alone to pursue his own interests. It wasn't his fault Pap had died, why should he have to take over as the man of the house, just because he was the eldest? Why couldn't she just leave him alone? It was in this seething rage that he entered the market square. His Mam had given him three silver as usual but he wanted to keep as much as he could. He had managed to pilfer a small purse the night before so he had two silver stashed in a pocket already. If he could get a deal or even nick some vegetables he could get enough Spice for a couple of days.

'Ah, the thief returns,' yelled Jathro as Rollo walked up to his produce stall. Rollo jumped at so openly being called a thief and gave Jathro a wild-eyed stare. He realised then that Jathro was joking and tried to laugh it off.

'Hah. Hail Jathro, you know I am no thief,' he tried to quip but the tone of his voice was not convincing and lacked his usual light-heartedness.

'Are you feeling well young man, you look a little under the weather?' Jathro enquired. 'You usually bounce in here like a Labrador puppy!'

'Just a bit tired, Jathro, so please, if your good self and Hommit over there would like to decide between you who will give me my usual order, I'll just have a rest and be on my way as soon as possible. I have only two silver and a copper for you today.'

Jathro was quite taken aback; this was not at all like the Rollo he had come to know. He waved to Hommit to indicate that he would see to the order, Hommit waved back in acknowledgement, not too concerned as he had had the last order, and Jathro turned to fill a sack for Rollo. He carefully placed carrots, tatties, sweet tatties and a selection of greens into the sack and was about to add the apples when, out the corner of his eye, he saw an errant hand, swiftly pocketing some fruits from the front of the stall. He turned on Rollo

'What are you doing?' he yelled. 'How dare you, after all we've done?'

Rollo balked and held his hands out wide in a passive

gesture. He didn't expect to be caught, and his brain wasn't functioning that well, so he had no excuse ready.

'He's stealing, he's stealing from me. He's a thief, a real one. Guards!' bellowed Jathro. If there was one thing the traders couldn't stand it was a thief. They were always more than happy to barter, since they still made a profit on everything, even if they slashed their prices, but theft could not be tolerated. It affected everyone, him, his family, the farm workers.

The city guards, three sturdy looking men dressed in black leathers and steel helmets and carrying polearms, advanced on the stall. Rollo ran off. At least his brain worked well enough to register danger. He ran up Coach Street, then cut left towards the river Fin, thinking to go to the dock district and disappear for a bit. He may even have to get a boat somewhere for a few days. He was dashing down a familiar alley now and ahead, saw a familiar man. Kollin was in the alley. Rollo slowed to a jog, then to a walk and approached slowly but breathing heavily.

'Hi, two packets.' He pulled out a silver, but got two. 'Make that four, Kollin, and I'm in a hurry.'

Kollin stared hard at him and reached into his pocket. He looked around to see if Rollo had been followed, but no one was

there. He held out a clenched fist and reached to Rollo.

'Here's four, but you won't find me here again, understand!' He had a look of total seriousness on his face. 'You need to go to the slum on the other side of the docks if you need more; there are a few of my lads over there. Now get out of here before anyone sees us.'

'If you say so Kol..' but Kollin had already slipped in to the dark alley and vanished.

Rollo stuffed two packs into his pocket and wolfed down the other two; he found he needed that bit more now to get the full rush. Within a few seconds he felt a tingle. He continued to walk down the alley, and exited on to the promenade by the river.

He didn't think he had been followed but wasn't sure. As the Spice kicked in he began to shudder, shrugging his shoulders and rubbing the back of his neck. He thought he could feel the eyes of passersby trained on him, everyone was looking at him. He began to walk towards the docks, passing the willows and poplars along the stone promenade. He shuddered again and again and even let out a moan as he yawned.

'Ooh!' Suddenly he felt great. Who cared if he was being followed, he could outrun any of the useless city guards, failed adventurers all of them. He lifted his chin and began to walk with a swagger, breathing heavily and with sweat dripping from

his brow. He wouldn't have to leave Findon; he would lay low in the docks for a couple of days till it all blew over. It would be fine. He reached in to a pocket and pulled out a pear, one he had stolen. He bit into it and enjoyed the moisture as his mouth was now very dry.

A few hundred yards behind, the city guards emerged from Church Street onto the promenade and were scanning both directions for any sign of Rollo. It wasn't easy to see with all the street cafes and spill over from the outside areas of taverns but as they walked towards the docks they spotted him. The three city guards broke into a run, shouting at those on the promenade to get out of the way as the lethal polearms they carried in both hands were being swung side to side as they ran. Only twenty yards from Rollo he heard their calls. Rollo turned his head and cried out in a half roar, half laugh and began to run away.

'Stop that thief!' yelled the lead guard.

'Silver if you stop him,' cried another.

A burly dock worker heard their calls and stepped out to intercept Rollo. As Rollo was not fully looking ahead he crashed into the man and they tumbled to the ground.

'You idiot,' Rollo snarled into the man's face, 'I'll kill you for that,' and Rollo's hands went for the old seaman's

throat. The dockworker was a strong man, he had worked manually for nearly thirty years and had been involved in more than his fair share of scraps and brawls over the years, but he had never felt anyone as strong or frenzied as this. Rollo seized him by the throat and pressed his thumbs down as hard as he could. The burly worker tried to grab the two wrists, succeeding, but was unable to stop the pressure. He heard the sound of the cartilage snapping and an immense pain from his throat surged through him.

Rollo delighted in the feel of the man's throat crunching and giving way under his thumbs. He pushed hard again, driving the broken windpipe deep back into the voice box. The burly dockworker's eyes glazed over in pain as he fought for breath.

'Leave him,' yelled the lead guard as he arrived at the scene. Rollo ignored or didn't hear anything. The guard whacked Rollo across the back with the handle of his polearm in an effort to subdue him. No effect.

Rollo leaped up snarling and faced the guard hands up and at the ready to attempt to catch or deflect his polearm strike. The other two guards arrived and surrounded Rollo. There was no escape.

'Ha, city guards! Failed adventurers or gutless wimps,' Rollo snarled. 'I can best you all even without a weapon.'

'Stand down thief! We have you,' said the largest guard.

'Don't make any more trouble for yourself.' The dock worker wheezed in the back ground and tried to sit up.

'I'm no thief, I'm an adventurer, and soon you'll know it,' said the frenzied boy.

'Stand down, now, or there will be trouble!'

'Pah!' spat Rollo. He lunged forward, but it was a fake move. The guard he lunged for backed away as the largest to his rear left moved in with the point of his glaive. Rollo spun, catching the large veteran guard by surprise. He grabbed the handle of the glaive, just below the steel head and pulled it away from the guard. The guard had been caught off balance and was powerless to resist. Rollo wrenched the glaive free, spun it around and jabbed the point into the gut of the leather-clad guard.

'You see' he screamed in triumph, 'I am...'

Umph!

He was stopped short by a blow to his back. In his frenzy he had overlooked the third guard, who was now withdrawing the five inch steel point of his glaive from Rollo's back.

The stabbed guard dropped to his knees, a large blood stain appearing on his black leathers.

Rollo turned and faced his attacker.

'You dare attack mee!!' his voice becoming more high-

pitched and maniacal. 'I'll finish you!'

He lunged for the guard who parried his effort and jabbed back, catching Rollo in the thigh.

'Stand down, young man!' the guard bellowed at him in desperation.

Rollo swung again, this time across from right to left, attacking with the blade. The guard parried the blow with the long handle and then turned his head away so as not to watch what happened next. The first guard attacked Rollo from behind, using the blade of his polearm, and struck down onto Rollo's left shoulder. The blade went in a foot deep and wedged there.

'Nnraaaaah!' yelled Rollo, still struggling to stand. He dropped to his knees, blood now gushing from his three wounds.

'Nraaah!' Rollo yelled again, but he was fading now. The superhuman qualities the Spice had lent him were not enough to survive that blow. He felt suddenly cold.

All along the promenade people were alerted to the incident by the noise of the commotion. A group of five elves moved swiftly to see and even swifter once they saw who it was. Just after the fatal blow was struck and Rollo collapsed to his knees, Lishiana pushed through the crowd and approached the dying boy. Everyone had gone quiet as Rollo collapsed back, dislodging the glaive from his body and causing a fountain of

blood to spray everywhere. She ignored it and crouched down over him.

Rollo's last image of life was that of a beautiful elven face with tears in her copper gold eyes, but his addled brain could not make sense of it. Then there was only darkness.

Upping the Ante

In a dark cavern close by and overlooking the mushroom fields on the edge of the Shadow Gnome city of Imar, two great Clan leaders, Kymru Galavan and Braden Puttnik, were deep in discussion. They were accompanied by their high mages, Mentza Galavan and Akkron Puttnik, as they put together their plans for the further spread of the Spice trade.

'I think, Braden, that we can safely say that our infiltration of the city of Findon has been a complete success. Djemmini has served us well,' said Kymru.

'I could not agree more, Kymru, hence it is time to sspread our network. Akkron is keen to get on with his summoningss and has already made contact with Cheragai, a particularly nasty and deceitful devil, but highly skilled in shapechanging and esspionage,' replied Braden.

'Excellent, my friend! This Cheragai has friends?' enquired Kymru.

'Indeed he does,' Akkron jumped in. 'He can bring a legion of subordinates with him to assist him in his work of corruption.'

'And you have enough control over him to stop him running amok?' asked Mentza, fully aware of the dangers of relying on

devils.

'I have something of his,' chuckled Akkron. 'He was a little careless in his information to me some years ago and is now effectively my servant. And it's more than just his true name!'

'Intriguing, Akkron. Best keep it secret then. I don't wish to be on his list for vengeance should he ever get whatever it is back!' replied Mentza.

Akkron stared at Mentza with a look of surprise. 'You doubt me Mentza? You believe that you are the only shadow gnome who can control Demons and Devils? You only have that crazy whore Leileilii under your control.'

'Take care Akkron,' Mentza began, but was interrupted by the sound of hard boots on the stone floor. A topless woman, a huge batwinged devil of a woman, entered the cavern from a side alcove - Leileilii.

'Little shadow gnome, how sweet, calling me a whore,' the fiendish being said looking straight into Akkron's eyes. 'I have, of course, been called far worse than that,' the husky, bold voice continued. 'Not that anyone who did is still here to repeat it.'

She shot forward and produced an evil-looking red trident from nowhere, dripping acid and poisons from its tips, and

thrust it under Akkron's nose.

'Haaaa!' she rasped into the face of Akkron Puttnik. 'No more warnings little shadow gnome, or I'll skewer you for rat meat, whatever magical spells you think you have protecting you!'

'Apologies, Leileilii, I spoke out of turn,' said Akkron with a shallow bow, trying to backtrack. He wasn't unduly worried by Leileilii; Akkron believed he was far too powerful for her but she was meant to be an ally in this, not an enemy.

'We digress' stated Kymru interrupting the face off. 'A pleasure to see you, as ever, Leileilii. We are sure you will enjoy your work on the surface - a whole town to corrupt, relationships to be had!'

The succubus smiled at Kymru, a shudder rippling through the devil's body as she imagined the fun she would have. The shadow gnomes of Clan Galavan were always a pleasure to work with and this mission looked like it would be no exception. She cast a spell, and ever so slowly the bat wings retracted and disappeared, she shrank slightly in height, her hair turning a deep luscious red, till there was just a stunning human woman standing before them.

'Do you like my disguise little gnomes? It is not one I have used in anybody here's lifetime, but it served a purpose a long time ago. I seem to recall that it beguiled many a surface

dwelling human fool back then. I'm sure it will suffice this time'. She tossed her shaggy long red hair in an alluring manner and ran her hands down the sides of her curvaceous body. Her black eyes locked onto Mentza.

'Thank you for this opportunity again Mentza, you won't be disappointed!' The succubus woman whispered a few arcane words for a spell of teleportation and was gone.

'She has already been fully briefed on her mission,' Mentza began, 'she will begin with lesser nobles within the town. I believe there are a great many that reside in the town so as to be a little further away from Theobold's influence. They shouldn't be too hard for her to seduce. She will ensure they turn a blind eye to any unusual activities, perhaps turn some of them on to the Spice. As you saw, she can be most persuasive. She should pave the way for Djemmini and his followers to trade freely within the town. I have told her not to lose control in the town though and that there will be dire consequences if she does!'

Akkron looked at Mentza with an expression of surprise.

'You have threatened her?' he asked.

'She and I understand each other, let us say. Like you and your Cheragai, Akkron, I have a certain hold over her,' Mentza replied.

'Akkron,' Kymru Galavan began, 'you will summon this Cheragai and any of his cohorts you see fit. Send them to Abinger; try to peddle as much Spice as possible. Give them as much Spice as they can carry and start giving it out to the poor and the lowly; they are always the easiest target.'

Akkron turned to Braden to confirm he could accept the order from someone other than his Clan leader. Braden simply nodded.

'Very well, I shall return to my summoning chambers right away. May Shylar grant us all the darkness we need to succeed?' Akkron said in a brief reference to the god of the shadow gnomes. He twisted a ring on his middle finger and vanished.

'We will be in touch, Braden. Let us meet again in a tenday and assess the progress of our devilish allies.' Kymru nodded to Braden and he and Mentza walked calmly out of the cavern.

Braden smiled, twisted a ring on his finger and was gone.

On a particularly unpleasant, hot, arid, hostile and noxious region of the seventh plane of hell, the eight-foot tall bearded Devil, Cheragai, was laying down his law to a handful of his subordinates. The smaller devils, some winged, all horned

and tailed, hopped around, half out of fear, half out of excitement for the mission that was to come. All were shapeshifters and they were going to be humans, a favourite disguise, for humans were not far off devils in their drive and personal ambitions. So pretending to be them, while infesting their worlds, was always a pleasure.

'We go to this plane, a prime material, and we do exactly as we are told. It is imperative that you follow my instructions. Is that understood?' barked Cheragai, staring hard at the bobbling fools before him. He loomed over them, much as his forbidding residence, a five-storey tower made of red blood stone and the bones of those Cheragai had conquered, loomed over them all.

Cheragai was in a foul temper, a rage he hadn't been in for millennia. He had been stupid, he knew that, but to let slip both his true name and the whereabouts of the phylactyr he kept some of his essence in was unforgivable. That evil, tiny, creepy shadow gnome had conned him into revealing all with the promise of more power, and he had fallen for it. But this would be a short-lived state of affairs. The gnome, Akkron Puttnik, would not last long, for he would surely make a mistake somewhere along the line and Cheragai would gain his revenge. In the meantime, he may as well wreak some havoc on a prime material;

it had been a while.

'Assume human form now!' he ordered the gathered throng. The hopping devils briefly calmed and slowly they became humans or as human as they could. Of the twenty gathered, at least four were not well disguised, with the odd horn or tail nub still showing.

'Imbeciles!' roared Cheragai as he grabbed the nearest malformed. He held the smaller devil by the throat and squeezed the humanesque form with his huge right taloned hand. The head started to bulge and the eyes popped out of their sockets and rolled and dangled down onto the creature's cheeks. With a roar Cheragai grabbed the now bulbous head with his left hand and tore it off.

'No more mistakes!' he roared at the rest. He turned away back towards his tower, moving several yards from the others to begin his own transformation. A few moments later he was a human himself, a particularly handsome one, he thought, and cast a spell to contact his now master. A few moments later, a gate appeared, on the other side of which the devils could see their new home. What they could actually see was a small back alley in the large town of Abinger, the gate the handiwork of a certain Priest of Nyrex.

'Get through and don't cause a stir yet! We must

infiltrate, not destroy, not yet at any rate,' barked Cheragai. One by one the human devils jumped through the gate and arrived in the unwitting town of Abinger. Before he stepped through, Cheragai took a last look back at his cherished tower, and instructed himself, 'Infiltrate! That's the job, spread this 'Spice'. Only after that would he feel confident enough to try and end his misery at the hands of Akkron Puttnik.

Not long before the unwanted arrivals in Abinger, a beautiful human woman had sashayed in to Ingles, on a warm autumn evening. She had beguiled the guards at the city gates to such an extent that they had taken her personally straight to the best inn in the city. Once there and after several desperate attempts by the guard to secure a further meeting, she set about seducing the inn keeper and the other guests that were giving her more than a lingering glance. She wore a long red velvet dress with no back; she loved the irony of exposing the flesh there, and frequently tossed about her flowing red hair as she laughed at the very poor witticisms of the innkeeper and the growing number of potential suitors. As the night wore on she

drank, seemingly without effect, but began to discreetly tell tales of a wonderful substance that made her feel... Well, a batting of eyelids and a slight shudder gave all concerned enough of a hint and did anyone know if it could be found in Ingles?

During the following days there was a frenzy of activity as men, mostly young and wealthy but some old enough to know better, made discreet enquiry after discreet enquiry, mostly in vain, until one young man was fortunate enough to ask a dark haired unshaven man he hadn't seen before. He was in luck. The unshaven man said he had just come from the city of Findon and this substance was all the rage. He fortunately had a little on him, and the young man could have it if he wanted. The young man whooped with delight and visions of the gorgeous, voluptuous flame-haired woman flitted through his mind. He thanked the man profusely, whereupon he was informed that if there was such a demand he would see if he could pick up some more. Perhaps if they were to meet there again in, say, three days time he could give him some more to distribute himself?

The young man was in the finest inn that night and approached the flame-haired beauty. She squealed with delight when he told her of his success. She insisted on inviting him up to her room and sharing the Spice with him.

The following morning, the battered, bruised and shell-shocked young man sauntered into the main feasting room of the inn with a grin the size of a slice of watermelon. They had tried the Spice and, Pow!, all he could remember was feeling like a god and physical pleasure like he had never known before. In actual fact, Leileilii had planted the memories into his psyche after knocking him cold once she could no longer tolerate his amorous advances, after the Spice had fully taken hold. He couldn't help but brag about how great it was and that, if they were lucky, he might be able to help the others find this amazing, stuff, and they too could know this sumptuous woman.

Three days later, the young man received ten packets of Spice to distribute to his friends. The downfall of Ingles had begun.

A Call to Arms

'Companions of the Compass! Greetings from your erstwhile leader, mage and good friend! Yes 'tis I, Ethandril Thililisfarne. Though it has been some thirty years and very few conversations between us, it would appear that our skills are required once again to solve problems as only we can. Should you be able to and chose to accept this, rather exciting if I'm honest, mission, then please say the companion rhyme and you will arrive here with me, in the court of Sir Theobold. He was, if you remember, just little Theo before, in the city of Findon on the great continent of Vallilea. Please adequately equip yourselves as this may be dangerous.

'Come Abyss or high water, we shall always stick together, whatever the slaughter, companions forever.'

Ethandril.

Sir Theobold, his chief advisor Argyll, his mage Lorian and her father, the head of the Company of the Compass, all waited impatiently in the vast hall of Sir Theobold's palace. The waiting was excruciating. Would any of the companions heed the summons? Could they manage the mission if one didn't show up? Would Ethandril ever stop wittering away to himself? The

ever beautiful Lorianana had her chin in one hand and stared at her father. How could he have ever produced her she wondered? Certainly she had his gift for magic but he was borderline insane. From what she could remember, he appeared to be getting worse. The constant monologue was not all that new, but generally it was a musing when a question had been asked or a problem needed solving and not just the insane workings of his copious mind.

To the relief of all those waiting, there was a twinkling of lights in the middle of the hall. At least someone had chosen to come, they thought. There was a collective sigh, followed by looks of slight embarrassment between the three of them that they had been on such tenterhooks. A dark-haired elf, with shoulders as wide as a grizzly bear and covered in exotic tattoos, stood before them.

'Quin-Helwig!' exclaimed Ethandril. 'Quin, Quin, Quin, ranger extraordinaire, stalker of the unstalkable, scourge of the undead, defender of the living, friend to animals, foe to monsters,' Ethandril paused and beamed. 'You have more tattoos,' he stated, tilting his head to the right to further examine his friend.

'Hello Ethan, master magician, and scourge of...' he held back from saying anymore so as not to offend Ethandril, and came

forward to hug the wizard, now much cleaner than when he had first arrived at the palace, slightly charred. Up against another elf, the sheer enormity and muscularity of Quin-Helwig could clearly be seen and Lorianana felt her stomach flutter slightly. She had been only fifteen when the Company went their separate ways and as a half-elf she was now mature, where a true elf would not be.

'Now Quin, you know most of these people, I know, but let's do the introductions,' Ethandril began, being as helpful as he could. 'Sir Theobold, now ruler of this great city of Findon, merely a boy of eighteen when last we were here.'

'Greetings, Quin-Helwig! A pleasure and thank you for coming. Real problem we have here, hope you can help. Wish I had aged as well as you, ho yes, trouble with being human and all!' Sir Theobold greeted Quin slightly awkwardly.

'The Company would always come to your aid, Sir Theobold,' replied Quin emphasising the Sir. 'We were very close to your grandfather and would never let down a member of the Blackstone family,' he continued with a heavy elven accent.

'Splendid! Splendid! This, Quin, is my most trusted advisor, Argyll, a rock for me he is, a true rock. I don't know if I could make a decision without him.'

'Sir Theobold overstates my importance, Quin-Helwig, but it

is my pleasure to make your acquaintance,' Argyll said.

'Likewise, Argyll, you fill an important role here.' The mirth and understanding in the pair's eyes was not lost on either of them.

'And Quin, Quin, this,' interjected Ethandril, 'this glorious, heavenly creature is my daughter, Lorian. You may remember her when she was young, but she has blossomed into something rare, Quin, intelligent beyond compare, beautiful beyo...'

'Alright, Ethan, enough,' Lori butted in to stop her father's embarrassing rambling. 'Greetings Quin-Helwig! Thank you for coming, you are much as I remember. I hope you can help,' she finished.

'You are little as I remember, Lori, 'tis a pleasure to see you again, and how you have indeed blossomed'.

She felt her cheeks flush as the burly ranger looked her up and down in an extremely inappropriate manner.

'So this problem,' Quin began, 'it must be serious, for no one has felt the need to assemble the Company for, what thirty years? What's the story, and is it your fault, Ethan?' he ended turning to face the taller flame elf.

'I,' replied Ethan, thrusting his long, elegant, sharp pointed nose into the air, 'have nothing to do with this. It

would appear to be a man-made problem.'

'Man-made, with due respect to you, Sir Theobold, does not surprise me. On the southern isles we are starting to get more and more curious boats in our waters, especially the last ten years. The southern elf council is even considering turning Zinzu island in to a defensive position, much as the Solar elves have with Floreal and Sangreal islands to protect their mainland.'

'And we have with Wye,' interrupted Ethandril.

'Men are starting to spread and fast,' Quin finished.

Sir Theobold was unable to think of much to say as it was almost impossible for him to understand the fears and feelings of these two elves. He knew from Loriania that her father was over a thousand years old, and that Quin-Helwig was not a young elf either. They had seen the rise of man from small towns and villages to the cities of today and it was not easy for them to witness such a speed of expansion.

The slightly awkward pause in conversation was thankfully broken by more arrivals. A twinkling of lights preceded two elves arriving simultaneously, the brother and sister, Elwood the Priest and Catarina Farfadet, both dressed in green leather and travelling cloaks. They smiled as they saw the collected throng.

'Siblings!' screeched Ethandril in delight. 'My, how you have grown.'

The brother and sister were the youngest of the group, now a little over two hundred years apiece, and both had matured to full adulthood in the years they had all been apart. It was noticeable that the pair, as copper elves, had a tendency to be broader than other elves and they had certainly filled out since the Company had last been together.

'Ethan, good to see you again, all in one piece too,' Catarina said as she advanced towards the smiling mage with open arms. They hugged as old friends do, though Lori couldn't help but notice her father's rather lingering hug.

'Ethan, it's great to be back in your esteemed company again. You'll be pleased to know that I am greatly in Yllana's favour now. I look forward to her aiding our cause,' Elwood said as he followed his sister into embracing Ethan.

'Oooh Elwood! You're not going to beat me with the 'our God' stick are you, you know I'm not a huge fan, especially as she seems to have it in for me,' Ethan said with a slightly concerned look.

'Yllana is always looking out for you, Ethandril Thililisfarne, and those around you. She loves you just as much as she loves all her children,' Elwood replied.

Ethandril winced at the use of the word children as he received a grim stare from Lorianana and had a momentary pang of guilt about Thelandril. But it passed.

'It's good to see you again, Elwood,' a smiling Quin declared, as he advanced upon the Priest, 'and with such strength from our Goddess too.' They hugged in greeting before Quin turned his attention to Catarina. 'Cat, how the years have flown and they have touched you well I see. I presume your training has developed too?' he asked as his eyes travelled up her body to meet her copper eyes.

'Hello Quin, I see the years have lent you no more subtlety, but a few more tattoos.' She replied grinning as she appraised the heavily muscled ranger. They embraced as those who have shared intimacy do, an act that left the rest of the room looking away rather awkwardly.

'Siblings, here please,' Ethan called.' This is young Lorianana, my daughter. You may remember her from our last days together. She is now very important around here, advising,' Ethan paused and pointed at Sir Theobold, 'him, Sir Theobold.'

The rapid nature of semi-introductions had heads spinning, so Sir Theobold took control.

'Elwood, high Priest, welcome, and thank you for coming in our time of need. Catarina, likewise, your skills will be most

helpful with our situation. I welcome you both with open arms, and should you require anything, anything at all, do not hesitate to ask either my advisor here, Argyll, or Lorianana,' Sir Theobold stated.

Argyll gave a small bow to the two continental elves. He could feel the godly presence emanating from Elwood. Fascinating, he thought, he hadn't been near a priest emanating such godly power before; Elwood was clearly in high favour.

'So this situation, 'Elwood began, 'what has been going on? It must be serious if you felt the need to call on us? It must be local, too, as we haven't heard anything in the Daphinium forest and we're not that far away.'

'Yes. Indeed it is local,' was the clipped response from Sir Theobold. 'We actually have a witness to some of the goings on too. Aside from Lorianana's scrying, a copper elf, Lishiana is her name, witnessed a tragic event recently. She should be here to recount her tale shortly.'

'I will ask what I can of Yllana to help guide us in this, once we have all the facts together,' replied Elwood.

'So, Catarina, how's the spell craft coming?' Ethandril interjected. 'Mastered anything particularly exciting yet? Anything that may whet old Ethandril's appetite?'

'Nothing particularly new Ethan, as I spend as much time on

my sword craft.'

'Oh do you have to?' Ethan stopped her. 'You're such a capable wizard; you have no need to use a metal stick too. I never needed one.'

Quin coughed as he tried to suppress a laugh. The reference to a metal stick was fine for now, Apollo hadn't arrived yet.

'I believe metal sticks have saved you on more than one occasion, Ethan,' Quin said. 'And remember we don't all have your talent for sorcery.'

'Yes Ethan, sometimes a sword can be more specific when dealing with a problem. Not every situation can be dealt with by utter annihilation of the opposite side,' Catarina finished.

'Hhmmph' said Ethandril.

A twinkle of lights from the centre of the room indicated another arrival. Had anyone unfamiliar with what was occurring watched the scene, they would have thought that an avatar of the gods had just arrived on Estrella. A tall and slender being, with shoulder length golden hair stood before the gathering. He was hard to look at such was the nature of the highly polished chain mail he wore like a second skin, emphasising the steely nature of the slight body beneath. He walked forward with such fluid grace it was like watching smoke travel effortlessly

across a room. He stopped before the others and cast deep indigo eyes around the room taking in each and every one of those gathered.

'What a motley rag-tag crew of half breeds we have assembled here,' he said. 'Dwelf, I see full clothing has yet to make it to the southern isles. You are supposed to cover yourself with them, not ink. Continentals, yes I see you have grown and filled out, anymore so and you will look like humans.'

Ethandril beamed at the new arrival.

'Furnace face, wipe that ridiculous grin off your visage, you look even more demented than usual. I can only assume that she,' he said turning to Lorian, 'is your half-breed bastard.'

Jaws went slack around the room. Sir Theobald couldn't believe what he had just heard. This was meant to be a friend.

'I take it the ghost is not here yet, or is he lurking in the shadows as ever?'

No one replied.

'Well then, what's all this about? It had better be good. I was very busy training Solars before this summons so you had better not be wasting my time, Ethandril,' he said, his ancient indigo eyes boring into first Ethan then Sir Theobald.

Quin-Helwig slowly approached the taller elf, locking gazes with the stately creature. He stopped a mere six inches short

and stared hard at the solar elf. Slowly the corners of his mouth began to turn upwards and a smile appeared on his brown skinned tattooed face.

'It is good to have you back with us Apollo Shiningblade; I see time has not blunted your disdain for the rest of us,' Quin said. He lunged forward and wrapped the taller elf in a huge hug and lifted him off the floor.

'Dwelf, is it really necessary to show such coarse physical emotion? Put me down. You repulse me and are leaving greasy sweat on my mail,' Apollo said as he struggled to get out of the ranger's grip.

Quin let go and turned away laughing. The pair had adventured together for several centuries and there was nothing that Apollo could say that could upset Quin, not any more. He even accepted the name Dwelf with good nature, the supposition that he was part dwarf due to his muscular stature.

Not everyone was as accommodating of Apollo's caustic wit, however. Lorianana, visibly upset, started to speak.

'You have been summoned here,' she began, but Apollo cut her off.

'Half-breed, my, you have grown, you even look like some of the other ones Ethandril fathered.'

Lorianana's eyes widened, because she had never heard this

before. She looked over at her father for confirmation but he was busy looking everywhere else except at her.

'Oh you didn't know, never mind. I forget that when you have been around as long as I have that these things can have an impact on the shorter-lived. Your father has quite a history of half-breed creation. Just ask him,' Apollo sneered.

'Now listen here, Apollo Shiningblade,' Sir Theobold jumped in, furious at the treatment of his mage and the general attitude of this so-called hero. 'You are in my palace and if you didn't want to accept the summons, you didn't have to come. Now apologise to my high mage and...'

Apollo held up a slender golden hand to silence Sir Theobold. He approached to within a foot of the ruler of the city of Findon and looked down his nose at him.

'When last we met, you were just Theo and not much more than a boy. In the time since you have become virtually an old man. I believe I have had one haircut in that time and needed to trim my nails perhaps twice. I am here because you asked me and I choose to be here. Now, if there is a problem perhaps I may help but do not suppose to tell me how to behave. I'm sure you would like me to speak well of you in another millennium when few others will remember you, never mind there being anyone else still around that met you!' Apollo finished.

'It is good to have you with us,' Catarina broke the standoff. 'Lord Shiningblade, I have much to show you. I have improved my rhythm dance significantly since last we met and have found several excellent spells to accompany it.'

Apollo looked her up and down. 'I am delighted you have made such improvements, truly I am. Just make sure those don't get in your way too much,' he gestured indicating her breasts. 'I see you and you brother have fully acquired the usual copper elf physiques.' Catarina closed her eyes and suppressed any retort, since she knew it would be useless against the beyond arrogant elf.

A twinkle of lights heralded the last arrival, much to the relief of Sir Theobold, Argyll and Lorian. They were unprepared for the caustic Apollo and were trying hard not to lose their tempers with him. Even Argyll was astonished that he could be so hurtful and yet he radiated no malice; it was extraordinary.

A cloaked figure stood before them. No features were visible. The cloak seemed to be made of shimmering shadow, giving an indistinct edge to the person underneath, and both the leggings and boots that were visible beneath were midnight black.

'Oh dear,' sneered Apollo, 'the ghost has arrived.'

Orion Lutin pulled back his cowl and shook out his long

shaggy white hair. His white skin did indeed give him the appearance of a ghost, but the hardness in his pink eyes revealed he was very much alive.

'How wonderful to see you again too, Apollo, though please don't sneer too hard, I'd hate for you to crease that beautiful face of yours on my account,' Orion replied.

There was a sudden burst of laughter from all assembled, except Apollo, and an easing of tension in the room. Just when Sir Theobold was wondering how anyone would be able to spend any time in the company of Apollo Shiningblade, the answer, and the antidote arrived. Orion Lutin did not suffer fools; in fact, any fools he had had to suffer were dead. Apollo was no fool, but Orion knew just how to keep him in check. The final piece of the Company jigsaw was now in place. They fitted together perfectly, youth and experience, intelligence and wisdom, strength and guile, openness and cunning, magic and steel, all the attributes needed for a successful adventuring band. They were an awesome outfit.

'If I may, Sir Theobold,' Argyll began, 'I'd like to bring in Lishiana so she can tell her tale and we can plan a course of action.'

'Yes Argyll, very good. Lishiana. Well done, staying on the

task at hand as ever,' rattled off Sir Theobold, now reverting very much to his default self. 'Bring her in right away!'

Argyll left the main hall through a side door and returned a few minutes later with the copper elf. She carried herself with confidence and gave a small curtsy to Sir Theobold when she approached. Apollo raised an eyebrow.

'Oh good, more curvaceous continentals,' he said in a tone dripping with sarcasm.

Sir Theobold shot him an angry glance but Lishiana appeared not to have heard, or had chosen not to.

'Lishiana, please tell us your tale,' prompted Sir Theobold. She turned to the assembled elves and told the story of the preceding week and the demise of the young lad Rollo.

When she was done the elves looked at each other, each wondering where it left them.

'You have dragged us all here to deal with a few humans with a drink problem,' said Apollo incredulous. 'I shall be on my way.'

'Wait' Catarina interrupted, 'we should at least go and see for ourselves. If this happened on the main promenade what are the slums like?'

'Chaos from what I have scryed,' Lorianana butted in. 'There are people behaving like rabid animals all over the place. We

can't get enough guards into the area at any one time, as the frenzied state happens quite quickly and randomly. That's why we need you, to go in and try to get a handle on it. We are fairly sure that something is being imbibed, but you need to go to a tavern or two to see if you can find out any more. I'm sure I have witnessed some sort of deal in the street but it is so hard to tell from a scrying. We summoned you because you are the best, and you can protect yourselves. Those under the influence are unusually strong.'

'I will happily come with you,' said Lishiana. 'I was an adventurer a while back and would gladly help out, in poor Rollo's memory.'

'I'm not sure sentiment will be helpful,' said Quin.
'Emotions in this could hinder us'.

'Nonsense Quin! Nonsense, nonsense! This lovely lady can of course accompany us,' said Ethandril. 'I am the leader of this Company and I say she can join us.' He smiled a great broad and salacious grin at Lishiana. She returned the smile, a little nervously.

'Well, if that is agreed, I think you should get some spare cloaks so you don't stand out so much if you are going to the docks district and on from there,' suggested Sir Theobold. They were just spreading out, moving towards the side door from where

Lishiana had come, when Orion stopped them.

'Wait!' he said in a very clear and uncompromising tone. Everyone turned to look at him. 'She can't come' he finished.

'But..' several voices began in unison.

In an instant Orion disappeared and reappeared right behind Lishiana, her chin now in his left hand and an evil looking black dagger pressed to her throat. Lorianana audibly gasped.

'What are you doing, elf?' roared Sir Theobold.

Calmly Orion spoke 'what happens if I draw my dagger across your neck?'

Lishiana tried to swallow but couldn't. She was terrified. Orion gently pressed the wicked edge against the pale milky green skin and drew a little blood.

'As I thought, he said'. Suddenly he was a flurry of motion. He leapt from behind Lishiana and threw the dagger at Catarina's head. He produced darts from nowhere and hurled them at his remaining companions, all straight and true for the heart.

The first dart hit the vast pectoral of Quin-Helwig and dropped to the floor at his feet, the point of the dart bent from the impact. The dagger hurled at Catarina hit her stoneskin and likewise dropped to the floor. Apollo drew his shining blade faster than most people could blink and parried away the dart aimed at him as if swatting a particularly slow fly. The dart

flying at Ethandril simply passed straight through him as though he wasn't really there and flew on to stick several inches deep into the wooden door on the far side. The final dart aimed at Elwood was consumed by holy fire as it came within a couple of inches of hitting him.

Orion looked around the room into the eyes of each of his friends. They all realised why he had done it. There wasn't a mark on any of them.

'My apologies, lady Lishiana, but we are all protected all of the time and you are not. Even after thirty years I knew I would not hurt any of my friends. It is just how we are. We cannot afford to take along anyone we may have to protect; it's too dangerous, for everyone.' He beckoned Elwood over to see to her cut.

Not for the first time that day Sir Theobold had to shut his open, slack-jawed mouth. He had never seen anything like what he had just witnessed. The speed and ferocity of it all was staggering and the nonchalant way the Company dealt with it... He felt sure he had made the right decision in calling upon them. If anyone could get to the bottom of this, the Company of the Compass could.

There was a murmur, a whisper going around the slums that evening. Vagabonds and street dwellers were eyeing up intruders suspiciously. The slums had their own rules. It was an area of five streets across, where the last few warehouses of the docks and the first few streets of the workers' district should have met, except that they didn't. Anytime anyone tried to use the area for that purpose, fires were started, goods stolen and murders were common place. In that area the people, if they could still be described as that, were the homeless, the displaced or the addicted. It was not uncommon to see the odd body slumped by the side of the road, unconscious from too much grog. They were mostly human, addiction seemed to be a particularly human trait, but there were a few half-elves, continental half-breeds, and a few thunder dwarves down on their luck and who had succumbed to the bottle.

A group of six cloaked and cowled strangers were walking the alleys, effortlessly gliding along the road, turning to look at those propping themselves up against solid walls of burnt-out

houses. Although their faces were not visible, the street people knew they were elves, there was no disguising it. Bloodshot, half-mad eyes stared back as the group passed, ravaged minds searching for the possibility of an attack. What did these elves have on them that could be sold, could be traded, for Spice? That was the issue. The last month a new epidemic of madness and addiction had swept through the slums like wild fire and its name was 'Spice'. They all wanted it; all wanted more of it and were willing to do anything to get it. Those not yet comatose started to follow the group, nipping in and out of old and burnt-out buildings, watching for any signs of either power or weakness. They were more than adept at this. Often a sailor, new to the town, would stagger out of the taverns of the dock district the worse for wear and go the wrong way to his ship. Few of them ever made it anywhere again if they entered the slums.

'Ooh, we're being watched on all sides,' whispered Ethandril, trying to suppress a squeal of excitement.

'Calm down, you over-excitabile fool, of course we are. It's why we are here. I don't as yet see anything that unusual in a place such as this,' replied Apollo.

The Company turned from one street to an alley that linked across to the next street; they were right in the heart of the

slums and it's denizens decided now was the time to say 'Hello'.

A group of at least six shambling men appeared at the other end of the alley. They began to make weird gestures, raising their hands to their mouths, and letting out roars and whoops of excitement. The Spice was going down well. They stood blocking the alley some twenty yards ahead, raising their arms high above their heads and drawing deeper and deeper breaths.

'It's like some sort of shamanistic ritual,' Catarina noted. 'Did they all just take something?'

'It looks that way,' Orion answered her. 'We have many such rituals on the northern isles, but I don't recognize it. If they have taken something, I'm sure I can work out what it is,' finished the assassin.

There was a shuffling noise from above and behind, several rag-covered heads appeared over the edge of the roof tops above and the way behind was now blocked off by at least another half-dozen men.

'It looks like we shall be getting some answers tonight,' said Quin.

'Hail! Slum residents and unfortunates of the city of Findon,' began Ethandril. 'I, Ethandril Thililisfarne, and my trusty friends here would like to ask you a few short questions, then we shall be on our way.'

The Company were used to Ethandril but it had been thirty years since they had been together and even they were caught by surprise at his behaviour.

'You are quite mad, aren't you?' said Apollo staring at Ethan.

'They probably want to kill us and strip our bodies so as to sell anything valuable we have, Ethandril, not chat,' finished Orion in his usual realist tone.

'Oh no, we can achieve a whole lot more from parlay, don't you think?' replied Ethandril, aiming the last part of the sentence at the gathered slum dwellers.

Those blocking the alley whence they had come seemed to go through the same ritual as the others. Hand to mouth, stretching and excited roars. There was a brief pause as the two sides eyed each other, then, as the six members of the Company all felt the moment the balance tipped, the slum dwellers attacked.

An almighty roar came from the twenty or so Spice-addled slum dwellers on all sides and they charged. Orion vanished almost instantly, much to the irritation of Quin-Helwig and Apollo, both of whom preferred to stand their ground. Apollo drew his dazzling green pulsing blade and awaited the rush from the direction ahead. The siblings turned to the direction they had come from, with Catarina whizzing through her spell and

letting loose a volley of missiles. Elwood unleashed three arrows from his divine bow into separate men, Catarina four green magic missiles into four others. They barely flinched as they rushed on. That really caught the brother and sister by surprise. Only ten yards away now, Ethandril finished a chant and a wall of fire appeared between the onrushing crazed slum dwellers and Elwood and Catarina.

'Ha! Ha!' Ethandril proclaimed.

The Spice-addled lunatics rushed straight though it.

Rushing in from the other side, Quin-Helwig strode forward to meet them, short sword in his left hand, long sword in the right. The slum dwellers were not heavily armed, mostly they held daggers or knives while a few held clubs. Quin met the first attacker and parried a dagger with his short sword, forcing the thrust out to his left, and swept down on to the neck and right shoulder of the man with his long sword. There was a huge bang as the sword exploded on contact with the vagabond. What was left of him collapsed to the ground. The rush didn't stop despite the brutal killing. Two more jumped in to attack Quin as Apollo stepped forward. Quin took a step back to allow Apollo room while his attackers' bull rushed him. He dropped to the ground, doing the splits in the process, and held

both swords out for the onrushing madmen. The long sword exploded a second time, removing the man's midsection and leaving three cauterized parts, two legs and a shoulder girdle and head, to drop to the alley floor. The short sword slid into the other madman like a hot knife through butter. The man appeared not to notice and furiously stabbed at Quin's arm with knives in both hands. Although Quin could not be cut, attacks, if hard enough could leave bruises or worse. He heard a snap.

'Aarrgh!' Quin roared in pain as he felt the smaller bone of his forearm crack under the assault. He had never felt such power from a human and let go of the short sword. He jumped to his feet, leaping three feet into the air, and swung down with his long sword onto his frenzied assailant's head. The sword dug in, cleaving the head in two. There was no bang this time, a situation that always disturbed the goodly ranger, since the sword only tried to obliterate evil beings.

Apollo meanwhile was thoroughly occupied by three others, though they were now down to four arms between them. He was spinning vigorously in both directions and the extra strength these men appeared to have only increased the power of his own attacks. He was awesome. A low parry to his right caused an anti-clockwise spin, the sword coming down over his right shoulder, and a head went flying. He spun anti-clockwise again

of his own accord, only to meet a dagger thrust at his middle; he parried it and spun clockwise back, while stepping back. The last six inches of his blade slashed across the belly of the dagger wielder, spilling his guts. The frenzied creature, a half-elf by the look of him, continued to try to attack, even on his knees with no innards. He collapsed moments later. The last one-armed frenzied lunatic rushed in holding a dagger, point down, in his white-knuckled fist. He raised his hand high to try to stab Apollo in the head or neck. The regal solar elf gave a push of his left leg and thrust forward by two feet, skewering the one-armed man. The slum dweller shook violently as the green-hued sword pulsed and burned his insides, yet still furiously tried to swipe at Apollo. It was to no avail; with his life blood pouring from his severed arm and opened gut he dropped to his knees. As Apollo swiftly withdrew his shining blade and stood back, the urchin collapsed at his feet.

Even though they were seasoned adventurers, Elwood, Catarina and Ethandril were all caught by surprise as the slum dwellers rushed through Ethandril's wall of fire. The leading two, rag clothing now burning, took hard swings at Catarina. Their blows were blocked by her stoneskin spell, though she was shoved backwards by the enormous force behind the blows.

Bow still in hand, Elwood reacted quickly and let off two

arrows from point blank range into two more vagabonds that were heading his way. This time they did drop with large smoking holes in their chests.

Catarina pulled out her trusted long sword in a bid to engage her assailants. She whipped the magic blade out in front of her to parry the first incoming blow, using the rhythm dance to help her. An overhead blow came from a club and she angled her sword horizontally. The blow struck hard and Catarina lent slightly forward and gave a small jump. The momentum from the strike spun her head over heels. Her blade came down held in both hands and split her foe in half, from the top of his head to the middle of his chest. She barely had time to worry about her second attacker as a thin green beam passed her back by a matter of a couple of inches. It struck the second man in the chest and with a loud 'puff-pop' he was nothing but ash.

'Ethan,' she called out 'be careful! You almost hit me'.

'Almost, but I didn't, did I?' Ethandril replied. 'Have a little faith, young Cat.'

The last two that had rushed through the wall of fire seemed unsure whom to attack. In their momentary pause of indecision, Elwood unleashed two more god-blessed arrows, this time aiming at their heads; he was taking no chances. The arrows exploded into the slum dwellers, virtually decapitating them

both; their knees buckled and the remains of their bodies flopped to the ground, what would have been face first had they still had faces.

'Bravo! Elwood, cracking shot. I'd almost forgotten how good you were,' praised Ethandril as he stepped forward to examine the fresh corpses and admire Elwood's handiwork.

'Where did that pasty shadow dweller go?' Apollo enquired as he turned to the others after finishing his last opponent. 'He just loves to slip away when we have martial affairs to deal with, the coward.'

Just then, two bodies came crashing down from the roof top. The five members of the company looked up, just in time to see two more hurtle to the ground around them. They all hopped out of the way in time but continued to look up, weapons ready. A lithe figure vaulted off the roof top, landed on a window ledge, barely visible from the ground, and vaulted and somersaulted down to the ground, landing ever so lightly on its feet. Orion pulled back his cowl and looked at Apollo with disdain.

'Coward, eh? That's one more than you managed, granddad,' Orion boasted.

'This time, ghost, only this time. And I stuck around to aid us all,' Apollo retorted.

'We've attracted enough attention. See if there is any of

that stuff they all took, search the bodies,' Elwood urged the group.

Orion waved a packet in front of them all. 'Already done, Elwood. Let's get back to the palace and see what this stuff is, before we have any more run-ins.'

The group gathered in a circle just as Ethan finished his teleport spell. They vanished from the slums together in a twinkle of lights.

Problems with the Supply Line

Hurder was bored. The days were getting noticeably shorter as winter drew nearer and the snow began to fall. That meant there would be fewer and fewer travellers passing through the Shuddering Peaks. He hadn't seen as much as a caravan come through his region for several days. Nothing to throw rocks at, no merchants to terrorize, no flesh to rip apart nor bones to crunch.

'Bah' he said to himself. 'Da little fumans and ilves are avoidin' uses, knows we is here. Bah, s'borin,' he said to no one but himself.

He was sitting on a hillside in the foothills of the Shuddering Peaks. In the distance to the south he could see the urban sprawl of the human city of Findon. He had a large pile of what he termed rocks, but any normal-sized creature would refer to as boulders, next to him, to use both as camouflage and as weapons. He looked at a few wild sheep in the distance but couldn't even be bothered to go after any of them, he was bored with their taste and he fancied human meat for a change.

He was interrupted from his dim-witted thoughts by the ground vibrating. His first reaction was a rock slide and he stood up and turned to face up the slope to see if he was in any danger. Coming down the slope towards him were two huge forms,

not dissimilar to his own, which were silhouetted against the sky so he couldn't make out their faces.

'Hurder,' boomed a male voice, 'we's have a need for yous, fink you gonna like id too.'

'Dat you, Roban?' his own booming voice replied as he held a huge hand up to shield his eyes.

'Who else'd come a see you?' Roban replied. 'Got me sis Doris wid me too if you can na see all dat well, she's dis smaller one next to me,' he stated and let out a huge ground-shaking laugh. All three hill giants started to laugh together, causing the sheep a mile away to run off in alarm. Several people in Findon looked up to the sky expecting to see grey clouds and the promise of rain after the thunder they had just heard.

'I'ms bored, Roban, not seen mes no wagons for dayses, what yous got goin on?' Hurder managed to say once the laughter had died down.

'Plenty of wagons, Hurder, we's got loads, and deys all coming out a tunnel, wid fuman guards. Goin off to dem towns dan der, Findon and Iggles and wotnot. Wes been watchin for days now, Grunt n Brawny are still watchin dems,' replied Roban, an edge of excitement to his deep voice.

'We's finkin to attack uses one, see what's it all abaht,'

Doris chipped in her slightly lighter voice.

Hurder thought about this for a second whilst staring at the visiting pair. This was music to his hairy ears. His face split into the broadest of grins.

'What's was waitin for den?' he said. 'Let's not be wastin time.' With that he picked up one of the rocks from his stockpile and hurled it with all his might in the direction of the sheep. Though it dropped well short the shudder from its impact sent the poor skittish sheep running off in all directions for a second time.

The five hill giants had organized themselves well. Though they were not blessed with the greatest of intellect, they knew their way around a battlefield and were very happy to work together, especially as this was a seemingly well-prepared target. They had seen one caravan leave the dark tunnel several hours earlier and had noted four guards and a driver, which was probably it, but they couldn't rule out the possibility of a wizard lurking somewhere, as was often the case.

Their approach was simple. Wait till the wagon came to the designated spot, equidistant from them all, which was a fairly wide flat area about a hundred yards across. It was perfect for

the hill giants as it seemed to be too far from cover for an ambush, so the caravan's guard would be down, yet was wide enough for all five hill giants to rush in and attack. They would start with the rocks and then race in with their clubs to finish off what was left.

They waited, completely absorbed with the task at hand. Not one of the slow-witted creatures dared to look away just in case they missed the mark. Hurder was almost drooling in anticipation of the battle and the possibility of crunching some bones.

After several hours another caravan appeared. Large hands slowly reached out for the boulders next to them, with five pairs of beady eyes staring intently. Four guards again, though this time there appeared to be a robed figure next to the driver. Brawny would target them, which was his assignment as he was the most accurate boulder thrower. The caravan rolled forward. It was being pulled by two bay horses that appeared to be well under control and even to such edgy creatures all seemed as it should be.

There was no warning, although if you had the hearing of an elven thief it might have been possible to hear the whoosh of the flying boulders, but the first the caravan and horses knew of it was when five two-foot across, hundred-pound granite rocks landed on them. Brawny's aim was true and his rock hit first,

smashing into the robed figure and the driver; there was a blinding flash as some sort of contingency spell was activated, and the robed figure was no more. The weight of that throw collapsed the front of the caravan, causing the reins on the two horses to be yanked down hard. They would have reared up, but following in closely on Brawny's throw, Doris and Grunt had targeted the horses. Caravans don't go anywhere when those pulling them are dead. Huge dark boulders crashed into the two bays, snapping bones and sheering off limbs. The horses died instantly, without even time for a whinny of protest.

The remaining two boulders hit the sides of the caravan. While Hurder's shot clipped the back axle and a rear guardsman, Roban's effort landed on the front of the cart, smashing the axle. The stricken guard yelled in pain as his left leg was flattened in a shower of blood. Although they were stationed yards apart and unable to see each other, all five hill giants grinned simultaneously, grabbed their tree trunk clubs, leapt out of hiding and advanced upon the smashed wagon.

The shocked guards drew swords, a subconscious reaction to being attacked. When they came to their senses several seconds later they were less sure about their reaction.

'Gord, this is serious!' yelled one, except Gord was no longer able to answer, his blood loss taking his tongue.

'Jordo, we're in trouble, less ged outta here!' yelled another. The hill giants, twelve-foot tall hulking brutes with sloping foreheads, were still just far enough away for the guards. They ran as fast as they could. They knew that those who had hired them would not be happy but they would take their chances; it was more promising than facing five of these behemoths. They ran for the dark entrance of the tunnel and didn't look back.

'Bah, dem fumans ain't providin no challenges anymore,' moaned Hurder. 'Dat was too easy,' he finished as he bore down upon the mangled guard's body and tore off the good leg.

'Cos we is good and all and knows what we is doin,' Roban retorted as he heard Hurder crunching through a thigh bone.

'My thot wasth the bestht,' lisped Brawny. 'Mustht have hit a mage or sthomething.'

Doris looked at the remains of the horses, pleased with her handiwork, and bent forward to remove a haunch; she liked nothing better than fresh horse! She ran the limb she had just ripped off below her nose, savouring the smell of the kill, and took a bite. It was delicious!

'Let's see whads so important to'em,' Roban continued as he approached the shattered wreckage of the caravan. He looked at what was before him, shrugged massive shoulders and wrenched the

roof off in one movement.

He peered down into the caravan. There were four large sacks and that was it.

'Hmmp,' he said, disappointed, 'nuffin. No gold, treasure or nuffin, just sacks full of...' he didn't know what.

Roban lifted the four sacks out of the remains of the vehicle and dropped them all on the ground. They were not heavy, even by human standards. As delicately as a creature with such gigantic fingers could, he opened a sack to reveal a dark powder. He dipped a huge shovel like finger in the powder and sniffed it. He thought he knew the smell.

'Whad is it, Roban?' Hurder enquired.

'Smells like....,' he paused, 'like damp.'

'Sthmellsth like damp, how sthtrange, let me sthmell,' said Brawny as he came over to Roban. Brawny dipped a finger in the dark powder and sniffed. It did indeed smell like damp. He decided to taste it.

'Tasthtesth like...' Brawny looked as thoughtful as he was able, staring up into the sky as his huge tongue rolled the flavour around his mouth. He suddenly convulsed, shrugging his shoulders and letting out a 'brrwwer' noise as his whole body shuddered.

'Is it poison Brawny?' asked Roban with a start. 'Spid it

out, quick!'

'Na, itsth, ok. Itsh...' another shiver went through him. 'Itsh good.' A huge hand reached up and rubbed the back of his neck.

'Is good?' Hurder enquired. 'Les give id a try,' he went on.

Hurder moved across to the open bag and dipped a finger in. As he was doing so, Roban decided to join Brawny and sucked the powder from his massive finger. Doris, who had finished her haunch of horse and was watching the others, and Grunt, who until this point had lived up to his name by saying nothing and grunting infrequently, stared on.

Roban and Hurder both began to shudder and rub their necks as the Spice kicked in. All three dipped massive fingers in a second time and took some more. They began yawning and stretching in unison making strange animalistic noises.

'I feel amazthing,' said Brawny as he beamed at the others. 'Letsth go to Findon and ransthack the place.'

'Yeah, leds go and smash da place,' chipped in Hurder.

'Doris, Grunt, yous gotta try this stuff; is amazing, we could take over the wholes of da Peaks wid dis. Dem Frosty giants wouldn have a chance da way I feels now,' Roban urged his sister and Grunt. Doris and Grunt approached the sack, but after two giant fingers each there was very little left for them. They

opened a new sack and dipped two fingers in, just so they could catch up. Twenty minutes later when all the shuddering, rubbing and heavy breathing had died down the five Hill giants started to wonder what it all meant. The only difference in them now was the speed of their conversation.

'So why d'ya reckon dis is so important den?'

'Its feels good and da fumans will like its a lot.'

'Yesth, muthsth be for the fumansth.'

'Dey like stuff like dis, dey is always makin dem drinks and fings.'

'Nrr,' Grunt added as his sole contribution so far.

'Is good, but maybe we should exchange some of its for gold?'

'Dats not a bad idea Hurder, who da we know?'

'That fuman Treffa's always good for stuff with usses, we cans try to gets him here and dos a swaps.'

'Get him here as quicks as you can den Hurder. Leds just have a liddle more first, we can swap one sack, whaddya reckon?'

All five drooling, Spice-affected giants nodded in unison and hurriedly set about the third sack. Hurder ran off, after getting his last fix, to light his small signal fire that was located high up a mountainside ledge but which was just visible from the city of Findon if you knew what you were looking for.

The fire would burn for several hours and the rogue and fence, Treffa, was likely to appear in their midst sometime within a day or so. Hurder had never managed to scale the rock face as fast as he did that day. Once the signal was lit he raced back to join the others. He was barely out of breath.

The addled giants spent the rest of the day whooping and hollering, having rock tossing competitions and chasing after any creatures they saw. A curious wyvern had to perform aerial acrobatics to avoid becoming a victim, and several yetis decided that the Shuddering Peaks were large enough for them to move well away from the Hill Giants. Even a particularly ancient wurm, asleep atop his treasure pile several hundred feet down below in a large cavern, shifted his position for the first time in a century such was the commotion.

The following day, Treffa duly arrived. He had had little difficulty in locating the giants after the previous day's antics, though they had gone much quieter now. He was a small man and dressed well but in simple and unremarkable clothing, the sort that would never attract attention. He had learned as a youngster the value of stealth and going unnoticed, as well as being as pleasant as possible to the physically superior. It had served him well through his thirty or so years, as he had

elevated his position within the Findon underworld from being a thieving toe-rag to an almost respectable trader, even if his trade was stolen goods.

'Hallo Hurder, whotcha got for us then?' he said.

Hurder, who was flat on his back with his left arm draped over his eyes to shield them from the too-bright daylight, lifted his other arm and pointed at the one remaining sack.

'Iss over der,' he replied. 'Iss real good stuff, but my 'eads hurtin' like nuffin else todays.'

'Per'aps I should call you Hurter then, eh Hurder? Hahahaha ha,' Treffa responded and continued to laugh at his own jest. It was well beyond Hurder even if he hadn't had a hangover.

'Judgin' by the state of you all, it doesn't look like it's worth a whole lot; I mean, you lot can barely move,' Treffa carried on.

Roban stood up, and Treffa went quiet as the behemoth stumbled over to him.

'Ids good stuff dat. Give us a fair price, and we can ged more. Whadhav ya got?'

'Silver? Or a few gold?' Treffa questioned Roban.

'A hundred gold,' Doris called out from a supine position some fifty yards away.

'A handred? That's a lot you know. I ain't sure I got a

hundred.' Treffa complained.

'Well you know whad you're option is don't ya?' Roban stated as he looked over at his tree trunk club.

Treffa didn't need this to turn ugly. He was no mage, and although he could probably escape, why risk it? He may not get away and, even if he did, the giants were an excellent source of loot from their regular ambushes. He made an awful lot more gold for himself than they ever realized from their bounty.

'Alright, let's see what I've got,' Treffa said, reaching into a seemingly bottomless pocket. He pulled out a sack that was clearly heavy for him. 'That's a hundred. You can caant it if you like, but it's all there.' He opened the top just to show Roban it was gold. Satisfied, Roban walked over to the last sack of Spice.

'Take dis wid ya. Iss good. Come back in a week or so, we have a bi' more for ya.'

Treffa threw the light sack over his shoulder and walked out of the clearing and then magically dimension doored, courtesy of one of his many rings, still further away to his waiting horse and companion. They then trotted back toward Findon, Treffa suspecting that he was in possession of this new Spice that had been going around and looking forward to setting up a rival supply.

Later that day, after the giants had slept off their sore heads, another caravan emerged from the tunnel. It was guarded in much the same way as the previous one but with no robed figure. Clearly news of the first attack had not filtered down to the people supplying the stuff. The giants were far less coordinated this time, in fact they were spotted almost straight away by the driver and guards. They didn't care though. Brawny threw two boulders in quick succession with his usual accuracy and hit a horse and the driver with the two shots. The four other giants ran hard for the caravan, the guards hopping down from their posts to intercept them as the ground shook with the weight of the rampaging hill giants. The remaining horse rose onto its hind legs to escape but was dispatched in one mighty backswing by Grunt.

The battle was swift and bloody. The guards drew their weapons, fine steel long swords, and each managed one parry but they were no match for such mammoth creatures. The return swings by the giants were enough to send all the guards flying several feet, chests caved in and skulls crushed. With a roar of triumph the giants hauled the wagon to the centre of the clearing and ripped the top off the back. Four more sacks of Spice were inside and they let out yells of excitement.

The scenario was repeated later that day. This time the

giants were even more ferocious as they were under the influence of the Spice. The caravan was smashed to smithereens and the guards ripped limb from limb, even having chunks bitten out of them as they were torn apart.

However, this time the attack did not go unnoticed. A shadow gnome, with crossed bandoliers and a pair of jagged daggers, stood at the entrance way, invisible to the giants, and watched the scene unfold. Darios Galavan squinted against the bright light and wiggled his fingers in anticipation. He thought better of trying to finish them himself; if Kymru found out he had jeopardized himself he would not be pleased. He turned quickly and headed off down the tunnel, back to his Clan leader and high mage to report what was disrupting the supply line, and to work out how they could best deal with it.

Several days and several more caravans later the giants decided to summon Treffa again. They had had their fill of the Spice for now. They had been dipping fingers into it for three days non-stop and the rush was diminishing; they felt in need of a rest. There were still several bags left and Roban had suggested that they sell some off, so Hurder had lumbered off to his rock face ledge to light a fire to summon the useful fence Treffa. The giants were in a melancholy mood. None were truly

able to sleep; they were lying down around the edges of the clearing, slightly camouflaged, and trying to rest but with minds still racing. They were all looking at each other too, just to make sure no one had a little extra Spice. They were finding sharing it harder and harder over the previous day and all were convinced that one of the others would be trying to have more than his or her fair share. Doris lay on her front, staring hard at Grunt, who in turn pretended to have his eyes closed but was staring at Brawny. Brawny lay on his back with his eyes shut, but listened intently for anyone moving about. Roban lay on his side where he could watch the pile of the six remaining sacks. All jumped when Hurder came jogging back in to the clearing, sweating heavily from the exertion of the rock climb, fire building and jog back. It had been a far tougher journey than the last time he had done it and he was exhausted.

'Dun it,' he exhaled at the other four. 'He should be heres wiv usses soon.'

Hurder looked for a comfortable place to lie, one where he could see as many of the others as possible, and lay down. His tiny mind worked overtime as he tried to sleep.

'So, Clan leader, these giants seem to have come across our supply train purely by chance,' Darios said at the end of his

report to Kymru. I suggest that I can handle it myself; it shouldn't be too much work. They may be big but they are stupid and Spice addled, so they will prove no match for my skills.'

'Whilst I do not doubt you, my chief assassin, I do not wish to risk you in any way with such serious operations afoot. You are far too valuable to me, even if I could resurrect you. That can always go wrong and it is tiresome retraining clones,' Kymru replied. 'I wish you and Mentza to go together and use whatever denizens Mentza sees fit. I know you like to prove your worth but they are only hill giants and you are not to put yourself at risk.'

'As you instruct, Clan leader, 'said Darios as he bowed to Kymru.

Mentza stepped out of the shadows and nodded at Darios. 'Shall I do the honours, Darios? It will be quicker and we may surprise them.'

'Certainly, Mentza, but just teleport us to the tunnel entrance. We can observe the brutes from there and should you feel the need to summon any lower planar creatures you can do it within the cavern before we engage them.'

The pair of powerful shadow gnomes touched and vanished from Clan Galavan's meeting hall. Kymru smiled at the skill and loyalty of his closest henchmen.

When Treffa arrived in the clearing the following morning he was alarmed to see the difference in the giants and it had only been a few days. They were all up and about, milling around the clearing, circling the Spice sacks like sharks in the ocean sizing up potential prey. There hadn't been any more supply caravans to attack either and the giants were concerned that maybe this would be all there was. They were all eyeing each other suspiciously, and Treffa was worried; he wanted this over quickly.

'Treffa, yous can av three sacks fors five hundred, then gets outta heres,' Hurder said aggressively without even looking at Treffa. Treffa raised his eyebrows at the price increase but said nothing.

'No gonna talk to us den, Treff?' Roban snarled. 'Fine, den da price jus wen up, six hundred.'

'Nnnr,' grunted Grunt in agreement.

'Yeaah, Treffa,' Doris chimed in. 'You won't be gettin' much of a deal this time. Now it's seven hundred.'

'Nah hang on,' Treffa started. 'I ain't all that bovered to be honest, I fought I was doin you all a fava.'

'Yous, doin usses a fava? Why yous cheeky fuman. Yous is lucky if wees lets you outta here in one pieces,' Hurder

interjected.

'Nah Hurder, my old friend, this ain't like you, we've always had a good relationship, mutually beneficial like. I've always given you a fair price for everything,' Treffa moaned.

Hurder was barely listening, more intent on watching the others about whom he was becoming increasingly suspicious. He was beginning to wonder if they had stashed more of the powder away when he had gone to light his summoning fire.

'Thatsh our final offer, piddly fuman, takesth it or go sthswiftly, before I useth you for target practicthe!' Brawny lisp-growled at Treffa.

Treffa decided he had run out of options. He did want the Spice, he had sold about half the first sack and made a huge profit. It was risky work though, as there were clearly other powerful dealers in the city, probably working directly with whoever the giants were stealing from. He reached in to the pouch on his hip, one of several extra dimensional spaces about his person, and pulled out a small bag.

'I 'ave gems,' he said to Roban. 'Any good to you as payment, they're worth plenty?'

'Bah, fuman. Yous tryin to makes fools of us. Dems not gems,' Roban roared. With that he lunged at Treffa. Something in the drug addled minds of the giants just snapped at that moment

and Treffa was their target.

Treffa twisted his ring and a dimension door opened but just as he was trying to step through, Doris slapped the back of his head from his blind side. He couldn't believe he hadn't spotted her and he knew he was in serious trouble now. Roban grabbed his left arm as he staggered forward, the pull of the giant dislocating his shoulder. If he could just get to that door he might escape this yet. Roban tossed Treffa into the air by that loosened arm. The pain Treffa felt was excruciating. He screamed in agony as he was launched skyward. As he fell back to the ground he saw Roban, Brawny and Doris waiting for him. Three feet from the floor he was met by the huge foot of Brawny who kicked him six feet back into the air. All the air in his lungs was blasted out of him as ten of his ribs shattered with the blow. Not even his protective cloak or quickness could do anything to help him at the moment. As gravity pulled him back down to the giants he was caught by Roban and Doris, both had one arm and a leg. They gave him a pull just to teach him a lesson.

'Like dat do you, fief, maybe we can make ya tall as us,' Roban spat at him.

The giants were rewarded by the squelching pop of three more joints. Treffa screamed his loudest scream as the waves of

agony shot through his mangled form. He was then launched back up some thirty feet into the air, both giants laughing as he flew.

Treffa was spared anymore punishment except for his crash landing. As he flew high into the air, the three giants beneath him all felt sharp stings in the backs of their legs.

'Aah!' yelled Doris. 'What was thats?' she said looking around.

'Dunno, but it hurts,' Roban replied.

'Been sthtung,' Brawny added.

They looked around for the bug, which surely would be huge if it had hurt them all. In horror they looked over at Grunt, who was lying face down in a pool of blood, with the strangest of creatures next to him. A snake-bodied creature with six arms, each with a ferocious blade in the hand, smiled at the three of them. She was blood spattered from her kill and began to slither toward them, demonic red eyes flaring.

Hurder was unable to move, he had felt a sting in his leg just as the others had lunged for Treffa and within seconds couldn't budge an inch. He stared on as Grunt was hacked to pieces by this slithering thing that had appeared from the tunnel. He couldn't even raise a warning to the others.

The three stung giants didn't appear to have been slowed by

their stings and backed away from the demon, but in the direction of their tree trunk clubs. They then moved as swiftly as they were able to pick them up. Doris, Brawny and Roban advanced to meet the marilith, thinking that they were all powerful and that even though Grunt was lost to them, they would take revenge.

Roban swung hard from the right, but was met by three razor sharp blades. His swing seemed to speed up after the impact but he soon realized it was because he only held a small stump of a club, the rest having been removed by the super sharp blades. Two blades from the other side slashed at him, cutting thin red lines across his abdomen and thighs.

'Bah!' he roared, 'dat all you got missy?' The full extent of the wounds then became apparent. The abdominal wound began to open, it was far deeper than Roban had realized. It grew wider and wider, his intestines pushing to come out. At the same time he began to feel a burning in his thigh, as more and more blood gushed out of the ever-widening wound.

'Nah!' he cried as he backed away.

The smiling marilith advanced upon Doris and Brawny, who still had enough Spice floating around their system not to fully comprehend that they were in mortal danger. They raised clubs simultaneously and swung from opposite sides. Six arms came up

to block, and the clubs were again chopped to bits. The marilith went for Doris, darting forward like lightning, two arms from each side criss-crossed in a flash, and the marilith backed away. Doris looked dumbfounded, and then simply fell apart in neat chunks, a bemused look on her giant face. Brawny's small brain did not know what to do. The marilith hissed at him and he wanted to run but his legs wouldn't work. He was held by her demonic gaze and continued to stare into those evil eyes as she reared up onto the back of her tail, rising to a similar height as the giant. The blade in her top right hand slashed across him and Brawny never flinched. Brawny's head rolled off his gigantic shoulders and a huge fountain of blood sprayed five feet into the air, showering the grass all around with giant's blood. His body collapsed forwards and Brawny was no more.

Hurder was terrified although the marilith did not advance further. She just stood looking at her handiwork of dismembered giants. A small creature, one Hurder did not recognise, came forth from the tunnel entrance. As it approached, Hurder could make out its deep purple colouring and the black, gold sigilled, cap it wore. It was the strangest being Hurder had ever seen. Mentza Galavan wiggled an index finger at the immobile and speechless Hurder and the giant thought he could hear a tutting sound.

The small robed purple creature began to chant. This was something Hurder did understand and knew it would not be good. A thin green beam shot out of the raised hand of the small man and struck him in his midriff. Despite his size Hurder was no match for the spell. There was a loud popping sound and then a huge pile of ash was floating in the air where the giant Hurder had once been. Satisfied it was over, Mentza quickly called the marilith over and with a gesture dismissed her back to whatever part of the abyss she had come from. As he walked to the tunnel entrance, keen to get back into the darkness, he heard a groan coming from the human lying prone on the ground. Also hearing the noise, the previously invisible Darios walked over to examine the man.

'Excellent,' he said in shadow gnomish. He whipped out his right jagged dagger and swiftly plunged it into the still alive human, letting the abominable dagger have a good long drink, and consigning Treffa the fence to eternal hell.

Renegades see an Opportunity

It had been some fifty years since the end of the time of The Persecution, a time when the humans of Estrella, driven by jealousy, had decided that the halflings were too powerful and a danger to human civilization. The halflings had been hunted down and slaughtered for who they were. Not based on their actions or deeds, but purely because they were or had the potential to be powerful and the humans did not like it. They could not stand this child-like race potentially having a huge elemental power at their finger tips. Men both wanted it and were frightened by it. In the end, they decided to try to destroy it. The halflings of all four elements - earth, air, fire and water - with all their potential power were neither aggressive nor power hungry by nature. So they tried to reason with the humans who sought to wipe them off the face of Estrella, but to no avail.

Many thousands of halflings were killed, as evil men decided to teach them a lesson: they would never be allowed to use their amazing powers. The halflings tried to fight the slaughter, mostly by fleeing and pleading. Some sought refuge on the Elven Isles or in the Daphinium

Forest, where they were accepted. Others tried to flee to other human towns but were rounded up there and butchered.

Being trusting and lacking the evil cunning of man and by nature unaggressive, the halflings took what happened with a stoical attitude. They were too upset at losing loved ones to mount any resistance; they put their trust in their God Clovis, believing that he would take them to a better place. In fact the ritual slaughter was stopped by other men, led by the Paladins of Keelee, the Goddess of kindness and charity, and backed by other good warriors and light gnomes who could no longer stand what they were seeing. They confronted the leader of the Persecution, a particularly unpleasant man, later discovered to be a warrior in the name of Nyrex called Horbrace. For the sake of man and so as not to start a continent-wide war, the two factions agreed on an end to the Persecution. Secretly the leaders of the slaughter felt they had done enough in the previous years to send a strong message to the halflings never to antagonize man in the future.

That other men had stepped in to aid them helped to mend the relationship between the halflings and humans.

For many, especially the short-lived humans, The Persecution became a footnote in history but for many long-lived elves it was only yesterday and a reason to watch the rise of the humans with care. For the halflings, it was in the past; they had put it behind them and decided to carry on as best they could. At least most of them had.

In a remote part of the Shuddering Peaks, in a small cavern, behind a magically reinforced steel door which was behind an illusionary wall, at the end of a short tunnel off the edge of a vast, stalagmite-filled cavern, which was at the end of a long winding tunnel that had a hidden entrance and many other exits, a meeting was taking place.

Nine colourful halflings were seated around an old oak table. They were having a lively discussion about the state of the human towns to the south while they waited for their leader. They were the Renegades, a group of halflings that had taken a vow not to forget. The Persecution had happened, some at that table had even had to flee from it, and they would remind the humans forever of what they had done. Life in a human town would never

be a simple thing. When they needed water, rivers would dry up; when they were hungry strong winds would keep fishing fleets in the harbour; buildings old and new would 'accidentally' burn down; stores of grain for the winter would become soaked and rotten; a town's treasures would disappear from safe vaults without anyone knowing how. The Renegades swore to make life for mankind as hard as possible but they would do it all without sinking to their murdering level. Halflings were better than that!

The general chitchat was interrupted by the arrival of their leader. Materializing out of thin air, hovering on his magical board an inch above the centre of the table, a ruby-cloaked halfling addressed the others, his right arm drawn across his face, so only his black and red eyeballs showed.

'Greetings Renegades, the humans are in strife to the south, and we are in a position to add to their misery,' the whispery voice stated. 'A strange new affliction is gripping the cities and a perfect opportunity to compound their ever growing problems is upon us.'

A blue-green water halfling responded, 'Red Baron, what would you have us do?'

'I propose, Nilo, that you and your fellow water halflings create some freshwater difficulties. It is an excellent strategy, one that has brought the humans much inconvenience in the past. Perhaps you can start by drying out the River Fin and reducing the supply to Sir Theobold's beloved city.'

'An easy enough task, Lord. We can get on to it straight away,' Nilo replied.

'My intention is to add to their difficulties, to make them suffer because you know I do not approve of their murdering ways. I want humankind to be here for eternity and always aware of what they did to the superior halfling race. I want them to grovel to us for assistance, I want them to plead with us for help and to be eternally grateful when we give it,' the Red Baron continued to address the group.

'We shall cut back water supplies to all their disintegrating cities and then start wildfires, which we shall allow to get out of their control but not of ours. I would also like strong winds to keep fishing fleets away from their grounds, to disrupt merchant vessels by backing them up in the docks and damaging a few so that the dock workers grow frustrated. We can condense the

human population in their over-crowded dock areas. Humans will soon cause more problems among themselves, as they always do.'

'Excellent planning as ever, exulted leader,' said Sederic, a brown earth halfling, genuinely appreciating the Red Baron's ideas. 'What would you like me and my loyal followers to do?'

Spinning to face Sederic, swapping cloaking forearms as he did so, the Red Baron spoke, his fearsome red eyes staring directly into the dark brown eyes of his loyal henchman.

'At first you watch and sympathise. Then you begin to suggest that you may know some people who may be able to help - for a fee of course. Then slowly, through you and the other earth halflings, we gain their trust and their gold and increase our influence over them. By the time you do this, Sederic, these cities will be on their knees. Halflings will be seen as the saviours of men, they will be eating out of our hands like the uncouth animals that they are, and we shall all be the richer for it. You see, Sederic, all the rest of you, that, once again, the Red Baron holds the balance of power in the world!' With that dramatic final statement the Red Baron

slowly rotated to look at the rest of the Renegade council, staring intently at each and everyone.

'I leave the final details to all of you. I can be contacted at any time in the usual way should you need my help. Halflings, seize this opportunity! We shall rise above these humans once again and treat them with the disdain they deserve. Till next time.'

The self-styled Red Baron disappeared in a blinding flash that left only a small candle like flame flickering for several seconds where he had been, then nothing.

The nine halflings that remained in the room - three red-skinned, flame-haired fire, two aqua-skinned, green-haired and gilled water, two whitish blue-skinned, silver-haired air and two chocolate brown-skinned, brown-haired earth - looked around at each other. The Renegades had a purpose and they would all go back to their loyal groups of followers and add to the desperate situation in which the human cities found themselves.

Capturing a Supplier

The Company of the Compass teleported back to the quiet surrounds of the gardens of Sir Theobold's palace. For all his faults, Ethandril Thililifarne was a master of magical travel. The worst teleport he had ever done only landed him a foot above the ground and that had been to a location described to him by another equally exuberant flame elf friend of his with a tendency to exaggerate. The six looked at each other, glad to be out of the slums all in one piece.

'Marginally tougher than I was expecting, it must be said,' stated Apollo.

'Did you see them come straight through Elwood's arrows? No one except a berserking barbarian has ever done that,' Catarina put in, 'let alone ordinary men, unarmoured ordinary men! They even went through Ethan's wall of fire. Whatever that stuff is, it's going to cause serious problems if they can't be subdued at all.'

'Look at my arm,' Quin raised his broken left arm. 'I've not been hit that hard by a man ever, it felt more like a cyclogre hitting me.'

Elwood moved over to Quin-Helwig's side and said a small prayer to Yllana. Quin felt the bones of his forearm realign and

knit back together with the blessing of his goddess. Though at first it hurt, a warm wave soon engulfed him as the arm was healed and he was touched by the love of the elven goddess.

'Thank you Elwood, you certainly do have Yllana's favour. I can feel it in the way the healing took hold, like nothing else I have ever felt.'

'She just wishes to look after all her children.'

'As I have said before, Elwood, she's not my biggest fan, nor am I hers, so please refrain from too much preaching,' Ethandril butted in.

Elwood just smiled since he was fully aware of the relationship between his god and Ethandril Thililisfarne.

Orion addressed the group. 'Let's get to our beds for reverie. We'll meet in the morning when refreshed and talk to Sir Theobold about the dire state of his city. I have the beginnings of a plan forming, but I need the rest to sort through it all.'

He turned and made for the palace and the room he had been allocated by Sir Theobold. The others nodded their agreement to each other and followed a few paces behind, separating as they entered the palace and then heading to their own rooms. Each of the Company members then went through their own security checks, just to make sure they would be safe.

Ethandril cast his own powerful spell of detection that detected just about everything at once, such was his paranoia about being spied upon. He stared round his room with the intensity of a tiger stalking its prey, looking for the tiniest sign of an intruder, with a lightning bolt spell on the tip of his tongue and a wand of magic missiles next to his right hand. His room was empty. He stalked over to his bed, still looking around suspiciously, and cast another spell. He was now sealed behind a dome-like force wall. Feeling slightly more secure, he giggled to himself, hopped onto the bed and was soon lost in his own half-mad reverie, letting out more giggles all the time.

Orion approached his door and vanished, blinking directly into the middle of his room - how useful that ability was proving - and dropped to a low crouch, dagger in hand. There was no one else there. He looked all around at all the small spaces he would have used had he been on a mission but detected no one. Satisfied that he was alone, he walked over to the door and set a thin wire across it, one that would snag any intruder long enough for him to react and kill him. He did the same to the window but fought back the urge to poison the trips. He didn't want to have to explain any nasty accidents just in case any servants came by. He stripped off his shimmering cloak and went to his bathroom. Removing the rest of his shadowy clothes he ran

a bath and jumped in to enjoy a rare moment of relaxation from his work as a killer for hire.

Elwood and Catarina said goodnight and went to adjacent rooms but not before Elwood had first cast a spell of detection to check both rooms. He then prayed to Yllana to watch over them, effectively sealing the rooms off from any outerplanar creatures and evil beings.

Once alone, Catarina spent the next half hour going through her rhythm dance exercises, spinning and pirouetting in her room, practising her lightness of step, and remaining orientated even after several spins back and forth. After the exertion she too bathed, then went to her spell books to prepare for the following day. As it appeared that their task mostly involved these frenzied humans, she chose defensive spells and spells of evasion. It appeared that the more subtle spells of hindrance that she knew, such as slow and web, would be of little use.

Elwood washed himself down and settled into his own reverie but unlike the others his was more of a trance and a communing with his god. The whole night he sat cross-legged on his bed, softly chanting and feeling nothing but love for the elven goddess and asking for her guidance.

Very little concerned Apollo Shiningblade as he strode

boldly and happily into his room. Once he had shut the door though, he pulled out his magnificent sword, looked long and hard at it and sent it his thoughts.

'Well brother, it looks as though we have an intriguing mystery on our hands. What did you make of the slum dwellers? Could you pick up anything?' The spirit of Apollo's long dead brother sent a telepathic message back.

'Their minds were so bent that it was hard to gauge any of their humanity. The word 'Spice' kept going through all their minds, which must be what they call whatever it was they took.'

'Hmmm. We will be having a look at it in the morning. The ghost made sure to take some off his victims before he nearly dropped them on us.'

'He only does it to rile you Apollo. He means no harm. He is utterly calculating in everything he does and not a danger to his friends. Remember he is a snow elf even though he excels as a killer for hire. He has years of ceremonies and rituals drummed into him about the sanctity of life and doesn't kill for fun.'

'Indeed, he has never caused any problem to me, except with his little snipes, and has more than pulled his weight in our past adventures. He just irritates me with his sneaking off.'

'True, but remember he did save you all that time with the

vampire king and his minions.'

'You have a point, Horan, but I still say it was a lucky shot.'

'Lucky for you or you would be a mindless vampire slave now and I would be in that horrendous creature's hands. But still, it's the rest of your group we should be talking of. I am concerned that Ethan is slipping slightly in his perception of reality.'

'You mean he really is going mad rather than just playing at it?'

'Perhaps, but maybe he just needs some time in all your company again. I suspect he has been locked away in his lab for the best part of the last thirty years driving himself on to find and create bigger and better spells and potions. Even we went a little odd when you took the grand tour and got lost for six years and we only had each other for company.'

'Agreed, but the Abyss is not much fun for a wander is it?'

'Elwood has grown in power too. I can really feel the goddess' power emanating from him.'

'Perhaps she just wants a closer look at me!'

'Who knows her reasons, but it is good for you all. Catarina is in some conflict with herself too. The dual roles of rhythm dance fighter and mage are at war within her. She seems a

little undecided whether it's worth all the effort to do both when she sees how powerful you and Ethan are with just the single skill.'

'Then I must encourage her to continue, even though very few can manage both disciplines. She has a rare talent. I have only seen about, what, five others who have managed to combine the two.'

'I think she would appreciate your letting her know that, as she greatly respects you, but you may have to tone down your way with the others though. She is older now and has more experience with the outside world and other races but I think she found your initial entrance hard to take.'

'Hmm, we'll have to see about that and what of Quin-Helwig?'

'The same, he just seems to glide on as ever, happy and content, stoical almost carefree, as though the natural order is being played out and he is just going with it. He has a real air of serenity about him.'

'He becomes more like one of his beloved animals every time we see him. Still, he is a loyal friend, I just wish he would put a few more clothes on and stop ruining his body with those tattoos, and he's embarrassing! Imagine him coming back to Solaria again now; he's got five times as many tattoos.'

'Ha-ha!' The idea made Horan Lutin, long-deceased twin

brother of Orion, chuckle. He would never be able to see the mighty Quin-Helwig but he knew all about him, all about all of them. His spirit would be forever held in the elegant longsword his brother used.

'Well, I must turn in. It has been a long day and I need reverie to refresh myself.'

'Good night, brother,' Apollo said to an empty room.

'Good night, twin,' was the familiar reply from Horan.

Quin-Helwig entered his room quietly, short sword never far away from his left hand, though in truth he worried very little. Because it was nigh on impossible to wound the ranger when he wore his lion's paw scabbard, most assassination attempts would be easily foiled and indeed had been more than once in the past. His agility and skill would account for anything else. Anything that would really scare him was unlikely to be hiding unnoticed behind the door of a palace room, since demons and such were not known for their subtlety. He looked around and found nothing amiss so relaxed and decided to bathe, to wash away the sweat and blood from the battle and to examine more closely his recently broken and healed arm. It was remarkable; there was no sign of any damage.

He removed the garments he was wearing and went to the

bathroom to fill a tub with cold water since he always felt it refreshed him more to bathe in cold water. He said a prayer to the goddesses Yllana and Daphnia, the nature Goddess. The water took on a bluish tinge and he slipped in, disappearing under the surface and rubbing away the day's exertions. He stayed under for more than three minutes, eyes closed and remembering the woodland streams and rivers of his home isle. He resurfaced, opened his eyes and nearly leapt straight out of the bath. He hadn't heard the intruder, which was most unlike him, since there had been no vibration on the floor, nothing. He could normally feel a field mouse approaching from fifty yards but how different it was in cities with all this stone and noise.

He looked into the almond-shaped vermillion-coloured eyes as the water dripped off his muscular naked body.

'This is unexpected,' Quin started. 'I didn't even hear you knock!'

Loriana Thililisfarne held a finger up to her full bow lips to keep him quiet, turned and walked to his bedroom. She looked over her shoulder and beckoned him with a nod of her head. There was something about the animal magnetism of the broad ranger that made him irresistible to her.

He watched the curvaceous half-elf as her robe slipped to the floor. He jumped out of the bath as quick as a leopard after

its prey. There would be little reverie this night for Quin-Helwig.

The following morning the Company met with Sir Theobold and his advisors in his private chambers well away from prying eyes. They sat at a long table that had been lavishly set for breakfast with a multitude of fruits and breads and thinly sliced meats and cheeses. They were all there except Orion. When he finally arrived, some ten minutes after the others, Quin-Helwig had already demolished almost half the food on the table.

'Dwelf, I had almost forgotten what a savage you really are,' Apollo sneered.

'Jus hungry, need to keep my energy up.'

'He's always had a monstrous appetite, Apollo, it's what keeps those shoulders how they are,' Ethandril quipped.

'I've seen wild pigs truffle hunting with more manners,' Apollo replied.

'Jus' hungry,' Quin managed to say between mouthfuls and he gave Lorianana a quick glance. 'Need to keep my energy up.'

She gave no sign that anything was amiss and simply looked around the room trying to stifle a giggle.

'Quite so, Quin,' Orion said, 'as we'll need your trapping

skills today.'

'So. A plan. You've formed one then. Excellent,' Sir Theobold jumped in excitedly. 'Knew we could rely on the Company. Good eggs all of you. Competent and skilled, I like that.'

'I believe that in order to fully work out what's going on we must capture one of the sellers of this stuff,' Orion began. 'I have been looking at it over night and my guess is that it's a powdered mushroom of some sort. I tasted a small amount and it certainly has that odour, though I'm not aware of a mushroom that has this effect, and I know my poisons.'

'Splendid idea! Go in, grab one of these men and bring them back here. Yes, good idea!'

'I don't think it will be that simple. I propose that tonight, Quin and myself will disguise ourselves as slum dwellers and enter the slums. We are the least likely to attract attention as we can best disguise our elven appearance.'

'Too right,' Apollo muttered.

'We'll wait and see if anyone is approached or approaches us then make our move. Between us we should be able to capture someone quickly and get out. Perhaps Elwood can put a scry on us and Ethandril, you can watch and teleport us away so as to cause minimum fuss. We don't want another great long struggle like

last night; it will attract too much attention. We'll return here where we can question the prisoner, and hopefully get some answers.'

'I'm glad you have so much use for me in all this,' Apollo said.

'We may well need you when we drag someone back. I doubt this will be the end of it all, more likely just the beginning,' Orion answered.

'Marvellous. I like it. Any more questions?' Sir Theobold rattled off.

'Tis a pity you don't want me in there with you, Orion, but I can't wait to work on your disguise. How about a few warts, and some stubble, yes, I can do human stubble, and lank hair and a limp. Ooohhh this will be fun!' Ethandril smiled at the others.

There was a collective sigh as they all privately questioned the sanity of their 'leader' once more.

'Oh do simmer down, Ethandril, you're excitement is unbecoming for such a mature elf,' Apollo said patting the excitable flame elf on the arm as he spoke.

At dusk that day, two heavily disguised elves entered the slums via the docks. They kept to the shadows, almost invisible as they went, and stopped in an alley where they had a good view

in both directions. They could see several humans slumped by the side of the streets, some lying flat, either unconscious or asleep, others rocking back and forth, seemingly talking to themselves. It wasn't long, once it had gone truly dark, before a figure emerged as if out of nowhere. The hiss of the word 'Spice' could be heard, firstly from certain individuals, then the air all around was filled with soft hissing.

'Ssspicce.'

The two elves could see quite clearly in the dark due to their infravision, but were cautious in case either the seller or any of the other slum dwellers were able to see clearly too. The seller approached a man standing up, rocking back and forth. They gave each other something and the seller moved on. Orion felt he should try and attract the seller's attention.

'SSpice!' he hissed. The dark figure looked over and began to walk towards them. He stopped as he was called by another wretch, lying on the floor. Nothing happened for several moments, then the seller pulled his leg away as the urchin tried to grab for him. No exchange had taken place.

'SSpice!' Orion hissed again as the seller approached. As he got there his gruff voice simply said:

'Silver!'

Orion reached under his clothes and his binding whip

flashed out. Simultaneously Quin threw off the cloak he was wearing and prepared to grab the seller. The whip struck first and wrapped around the stunned man, binding his arms tight to his body. Quin-Helwig quickly dropped his cloak over the man's head, punched him hard twice, and the man went limp.

'Now, Ethan, get us back!' Orion called.

In a twinkle of lights and much to the utter confusion of the Spice-addled slum residents, the three of them vanished, materialising moments later in a quiet part of Sir Theobold's garden.

Apollo, Catarina and Elwood waited there, weapons drawn, but there was no need. Quin dropped the still unconscious body to the floor and Orion withdrew his whip. Being hit by Quin had been likened to boxing with a cyclogre, the huge and ferocious cross-breeds of the north, and it was unlikely the man would awaken without assistance.

'Let's get him inside and start with the questioning,' Orion said. 'We need to get a handle on this quickly, because as soon as he appeared in the street slum dwellers started to call for the Spice. I fear this problem is worse than we originally thought.'

Quin-Helwig slung the unconscious man over his broad right shoulder and followed the group into the palace. They were

heading for Sir Theobold's rooms when they were intercepted by Lorianana.

'This way,' she indicated to a different corridor. 'If, as we suspect, he's part of something bigger he may be being tracked or scryed. We'll take him down to the cells.'

The five followed the palace mage through several doors and down three flights of stairs into the bowels of the palace where there were holding cells. They had a musty smell to them since they were little used any more, not since proper jails had been built in the city some twenty five years before. Sir Theobold had thought it best to keep undesirables away from the palace and under tight security, in a jail fit for purpose with a full time guard and mage. Argyll greeted them and showed them to a cell where the rest of the Company and Sir Theobold joined them.

'Good work, splendid, bravo Orion,' Sir Theobold began. 'Now tie him up and we'll question the bugger, find out all he knows and get on with finding the rest of them.'

Quin dropped the still unconscious man into the waiting chair and removed the hood. There was an audible gasp as the group saw the state of his bloody, puffy and swollen face.

'I only hit him twice,' Quin said in his defence. 'We didn't want him waking up.'

'No worries there, Dwelf, it's more a question of whether he'll wake up at all. At least he's still alive.'

'I'll heal him somewhat, Yllana will allow it. Orion, I suggest you bind him first.'

'Ooh let me, I'll use a spell, I have a fabulous one.'

'Just be careful, furnace face. I don't want you to bind us all for the next millennium or anything stupid.'

Elwood lent over the man and began a small spell of healing. As the street seller began to come round, emitting a low groan, Ethandril stepped forward with his 'fabulous' spell.

'It's like a hold person, but leaves the head free to move,' he said grinning broadly at the others. He pulled a marble and some sort of sticky substance from his magically deep pockets and cast his spell. A few seconds later a huge blob of goo engulfed the recovering street seller, leaving just his head poking out of the top. There was a sweet smell in the air, like honey. Ethandril grinned again, and received several scowls in return.

'He's all yours,' he said, still smiling and nodding to Argyll.

Argyll stepped forward; this was one of the great areas of expertise of the light Gnome race. Their ability to detect lies made them the best interrogators in the world; they just kept

repeating the questions till there were no more lies. They were happy to keep going for days in order to seek the truth, it was just their way.

'Who do you work for?'

No response. The seller now had one eye fully open, the other only half due to the remains of his injury, and was staring at the Company.

'Who do you work for? You may as well come clean. You won't leave here till you tell us.'

The man struggled but was very effectively held by Ethan's spell.

Quin stepped forward and snarled. The man gulped and let out a whimper.

'Ain't for sayin!' he said.

'Let's try 'What is your name?' Sir Theobold interjected.

'Ain't for sayin!' came the response.

'This is my city and you will tell us. Name!'

The man began to look around; he could feel a voice in his head.

'His name is Lesta,' said Apollo, looking down his nose at the man. 'Care to tell us more?'

'No it ain't,' he replied.

'Yes it is,' said Argyll hearing the truth. 'It is Lesta.'

Lesta looked worried, because he didn't want all his knowledge given up, but this voice kept goading him, telling him he could read his mind.

'So, Lesta, I ask again, who do you work for? Come now, it can't be so hard to tell an old gnome like me. I have got all day and perhaps even longer. So just tell me who it is and maybe you'll be out of here soon,' Argyll said pleasantly.

Lesta was getting nervous; perhaps letting this lot know a bit might be safer than going back to his masters. He really didn't want them to find out he had been captured, for their interrogation would be far worse than this. Perhaps he could negotiate relocation if he said something.

'Getting nervous?' Apollo asked.

That elf seemed to know, seemed to sense his feelings. Perhaps he was the voice but then it could be any of them. Lesta's mind was racing. What if the Shades found him after he had run away, he'd be done for?

'Ah, the Shades! Thank you Lesta, you're too kind,' Apollo said.

'Noo!' Lesta screamed. Everyone was taken aback, the sudden outburst, but also the name, the Shades.

'I'll be killed!' his gruff voice continued.

'What else do you know?' Argyll said with a calm demeanour.

'Nothing, I just take the Spice and sell it. That's all.'

His head had drooped, his shoulders slumped within their gooey confines and resignation entered his voice.

'He speaks the truth,' Argyll told the group. 'I don't believe there is any more from him but we do have our answer and if it is the Shades, then this is very serious indeed.'

'They were only a small group thirty years ago,' Orion spoke up. 'But they are a nasty network of evil, causing trouble everywhere. They include mercenary soldiers, Priests of Nyrex, some even suggest Shadow Gnomes and deranged Halflings. I have crossed swords with a few of them.'

'Hmm. Then where do we start? What next? Any suggestions?'

Sir Theobold asked, looking round the room.

'I shall ask for guidance from Yllana,' Elwood replied.

'Let's meet back in the main chamber this afternoon.'

'Yes. Good idea Elwood. This afternoon.' Sir Theobold seconded the idea. 'What about him? Shall I throw him in the cells or leave him here?'

'He has told his tale. He should be locked away,' Argyll responded.

'Ooh let me, let me send him, please, you know I can, I'm good at this, I have just the place too,' squawked Ethandril, jumping up and down in excitement.

'Oh for goodness sake calm down, lava lips, you're embarrassing. You should really show more decorum at your age.'

'Very well...' Sir Theobold began, but before he could finish, Ethandril had begun his spell. Lesta vanished and Ethan turned to look at the group with his inane broad grin.

'Exiled, but it could be worse. I quite enjoyed my time there,' was all he said as he slapped his hands together as though washing away the problem.

Lesta arrived sitting on a beach staring at the ocean. He couldn't see anything in the water, no other islands, boats or anything. He was glad to be away from those lunatics, and perhaps even the Shades and he was free of the holding goo. He looked all around, there appeared to be a wood behind him, so he stood up and started walking in that direction. He had only gone a few paces when he thought he saw some people running down the beach in his direction. He stopped, and then decided to make for cover, just in case, and headed behind a small sand dune. As they approached he could see them more clearly, they were women. He breathed a sigh of relief and decided to make himself more conspicuous by sitting up on top of the dune where he could also get a better look. When they were within a hundred yards, he could clearly see their weaponry too, daggers, axes and clubs,

and he felt a little less sure of himself, but it was too late. They had spotted him and were heading his way fast. In a panic he jumped up but lost his footing on the loose sand and tumbled over backwards down the dune. He stopped rolling at the bottom and spat out the sand that had found its way into his mouth, just in time for him to be surrounded. He looked up to meet the gaze of ten women, several human, some half-elven and a couple of full elves, all staring hard at him.

'Pah. Another human male,' said a half-elf. 'He'll have to do. Take him to camp; we'll get what we can from him.'

And so that was how Lesta spent his remaining years as a slave on the mythical Amazon isles of the southern ocean, enduring hard labour by day and often harder labour by night!

When they met that afternoon, Elwood announced that Yllana had instructed him to go to the temple of Keelee, goddess of kindness and hope. There the Company would find help in the form of a priest with exceptional talent for scrying the unknown.

A half-hour later, the Company arrived at the temple, dressed in their dull cloaks to avoid unnecessary attention. They were met by high Priest Johna, a tall slim man of middle age, who welcomed them in and led them through to the temple's

scrying room. There they found a huge cauldron, said to have been blessed by Keelee herself so that her priests could best watch over her people and look after them. Sitting beside the cauldron was another priest, who Johna introduced as Eclaine, a woman of young appearance but with old and wise eyes.

'Eclaine here has an amazing ability with the cauldron; she has been truly touched in the art of divination. Tell her what you are after, and you should be able to get some assistance from her. I wish you well,' Johna said and then left the room.

'Thank you for seeing us, Eclaine,' Elwood said. 'We are trying to look into the underworld. We believe the Shades and therefore shadow Gnomes are behind some of the city's problems.'

'Very well, I shall try to look in on Imar, their home city, but it is heavily protected by magic. This may not be very successful.'

Eclaine began her ceremony for scrying, sprinkling holy water and oils into the cauldron, as well as lighting incense that smelled like sandalwood. The Company looked on in anticipation. She stood over the cauldron and began to chant. She swayed back and forth, chanting over and over until the water went still, and an image appeared. A dark cavern, that almost looked like a field with several figures bobbing around. They looked as though they were farming. The image then seemed

to veer away from this, as though it was being pulled by something. Eclaine began chanting again, but it looked as though she was no longer in control. The image was moving quickly now, whizzing down corridors and tunnels, till it suddenly stopped and the whole cauldron was filled with the image of a shadow gnome wearing a black skull cap with gold sigils on it. He stared straight at them.

'Waff!' he yelled as he flung his right arm across himself.

Eclaine screamed and fell over backwards as the image vanished and the water in the cauldron went into a rolling boil. The company gathered around Eclaine as Johna came rushing back in.

'What happened?' he said with urgency as he knelt down to see to Eclaine.

'Shadow gnomes,' Orion replied. 'They attacked her through the scry.'

Johna began a prayer to Keelee as he tried to help Eclaine, now foaming at the mouth.

'Can I help?' Elwood enquired.

'No. Go back to Sir Theobold and try and stop this by whatever means you can' Johna replied. 'This should never have been able to happen, not through the cauldron. Be very careful though, you have a very powerful enemy'.

We Have Attracted Attention

Kymru Galavan was relaxing in his fortress home in Imar. He had just received a report from Djemmini that all was going well. Findon was rapidly being overrun by Spice addicts and the summoned devils were doing their work in the towns of Abinger and Ingles. The flow of Spice to the towns had been restored, after the brief interruption by the errant hill giants, and general chaos was happening on the surface world. He was pleased and, feeling satisfied, poured himself a Whelf, a drink of particular delicacy made from distilled elves' blood. It was hard to come by and expensive but well worth it. He sipped the strong liquor, savouring the flavours as he rolled it around his mouth before swallowing, almost as though he could taste the death of the elf that had gone to make it on his tongue. He held up the glass and swilled the contents around looking at the pink liquid, smiling all the time.

There was a knock at the door.

'Yes,' Kymru said, somewhat irritated that his enjoyment had been disturbed.

'It's Mentza, Clan Leader. I have urgent news for you.'

'Come Mentza, you have no need to knock; we have no secrets.'

The Clan wizard walked through the still-closed door and gave a barely perceptible bow.

'Whelf, Mentza?'

'A pleasure, Clan Leader. Thank you.'

Kymru poured a second glass of the elf liquor and handed it to Mentza.

'So, what has occurred to bring you here with such urgency?'

'A powerful scrying has been used upon us. It is unusual in that it can get past the outer city wards but my personal detections caught it as it was looking at the mushroom fields.'

'I presume you have dealt suitably with the perpetrator?'

'Indeed, their mind will take many years to reassemble after my blow back. It was priestly magic and they are always far more casual about defending themselves than wizards. It must be because they believe their God is watching out for them. No, what concerned me was that I caught a glimpse of several other hooded figures watching the scrying too. The connection was not long enough to see exactly who they were or what was going on but there is the distinct possibility that someone may be on to us. Perhaps we should check with Lord Djemmini to see if he has any news on this. Is anyone missing or has anything suspicious happened that we aren't aware of?'

'I shall indeed contact Djemmini soon. His last report,

which was only a few hours ago, suggested all was well. I wonder how closely he monitors his subordinates.'

'Perhaps you would like me to go to one of the towns or cities and see if anything is amiss. Perhaps that fool Theobold has got wind of us, Clan Leader.'

'Unlikely and no, you are far too important to me and the whole Clan and the operation here to go off to the surface pursuing who knows what. I'll send Darios. He's keen to return to the surface after his foray with the giants. He was hugely disappointed by that battle, you know. They barely put up a fight; he didn't feel he had been tested at all.'

'Yes, I know of his disappointment but then the marilith made rather short work of the giants, as they tend to do with everyone.'

Kymru chuckled at that. Mentza was a superb summoner of lower planar denizens and somehow seemed to keep them under control when many others were unable to. His ability with the mariliths, six-armed snake women from the Abyss, was extraordinary. He seemed to be able to summon them at any time. Perhaps, Kymru thought, I should investigate further what he is offering that keeps them coming back without question.

'Keep an eye on the surface but don't attract any attention doing it. See if you can spot anything unusual but don't concern

yourself too much. I'm sure Darios and Djemmini between them will be able to inform us of events,' Kymru stated.

'Indeed, I believe you are right, Clan Leader,' Mentza replied.

'Perhaps you would like to accompany me to the fields as we have developed something new and have managed to increase production too,' said Kymru.

'Of course, Clan Leader.'

The two shadow gnomes vanished through a door, which Mentza had brought into existence, and stepped out on to the edge of the mushroom fields, just in time to see a human being flogged to within an inch of his life.

The flogging stopped the moment the bald, deep purple, shadow gnome handing out the punishment became aware that he was being watched. He was even more surprised to see who was watching.

'Clan Leader,' he said in respectful tones.

'Carry on with your work,' Kymru replied. 'Just pretend you didn't see us.'

'Yes Clan Leader,' he replied and immediately thrashed the man three more times.

The two most powerful gnomes of Clan Galavan wandered the fields, watching slaves hard at work, picking and hoeing, with

the odd gnome handing out a thrashing. They were pleased with what they saw.

Towards the back of the field were some smaller mushrooms, with a gnome standing guard. He pulled a wand as he saw them approach, raising it to eye level.

'Halt! Names,' he said.

'Clan Leader Kymru Galavan and Chief Wizard Mentza,' Kymru responded.

Mentza looked astonished that Kymru had even answered. He was about to ask why when Kymru spoke.

'Randar here will fire that wand at anyone who doesn't answer and they aren't magic missiles in that thing. It's chain lightning.' Mentza nodded in understanding, though he was surprised he hadn't been informed of this development by Kymru.

'Our little secret,' he continued. 'I have discovered that if you pick the mushrooms early, like they are now, and then process them, you get a much milder but no less addictive form of Spice. It's almost as though you can still function on a daily basis, still getting a high, but without all the over-the-top madness and neck rubbing that accompanies the real thing. With this, we may even be able to infiltrate higher up the social order of the human cities, perhaps create something,' he paused, 'socially acceptable, but all the while it eats away at

the psyche, little by little. We're manufacturing the first few batches now. I thought we'd try it in a fresh city, Salvington perhaps, and this time work from the top down; aim for officials and the town council first. That way we can knock out the whole place, not just cause trouble through the undesirables, I mean bring the whole place under our control. What do you think, Mentza?'

'If it really does work, it's genius and has far more potential than the regular Spice.'

'Yes, indeed. I have yet to tell our erstwhile colleagues from Clan Puttnik of this little development. Who knows what the uses for this may be?' Kymru turned to Mentza and gave a sly wink.

'Excellent again, Clan Leader. You show real vision in this,' Mentza replied.

'Stay well on guard Randar, no one but me and the harvesters approach this area. Understood?'

'Yes Clan Leader,' came the reply.

The senior pair of shadow gnomes left the fields the same way they had come, through one of Mentza's instant dimension doors, arriving back in Kymru's private chambers. Mentza was the only living being able to by-pass Kymru's fortress wards, by using a special inflection in the casting of his transportation

spells.

Within moments of their arrival there was a knock at the door.

'Enter, Darios,' Kymru said and sure enough the malevolent assassin walked through the door the same way Mentza had done before.

'Greetings, Clan Leader, you have use for me? Something more testing I hope?' Darios stated.

'Indeed, my chief assassin, it is testing. We may have a watcher or watchers so I'm sending you back to the surface. Try Findon first and see if there is any sign of Theobold getting to grips with this, or if he has any idea that we are behind the misery in his sorry city. We were scryed by powerful magic and I want to know by whom.'

'Excellent Clan Leader, I'll be on my way immediately. I shall report back when the problem has been dealt with,' Darios replied, eager to begin the hunt. The assassin turned his back and headed out of the room, passing straight through the door as he did so. He was on a mission to Findon and nothing would get in his way!

Renegades cause chaos

When they put their minds to it, the halflings had the capacity to be the most powerful of all the demi-human races of Estrella. The humans had been right in fearing them. However it was not within their nature to seek power. Most halflings that came by it had done so by chance or had been part of powerful adventuring bands. They enjoyed the thrill of the adventure far more than the rewards that had come along with it. While they never quite understood why the humans hated them so much, since they couldn't help how they were, a small band of halflings, The Renegades, were now ensuring that the humans would suffer for the atrocities they had committed against their kind.

Some twenty miles outside the city of Findon, four members of the Renegade council, earth halflings Sederic and Graanti and water halflings Marian and Nilo, were working on the project. They were on the lower slopes of the Shuddering Peaks, standing on the banks of a small, fast-flowing river, a tributary of the river Fin. This tributary would get steadily bigger and bigger through the autumn as more rain fell, before slowing again as the precipitation turned to snow and settled over the winter. The four halflings had other ideas though.

'So, if we dig out a pool here,' Sederic began, 'then we

can create a dam and slow the supply. If we do that here and further up stream, the water supply into the Fin will significantly decrease.'

'I can stop the water here for a while if you wish to dig,' Marian replied. 'I like the idea, it is more permanent than if Nilo and I just reduce the flow for a while.'

Marian drew on her innate powers and began to wave her hands at the flow of water coming down from the Shuddering Peaks. At the same time Sederic began summoning his elemental; he was hoping that he would get a large earth elemental today as it would speed up the whole process no end. The river started to reduce in volume as Marian initially reduced the amount of water flowing, then started to bank the water up in a wall until it had completely stopped, showing the river bed. Sederic stopped his chant and waited, wiggling his fingers in anticipation. He stared at the river bed, believing that to be the most likely place the earth elemental would come. He felt the earth shuddering and his eyes widened in excitement. Graanti looked hard at the earth too, craning her neck forward to see what size of being Sederic had managed to bring forth. The rumbling of the earth stopped, but there was nothing there. Sederic's shoulders sagged in disappointment, it must be a tiny one if he couldn't even see it; this was going to take ages.

Nilo let out an audible gasp. The two earth halflings looked at him but he was staring straight back at them, or rather over them.

'Oh well done Sederic,' he said, pointing.

Slowly Sederic and Graanti turned and came face to face with a shin. A great big shin made of earth. They looked up in unison at the largest elemental either of them had ever seen.

'Wow! You're enormous,' Sederic exclaimed in awe of what he had achieved.

'You called, little one,' the gigantic Earth elemental rumbled.

'So good of you to come to my aid, friend,' Sederic replied, quickly gathering his wits. 'We need to dig a pool here for the water to flow into, as big as you can, so it will reduce the flow down into the main river.'

'My pleasure, little friend,' boomed the voice.

The earth elemental slid into the ground and reappeared in the river bed and with huge hands began to excavate a bowl shape to serve as a reservoir for the river. Each great scoop and shovel widened the basin till it was some thirty yards across. The halflings were all most impressed with their friend.

'Now I shall dig it deeper so it holds more,' the earth elemental said to them.

'As you see fit,' Sederic replied.

The massive being began to take great scoops of earth and pile them up by the side of the basin he had created. As he did so, Sederic and Graanti began to shape and mould the earth, making sure it was compacted and landscaped, thus attracting less attention than a new excavation. The elemental was now as deep as his shoulders, some sixteen feet down, and still digging away furiously.

'This would have taken all year with a little one,' Graanti said. 'You must get his name in case we need him again.'

'Agreed, he really is the finest specimen I have ever summoned!' Sederic replied.

After just over an hour of frantic activity, a thirty-yard wide, twenty-foot deep bowl had been created, with high levees on either side. The finishing touches of channelling the water out of the reservoir were added by the earth shaping skills of Graanti, and they gave Marian the go ahead to slowly release the water back in. Sederic dismissed his elemental companion but never did get his name, much to his disappointment.

It took a full two hours for the basin to fill and begin to slowly trickle out down the other side. Nilo turned to his earth brethren and said

'Now this is in place, it makes regulating the flow a lot

easier.'

He turned to the full reservoir, muttered a few short phrases and the water level dropped almost instantly by half.

'There you go,' Nilo said. 'Pretty much any water halfling can do that, so we now have almost full control over the supply from this river. I shall send one of my friends up here immediately to keep the flow regulated.' Nilo finished as he cast a spell of sending to one of his many useful friends.

The four halflings all grinned at each other, and patted each other on the back for a job well done.

'Right,' said Marian. 'Shall we go further up stream?'

'I don't think we really need to now,' Sederic replied. 'Let's go further up the river Fin and do the same there. We may well have to do more of these pools on such a big river and we'll have to be less conspicuous with our excavations. We may not get such a helpful friend next time either.'

'True,' said Marian. 'We'd better get going then. Shall we travel by river?'

'If we have to,' Graanti replied, 'but you know I'm not that keen on the water'

'It is the quickest way,' Nilo added.

'Okay, okay,' Graanti's resistance crumbled.

The four held hands as Marian whispered a spell of travel

and the four jumped in to the reservoir they had just created. They resurfaced some fifteen miles away, still in the water, but right on the banks of the river Fin.

'Oooh, I love that,' Nilo shivered. 'Gives me goose bumps.'

'Glad you do, I just feel like clay,' Sederic responded, and indeed his wet appearance did make him look a lot like wet clay fit for the potter's wheel.

They hopped out of the river, and began the process again. This time the elemental was less impressive, though no less hard working, and they excavated a lot further down rather than across. By the end of two days hard slog, the Renegades had control of the river and hence the freshwater supply going into Sir Theobold's beloved city of Findon.

'What do you mean, the river is low?' Sir Theobold asked in a slightly confused state, scratching his salt-and-pepper haired head.

'The River Fin, Sir,' Argyll continued in his most placating voice 'is, well, there's less water in it than perhaps

there should be.'

'But why Argyll? How does this happen? Surely there has been enough rainfall?'

'We don't really know, Sir, but although it has only been a few days, it could start to affect the water supplies, Sir.'

'The water supplies? You mean real drinking water. Don't we have a store?'

'We do, Sir, but if the river stays this low we'll have problems in the future. We store water in case of dry summers, not for now. If the summer was to be dry and we have used up the reserves we could have a serious drought on our hands.'

'I'm at a loss, Argyll. How low is the water in the river?'

'About a quarter of what it should be, Sir,' Argyll replied, looking down as he did so.

'A quarter!! A quarter!! How can a river be only a quarter full at this time of year? Where has all the water gone? Are any ships afloat in the docks?' Sir Theobald said, aghast.

'Only just, Sir, and the unusual on-shore breeze is keeping the deeper-keeled boats in the docks when it would be best if they went out to sea. It really is a dire situation, Sir.'

'By the heavens, Argyll. I really could do without this right now you know. What with addled madmen on the streets, half crazy adventurers in my palace and now this.'

'I understand, Sir'

'Do you, Argyll? Do you really? Then what do you suggest?'

said Sir Theobold in a slightly desperate tone.

'Drinking water is most vital, Sir. If that runs low there will be anarchy. Not many citizens have noticed the significance of a low river yet, but it won't take long before there is a drinking water shortage. The problem with the river running low is that what water is left becomes, er, thicker with mud and city waste. It is harder to clean up so the supply slows.'

'Then get started, Argyll! Do we need priests or what?'

'Actually I thought we may be better off seeking out water halflings, Sir. That would probably solve the problem quicker.'

'Uhhh. Very well, Argyll. See to it, whatever the mercenary little blighters want. This is far too serious to be allowed to continue. And try to find out what has happened. If a group of giants has dammed the river for their own amusement, I want to know about it!'

' I'll get on to it all straight away, Sir,' said Argyll, as he gave a small deferential bow to Sir Theobold and headed for the door.

'Very good, Argyll, very good,' Sir Theobold replied with a wave of a dismissive hand.

Sir Theobold walked over to his large comfortable chair

and flopped heavily into it with a sigh.

'It's not meant to be this difficult, surely,' he said to no one.

Over the next few days a network of secretive palace workers set about subtly informing the locals that they should consume less water in their homes, and telling businesses that they too should make a few cutbacks. Blacksmiths were told not to change their cooling water so often, the stables didn't need to be cleaned quite so often, nor the horses within them exercised quite so much. The agents of the palace were very discreet, but their actions didn't go unnoticed. Seeing a chance to add to the chaos afflicting Findon, the Priests of Nyrex informed their street sellers to spread rumours of a water shortage. The rumour took hold and wasn't helped by the turning off of several of the city's drinking fountains, some of which had been authorised by the palace, others the malicious handiwork of the Shades. There was a tension in the city; it was underlying, but everyone could feel it. All was not well in the city of Findon.

Three days after Sir Theobold and his light gnome advisor had met, a fight broke out. Several Spice addicts from the slums had gone into the dock district and tried to steal water from a tavern. The ensuing fight had seen seven dead, including the two perpetrators, a dozen wounded and two score city guards had gone in to try to control the fighting. It was chaos and there appeared to be very little Sir Theobold could do about it.

The following day Sir Theobold was invited to a meeting by Argyll. When he entered his audience chamber he was greeted by a small blue-green halfling with slightly darker blue-green hair and vibrant teal eyes. He held his hand out and smiled a jovial halfling smile.

'Good morning, Sir Theobold. A pleasure to make your acquaintance. My name is Nilo, and I believe you have some need of halfling assistance.'

'Morning, morning, yes. Help, more like it. That's what I need. Let's not beat about the bush. I need help and I believe you can help,' Sir Theobold rattled off.

'If it involves water, and I noticed the river is a little low on the way here, then I and my friends will be more than happy to help.' There was a pause. 'For a small fee.'

'Nilo believes that it is just a small matter of..' Argyll started.

'How much?' Sir Theobold asked, his voice one of resignation as he cut Argyll off.

'Hmm, oh, well. It is a fairly large and important task we will be undertaking. It could be dangerous too. Does anyone know what has caused the low level? I mean you could have any number of monsters or other such. I remember once in the north a situation where a green dragon had blocked the river in a forest and used it as a lure to bring in adventurers and...'

'How much?' Sir Theobold interrupted a second time.

'Five hundred,' Nilo said.

'Fine. Five hundred,' Sir Theobold replied>

'A day,' Nilo continued

'A day?' Sir Theobold said incredulously.

'Well, it's your city, and we can supply the water, probably. Your gnome here tells me it was quite a fight yesterday. You don't want too many of them now do you? And what if there was a fire, in the docks or surrounding areas. It could spell disaster.'

'Is that a threat?'

'No, no of course not. I was merely outlining a worst case scenario for you.'

'Thief!' Sir Theobold said, resigned yet again to go with what he had to do.

'I prefer, saviour,' Nilo replied with a broad grin. 'I'll contact a few of my friends, and we should be able to get the river level up a fair bit over the next few..'

'Days?' Sir Theobold asked hopefully.

'Weeks,' Nilo finished .

Sir Theobold looked down his right hand holding his forehead. 'Fine, just get us some water. Meet Argyll for payments when you have accomplished something. I presume gems may be suitable as payments as you will probably struggle to carry all that gold,' he said sarcastically.

'Gems, marvellous. Pleasure doing business with you, Sir. We shall have you up and flowing again in no time,' Nilo beamed. Argyll escorted the water halfling from the room and Sir Theobold slumped into his comfy chair once again. He felt like crying but at least he felt he had saved his city from catastrophe.

The halflings were not quick in their work. They took several days to make any real impact on the river, citing any number of different reasons as to why it was so hard to raise the river level. During that period, more fighting had broken out in and around the docks, with slum dwellers trying to steal drinking water from people's homes as well as ships' supplies.

Several died in the fighting and the city guards were becoming seriously over-stretched. Sir Theobold toyed with the idea of sending the Company in to help, but didn't want them to attract any further attention and detract from their main mission. They had been wandering the town observing for the last few days, heavily disguised by magic, in an attempt to uncover more secrets of the Spice trade, but to no avail. The city was on the verge of meltdown and Sir Theobold was at his wits' end. The chaos did, however, please some. The city was being observed by several interested parties. Lord Djemmini was enjoying the chaos, and the fights were offering up more spirits to his God Nyrex who was very pleased with Djemmini's handiwork. Kymru Galavan was also enjoying the spectacle; unrest and deaths on the surface world were what he lived for. The Red Baron was also pleased with what he saw. The suffering of humans brought about by their own stupidity always gave him pleasure.

Some chance help

'Quite frankly, Ethandril, my city is in meltdown and we are no nearer to solving this infernal problem than when you arrived!'

Sir Theobold stated in a harsh tone.

'Not true, Theo; we do know something that you didn't about YOUR problem,' Apollo retorted.

'Let's not,' Catarina jumped in, desperate to steer the conversation away from a heated row. It was hard as everyone was feeling the strain.

Just at that moment Argyll and Lorian entered the main hall.

'Sir, we have a most interesting visitor, an elf with some fascinating information that we may want to investigate,' Argyll said.' He is just outside seeking audience with you and I believe you may want to share his information with our friends here.'

'Ah, good news at last. Excellent Argyll, show him in,' Sir Theobold replied with a sense of relief.

Argyll turned to the side door of the main hall and called, in a loud clear voice:

'Mikalís the wanderer, please come and join us.'

At this summons an elf appeared, a most unusual looking elf.

Apollo let out a sigh of disgust. 'Oh by Yllana! Why does she allow such aberrations?'

The guest, Mikalis, had the bright red hair of a flame elf, the pale green skin of a continental elf and the pink eyes of a snow elf.

'In all my many years, and I've been around for over two thousand, I believe I've only seen one other like you before, but a different combination,' said Apollo.

The rest of the group just stared, not quite knowing what to make of the newcomer.

'He's a Harlequin elf!' Ethan yelled in surprise. 'I was never sure they really did exist!'

'A Harlequin?' Quin-Helwig asked, unsure of the term.

'Yes, yes, Quin. Heavens, do they teach you nothing on your southern isles? Well, let me tell you, all of you,' Ethandril was getting very animated at this point. 'So! You know that we don't have any combined elves, we always look like our mothers, even if our elf parents were of two differing types and that is in fact rare.'

'Extremely, where we are concerned,' Apollo the solar elf chipped in.

'Not where you're concerned, Ethan,' Orion muttered.

Ethandril ignored the two catty comments and continued.

'Well, if one of these elves with different parents has a relationship with yet another type of elf, then it appears that it is almost impossible to keep all that fantastic elveness in, and - ta da! All three types appear on the child and you get,' Ethan said waving an arm at Mikalis, 'a Harlequin elf. And they're meant to be bringers of good luck.'

'I couldn't have put it any better myself,' Mikalis said with a bow.

'He's not one of yours is he Ethan?' Quin asked.

'Not that I'm aware of,' Ethandril replied with a grin, and turning to Mikalis just to check.

'No, no, my father was a snow elf, my mother a copper, or so it was believed'

'He could be your grandson,' Apollo couldn't help but let out.

'Enough, please on the lineage or otherwise of the elven race. We may be here all day, and I simply do not have time to waste,' Sir Theobold interjected. 'Mikalis, please tell us your story.'

And so the unusual harlequin elf told his tale, the sort of thing he was used to doing, though normally in rowdy taverns.

'I was wandering the Shuddering Peaks in search of inspiration for new songs and poems, hoping for something to

kick start the creative process, and sure enough I found it. I came across a battle scene, one not long finished and among the most extraordinary I had ever seen or heard of. Hill giants, cut to pieces on a small clearing right in the heart of the mountains. There were several shattered carts around along with the bodies of dead guards but no sign of large numbers in opposition. Some creature had clearly been slithering around the clearing but again it was impossible to tell what; at a guess, perhaps a yuan-ti or such like. I have no idea how so many giants could have been slaughtered and just left, but it surely warrants some sort of investigation. I left the scene swiftly and made my way here, as it's the largest city in the region, as soon as I could'

'We must go,' Orion said. 'We've had little luck here and maybe this is linked.'

'It is intriguing,' Sir Theobold said, rubbing his bearded chin. 'Do you all agree?'

The Company all nodded in agreement.

'I suggest we spend the day sorting ourselves out,' Orion continued. 'I'm sure Elwood and Cat need to organise their spell repertoires.'

'Me too, me too,' Ethandril joined in.

'Furnace face, try and make them useful. Think about

targeting individuals,' Apollo said 'We don't want the Shuddering Peaks shuddering because you thought a meteor swarm was the best way to kill a band of kobolds!'

'That was only once!' Ethandril retorted, his face taking on a slightly sulky expression, 'and they were goblins!'

'We're just saying that you should think small,' Elwood said. 'Think about some of those purple magic missiles you like or the orange lightning bolts, stuff like that.'

'Oh yes, now you're talking! Did I tell you I managed a blue fire ball? It was beautiful, it created this wonderful silhouette around a pirate ship I used it on, just before it sank!'

The company all looked at each other and decided that perhaps that was a story for another day. They all went back to their rooms to prepare for the Shuddering Peaks the next day.

The information Mikalis had given them was so good that Ethandril managed to teleport them right into the middle of the clearing.

'See, you should never doubt my ability with a teleport,' Ethan said. 'Do I ever get it wrong?'

'Best not tempt fate, Ethan, but well done,' Catarina whispered.

'I have to hand it to you, flame brain, you are very good at it, just don't get cocky. As much as it pains me to say it, we do need you with us,' Apollo said as looked around the clearing, his pulsing green sword in his right hand. 'Anything brother?' he imparted to the sword. He got no immediate response.

The six members of the Company of the Compass all looked around the clearing, though there were no longer any hill giant bodies strewn around. There were, however, several smashed up wagons and, upon closer inspection, the remnants of a battle that seemed very like that which Mikalis had suggested occurred.

Catarina and Elwood went over to the shattered remnants of a cart, while Orion and Quin-Helwig used their tracking skills to map out the fight scene.

'Certainly something slithered around here,' Quin said, turning to Orion, 'but judging by these scorch marks, it wasn't any ordinary Yuant-ti. These look like, like demon tracks if you ask me.' Orion raised his eyebrows and came even closer to take a better look. The Company had fought summoned beings from the lower planes several times over the years and it was never an easy battle, especially if they started to gate in more of their kind.

'Quin, I have to agree with you,' Orion said. 'The weight of this creature was enormous, much heavier than you would

expect from a lizard, and if you look closely there are burn marks all around, and blood. Look!'

Quin looked hard at where Orion indicated and, sure enough, could see the huge quantity of blood that had soaked into the ground. The pair continued to look and found more and more, as well as finding the footprints of several hill giants.

'I think,' Orion began, 'we're looking at a marilith here. Do you remember when we fought one..'

They were interrupted by a huge boulder sailing through the air and landing in the middle of the clearing with a mighty thump. It was a poor shot and only served to alert the company to the danger. And, indeed, they were in danger.

'Company, ready yourselves,' Ethandril shouted, trying to be as commanding as possible. He muttered several incantations as quickly as he could and began to move with purple flames licking all around him. 'It protects against hot and cold at the same time,' Ethan said to Apollo. 'I merged the spells.'

Elwood finished a short prayer as quickly as he could and all the members of the Company glowed with a faint holy light. He drew his bow and looked up for his first target. Finding one was not a problem.

Coming down the path into the clearing was a band of some eight hill giants all brandishing huge clubs. Standing on the

top of the ridges either side of the clearing were another dozen, all armed with boulders which they were in the process of launching at the Company. Twelve huge stones sailed through the air, and this time there was no problem with the accuracy, all six elves had to take evasive action, tumbling, rolling, jumping and blinking out of danger.

Orion vanished, blinking halfway up the slope towards the giants on the west side. He merged into the shadows behind a boulder as he observed the hill giants for several seconds and worked out a route to take him through them all with as little risk as possible. He knew he could take them with his poisoned darts if he could get close enough.

Apollo having elegantly side stepped a boulder walked forward toward the on rushing throng coming down the main path. He felt very little toward them, certainly no fear. Hill giants were their own worst enemy when fighting such an accomplished rhythm dance fighter. He was actually quite looking forward to the extra power these ridiculous brutes were going to lend to his sword strokes.

'Don't learn a meteor swarm, they said, concentrate on individuals, they said,' Ethandril called out to the group with as much indignation as he could. 'One good swarm, and this would barely be a battle,' he continued. 'Instead, I have to rely on

other ludicrously less effective spells,' and promptly unleashed a bright orange bolt of lightning up the eastern slope and grinned his broad inane grin as it slammed into the first hill giant, sending the behemoth flying backwards with a huge smoking hole in its midriff.

Quin-Helwig drew his long and short swords and, having rolled away from the first volley of boulders, strolled forward to join Apollo to meet the eight onrushing giants. 'I'll go to the right if you'll take the left,' he said just moments before the stampede was upon them.

The siblings, Elwood and Catarina, went back to back in the middle of the clearing and prepared themselves for the next boulder volley. It wouldn't get very far they both knew and, sure enough, as the giants reached for and launched the next wave of massive rocks, Elwood and Catarina let off their own volleys. Five green magic missiles shot from Cat's finger tips and blasted the boulders, thrown by the five remaining giants on the eastern side, out of the sky. The hill giants ducked so as not to get struck by rock shrapnel from the explosions, and looked slightly perplexed. This had never happened before. Elwood let loose a volley of his arrows, sending six into the six rocks that were thrown from the west. The boulders shattered high in the sky, fragments landing all over the western slopes,

much to the disappointment of the hill giants.

The hill giants on the western slopes had more than disappointment on their minds a few moments later when two of them slapped at their legs, thinking they had been stung. As they looked down they both saw a small dart sticking out of their thigh, and soon began to feel the insidious rise of the poison. A quite terrible burning pain began to assault the pair and they cried out to their fellow giants.

'We's been attacked. Little darts. Aahh really hurts!!' was all they managed to blurt out before they both sank to their knees, then slumped to the ground quivering in pain. A shadowy figure vanished from all sight and reappeared some fifty yards away, between the next two giants and some fifteen yards behind them.

The rush of giants made the ground shake and less well balanced fighters than Apollo Shiningblade and Quin-Helwig might have struggled with their footing. But these two had millennia of experience between them and stared right into the eyes of the half-crazed club wielding giants. The first, his club held high over his head, smashed down at Apollo but the elf had left his sword out in front of him at a slight angle and took some of the blow on it but this gave him the momentum he needed. The giant's club smashed into the ground with a massive thud as the agile

elf was flipped three hundred and sixty degrees and swished his sword down upon the creatures shoulder. The left arm holding the club fell off, blood spurting everywhere, covering several of his companions.

Next to him Quin was attacked with a swipe from his left. He jumped back out of the way and came in fast behind the club. He delivered a backhand with his longsword to the creature's right knee. There was a loud bang as a chunk of flesh was removed from the vast creature leaving it looking astonished as it stood on one leg, its foot unattached on the ground next to it. Quin dashed in further, stabbing into the Achilles tendon behind the left ankle and slicing straight through. The monster roared in pain, but what was left of his lower legs could not support the thousand pound body weight above and he crashed face first to the floor in absolute agony, with the ever agile Quin dodging swiftly out of the way. The fallen bodies provided an advantage to the smaller elves, so the hill giants at the rear of the charge began to circle round to surround the pair, leaving two in front. They too began to fan out until Apollo and Quin were surrounded by six hill giants.

Still irritated that he hadn't memorised a meteor swarm, Ethandril paused to go through his many memorised spells. 'Disintegrate, dull bit far away, chain lightning, done

lightning, fire ball. Hmm, bit old school. Prismatic spray, hmm, not bad, maybe later.' His thoughts and personal conversation rolled on till he yelped in excitement 'Yes, yes, yes, oh yes!' He began waving his arms frantically and muttering the spell as quickly as he could. From nowhere he had pulled a black glove and a small rock hammer and was waving them around too as part of his spell. When he finished, the glove and tiny hammer had disappeared and Ethandril stared expectantly up the hill, and appeared to be concentrating as much as he was able. Suddenly there was a shuddering from the slopes and a large hand, some six feet long and holding a six foot hammer, emerged from the ground

'Ah ha! You've got nothing on me, Bigby,' he yelled and waved at the hand.

The disembodied hand and hammer hovered over to the nearest startled giant and took a swing. The creature had no time to react, such was its surprise. The huge hammer crashed into the side of its sloped forehead, caving in the thick skull and killing the poor beast instantly. The four other giants on the eastern slopes had seen enough, deciding that they were at a disadvantage at range, possibly for the first time in their lives, and hurried down the slopes, to escape the hand and hammer, and engage the enemy up close, the enemy that had

slaughtered their friends several days ago. They would have their revenge.

As the four giants stumbled their way down the slopes they were greeted by a new problem. The one small elven girl that had blown their rocks from the sky had become eight, and they were advancing, each with a glowing sword in her hand.

Though it was a simple spell for Cat, it always started a battle well for her, giving her enough time to reduce the number of her opponents before they could work out which one was the real elf. The trick worked just as well this time, as the real Catarina waltzed up to the first giant and slashed him across the knee. The wounding ignited several more spells stored in her sword, and the giant was jolted with electricity and burnt with acid and cold simultaneously. Although well trained in the rhythm dance style, there were times when Catarina just enjoyed her status as a fighting mage and let her opponents have it from both her resources! The behemoth jumped back, raising its huge club above its head.

'It's dis one ere,' it called to its friends, though none were too certain he spoke the truth. He swung his club down as hard as he could and Catarina managed to swivel out of the way, the massive club missing her by a matter of inches. The club smacked into the ground and sent up a puff of earth, some of

which stuck to Cat.

'Dis one, da one wid da erf on it. Dis is da real one,' the giant yelled again, and this time, the other three could make out which one he was indicating.

Elwood sent another volley of six arrows up the western slope, just in time to see two giants fall over even though he clearly hadn't hit them. Orion he thought. Must be the assassin, it's what he does best. His volley had disrupted the rock throwing a second time, making the giants duck for cover, catching two on hip and shoulder respectively. They looked down at him, and like the hill giants on the eastern side decided that coming down to battle the piddly little elves close up may be a better option. Then he heard Catarina call out.

'I may need some help, Elwood, I've got four on me,' she yelled.

Had he not turned to assist his sister, Elwood would have witnessed the true genius of one of his friends. As the giants set off down the western slope, Orion threw two more highly toxic darts, both scoring hits, and pulled out his whip of entangling. The two struck by the darts yelped in pain and began to shudder, much like their comrades had, as one of the most lethal poisons on the whole of Vallilea coursed through their veins. They began to stumble on their descent and fell face

first for the final twenty feet to the clearing at the bottom, convulsing as their bodies were overcome with Orion's special brew. Orion swiftly blinked down the slope and lassoed another hill giant, his whip entangling the legs and holding the monster like a boa constrictor. The creature staggered and fell to the ground. Quick as flash, the assassin was upon him. He drew his lethal jagged black dagger across the monster's neck and let his blade savour the kill. Though he had no need of the hill giant's strength it was trying to confer, he didn't want to become weaker. He murmured a quick snow elf prayer as he resheathed the blade and looked down the slope at the scene below, where the one remaining giant was about to give Elwood and Catarina a nasty shock.

Apollo and Quin were almost too small a target for the hill giants to get at having circled them. None of the creatures seemed quite sure of how to engage successfully and the elves were happy to dodge and parry, feeling no great sense of danger, as long as they didn't try to overextend themselves. The creatures were too slow and deliberate in their movements to be able to catch the pair, and because they were in a circle, they couldn't even take their usual great swipes that might have been more effective.

'We seem to have hit an impasse,' Apollo called to Quin.

'I think you may be right, we need to separate them,' Quin replied in the elven tongue.

Apollo stared into the eyes of one of the dim-witted creatures and beckoned him forth, goading him into action.

'Is that all you can manage big boy. Pretty poor for a creature of your size, I've felt more power in an orc!'

This was far too much for any hill giant to take and the ridiculously simple plan worked a treat. Five of the giants backed away to give their friend more room so he could take on the challenge and put this elf in his place, squished into the ground as far as they were concerned.

Apollo let out a sigh, these great lumps never learned, they still reacted just the same as they always had, for two thousand years.

The giant swung his club around twice to limber up his left shoulder then continued with a sweeping backhanded swing at Apollo from his left. Apollo stepped back out of the way, and the giant growled in anger. It reversed its swing and came back from the right. As he did so, Apollo stepped in closer, spun around so turning his back on the giant and only a foot in front of the creature. The giant could not stop the momentum of the swing and his mighty club smashed into the out held shining blade. Apollo was spun one hundred and eighty degrees in a split

second, his razor sharp sword slicing through the giant's midsection, which seemed to offer as little resistance as a cobweb.

Nothing happened, as the sword reappeared from the left side of the giant's torso, and Apollo stepped back. His assailant stared at him, then gravity did its work and the top and bottom of the giant slowly fell apart. The gush of blood was horrific, spraying some twelve feet into the air, but none of the giants reacted for several seconds as they watched their friend fall into two pieces.

Knowing giants well, Quin decided now was the time to act first. He launched forward swiping and stabbing at the first giant he came to, still transfixed by the death of its colleague. There was a bang as the longsword struck home and the short sword took a great gouge out of a leg, and Quin whizzed on to the next one, slashing and stabbing at it too, as it began to regain its senses.

Apollo was faced with two hill giants, their initial horror now turning to anger and rage. They roared as they lunged forward, determined to flatten this shiny elf with the glowing green sword. One smashed down, just missing the slick elf, the other came with a swipe. Apollo again used this momentum to send him spinning. He jumped just above the club as it swished at

him, letting it clip his sword which he held down. He span anti-clockwise, raising his sword straight out in front of him, as he spun through two full revolutions. He landed in front of his attacker who now had two thin red lines on his chest and abdomen, both growing in width by the second. Blood began to pour down his front and he backed away from this terrifying elf, clutching at his wounds as he did so.

The broad brown elf, with the two swords, continued to whirl through the giants. He had been clipped on one shoulder but had barely felt any pain. All three he had faced down were now on the floor with large cauterised chunks missing from their legs and bodies. They were now all quite dead.

Apollo stood before the last of the ten giants, elegant green pulsing sword held before him. Although hill giants were not bright, they did have a sense of self preservation. The last of that group turned and lumbered off, as quick as he could, back up the path the way he had come.

The eight Catarinas looked ready for a fight. However, the real one had been spotted and was now facing down four furious giants, although one was severely wounded. She moved around her wounded opponent, using him to shield her from the others. As she did so she saw the great black hammer-wielding hand come floating down the slope. The three other giants were so intent

on her they had forgotten the potential danger they were in. Not even a single thought was going through the head of one of them as it was removed from its shoulders by a mighty stroke from the hammer.

'Boom!' Ethandril yelled, overwhelmingly excited by his handiwork. 'Did you see that? Did you seeeee, that!!' He began chuckling to himself, completely wrapped up in his own genius.'

Cat tried not to attack the wounded giant again for fear of finishing him off. She could keep him at bay with little danger to herself and hoped that her allies could help dispose of any of the other giants.

Sure enough, her brother said a prayer to Yllana and a huge column of searing flame shot up from the ground and engulfed another one of the giants. Catarina could feel the heat from the spell as could her opponent and his remaining friend. They turned to see their crisp companion fall to the ground, blackened from head to foot, and quite dead.

Elwood hadn't noticed the last of the giants Orion hadn't managed to finish off, however, and just as he finished his flame strike spell, was struck from the side by a mighty blow. There was a blinding flash as his body protection spell flared, blocking most of the damage, but nothing could stop the sheer force of the blow sending him ten feet away, landing heavily on

his left side. He just managed to regain his feet, clutching his hugely bruised and broken right arm that had taken most of the blow. He tried to breathe, but there was little left in him, and it took him several moments to reorientate himself.

'Wow!' Ethandril said in his ear. 'That must have hurt but don't worry, I'll get this one.'

Ethandril rapidly went through the motions of one of his favourite spells and a seven coloured beam shot forth from his hands straight into the giant. The great beast was hit by so many of the colours, five of the seven, that it was hard to tell whether he had been turned to stone, sent to another plane or disintegrated first. All anyone knew was that there was nothing left in front of them.

'Ha! Ha!' Ethandril cried in triumph. He hadn't noticed the pained look on Catarina's face yet though, as she was nursing a wound from the red part of the prismatic spray. The giant she had been fencing with was now on its knees, having been struck too, and she decided to finish it off with one great spell releasing stroke to its shoulder.

There was now only one giant left and a disembodied six foot hammer wielding hand, a hand that was no longer being controlled. It moved towards the last giant and took a swing, missing before it carried on past and headed for Catarina.

'Ethan, why do you do these things?' she cried out.

'Oops!' he replied, realising his mistake. He closed his eyes and searched within himself to try to bring the hand with the hammer back under control. It was no good. Once his concentration had been interrupted the hand moved of its own accord, seeking out life and attempting to destroy it.

As Catarina readied herself to block or avoid the hand a curious thing happened. The last giant, that had just avoided being hit, dropped to the floor. Once the puff of dust from its impact subsided, Orion calmly walked forward wiping his black bladed dagger clean with a piece of rag.

The hammer swung but Catarina was equal to it, she blocked the blow and swung back the other way, much as Apollo did, and landed a clean blow on the glove. The black hand gave a little, but nothing else happened, except for the hammer rising into the air to try and hit her again.

'Ethan, can't you stop this thing?' she called out.

'Well, yes, but you may get hit,' he called back.

'Just do it!' she yelled, stepping back from the ominous glove.

Ethandril muttered through his dismissal spell, the one he used to dispel any of his magic. It was a little something he carefully wove into all his spells so that should anything ever

happen to him his magic wouldn't just disappear. That was all well and good for him but in situations like this it was somewhat hazardous.

He finished his spell and flung his hands out wide so as to disperse his magic. It happened in the nick of time. The hammer rose up some fifteen feet into the air and was just on the down swing to hit Cat again when there was a loud puffing pop and the whole thing exploded. The force of the explosion sent Catarina flying some twenty feet back and she landed at the feet of Quin-Helwig who had just finished off the last of his giants. Half dazed, he helped her to her feet and looked at her soot blackened face.

'I'm fine,' she said, her brow furrowing. 'Not a scratch from the giants, but he,' she pointed an incriminating finger at Ethandril, 'is accountable for this,' she indicated her face, 'and this,' she pointed to the blackened area of her back caused by the prismatic spray.

'Up to his old tricks is he?' Apollo enquired as the last of his giants ran off. 'Dear, dear, Catarina; we'll have to get you cleaned up before we go back. Can't have people thinking we have been in a serious battle or anything,' he finished.

The Company looked around at the dead giants, all the huge bodies in several bits and charred, and wondered what had led to

the attack.

'My guess is revenge for the other dead,' Elwood said as he walked over to Quin, Cat and Apollo.

'You're probably right,' Apollo agreed. 'My brother says all he could make of their thoughts was a strong sense of wanting revenge.'

'Over here!' Orion called and the other five, including the moderately contrite Ethandril, looked some fifty yards away to where Orion was standing at the entrance to a tunnel, one that obviously went down into the mountains.

'This is where all the wagon tracks are coming from; the ground is quite rutted here,' he called.

The others walked over and, sure enough, the tracks were obvious if you looked for them.

'Let's go back to Theo first, tell him the good news,' Apollo said. 'Then we'll come back and take a look down there. And flame brain, get us back safely, OK!'

'Circle up boys and girls, no harm coming to you here,' Ethan replied, as he whizzed through his teleport spell when they were all assembled.

Meddlers

Nilo, Mariana, Sederic and Graanti, the halflings chiefly responsible for disrupting the river Fin, were pleased with what they had achieved. They were staying in a small cottage owned by an earth halfling farmer in the countryside several miles outside Findon. The farm was some ten miles from the lower slopes of the Shuddering Peaks and, needless to say, had not been suffering from the recent water shortage.

The four were chatting away freely about their great success.

'So I told Sir Theobold that of course we would help; he offered to pay in gems and look!' Nilo said, holding open a small velvet sack. 'That's just the first week's worth.'

'Our leader will be pleased; the more we have in the coffer the better,' Sederic replied.

'The Baron always says that if you can buy others to do our dirty work it removes suspicion from us and helps to keep us all safe.'

'Well remembered, Sederic,' a whispering voice said to the room. 'My friends and loyal companions you have indeed done well. However, we must now target two more towns, Abinger and Ingles. Both seem to be suffering a similar fate to that of

Findon. It would be remiss of us not to add to their woes.'

'Certainly, Lord, what would you suggest?' Sederic inquired of the unseen voice.

'A different approach to both is in order. Since it is on the coast, I believe that Abinger requires a particularly high tide in the next day or so. A minor flooding of their docks should cause more than a few problems there and, of course, you can once again follow the disaster with an offer to help, for a fee of course. As for Ingles, it is surrounded by hills. I'm sure that after a heavy storm the chances of a mudslide would increase dramatically. Perhaps get one of the airs involved; Icari should be able to help. Get him to create a stormy night; lots of rain, thunder and lightning, perhaps a whirlwind or two if you are feeling adventurous. Then, drop the side of one of the hills that run down into the town. It should be enough to wipe out that stick fence they use as a city wall there and flatten some houses. Again, follow your handiwork in and try to help, but not too much. Let the pitiful humans see you as saviours in their time of need. Good luck, fellow Renegades! I will contact you soon as the balance of power tips further in our favour!'

The four halflings looked at each other and smiled.

'He is a genius,' Mariana spoke in total admiration for

their leader, the Red Baron.

'He certainly is,' Sederic confirmed. 'Let's get our rest. We'll start on this in the morning'.

Two days later, a freak high tide washed into the town of Abinger, causing devastation to the dock district. The people of the town, already suffering with the rising crime level from the Spice addicts, wondered what it was they had done that had so angered the gods for them to be punishing them so. Many were openly praying in the street to Tuke, the god of luck, asking for his favour to end the bad luck. Others were openly cursing Kaspian, the god of the seas, and offering treasures up to him in an effort to stop any further damage being inflicted.

There was one fortunate occurrence for the people of Abinger that went little noticed, however. The dock region was where the devils-come-humans had been plying their trade. It had proved a most convenient place for the invading, Spice-peddling, shape-changed devils to inhabit and they had had great success in selling the Spice to dock workers and those coming into the town on boats. Cheragai, still well disguised as a good-looking, tall and elegant human, was far from impressed. Although he was not born of a prime material world, he had a sense that this high tide was no accident. These types of random events did

happen occasionally but this seemed a bit too orchestrated to him. He called his demons to him to stop them being scattered throughout the town and being discovered. He dismissed over half back to the Hells, so the operation would be less conspicuous for a while, and set about trying to establish a new area from which to peddle Spice. Later that day, in a quiet warehouse he had bullied the owner in to giving him use of, and well away from any prying eyes, Cheragai contacted his master.

'Akkron, there has been a freak incident here,' he began.

'Oh really, Cheragai. Of your making, I presume,' Akkron replied. Cheragai winced as he heard his real name being used so openly and had to control his rage towards the filthy little shadow gnome. One day he would have that snivelling creature's head in the palm of his hand and would take great pleasure in ripping it from his pathetic little body.

'No Akkron, it had nothing to do with me or any of my many minions,' he put special emphasis on many. 'A freak wave has hit the docks and virtually wiped away our trading area. Though I am not of this world, I know enough to suspect this was no weather front. It has been calm here for weeks. Someone or something has caused it,' Cheragai finished.

'Hmm. Do you think it wass an attack on you?'

'Unlikely. We have been very careful and I have just sent

some of my cohorts back to the Hells to avoid detection. I suspect this has been done to add to the city's problems rather than directed at us. These humans have many enemies, as you well know,' he chuckled at this. 'Perhaps it is an opportunist strike.'

'And have you managed to sset up a new point of disstribution?'

'I am involved in that process at the moment; we have several possible areas to operate from.'

'Very well, Cheragai. I shall look into thiss 'freak wave' with my brothersss. Keep up the sthpread of Sthpice and report back again if you disscover anything. I will contact you if we have any firm leads. '

The connection ended abruptly. Cheragai stood in his human form, hands on hips, seething about a great many things. He couldn't wait for this to be over and to get back to his tower on the eighth level of Hell with a certain shadow gnome's head on a pole outside.

At the same time as the freak tide occurred in Abinger, some hundred miles away the town of Ingles suffered a torrid night of storms. It rained all night, the like of which few had seen before. As morning broke and the sun rose in the western

sky the residents came slowly out of their homes to inspect any damage. The rain still fell but not like the torrent of the night before.

On the outskirts of the town, Nilo and Graanti were putting the finishing touches to their mud slide. They had to add just enough water to the already saturated slope and then off it would go. Graanti had magically dug a hole some ten feet deep at the top of the slope, and Nilo filled it with water, he was now gently feeding more and more of that water in to the saturated ground in front of him and...

There was a rumble, much like thunder. The two halflings had reached the tipping point and the mud on the slope of the small hill just above the town gave way. Several tons of mud raced down the hillside and smashed into the town wall, a twelve foot high wooden barricade. The mud smashed straight through and swept in to the town. Nilo and Graanti both looked on in awe at the fruits of their labours and scarpered, not wishing to be seen anywhere near the area.

The people of Ingles were devastated by the destruction of a large chunk of their town. They spent the whole day and night desperately trying to dig people out of the mud and collapsed buildings. They were, therefore, full of appreciation the next day when a pair of earth halflings sauntered into town and

offered to help with the clean-up operation, for a small fee of course. They marshalled the locals into an effective group and used their innate abilities, as well as summoning a pair of small earth elementals, to help. They made the best of a bad situation and got most of the mess cleared as best they could. The human population were overwhelming in their thanks, putting these two halflings up in the best inn in town for free. It was also the same inn that a certain shape-changed succubus was staying in, leading the local men astray with the promise of nights of unbridled passion as long as they managed to get hold of some Spice.

After the initial horror of the mudslide, Leileilii took very little interest in the following events. However, she was no fool. The chance arrival of two earth halflings was almost too much of a coincidence for her to believe, especially as halflings were quite rare in the town even though the population neared twenty thousand, mostly humans. She began to eavesdrop on the unsuspecting pair and sure enough overheard their celebrations of a job well done, and their comments that their leader would be pleased.

Leileilii contacted Mentza immediately and informed him of what she had heard. The ever-thoughtful Mentza thanked his loyal servant and told her to remain in close contact in the coming

days and inform him of any further developments. The succubus was more than happy to comply with her tormentor and master; she was having far too much fun toying with the human boys in the town.

In the small cavern overlooking the mushroom crop, the leaders of two large clans of the city of Imar, Kymru Galavan and Braden Puttnik, and their chief wizards were meeting.

'Greetings, Clan Leader Galavan and Chief Wizard! We appear to have achieved great things in a short period of time,' Braden said nodding to his allies.

'Greetings back, Braden Puttnik! Indeed we have. Spice appears to be causing as much trouble as we had anticipated, perhaps more. Maybe we have underestimated the greed of the humans and their hedonistic desires; they seem quite uncontrollable.'

'Even our devil friends have exceeded expectations and as yet have not been discovered. Akkron tells me Cheragai has performed well in Abinger and, despite a recent mishap, continues to do so,' Braden went on.

'Mentza tells me Leileilii is doing a fine job in Ingles, though there has been an intriguing recent development there too,' Kymru said in response.

The two members of Clan Puttnik raised their mauve eyebrows and nodded for Kymru to continue, which he did.

'There was an accident in Ingles, a mudslide, a rare occurrence. It came after a night of heavy rain that didn't seem to affect anywhere else along the coast. The mudslide badly affected the city, wrecking buildings and leaving a significant part of the town under mud. But wouldn't you know it, a day later a pair of earth halflings came to town to help with the clear up.'

'I think there iss a pattern emerging here,' Akkron interjected.

'These halflings helped the town, for a fee of course, but were overheard by our very own succubus celebrating a job well done,' Kymru finished.

'Cheragai had his doubts about the freak tide in Abinger too. He was unconvinced it was natural and this may well point the finger at our elemental friends,' Akkron said.

'Leileilii mentioned that the earth halflings said their 'leader' would be pleased. Perhaps we should make some enquiries,' Mentza added. 'I can cast a guided scry if you like. It should give us a better idea if the halflings are up to something and who this leader is.'

'Excellent suggestion, Chief Wizard,' said Kymru.

'Be our guest,' Braden added.

Mentza Galavan walked a few feet away and withdrew a large book from a concealed space within his robe. He pored through the book and found the page he was after. He studied the spell for several minutes; it was one he had used on many occasions before. He reached into another extra-dimensional pocket and drew forth some incense, some precious metal and red stones and uttered the spell. A large viewing portal, like a black mirror, materialised in the air in front of him and a face appeared.

'Ask your question,' the featureless face said.

'Who is the leader that has caused these so called natural disasters in the towns of Abinger and Ingles? Show the person to us,' Mentza asked.

The face vanished and the mirror went black. Moments later it began to fog. Slowly the fog cleared and a scarlet red image could be seen filling the whole viewing screen. It slowly became clearer to view but no clearer to understand. The viewpoint moved further away and began to move around the subject; it became clear it was a person. The image was that of a scarlet-cloaked halfling with the hood pulled down and his left arm raised, obscuring his face except for the eyes. The scry moved closer in to look at the eyes; the black eyeballs and red irises were those of a fire halfling. The eyes stared hard back into

the scry and began their own squint of scrutiny.

The mirror went black and Mentza turned to the other three.

'There you have our answer. Halflings are involved, however unusual that may be. Perhaps we can use this to our advantage. Perhaps we can use the halflings as scapegoats for the Spice dealing and keep the town authorities away from our real sellers.'

'I like the idea, Mentza,' Braden said. 'Framing the halflings in human towns should not be too hard.'

'I agree,' Kymru said. 'Let's make it happen. Tell all our contacts to capture and kill a halfling or two in each town. Plant some Spice on them, then leave their broken bodies to be discovered by the authorities. Pretend they have been caught by vigilantes or something. That should make them the focus for a while and we can continue unaffected, as well as teaching those pesky little meddlers a lesson or two. They obviously don't know who they are dealing with.'

The group all nodded agreement and left the small cavern, setting off to deliver their orders to their eyes and ears in the three Spice-influenced cities.

Start of the Journey Down

The sun was shining on the city of Findon and the white marble palace of Sir Theobold looked stunningly beautiful as it sparkled and twinkled in the Autumn light. Unfortunately the sun was the only bright thing around the palace. The dark cloud that hung over Sir Theobold was still there as he sat, more slumped, in his comfortable chair in his private chambers. He was surrounded by his trusted advisors, Argyll and Lorian Thililisfarne, his court mage.

The third person there was the strangest looking elf any of them had ever seen, the red-haired, green-skinned and pink eyed Harlequin elf, Mikalis the Wanderer, a travelling minstrel and teller of tales. It was he who was providing a necessary distraction for Sir Theobold while he waited for the Company of the Compass to save his city from the disaster for which it was heading. Mikalis was recounting yet another, more than likely embellished, tale when the doors to the private chamber flew open and in walked the slightly battered Company.

Sir Theobold leaped out of his seat and stood straight and tall as the graceful elves marched towards him.

'What news? Any joy? Found anything, anything at all?' he gabbled.

'Just a few hill giants,' Apollo said with a sneer, as he pretended to pick something out from under a slender finger nail.

'Excellent! So you found the ones Mikalis was talking about then?' Sir Theobold tried to confirm.

'No,' Apollo replied. 'These were their friends more than likely. All twenty of them.' Apollo looked into the face of the astonished Sir Theobold. 'And they weren't there for a chat.'

'He's quite right, Theo,' Ethandril jumped in. 'I had to use my crushing hammer spell, worked a treat, it knocked off heads and...'

'And nearly flattened me,' Catarina butted in.

'Only nearly, dear Cat, only nearly,' Ethan retorted.

To stop the conversation from getting away from the point, which it had a habit of doing where Sir Theobold was concerned, Argyll stepped forward and spoke to the whole group.

'So you met and I presume dealt with these giants. Are they anything to do with the problem though?' he asked.

'It doesn't appear so. We found no Spice on them, though some was scattered on the ground near the remains of a couple of wagons,' Orion replied stepping forward. 'We've found a tunnel into the mountains up there, and several wagon tracks. There had also been another fight, the one Mikalis here found the aftermath of. We believe the giants were slaughtered by the real

perpetrators, more than likely the shadow gnomes we scryed, and their demon allies. We've decided to go down the tunnel and take a look, but we thought we should keep you informed first, just in case!'

'Just in case? You believe this to be that dangerous, even for yourselves?' Sir Theobold asked tentatively.

'What happened to Eclaine during the scrying at the temple of Keelee would suggest so,' Orion stated clearly.

'Indeed!' Argyll spoke up. 'Shadow gnomes are as evil in all that they do as we are good. Their minds are bent and warped to evil. They will let nothing get in their way if they are carrying out some sort of scheme. They want nothing more than to destroy the surface world and they are certainly happy to use summoned demons to help them, no matter what the cost.'

'We should spend the rest of the day preparing,' Elwood said.' I need to pray for guidance from Yllana and ask her for my spells to be replenished. I'm sure we could all do with a day's rest to restore ourselves. Perhaps we should leave tonight or at dawn, the less time wasted the better, though, in case our handiwork from earlier is discovered by our adversaries.'

'Most definitely a good idea, Elwood. Now that we have a place to go to and we know our enemy, I have several fabulous spells which will help us no end and..'

'Flame brain, if you even come close to harming any of us again, I will personally remove your fingers so there will be no more spell casting. Understand?'

'Apollo, my oldest friend, you wouldn't, would you?'

Ethandril replied, more than worried and holding up his hands in front of his face while wiggling the fingers.

The stony look Apollo gave him made Ethandril gulp and quickly hide his hands in his pockets.

Ever the practical member of the group, especially when it looked as though battle would be joined, Quin-Helwig posed the next question.

'What can you tell us of shadow gnomes, Argyll, do they have any weaknesses?'

'Very few. They are very powerful magicians and, dare I admit it, highly skilled assassins. However, they are nowhere near as powerful as you in ordinary combat. Very few are warriors as you would understand it, so this is where their summoning comes to the fore. If you are engaged with them expect to have to deal with summoned creatures; devils are often the favourite but demons aren't uncommon. They will use poisons and traps and stealth.'

'Ghost, you should feel right at home,' Apollo interrupted.

'They also work well together. Remember, they are

calculating, but not chaotic and reckless. They will live to fight another day if they're in trouble,' Argyll finished.

'So that would be a none to the weaknesses then?' Quin responded.

The six members of the Company looked at each other with grim expressions. They were, however, aware of a strange scratching noise. Orion looked over to the corner of the room where Mikalis was frantically scribbling away. The white haired snow elf strode over to the Harlequin elf and stopped just in front of him, reaching forward to lift the pale green chin and stared into the pink eyes which were not unlike his own.

'What are you doing, Mikalis?'

'An accurate record of heroic deeds could be priceless. For nearly two centuries I have wandered the continent looking for inspiration and recounting tales told to me. Never have I been the one to actually witness the events as they unfold. You are history in the making, whether you succeed in glorious triumph or die trying in glorious failure.' He looked at the slightly shorter Orion with a disarming smile.

Orion squinted back and took a quick glance at the parchment in the bard's hand. It did appear to be a record of the current conversations.

'Very well. We'll be keeping a check on you, though. You

had better keep what's going on here quiet, or, well you don't need to guess, do you?' the assassin finished.

By early evening the Company had finished their preparations and reconvened in the private chambers of Sir Theobold's palace. Ethandril described, in minute detail, to his daughter, Lorianana, the location they were heading for, just on the off chance that should they not return within a reasonable time period. A week was suggested as the limit, after which a search party might be sent out. Apollo sniggered at this; the supposition that the group might not return was ridiculous in his eyes.

The group teleported away just as dusk was falling, arriving some twenty yards from the cave opening and well to the side, just in case anyone was waiting for them. They scanned the clearing, looking at the bodies of the dead giants. Some were definitely missing, others had been used as meals since lumps of flesh were missing in various bite-size chunks. The perpetrators were the other denizens of the Shuddering Peaks, ranging from vulture-like birds to a wyvern or something even bigger.

Before they could move, Quin-Helwig held up his right hand to quieten the group. His sensitive ears had picked up a noise on the slopes just above them on the eastern side, those dark in

shadow. He scanned the rocky out cropping searching for the noise maker. Orion looked to his friend as he too could hear a noise and wanted permission to blink up the slope to investigate, but the mighty ranger shook his head. He made a gesture indicating a cat like creature. The group made no sound, though Ethandril was almost bursting at the seams trying to keep quiet. After a minute they were rewarded as they all saw a furry head and ears appear briefly above a rock. Quin walked forward and began a series of low growls, eerily similar to a great cat. He heard nothing in response. He started up the slope, still growling in the back of his throat. There was a flurry of motion as two hundred pounds of fur leaped onto him from behind a rock. The immensely furry beast tried to pin the ranger to the floor but knew surprise for the first time in its life as the ranger, using his extraordinary strength, simply picked him off and held him up by the throat with one hand. Quin mumbled through a brief prayer and suddenly the communication between him and the beast was clear.

'Do not attack, friend, I meant no harm,' Quin began as he looked in to the eyes of the snow leopard. 'I am a friend of all animals.'

'Didn't know what you were, your language was strange,' the leopard replied.

Quin-Helwig gently lowered the beautiful animal and it shook itself to reorganise its copious amount of fur.

'Many strangers have come through my areas lately,' the leopard continued.

'Have you been threatened?' Quin asked.

'They threaten all things.'

'They are giants?'

'No. Very small, and with unnatural creatures.'

'Ones that slither?' Quin asked.

'Yes. Lots of arms. Killed giants. Very dangerous, a threat to all.'

'Did you see this?'

'Yes, this is one of my areas, clearing is good for catching food. I am always here.'

'And did they come from the cave here?'

'Yes. They all come from there. Small ones, humans and wagons.'

'Thank you for your help. What is your name?'

'Aravinda. How have I helped? I have just told you all I have seen.'

'You have confirmed what we needed to know, Aravinda. Take care friend. I would suggest moving a little away from this area. Keep yourself safe. Should I see you again, I am Quin.'

'Farewell Quin' Aravinda growled as he bounded up the slope and disappeared from view.

Quin-Helwig returned to the others who had all witnessed the conversation but only heard growling coming from both.

'Well. The leopard confirmed what we suspected. A marilith did kill the giants before us and everything is coming from the cavern,' he said.

'Well, let's be on our way without further ado,' Ethandril said smiling at the others. 'We are adventurers at heart are we not, and this is what we are here to do.'

The part-demented flame elf headed for the cave leading down into the mountains. The others followed a little more circumspectly than their 'leader'.

Once through the ten-yard wide entrance the cavern expanded almost immediately to some twenty yards across. It also became dark very quickly and all the elves adjusted their eyesight to infravision. As they moved along Apollo and Quin swiftly caught up to and got slightly ahead of Ethandril, both to protect him and anyone else. Catarina and Elwood followed just behind and Orion moved randomly around occasionally using his blinking ability to get further ahead. They were as silent as a puff of wind, even those least trained in the art of silent movement

made very little noise and Orion and Quin were inaudible. As the cavern started to wind down a series of side tunnels branched off. They paused and quickly looked down a few looking for any signs of recent passage, but the wagon wheel tracks were only found in the dirt straight ahead, so they continued on. The floor was still slightly muddied as they carried on, with the wheel marks clearly visible, but after another hundred yards the path became solid granite, and the wagon tracks disappeared.

'I can still make out the tracks,' Quin said turning to the others. 'There are enough indicators, moved pebbles and things. I don't think it will be too hard to stay on the right route.'

'I can cast a route finding spell,' Ethandril piped up flourishing his slender yellow fingers.

'Perhaps not Ethan,' Elwood said soothingly. 'If it's the one I remember it will attract every creature down here; we're trying to be subtle.'

Ethandril nodded, slightly crestfallen.

After only a few more minutes of stealthy walking, the path widened substantially as it entered a vast cavern. They could hear water dripping and the cavern was filled with stalagmites and stalactites. There was a clear path winding through the forest of obstacles and the Company followed it till it became an open space with several paths leading off in different

directions. Quin-Helwig and Orion looked around cautiously.

'I believe the wagons are coming from there,' Quin said, indicating the widest path.

'I have a suggestion,' Orion whispered. 'We wait here, there's plenty of places to hide, and we wait for another caravan to come through. Let's take a closer look at our targets and learn more about them. Let's keep surprise as our advantage.'

'Indeed, ghost. As much as I hate your sneaking I agree,' Apollo added.

'I can hide us by illusion,' Ethandril said, confidence returning. 'I could make us all look like stalagmites and when a caravan comes through we could jump out and..'

'The shadow gnomes will probably spot the magic, Ethan,' Catarina said putting a placating hand on Ethandril's forearm. 'But how about a rope trick? I bet you can make one last ages.'

'Oh yes, days. Did I ever tell you the time..'

'Lava lips, just do it,' Apollo cut in, trying to keep the scatter-brained flame elf on task.

'Let's move a little away from here, then I can stay out here and keep watch,' Orion said. 'Make sure you put it where we can see all these paths, Ethan.'

The six Company members moved ten yards away from the main clearing until they were hidden from view by the forest of

stalagmites. Ethandril produced a thirty foot rope from one of his many deep pockets and cast his spell. The rope stiffened and went up high till it cleared the stalagmites and stopped just short of the stalactites.

'Perfect!' Ethan exclaimed.

Five highly agile elves climbed the rope and bundled into the extra-dimensional space. Orion made sure the rope was inconspicuous, hanging against a stalagmite, and began to silently patrol the immediate area, practising his blinking till he was able to whip around a fifty foot area in an instant. He returned to the base of the rope and smiled, drawing his dagger. The powers that lethal instrument had bestowed on him over the years he would be ever grateful for, especially that blink dog guardian, what a wonderful bonus that had been from his last mission.

The rest of the group up above in the rope trick settled in to their slightly cramped space, sitting against the walls and chatting. Apollo took the opportunity to heed his brother's words and talk with Catarina.

'So Catarina, how are you finding the rhythm dance style? You said you were improving.'

'To be honest I have had far less opportunity to use it these past years. Elwood and I have been involved in a lot of

local diplomacy issues, none so far have ended in a battle,' she laughed softly.

'But when you do use it, do you drop into it, or do you just use some of the techniques?' Apollo pressed.

'I suppose I have just used the technique, for one off blows. I tend to use spells stored in my sword as well which often finishes a fight quickly.'

'That's fine, but perhaps you should come to me for some more training. You are one of the very few spell casting rhythm dancers ever. It's a constant war between the two disciplines I know, as you don't often get caught up in battles hard or long enough to fully lose yourself in the rhythm zone. When was the last time you did drop in to the zone, I mean completely?'

'Honestly, not since we were last together.'

'Really. Hmm. Then yes, it is imperative we do some more practice after all this. I will see if you can come to Solaria if you would like. I have King Sempero's ear; you could maybe even help me train a few youngsters. I sometimes wonder if I'm getting a little old for them now.'

'I must ensure my duties are finished here on Vallilea, but it would be an honour to come, if I'm allowed. You don't really think you're too old do you?'

'Perhaps.'

'But you are still the most skilled fighter on Estrella aren't you? Surely you can teach the youngsters more than anyone else?'

'Thirty years ago I would never have hesitated to say yes. But the humans are becoming more powerful very quickly. The fact that they can become warriors anywhere near my level of ability, when I am over two thousand years old and they are in decline by forty, is extraordinary. It's something all the elven nations should be aware of. The human level of ambition is totally beyond us too. They will only continue to make advances in everything - fighting, magic, building - which is not to be discouraged but nurtured. We must, though, help them make good decisions for the future. That's why I came to Theo's aid; it could be important to be thought well of by humans on Vallilea.'

'I won't tell anyone you said that,' Cat said with a grin.

'It's all about perspective, Catarina. We must continue our ways and be slightly mysterious to humans. That's why I want you to continue with the rhythm dance so much: it's why Ethan's half breed makes me so uncomfortable. It's not that I don't like Lorianana, but I don't like the fact that half-elves are possible. There aren't any half-dwarves are there?'

'Except for Quin.'

'Except for Quin-Helwig,' Apollo just managed a smile.

'Do others share your feelings on this?'

'Well we do have guardian isles for our main islands, the Solars and Flames. Quin revealed that even the island elves are considering having a guard isle. The snow elves are possibly too remote, but anything is possible. I think all the inhabitants of this world can feel the humans' influence spreading. And of course the halflings all remember the Persecution even if they don't talk about it.'

'Don't talk about that, it still makes me feel ill.'

'What we are doing here is important well beyond just helping out Theo and his city. And it's good to catch up, I have seen many come and go in my life time so I'm pleased to see you all progressing well.'

'You don't always seem like you're pleased'

'There are standards to maintain Cat, I wouldn't want people thinking I cared overly. Besides, when you asked am I the best warrior on Estrella, perhaps my only competition for that mantle is here. Quin-Helwig is as strong as ever and Orion appears to be gaining power rapidly. I may need to keep a little more of a check on him.'

'Why? He's invaluable.'

'Certainly, but mortals should be careful about acquiring too much power, it can corrupt. If I'm honest, that blinking

ability he's gained makes him seriously powerful and, if you consider some of the foes we've fought in the past, he could be picking up some extraordinary powers. Can he regenerate? How strong is he? Hill giant? Stone? Who knows?'

'I hadn't really thought about it. I barely noticed the blinking, he's always been hard to keep track of in a fight and I just thought it was an extension of that.'

'I'm afraid not. And I noticed he was slaying giants with just one throw of his poisoned darts, the force he must be imparting is massive. You saw that when he attacked us at the palace on our first meeting; the dart that hit Quin was not so much bent as compressed.'

'But aren't the deaths just due to his poisons?'

'A fair amount of the damage is, but the darts are going in far enough to have an immediate effect.'

Catarina was silent for a while, so Apollo continued.

'Then there is the potential problem of where he got that dagger from, of course.'

'Where? I didn't realise there was any issue there.'

'He's hidden it well, perhaps it didn't function so well at first, but the dagger has its own intelligence. I hope Orion is in control of it. It belonged to a very powerful demon, and you can imagine how powerful it was with a dagger that conferred the

abilities of the slain on to the wielder. Imagine a demon killing other demons for millenia.'

Catarina gulped.

'Exactly,' Apollo finished.

'And where is this demon?' Cat asked tentatively.

Apollo just shrugged. 'Orion would never say, but Ethan, Quin and I don't think he's been finished off entirely!'

If they had been in daylight Catarina's normally radiant pale green face would have gone almost white. As it was Apollo's infravision just picked up a loss of heat from her face.

'Still, he seems to be fine. I believe his snow elf heritage keeps him well grounded and stable, all those rituals he still performs when he thinks we're not looking. You know he still says a shorter version of the snow elf death prayer for every life he takes.'

'I had noticed him mumbling away, I just thought he might be trying to keep his calm around Ethan.'

'Talking of which,' Apollo said, 'Ethandril, shouldn't we check Orion is alright?'

Ethandril, Elwood and Quin had been having their own discussion, mostly a debate about the various merits of wizardly magic and god-given magic and their uses.

'Why yes, yes of course, just poke your head down through

there, see what you can see,' Ethandril instructed Apollo.

Raising an eyebrow at Ethandril as if to suggest this would be the last order he would take from him, Apollo poked his head back through the hole where the rope entered the extra-dimensional space. He peered all around, it was certainly an excellent view of the cavern, but he could see no sign of Orion. After several minutes of blood rushing to his head, Orion materialised below him.

'Anything?' Apollo whispered.

Orion shook his head. Just as Apollo was pulling his head back through the hole, Orion began to wave his hand. He could hear a rattling noise coming from the path, still some distance away. Apollo tucked his head back into the rope trick.

'Something is coming, be ready!' he told the four others.

Orion meanwhile blinked off in the general direction the noise was coming from. Less than thirty seconds later he was back at the foot of the rope. Apollo's head appeared again and Orion nimbly climbed half way up to meet him.

'It's a wagon, but there are a lot of guards, I've counted ten humans in armour and at least six shadow gnomes; there may be more. I think we should sit tight for now, it's too risky fighting them on their terms down here until we know more about them and their numbers.'

'You always were a coward when it comes to battle, ghost, but you're probably right. Can you stay out there to observe them?'

'They'll never know I'm here, but get that rope in, just in case.'

Orion Lutin, the snow elf assassin, blinked back down and began blinking circuits around the coming caravan, never in one place for more than a few moments. Apollo Shiningblade dextrously and silently pulled the rope up and informed the other company members what was happening.

'But I want to see too' Ethandril moaned. 'I am in charge here and I really think I should be able to see what's going on. Do you really think I can't see off a few poxy shadow gnomes and some metal encased humans.'

'Just sit tight, Ethan, we'll all get our chance,' Elwood said soothingly. 'If we observe this caravan, learn more about it, then we can be fully prepared for any more.'

'Hmmp' said Ethandril.

The caravan filled with Spice rolled no more than twenty feet away from where the Company was hidden. The ten human guards stood rigid to attention, five on each side of the wagon. There was obviously a shadow gnome driver and what appeared to be a mage sitting with him, but the remaining gnomes were hard

to spot, using illusions and shadows to conceal themselves from prying eyes. Orion was impressed and assumed that the numbers of guards had been increased due to the giants' attacks. He stood quietly behind a particularly thick stalagmite and watched the wagon roll away, following the path the company had used to come down into the underground world. His right hand tapped on the handle of his black-bladed dagger as he imagined what powers a shadow gnome might be able to confer upon him. He walked silently the few yards back to the bottom of the rope trick and waited. After several, seemingly endless minutes, Apollo poked his head through again. Orion gave him a nod, and the rope was silently lowered once more. Orion climbed the rope swiftly and with ease and entered the somewhat cramped space above.

'Well, we now know where these caravans are coming from, and they are heavily guarded. I think we should perhaps follow one and, if we're going to attack, wait till we're outside as that'll put us at an advantage over the gnomes.'

'Can't I just immolate them here?' Ethandril enquired.

'And bring the whole cavern down on our heads too, Ethan. Think about it,' Quin-Helwig chided the mage.

'I sometimes wonder who's in charge here. This is my adventuring group, and if I don't have the opportunity to express myself the way I want, then I'll just have to get a new

crew!'

The other five members briefly looked at one another. Quin cracked first and a small giggle slipped out. Catarina was next, a high pitched squeal escaping as she pretended to cough. Her brother and Orion both started to cough laugh too, and Quin cracked again and started to laugh properly.

'Oh, a figure of fun am I, that's all I am to you now, not the vanquisher of Dolomite the red, or the one that freed at least three of you from Orcus and that wand. No, a figure of fun. Fine, perhaps I will just...'

'Ethandril Thililisfarne, stop taking yourself so seriously. You are amongst my oldest and dearest friends on the whole of Estrella and I want to keep it that way,' Apollo said, placing a hand on Ethandril's shoulder. 'We have something important to do here that does not require meteor storms, orange lightning bolts or any of your other tremendous spells. Who knows, maybe we'll need them later but for now, let's just gather the information and then we will act. And no, I will never be grateful enough to you for saving us from Orcus!'

This seemed to appease Ethandril somewhat and as he looked at the others they all nodded encouragingly at him.

'Hmm. Perhaps you are right. Well, who's next for down there to await the next wagons?'

'I'll go, I can set up a clairaudience on the tunnel and stay hidden here, just below,' Catarina volunteered.

'Excellent, Cat! Be safe and let us know as soon as you hear anything.' Ethan replied, now much more sedate and yet more confident and less scatty, having said his piece.

Catarina dropped the rope out of the extra-dimensional space and slid down, casting her spells once she landed. The rest of the group shifted positions a little and Elwood and Quin-Helwig began chatting about the dwarves Elwood and Catarina had just been involved with on a diplomatic mission.

'They really are very uncomplicated,' Elwood said. 'You know exactly where you stand with them and they'll certainly tell you if they don't agree with you, that's for sure'

'I've been on the southern isles so long that I've almost forgotten what they're like. Even in all the years I have travelled with Ethandril, Orion, and Apollo before you joined us we had very little contact with dwarves. I think it's because those three are so elven they can be off putting even to the most broad minded of non-elves.'

'I can well imagine,' Elwood said with a smile. 'The races are also very distinct, very much like us. We were dealing with the local thunder dwarves, but they refused to speak for the chalk dwarf community even though it was less than twenty miles

away.'

'I suppose I can understand that. On the southern isles we allow each island self rule, though any of us are free to come and go from any island. There is pretty much universal agreement, but a few local issues do crop up, things like dealing with Sahaguin attacks or trading with the merfolk.'

'It is interesting how we all differ so much. You have a free fluid society where as we have fairly close governance, the Daphinian forest is one community for us. As for the solar elves, well, you only have to look at Apollo to see what they're like.'

'Yes, I know exactly what they're like.'

'You've been there? You've never said before.'

'It never really came up before. Your growing up now Elwood, becoming quite the curious politician, you should go there, ask Apollo for an invite, I'm sure they'll let you on to Solaria.'

'Would you come too?'

'I? I'm not entirely sure that I'm allowed back.'

Elwood gave Quin an encouraging look to continue and after several moments of thinking of a suitable response came up with,

'Let's just say that there is a possibility that some more Harlequin elves could be born under the right circumstances.'

Even the King's great grandchild could be one,' Quin gave Elwood a knowing wink. Elwood's jaw dropped and he just stared at his ranger friend.

'If Yllana didn't want Harlequin elves they wouldn't be possible, my friend,' was his carefully chosen, smiling response.

Quin grinned back as his mind wandered back to the summer many, many years ago when he had visited Apollo on Solaria. He was the first island elf to be allowed there, and had been a real novelty for the many sheltered solar elves who only knew of island elves from books and tales from other solar elves. He had caused quite a stir among the girls, including King Sempero's daughter, Princess Abriana. She came to visit Quin-Helwig many times during his stay to learn more about the ways of island elves. Her surprise marriage and the subsequent birth of her first child, Princess Helarina, within two years of Quin-Helwig leaving, had not gone unnoticed.

'How did your diplomacy with the dwarves go?' Quin-Helwig said bringing the conversation back to the original topic.

'We achieved a lot. The thunder dwarves will trade with us and we have worked out clear boundaries with them about where their tunnels finish under the forest and where our territory begins. I don't think they particularly like or understand us but we have at least agreed these things. I've even learned some

of the dwarven language.'

'That's impressive. I have enough trouble with the language of humans. I even struggle with Ethan and Orion's accents sometimes,' aQuin laughed gently.

They paused in their conversation and eavesdropped on the other three, in part to take in the range of accents the snow, flame and solar elf had. They were all quite distinct.

At that moment, a pretty green face with copper hair appeared through the entrance.

'Another wagon's coming, it's still a little way off, but it sounds like similar numbers to the last one,' Catarina said softly.

'That was quick,' Orion replied

'Perhaps they're sending out extra to make up for the wagons they lost to the giants,' Elwood added.

'Okay, come in little Cat, let's let it pass and then we'll follow,' Ethan said attempting to assume control.

'Let me follow closely,' Orion said with determination, 'I can move back and forth to keep you informed of the situation. We can't risk us all being right up behind them.'

'Agreed, ghost. I quite like it when you put your neck on the line for us,' said Apollo with a wry smile. 'It makes such a welcome change.'

Catarina pulled herself into the space as Orion went the other way, ignoring Apollo's comment. When he hit the bottom he blinked well away from the area of the rope trick and waited for the caravan. Sure enough, several minutes later another wagon came past with a similar number of armour clad humans and shadow gnomes as the previous one. Orion, ever silent, watched them pass. When they had gone fifty feet away he silently climbed the rope and told the others to come after him after a count of twenty, the way they had entered the cave system. As the caravan continued up the cavern path to the exit in the Shuddering Peaks, a shadow flitted back and forth around them, watching their every move. As the wagon came within sight of the tunnel opening it stopped. Orion observed a party of at least four gnomes and six humans cautiously approach the exit. They left the tunnel, Orion assumed to make sure they wouldn't be attacked, and it was some ten minutes before they returned. The caravan continued on and Orion swiftly returned to his friends.

'They checked the clearing and left. Let's follow them on to Findon and see how they're getting this stuff into the city.'

'Sure. We can give them a bit of a start. I'm sure I can find a vantage point to watch them from without getting too close,' Quin put to the group.

'OK. Let's go quickly and see which path they take,' Orion

finished.

The Company moved with fleet feet as only hurrying elves can and paused at the tunnel exit, just in case, but there was no one there. Ethandril cast a simple spell of invisibility to hide them and they hurried out in to what was now becoming the all too familiar clearing. Much to their surprise they saw the wagon heading off west into the morning sun, the opposite direction to Findon, but the direction of the large town of Abinger, beyond which was the city of Salvington. The Company of the Compass ran up the western slope, where there were still a couple of decomposing giant bodies, and watched from the ridge as the wagon made its way down the mountain path heading for Abinger and beyond. It was definitely not going to Findon.

'This really doesn't look good. I shall pray to Yllana for answers.'

'Never mind the gods, Elwood, they don't always know everything, as I've tried to tell you on numerous occasions. We should have made enquiries of these places ourselves.'

'You're right, Ethan. I can't believe we overlooked this. This Spice stuff is going along to all those towns and cities,' Orion stated, still staring at the rapidly disappearing caravan. 'We need to get back to Findon and see Sir Theobold, tell him the good news. Then, we must act and fast, this could be a lot

worse than we ever feared.'

The six all nodded agreement and slowly moved closer together for Ethandril's teleport spell, all still staring at where they had last seen the caravan move out of sight, the caravan and Spice bound for Abinger.

A New Strain

Lord Djemmini stood on his private balcony in the great keep of the Citadel of Nyrex, the secure and impenetrable fortress devoted to the worship of the God of Death and Murder. He looked out to sea at the Bay of Kas, named after the sea God Kaspian. He didn't like the name, he didn't like any of the other gods and resented having to look at anything that represented them. However, as he turned his head slightly further towards the west he could see the five large islands, Nyrex's Fingers, and he smiled. The five islands were home to countless pirates and murderers, all of whom gave thanks to the Lord of Death and Murder and carried out his work. The islands were a wonderful base from which to attack ships going to the huge city of Adur and on to Highdown, and the Citadel of Nyrex helped protect them in their work. The evening was drawing in, the temperature was dropping as the sun faded in the east and the last of its rays glistened on the rough sea; it was pleasant to behold. He particularly enjoyed watching the sea crash against the lava rocks a few hundred yards out to sea, rocks created by the volcano, Pyre, from one of its regular eruptions. It was the more active of the two huge volcanoes that helped shield the Citadel from the rest of the great continent of Vallilea. He

basked in the fresh breeze and knew that his god was pleased at the chaos he was helping to spread and the souls it was offering up to Nyrex as a result.

He turned on his fine-booted heel and headed back through the magically-warded, glass double doors to his beautifully appointed bedroom. Just because he practised death and murder didn't mean he couldn't appreciate the finer things that the world of Estrella had to offer. In fact, many of the things he possessed had come from those he was about to slay, from last ditch attempts to save their lives with the offer of some fabulous bauble or family heirloom. He always accepted and stashed the prize away. The look of horror on his victims' faces as they realized their bartering had been in vain was something he always savoured; it was one of his very favourite things. No one was spared, ever.

He walked around his large room and stopped in front of his ornate mirror. He leaned forward and looked closely at his reflection. He was still a good looking man, the slicked back, blond hair still showing no signs of grey. As he stared at his handsome face the mirror began to transform, its second purpose coming to the fore. Djemmini stepped back as an image appeared, one he was coming to know and understand quite well.

A deep purple shadow gnome, wearing a black cap with gold

sigils upon it, stared out at him.

'Greetings, Lord Djemmini! You honour us by continuing to keep the platinum coin with you at all times; it makes it so much easier to contact you.'

'Greetings, Mentza Galavan! I am finding the swiftness with which we can conduct our business to be very helpful. Our arrangement seems to be working extremely well.'

'Indeed. That is why we have decided to push on with the next stage. It is time to head for Salvington and we have a little something special in store for them there. While we are happy with the results so far, we have manufactured an even more potent form of the Spice. The greedy and weak willed will have even less defence against it, we may even have made something that in time could become socially acceptable.' Mentza grinned after he said this.

'I am intrigued by this development, Mentza. What have you created now?'

'It is much the same as normal Spice, but the negative effects and the general frenziedness of the imbiber are absent. If anything, a user should be able to function fairly normally.'

'Then what is the advantage?'

'Like normal Spice it becomes addictive. The longer you take it the worse it gets with irritation, paranoia, sudden

bursts of temper, things like that. It gnaws away at the psyche. All the types of thing that will make decision making poorer and allow us greater influence over those caught under its spell!'

'It sounds intriguing. What would you have me do?'

'Set up distribution in Salvington. Commandeer a warehouse or whatever it is you do. When you've done that, contact me. We will begin the supply and I will accompany the first batch. We won't be focusing on the slums this time; we're looking at the top end, politicians and those in charge of the city.'

'Really, that's quite a change.'

'We want to see if we can bring down the whole city, not just have it at war, or one part trying to contain the other. We want to affect and have influence over the decision makers.'

'It sounds excellent. I'll go to Salvington immediately. We have many covert worshippers there; we should be ready in two days.'

'In that case, we'll leave tonight with the first batch.'

'I'll contact you as soon as we are ready to receive it.'

'In two days then,' Mentza replied as his image faded from the ornate mirror.

Djemmini stared at himself in the mirror and wondered exactly how this was all going to turn out. His Lord Nyrex seemed to be pleased, though, and that was all that mattered to

him. He turned back to the rest of his room to pack a few things for his journey.

Two days later, a well guarded caravan rolled up to the gates of the large walled city of Salvington. They were allowed through as they had exotic goods and spices to trade; a brief inspection and even a taste of the new version of Spice, only confirmed that. While one of the guards on duty wondered why he could no longer feel his tongue against the roof of his mouth, the wagon rolled into the city where it was swiftly met and directed on its route by several nimble, dark clothed and unremarkable men. After several minutes it arrived in the warehouse district and entered a large store through open doors. Once the doors were shut, a murmuring of spells could be heard. A tall blond, elegantly dressed man appeared from the shadows and spoke.

'We are quite safe now from prying eyes and ears. Lord Nyrex sincerely approves of our actions and is more than willing to grant me the powers I need to make this happen.'

A small, deep purple shadow gnome became visible sitting next to the driver. He spoke in a heavily accented version of the language of the humans.

'Congratulations, Djemmini! You have worked swiftly and

well; you are becoming invaluable to us.'

'I am well connected in this city so it was one of the easier assignments I have had. Do you have the new Spice, Mentza?'

'New and old. After I spoke to you, Clan Leader and I thought why not try a two pronged attack by hitting the top and bottom of the city simultaneously? So, the poorer areas will be supplied with the original Spice while we will infiltrate the upper echelons with the new Spice. I believe this is a very democratic city with many races, including plenty of those disgusting dwarves. We must get after the decision makers.'

'They have an elected council here, with some fifty-one representatives from many different areas and aspects of the city. How do you propose we infiltrate? I do know..'

Mentza held up his right hand to quieten his associate.

'I have been working with the ideal candidate for this job. She has already spread the Spice in Ingles with great success, where she infiltrated the higher end of the town's society first.'

'She is with you?' Djemmini asked, looking around to see if he had missed anyone.

'If I may, a small gate spell will bring her to us.'

'Be my guest, the wards will allow it.'

Mentza Galavan, high mage of his clan, spent several minutes in concentration, gesticulating and speaking arcane words. When he was done a black portal appeared and, moments later, a stunningly beautiful woman with flaming red hair and a silken red dress to match, walked forth.

'Djemmini, this is my, associate, Leileilii. She is more than exceptional when it comes to espionage.'

Djemmini was well aware of how powerful the shadow gnomes were but calling up portals just like that was truly unnerving. Even more unnerving was what had come through. Djemmini knew full well that this was no human, but he was transfixed by her, her allure was so great. He was feeling emotions he hadn't felt in years. He wondered if it was a prompting from his Lord and master.

The creature spoke. 'Ahh, Mentza, what fun do you have for me this time? And what fine friends you are now keeping company with,' Leileilii said, as she glided towards Djemmini.

'This is your contact here, and someone to whom I wish you to show the utmost respect, Leileilii. May I present Lord Djemmini, Priest of Nyrex?'

'Ooh, a powerful one you are! It would be nice to meet a human with a bit about him after all those dim-witted fools I have had to deal with in Ingles,' she said admiringly as she

slowly walked around Djemmini, examining him in fine detail.

A wry grin crossed his face as the succubus circled him. He smoothed down his blond hair before replying.

'I fear it will be more of the same for you here. We need you to lead some councillors astray, this time with a new Spice,' he said, looking at Mentza for confirmation of what he was saying.

'Indeed Leileilii, you will probably have minimal contact with Lord Djemmini but his people will help point you to where your skills are most needed.'

'A pity,' the seductress replied with a pout.

Mentza turned to one of his guards and gave an order for the Spice to be unloaded. At the same time more grey and black clothed men, coming out of the shadows of the large warehouse, moved the different Spices into container boxes, from where they would be distributed around the city so that the street dealers would have ready access to their own supply. The unsuspecting population of Salvington would soon fall under the Spice spell.

In spite of the activity around them, the human Priest of Nyrex and the succubus, a mere five feet apart, stared into each other's eyes, an unspoken simmering passion building between them.

Switch of Allegiance

In an impossibly secure, well-hidden and secretive cavern deep in the heart of the Shuddering Peaks, the Red Baron, leader of the Renegades, was holding another meeting with his council. Covering the four elemental aspects of the halfling race, there were the usual nine members, most of whom had been involved with the recent incidents afflicting the human towns and cities to the south. The nine were seated around a sturdy oak table with the Red Baron hovering in the centre, cloak flapping as he slowly rotated to look at them all, with his left arm drawn up across his face so that just his black and red eyes were showing.

'My friends! May I be the first to properly congratulate you on our most recent accomplishments? The skill with which you have carried out my instructions has been phenomenal. You are all a credit to the halfling race.'

The nine multi-coloured halflings sitting around the table turned to one another and shook hands. Some shrugged as though it had been nothing, others started to tell a short tale of how it had all happened. The Red Baron interrupted them with his next line.

'We have certainly caused the humans some severe difficulties, a sight I like more than anything, as you well

know.'

Nine heads bobbed in agreement around the table.

'However, there is a cause for concern.' The Red Baron paused for dramatic affect as nine child-like, awestruck faces looked up expectantly, hanging on his every word. 'Firstly, the scale of the other problems in these towns and cities is vast. I do like to see humans suffer, I do want them to be reminded every day how superior the halfling race is to them, let them know they are nothing more than upright pigs. Yet I do not want their total destruction. Rather, I want us all to lord it over them; I want them to do our bidding.' He paused again, before lowering his voice as he lent forward and turned a full circle. 'I want them to be our slaves!' This elicited spontaneous and excited applause from the other nine council members. The Red Baron stood back upright and switched his hiding arm, now using his right to shield his face as he continued his address.

'I have found that, as humans have progressed, their cities are of benefit to us. We can lead comfortable lives there, taking advantage of their weak wills and lack of spirit, not to mention their lack of power. That is why what is occurring is starting to become troublesome. I want human cities, human cities we can rule without them even realising it. I want the best life available for all halflings on Valillea, lives of

luxury and comfort, paid for by the humans for what they tried to do to us.' He paused again and the nine faces just continued to stare upward, transfixed by their leader.

'This epidemic, this problem that they are experiencing in these towns and cities, is running out of control. Whoever started it has total destruction on their minds, and that does not suit us well. I have personally been the recipient of an attempted scrying recently.'

There was an audible gasp from the other nine.

'Yes, friends. Someone has both the power and audacity to try and spy upon our affairs, to try and spy upon me. I have surmised that these are the people inflicting the real damage on the human cities. To what ends we can only guess; it would appear to be total destruction of these cities.'

The nine council members turned to each other after the Red Baron's monologue and began discussing the possibilities. The Red Baron was the most powerful being on the whole of Vallilea as far as they knew; anyone able to scry him must be truly, terrifyingly powerful, perhaps even a deity.

'We must act,' the Red Baron continued. 'Let us ease the pressure on the cities, increase the water supply again, but just make sure that the humans are truly grateful for what we are doing for them. Make sure that they pay you and pay you

well. Now may even be a good time to acquire future favours, or property, something which we can use to take a hold in these places. I rather fancy a mansion house in Findon. By the time I have finished warding it, it could act as a fortress and a safe haven for all halflings in the south!’

The nine began chattering excitedly again, their emotions stirred by the brilliant vision of their leader.

‘Friends, we will meet again here in five days. Go and do your work, and take pride in yourselves. You are halflings, the master race, never forget that!’

With that and a dramatic puff of red smoke, the Red Baron vanished from his floating position above the oak table. The council members looked at each other and smiled, they would be about their work as soon as they could, inspired by the Red Baron.

‘Salvington you say?’ Sir Theobold asked in dismay as the

six members of the Company stood before him. 'I could try and contact someone there.'

'I believe we could try and contact the speaker of their council, Sir,' Argyll added. 'That would be the proper way to do this.'

'I believe I may just take us straight there, to Salvington,' Ethandril stated to the pair. 'We can be there tonight once we have prepared a few things here, and you won't have to alert anyone to our coming either, just in case,' he added, leaning forward and patting his long, slender, yellow, flame-elven nose with a long, slender, yellow flame-elven finger.

Loriana rolled her eyes at the ridiculousness of her father; she often wondered how it had come to be that he had seduced her mother to go to bed with him. Perhaps he had used magic after all.

'Very well, prepare yourselves quickly and be off, but try and stay in contact with us here. We may need you as things are going haywire all the time,' Sir Theobold said, with something of a scowl.

'Yllana will watch over you as she does all of us, Sir Theobold. She will let me know when you are in need,' Elwood said.

'Really? Well that's very kind of her. Just do what you can

and return.'

The Company went to their private rooms and prepared for travel, adding extra rings and magical trinkets to secret, extra-dimensional pockets, or reacquainting themselves with court wizards, if only for a short time.

Darios, chief assassin of Clan Galavan and one of the most deadly creatures on the continent, was watching the comings and goings of the palace of Sir Theobold with great interest. He had arrived after a fairly uneventful journey through the underdark, a journey he completed swiftly using the secret gates and tunnels of his people, as well as his own shadow-jumping and walking abilities, and a relatively trouble free surface journey. He moved only at night to protect himself from the hideous sun and had only been forced to deal with one overly curious, overly observant human who had tried to hinder his progress. One well-aimed dart had been enough to send him on his

way, to hell as far as Darios was concerned.

Getting into the city was child's play for him. He couldn't help wondering how humans thought they would ever be able to survive or rule the world since they were as useful at guarding things as moss, soft and easy to walk over. He met the associates of Lord Djemmini, led by a particularly helpful and unpleasant man called Kollin, perhaps the first human Darios thought he could like. Kollin had shown him around the city, how the operation of Spice peddling worked and where to find Sir Theobold.

He was now some fifty yards from the palace gates, well hidden in shadows. By using magic and a favourite magical crystal he was able to get a better look through some of the palace windows. There wasn't an awful lot to be observed and it would never do for any of the ruler's guests to be assassinated from the street, but he had glimpsed several elves walking around the upper floors and towers and even a pair of continental elves walking in the gardens late at night.

'So, there are meddlers working for the bumbling Sir Theobold,' Darios said to himself. 'A group of pretty elves. I'm sure they would make fine Whelf,' he sniggered to himself. He looked all around the perimeter wall and the gate and decided that, although it wouldn't be too hard to break in, not knowing

the capabilities of your enemy was always a dangerous game. A game he was not prepared to play. At the shadow gnome assassins' school they had a mantra, drummed into all the students.

'Trackeeolayhaa.'

They had to repeat the mantra over and over again till they understood that all assassinations were based on knowledge and planning, and that the need to be particularly adept at stealth or killing were secondary once the ground work had been laid. Darios stayed all night, taking in what he could, using another small magical item, a tiny conch shell, to listen into the palace. He could make out the voices of several elves chatting and with different accents, not just continentals then. They were clearly discussing the Spice problem and the wagon train. Darios raised his eyebrows at this. He was unaware that anyone had that much knowledge of their operation. He was just thinking through his choices when he overheard talk of the other Spice-affected cities, and Salvington was mentioned. The group, whoever they were, were planning to go to Salvington. He made his decision then and there. He was going to Salvington. There he would lay a trap and they would be his. Perhaps he could even make a new elf-ear necklace. The deep purple shadow gnome killer smiled, but no one was able to see it.

The day after Darios' observations of Sir Theobold's palace, the River Fin started to flow a little better. By the afternoon, it was rising fast and causing great alarm in some parts of the dock district. Boats that had been aground for the past few weeks suddenly began to float again; they were bobbing around all over the place on their moorings, banging into each other and the dock walls.

'Sir!' said Argyll, as he knocked on the door of Sir Theobold's chambers. 'You have a visitor, the halfling Nilo, whom you met two weeks ago.'

'Just what I need. Is the river any better, Argyll?'

'Actually, Sir, it is.'

'Really!' Sir Theobold said, as he jumped up from his comfy chair. He crossed the room quickly to the slightly open door behind which Argyll stood and threw it wide open. 'Excellent!' he bellowed. 'Where is that little thief? I need to thank him properly.'

'He is currently in the audience chamber waiting for you, Sir. Lorianana is keeping him occupied and trying to ascertain how he and his colleagues managed it.'

'Super! Let's go, no time to waste. Perhaps, if this is all over, we can concentrate on the real problem at hand. That bloody Spice stuff. Stuffing up my city it is, Argyll. Ruining everything! Drastic measures will be coming, henceforth, mark my words on this.'

'Very good, Sir. I'm sure you have the best and boldest of plans,' Argyll replied.

Sir Theobold stopped just as he was passing his chief advisor and turned to look at the honest light gnome through squinted dark eyes. 'You're not just humouring me are you, Argyll?' he enquired in a slow and somewhat threatening voice.

'Absolutely not, Sir. You should know well by now that we light gnomes do not lie, humour, or in any way manipulate the truth. You genuinely appear to have a good idea. I am merely reinforcing your confidence to go through with it,' Argyll stated truthfully.

Sir Theobold stared for a few more seconds, his mind still not entirely convinced that his advisor was as truthful and pure as he always claimed. 'Bah!' he said and continued on his way to meet with the blue-green water halfling awaiting him.

The tall, salt-and-pepper haired Sir Theobold breezed into his private audience chamber, where his chief mage and secondary advisor, Loriana Thililisfarne, was entertaining his child-like and colourful guest. The slender half-elven mage wore a bright yellow dress accentuating her natural fire-like colouring while the water halfling wore a deep blue tunic to match his teal and blue colouring. Sir Theobold had to squint as he looked at the clashing pair and wondered whether it was only humans who preferred browns and greys.

'Good morning to you both! Nilo, I believe congratulations are in order. You have solved the water problem.'

'Marvellous to see you again, Sir Theobold. Indeed it would appear that we have.'

'What, may I ask, was the problem?' Sir Theobold enquired.

'You had blockages,' Nilo stated with a smile. 'Something or someone had cut off the water way upstream. It could have been giants or very large beavers,' he said with a child like grin.

'Giant beavers? Oh, very good Nilo, very good. Well, you appear to have solved the problem and we are very grateful for that. I presume everything has been in order with your payments and we can call an end to this episode.'

'I was hoping to discuss that with you actually, Sir

Theobold. You see, there is the possibility that it could occur again. The giants or beavers. I and several of my friends who assisted me were wondering if perhaps you wouldn't like to keep us on permanently, just in case.'

'Just in case?' Sir Theobold repeated slowly.

'A retainer. But you wouldn't have to pay us,' Nilo said innocently.

'In which case, yes,' Sir Theobold jumped in.

'No, no payments. All we would request is that you could house us in the city. Perhaps, in one of the mansions on the upper side of town, one with views of the river so we could keep an eye on it.'

'But the only mansions in that region belong to the richest merchants and, of course, there is the royal lodge.' Sir Theobold stopped abruptly, realising where this conversation had just gone.

'So, it won't be a problem then,' Nilo confirmed and held out his hand. He swiftly grasped Sir Theobold's hand and shook it vigorously. 'Deal done. We shall be your halfling river wardens and we will help you whenever the river runs low or you have any other water supply problems. I'll let my friends know. There are a few of us. We'll move in straight away if that's OK?'

A bewildered Sir Theobold looked at the blue-green

trickster before him and wondered how this could happen. He looked to Lorianana for help but she was equally at a loss.

'Nilo, perhaps this is a bit quick,' Lori began. 'I believe Sir Theobold may need more time to assess the situation before making a Royal home available.'

'You don't want our help then?' Nilo said, his head dropping and looking utterly crestfallen.

'Oh we do, it's just...'

'Excellent,' Nilo interrupted. 'We'll move up there this afternoon. 'Does the lodge come with any staff?'

'It usually has a stable hand and butler as well as the cooks,' Sir Theobold said responding without really thinking.

'Fabulous. That will suit us perfectly. Thank you so much, Sir Theobold. You won't regret this.' Nilo turned on his heel, gave Lorianana a salacious wink that made her eyebrows rise in shock, and swiftly left the room so that he could tell his friends the good news.

'We'd better warn the Lodge they're coming then,' Lori said to a still stunned Sir Theobold.

'How did that happen?' he asked. 'I am the ruler of this entire city, I command a watch of several thousand, have you and several other powerful mages and clerics at my beck and call, and yet that little trickster has just procured the Royal lodge.'

Loriana shrugged her slender shoulders before replying.

'Water is essential, we need him and his friends. Besides, they aren't exactly dangerous, just cheeky. It's best to be friends with halflings, especially after all the history.'

Sir Theobold just nodded slowly, agreeing with his wise advisor.

In a secure and hidden space, that almost no living beings were aware of, a red-robed figure listened to the wise words and nodded its head in agreement, a broad smile on its small red, child-like face.

Chaos in the City

Garth Miller was a fine upstanding young man, tall and broad shouldered, with unkempt blond hair. He was a farmer by trade, growing cereal crops on the fields outlying the city of Salvington, as his family had done for over fifty years. He was also the newest and, at twenty six, the youngest member of the elected Council of Salvington, having been elected to a seat himself when his father had stepped down earlier in the year. He represented the farmers and outlying workers and voiced their views in Council debates.

Today Garth was in a hurry. He dashed through the streets with long strides, along the wide thoroughfares of Salvington, determined to raise a very personal issue with the council.

He had been walking through the city two nights before when he stumbled across a man behaving strangely; it was only blind chance that had saved him. The man, a lunatic, had tried to rob him but as Garth had slipped from his grasp the frenzied man had staggered in front of an oncoming coach on the main street. Even though he had been hit by both horse and carriage the man got up and tried to run off. He succeeded in going a good quarter-mile, bleeding profusely and leaving a bloody trail along the streets, before finally collapsing. When the City

Guard found the man he had died from his injuries but they did find a small packet of a strange powder on him. Garth had made some enquiries afterwards and discovered this was not the first such incident recently. In fact, the tavern district was becoming increasingly dangerous. He was incredulous that no one had said anything in council and that the general public had not been made aware of the situation. Having had his own safety threatened, he decided he would raise the matter with his fellow Councillors.

He marched swiftly down Main Avenue, the oak-lined street on which all the main temples were situated, and arrived at the large stone building of the Council House, the House of Marr, the god of Law and Order. He strode through the double doors, nodding to the guards as he went, and veered off to the side door where the Councillors went before entering the chamber. The general public were allowed in to the upper gallery to watch proceedings but were intensively searched before entering. Several robed priests and the Council mage were also on hand to stop any trouble makers or assassination attempts.

Garth entered the pre-meeting chambers perspiring heavily from the speed of his walk. He spent a moment trying to slow his breathing and generally compose himself before proceedings began. He knew that some on the Council did not think all that

much of him and he knew that he needed to give the right impression to those who didn't know him. Sweating like a pig was not a great way to show he was more than just a farmer. A bell sounded in the chamber and slowly the Councillors filed into the round debating chamber. There was a large central dais, some fifteen feet across, with a swivelling chair for the Speaker, who organised proceedings, in the middle of it and three rows of benches circling it with intermittent breaks. Garth's seat was in the third row back, even though his father had been on the front benches when he retired, having served for twenty-one years. He would have to wait his turn, maybe in years to come, for his chance to sit at the front and lead proceedings. For now he would have to wait for the free questions at the end of the session before he could raise his questions, since the council had a strict agenda. He sat in pensive mood, preoccupied by what was to come, only half listening to debates over the taxes of the seasonal merchants, trade agreements with the chalk dwarves and the need for greater mining rights and the debate with the thunder dwarves over them.

When the agenda had been concluded the Speaker, a small wiry man with grey hair, stood and called for free question time. At this point anyone could ask questions or raise points with the Council that concerned them. Garth leaped off his bench

and even raised his right arm, as a child in school would do. There were a few muffled guffaws from the chamber and one or two age-related comments being whispered, but the Speaker did turn to him.

'Yes. Councillor for the farms and outlying workers.'

'Thank you Speaker,' Garth said nervously and coughed to clear his throat. 'I have been witness to a very grave situation in the city, one I find hard to believe has not been brought to our attention already in this chamber.'

He then related the tale of the attack the two days previously and the discovery of the strange powder on the body.

'So, I believe we have a real problem, one we should be looking into,' Garth finished.

'Young man,' a tall dark man in the front row began in response. 'I believe you have just witnessed someone a bit the worse for drink. I may add that a young farmer such as yourself has probably had little contact with those down and out types of the big city, but these things do occur.'

Garth was shocked at the condescending tone. He was about to respond when a second front bencher stood and turned to address him.

'In support of my colleague, while I regret that you were attacked Councillor, these things do happen in a big city; it's

why we have a Guard. If you are feeling vulnerable it may be wise to step down from your role on the Council and head back to the farm where the pace of life is a little slower,' the man said, deliberately slurring the last word to mimic the accent of many farmers. This brought a ripple of laughter from the Councillors.

Garth stood again and blurted out 'But surely this isn't normal, people being run over and trying to walk away, and what of this powder?'

'Young man, if I shook the robes of the council wizard up there I'm sure you would find any number of things falling out of his pockets, including powders, potions and who knows what else. I'm afraid it just isn't that significant. Now, let's move on shall we,' the tall dark man said.

Garth sat back down feeling stupid and small. He couldn't believe his point had just been dismissed so quickly, and with such apathy. He stared long and hard at the two Councillors in the front row and wondered who they were. As he stared at the backs of their heads he couldn't help but notice that they both appeared to be looking up into the gallery. He couldn't see from his position at whom, but he kept watch on the pair.

After a couple of questions from other Council members were answered, the Council was dismissed till the following

week. Garth rushed out of his seat to the front of the benches. He looked up and was shocked to lock eyes with a stunningly beautiful red-headed woman. She stared back at him and gave him a smile and a wink before turning her back on him to leave. He was delighted but then deflated as he realised that the two Councillors had obviously just been admiring this beautiful visitor to the public gallery and were not in fact communicating with some suspicious third party.

Back in the chambers Garth tried to find the two men who had opposed him but they were nowhere to be seen. He spent several moments scanning the room but they appeared to have left already. He hurried out of the door and through the double doors on to Main Avenue. He looked left and right up the street and thought he caught a glimpse of one of the men heading down the road in the direction he usually came from. He set off, running to try to catch up, dodging in and out of other pedestrians, but he couldn't see the Councillor anywhere when he looked up again. Perhaps he has turned off, Garth thought. He turned off Main Avenue as well and realised that he was heading for the tavern district. In spite of his recent attack in the area, Garth kept going. It was still daylight and he was too worked up to have any fear of the streets at this time.

The tavern district was a busy place in such a large city,

with all types of drinking dens available for whatever need a man or being of any other race fancied. There were quiet taverns, where a relaxed drink and a chat could be had, and raucous ones where a fight was almost a nightly affair. There were inns for specific races too; ones favoured by educated light gnomes, like the Cerebral Celestial, many dwarven taverns, such as the Gold Mine and Foaming Tankard, but there was only one elven tavern, the Yllana's Idle, such was the scarcity of elves in the city. Garth peered in through the windows of several of the human establishments as he walked by but with little joy. He had no idea where the other Councillor might have gone, perhaps not even this way. He decided to make his way home and started to head out of the district and back to the boulevards for the mile long walk to the city's edge then

He had gone no more than a few hundred yards when he heard a call.

'Councillor! Councillor!'

Garth turned to see who was there but could see no one.

'Strange,' he thought, 'perhaps it's another Councillor.'

'Over here, Councillor!' the call came.

Garth stopped and looked all around. He turned back and came to a side street where a man stood smiling.

'Councillor, please,' he called. 'I need to talk to you.'

Garth was suspicious but he was a burly farmer and thought that, even though this seemed odd, he could handle himself if he had to get away. He strode toward the man who continued to smile at him.

'Hello Councillor!' he beamed as he threw a huge right hand punch at Garth.

Garth was struck just on the left side of his head and staggered back, thumping against something, someone behind him. The man behind, who felt like a bear to the confused farmer turned Councillor, held him upright in a firm grip. The thug who had struck him advanced and thumped him in the guts. Garth doubled over. He was then smashed on the back of the head with something made of steel, probably the pommel of a dagger. He fell to the floor, clinging to consciousness as the booted feet came for him. Both men set about him without any mercy, kicking him in the stomach and back. He could feel blood running down the back of his head from the blow and he could hear his ribs cracking under the force of the kicks.

'What have I done to deserve this?' he thought, as he accepted more and more blows. He tried to call out but the kicking continued, seven, eight, nine blows from each side. He wasn't going to survive this he knew. His mind desperately tried to work it out, why, who, what is happening, but the relentless

pounding kept on.

Surely they would stop but he needed a miracle now he thought.

Garth's miracle arrived in an unusual form. Just when he thought he could take no more and he was losing all his senses, he was brutally reminded that he had not. A shout, a great booming shout that almost burst his eardrums and made him shake stopped the pounding. His two assailants stopped their kicking and turned to face the newcomers, a pair of dwarves. They advanced upon the dwarves, who had been walking past the end of the side street and had witnessed the shoeing poor Garth was receiving. The Thunder dwarf pulled a mighty hammer from behind his back and advanced too. The assailants thought better of it, turned tail and ran off. There are few ways to placate an irate thunder dwarf, and they both believed their job was done.

The thunder dwarf, with ragged, dreadlocked, grey-blue hair, hurried down the street to see the virtual pulp that was Garth. He knelt down and placed a thick hand just above Garth's mouth. He could feel the Councillor's breath.

'He breathes,' said the thunder dwarf to his colleague. Let's get him back to ours. Let Downna take a look at him. He may be able to piece the poor creature back together. The thunder dwarf's friend lifted Garth and put him over an

impossibly broad shoulder as delicately as he could and the dwarves set off to their rooms in a nearby dwarven tavern, an unconscious and gravely wounded Garth bouncing around like a small sack of potatoes on the companion's back.

He didn't know what had really happened or how long he had been unconscious but when he came round Garth was surprised that the first face he saw was that of a chalk dwarf, with soft creamy coloured skin and straw coloured hair. His soft brown eyes stared down at him. The equally smooth, soothing voice spoke.

'Don't try to move too much young man. You may break again!'

'Where am I?' Garth asked.

'In a tavern. My friend Alto found you and brought you back here. You're lucky he did, those wounds took a great deal to heal and you'll still feel it for a while. What had you done to deserve that type of assault?' the chalk dwarf asked.

'I don't know. I am a Councillor, Garth Miller. They called me over and just attacked.'

'The dangerous life of a politician, aye. Some say you're no more than thieves anyway,' the chalk dwarf joked. 'Anyhow, I am Downna, priest of Kronk, and you are a lucky boy.'

'Thank you for helping me,' Garth uttered and lifted his

head slightly. He looked around the room and saw several other dwarves. Another chalk dwarf, three thunder dwarves, a lightning dwarf and could that really be a granite dwarf! Garth's eyeballs nearly bulged out of his head

'I take it you haven't ever see this many of us up close before?' Downna asked.

'Not really, I have seen some of you, but, is he a...'

'A granite dwarf, yes,' Downna finished.

The extraordinary looking dwarf stood up and walked over to Garth's side. He was about four feet in height, slightly shorter than the other dwarves, but must have been close to five feet in width and three in depth. He had jet black hair and completely black eyes that shone in the daylight. Most extraordinary though was his skin. It was like a shiny rock surface of deepest obsidian with little silvery flecks in it. Garth just stared.

'I am glad to see you recovering,' the granite dwarf said, his voice so deep it was hard to hear; it sounded like a rumbling of huge heavy boulders. 'You look better now than when we found you at least. I am Barakello, and, yes, I am a granite dwarf.'

So he had been with the thunder dwarf. What had Downna said his name was, Alto? 'Thank you,' was all Garth could manage.

The burly thunder dwarf Alto approached and lent over

Garth. 'So, what precipitated that little scuffle then? It's not every day anyone gets so public a beating without having done something. We're not going to regret having rescued you are we?' Alto said, trying his best to whisper.

'I really have no idea. I have just come from the Council's weekly meeting. I asked a question about...' Garth stopped. Surely this couldn't be related, could it? But he only asked a brief question and had been silenced so quickly that barely anyone would have registered what he had said. Unless.. Garth felt faint. What if the Councillors were in on this problem? What if they were causing the trouble?

Seeing the anguished look on his face, Alto asked 'what troubles do you have then young man?'

'I.. I'm not sure. I may just be seeing conspiracy where there is none, but I don't really know,' Garth replied.

'Then tell us and see if we can all make sense of it. We have been around a few more years than you and seen a great many things, perhaps we can help. Besides, we're between adventures at the moment, anyway.'

Garth related his story to the dwarven band who listened intently, nodding and shaking their heads at the appropriate moments.

'There may well be something going on then,' Alto said to

Garth and the group. 'Rest here a day or so, lie low. We'll take a look around this area and see what we can find out too. See if anything matches what you saw.'

'Thank you,' was all Garth could manage before he felt the need to rest his head and drift off to sleep again.

In a plush villa in the north of the city two Councillors were entertaining their favourite new friend. The stunningly beautiful red-haired woman had appeared in the city only a week previously but she had totally beguiled the pair of them. She had appeared in the public gallery at the Council meeting and had been anxious to meet with them afterwards. After a couple of days of dining and drinking, she had introduced them to this wonderful snuff, as she called it, a delicate powder made from rare flowers. It was all the rage in Findon and Adur, she assured them. It made you feel fantastic and allowed for much greater clarity of mind and thought. Wouldn't it be helpful to such commanding men as themselves, she had enthused.

They had both tried it and found that this woman, Leila she called herself, was right. They did feel fantastic. After another couple of days the subject of the downturn in the tavern district came up as they were endlessly chatting. Leila put it

to them that perhaps whatever was happening might be a type of social cleansing. The Councillors, desperate to stay very much on Leila's good side, agreed. They could definitely see it that way. So what if a few drunkards went a bit madder, the city would be better off without that sort of person, the pair thought.

Leila expressed her delight that they agreed with her. That night, the Councillors both believed they had had the night of their lives with the beautiful woman, though they didn't remember bumping their heads. She had given them all they could handle and more, or so they believed.

Making a Wrong Enemy

Cheragai received his orders from Akkron Puttnik with glee. Though he hated the little shadow gnome, who had effectively enslaved him, this new mission was much more to his liking. Capture several halflings; beat them to within an inch of their lives then leave them in the street appearing to have been attacked by vigilantes for peddling the Spice. Cheragai let out a guttural snarl, one he hadn't managed in weeks since being stuck in his infernal human form. He stormed out of his private room and quickly made his way to the street corners, where the remaining few disguised devils who were working for him were distributing Spice to an ever growing number of the residents of Abinger. He took the devils, fools each and every one of them, to one side.

'We seek halflings. Any will do. Capture one and disable it. When it is subdued plant Spice on it and dump it in the street, somewhere prominent, not round here. Somewhere where we aren't. Got that?' Cheragai barked the order, a touch of his devil nature starting to come through in his voice.

'Yess, yess bosss,' the three transformed devils he had rounded up replied. They started to jump up and down in their excitement.

'Stop that!' he ordered, his eyes burning with infernal fire.

Cheragai had had to dismiss most of his invading force already as the longer they had been in the city the more unstable they had become and the more of a liability they were. He had tried the usual threats to calm them, even ripped open a few throats, but the amount of time they were spending in human form was becoming difficult for them all to maintain. How he would make that gnome pay for doing this to him!

'Just get on with it! And don't attract any attention while you do it or you'll have me to answer to, both here and when we eventually get back to the hells. You wouldn't want to be gone permanently would you?'

There was a collective swallow from the three devils. They all nodded, then shook their heads in unison but were not quite sure what the correct response was.

Cheragai just looked away. It amazed him that, having spent all this time on a prime material, there were hierarchies everywhere and that the more intelligent had to suffer the interminable stupidity of an underclass on all planes. Perhaps one day he would create his own plane. Just him and perhaps a consort. And a gnome to torture and resurrect on a daily basis. He smiled at the thought.

The three devils in human form walked back on to the street, intent on doing their master's bidding. They slowly left their peddling area and made their way to the main avenues of the town. There they tried to be inconspicuous as they surveyed the street, keeping an eye on any halflings that wandered past. There were a few in the town, mostly earth halflings, though a couple of blue-green water halflings were still around helping to rectify the damage they had caused from the high tide.

A pair of cheerful earth halflings then passed them by and smiled at the group. Just after, the pair turned off down a quieter side street and the devil band seized their chance. They followed just behind and called out a greeting.

'Hey there!'

The halflings turned round and were greeted by an unexpected onslaught of fists and booted feet. The devils showed no mercy, quickly knocking the poor halflings into unconsciousness, then binding and gagging them. They threw cloaks over the bodies and carried them as fast as they could to their secure store room, where they kept the Spice hidden, just a few streets away.

The devil band quickly contacted Cheragai, who arrived minutes later.

'Excellent work! You have excelled yourselves. I thought I

might have to wait a while but you have done well,' he said as he examined the beaten pair of halflings. 'OK. Put ten packs of Spice in the pockets of each one and dump them in the street but wait till it's nearer dusk. I don't want anyone to see you do it.'

'What if they wake up before then boss?' a devil-human asked.

Cheragai smiled and drew back his human arm. As he swung to slap the face of the first halfling it transformed back into the great paw of the real Cheragai, the eight-foot devil fist bashed the already dazed halfling. The poor little creature's head snapped back and flopped forward.

'Is he dead?' a devil asked.

Cheragai shook his head with a wicked smile on his face. He had practiced torture for many years and knew exactly how to draw out a punishment beating.

He advanced upon the next halfling and slapped the second poor creature hard too. 'There, they won't wake till tomorrow, maybe not even till the next day. They may never be the same either but that is not our concern.'

Several hours later the two bodies were dumped in conspicuous places in the town, where they were quickly discovered by concerned passersby. The town watch was called

along with a priest, at which point the Spice was discovered.

News of the find quickly spread around the town. Halflings were to blame for the problems. Of course, the people thought it all made sense too. They had caused the high tide as well and now were selling this evil stuff on the streets. The people of Abinger began to take to the streets that night on the lookout for halflings. It was just like the Persecution all over again, with those that could remember it muttering that maybe they should have finished the job back then.

While the devils of Abinger went about their work, a similar message had been sent to the street dealers of Findon and Ingles. Though the human associates and subordinates of Djemmini were not naturally as violent or malevolent as the devils, they were equally efficient.

In Findon, a water halfling was found badly beaten on the boulevard by the river, but carrying twenty packets of Spice. He was swiftly dragged away semi-conscious, to the palace for further interrogation.

In Ingles an earth halfling, one some recognised as having assisted in the clear up of the town after the mudslide, was found outside the town hall. Again he had been badly beaten and was carrying a vast quantity of Spice.

As news travelled around the city of Findon and town of Ingles a similar reaction to that in Abinger began to take hold.

Halflings were to blame for the Spice epidemic and the 'natural disasters'. People began to take to the streets in search of any of the little people.

'Sir, we have a situation,' Argyll called loudly as he knocked on Sir Theobold's door.

'A situation?' the call came back, 'but it's nearly midnight. Can't it wait?'

'No, Sir. We need you now urgently,' Argyll replied.

The door flew open and a dishevelled Sir Theobold, dressed only in his nightshirt, stared at his closest advisor. 'What is it?'

'Put something on, Sir, and come with me. I'll explain on the way.'

Sir Theobold dressed as fast as he could and rejoined Argyll, who led him down through some of the palace's secret tunnels to the chambers where the water halfling was being held. Lorian was already there, somehow looking as immaculate as ever.

'So. What is this all about? Who's he? Why am I up?' Sir Theobold rattled off.

'He was found beaten but alive on the riverside boulevard

with twenty packets of Spice on him,' Lorianana replied.

'Oh, really! Your habit or distributing it, were you?' Sir Theobold asked the blue-green childlike creature.

The badly bruised halfling looked up through swollen eyes and spoke through puffy lips and a bloody nose.

'I was attacked. This isn't mine. It's a set up.'

'He tells the truth, Sir' Argyll butted in.

'Well of course he does, Argyll. Firstly we have some information on who we think is behind this. Secondly I've just, somehow, handed over the Royal lodge to some of his mates. I would be very surprised if they were going to jeopardise that. No. This is sinister, Argyll. Those responsible are trying to deflect attention from themselves. Has word of this got out yet?'

'Apparently there are rumours Sir.'

'Well, quell them. Do it now. I will not have a halfling cull on my hands as well. We have quite enough to deal with at present.'

'Certainly, Sir. I will get our operatives out countering the rumours.'

'Any word from your father yet, Lorianana?'

'Not since they left for Salvington.'

'Blast! I really could do with them here.'

'I will try and contact him, Sir.'

'Good, do what you can.'

'Argyll, heal him and get him cleaned up, but he remains here. Don't let anyone know anything other than it was a mistake and the halfling found was an innocent party. I've almost had enough of this!'

From an impossibly secure location a small childlike figure was watching the events unfold in the three locations his Renegades had affected. His blood was beginning to boil as he saw the people turn their anger upon the halflings of the towns and city.

'No! This cannot be happening. I will not allow this to happen. How dare they do this to my halflings, how dare they cross the Red Baron! How daarree theeeyyy!!' He yelled at the top of his voice.

The nine members of the halfling Renegades received an urgent summons to attend a meeting. Time was of the essence.

Off to the Next City

Salvington received two sets of visitors under the cover of darkness the day after Garth had been beaten to within an inch of his life.

The Company arrived in a quiet back street in the tavern district, an area that Ethandril seemed to know well. He explained to the group that on his many travels over the years he had been to Salvington on several occasions. Initially it was no more than a stopping post village before entering The Chalk Dwarf Kingdom of Danbury, a hilly region covering a vast swathe of the south west of the continent. He claimed to have seen it grow into the city it was today, carefully leaving out any mention of the time he accidentally burnt a third of the town down some three hundred years ago in a show of bravado to impress a group of impressionable human maidens. Fortunately for Ethandril Thililifarne, neither humans nor dwarves lived long enough to remember his recklessness. The company, all wearing their drab grey cloaks so as not to attract too much attention, exited the side alley on to the main thoroughfare.

'OK, Ethan, which way?' Orion asked in a whisper.

'Well, we could try Yllana's Idle, the only elven tavern I know of.'

'Too risky, let's just have a wander around and see what the general feeling's like,' Orion continued. 'You can always hide us in another rope trick if you've remembered it.'

'I'm never without it.'

'Let's do this incognito,' Catarina said. 'Mass invisibility?'

'It'll do for the general masses,' Apollo replied, 'though remember this place is crawling with dwarves and they can usually see through it, so walk as normally as possible, especially you, furnace face, unless you want to have to explain yourself.'

'Do you take me for a fool Apollo?' Ethan said indignantly. He got only stony silence in response from the haughty elf. Catarina cast her spell and to the many humans and some dwarves of the city they were no longer there. The group set off in the night and it wasn't long before they saw the tell-tale signs of the Spice. There were one or two shabby looking humans muttering to themselves in alleyways and the soft but distinctive hiss of the word, Spicccccce.

The second arrival also came as quietly as possible. Using the innate ability of powerful shadow gnomes to shadow walk, the assassin travelled from Findon to Salvington, skirting the real

world in the realm of shadow. It was the type of journey he had done on numerous occasions but it still gave him chills. Darios was not a natural magician; unlike many of his race he only used the ability out of necessity. He preferred his own skills of stealth and was glad to arrive safely and without incident. He arrived in the tavern district, too, an area he knew his brethren and fellow shades would target. Those under the influence of alcohol were always the easiest to persuade to try Spice. He remained in the shadows, barely drawing breath. Where would the elves go, he wondered? He decided to move around and check the taverns; there must be an elven one here, even in a predominantly human and dwarven city. He slunk around the streets, flitting swiftly from shadow to shadow, never making a sound. He peered through tavern windows and side-stepped drunks tottering their way out of them. He saw a sign in the human tongue, one he though he understood, 'Yllana's Idle'. The sight of the Elven Goddess' name made him spit into the ground in disgust but he stopped and waited. It was not long before a group of elves came gliding down the street, approaching the inn; he counted four of them. Was this the group. he wondered? Although he could see perfectly well in the dark he was unsure of the sub-race of all four. He knew full well that not all the group he was after were continental elves but was not sure of

either the numbers in the group or what the other sub-races were. These four seemed to be two continental and two others, all wearing long cloaks.

Move or stay? Move or stay?

The question raced through the skilled assassin's mind. He surveyed the area quickly; there were several alleys to escape down or he could shadow jump to escape if needs be.

Strike! Act now with surprise.

Making no more noise than a gentle summer breeze he approached the four, staying in the shadows just as they were coming to the front door of the tavern. In a flash of hands he threw four small shadow gnome darts, each tipped with lethal poison. One dart hit a protective shield with a blinding blue flash but the other three struck home. Before the elves or anyone else could see their attacker Darios was already well hidden in the shadows across the street. The three fell to the ground, two quite silent, one calling a prayer to Yllana in utter agony. The fourth with the protective shield looked all around the area, lips visibly casting spell after spell, some Darios recognised as protections, others attempting to find him. He managed a smile. No simple spell would locate him. He watched on as the elf crying out was engulfed in a green glow and appeared to improve, but the other two, still prone, were quite

dead, of that he was sure. Darios watched, enjoying the spectacle but feeling disappointed. He felt it hard to believe this was the group he was after. Surely they would be a harder target than this.

The Company had been meandering around the tavern district for more than an hour when they heard a shout. Elwood also felt a strong reaction from his goddess.

'Something's wrong,' he said. 'We must see what's going on.'

'That shout. It came from that way, south,' Quin pointed.

'Let's go with caution, just walk briskly, don't alert anyone that we're here,' Apollo added.

'I'll go ahead,' Orion said and with that blinked further down the street.

Moving at all speed with long elegant strides the other five hurried to where they heard the shout. They were advancing down the street towards a group some fifty yards away when Orion materialised in front of them.

'Quick, get in here!' he said, pulling Quin's arm into a side alley. 'It's right in front of Yllana's Idle, the elven tavern. There are, were, four elves up there. They've just been attacked by someone as they were about to enter the tavern, and guess what, they can't find the assailant.'

'You were right, Orion,' Catarina said, peering down the street. 'It was risky. Do you think they were mistaken for us?'

'Well, we do know that the shadow gnome that caused the blow back from Eclaine's scrying was very powerful,' Ethandril began. 'Not as powerful as me of course but they may well have picked up on our snooping around.'

'Shall we go and offer help?' Cat asked.

'In my considerable experience,' Apollo said quietly, 'we have two choices. We can be bold and saunter up there and offer assistance. Let the city know we are here and who we are. Send the rats scurrying for their bolt holes. We then try and weed them out and use boldness as our weapon. Inform the Council of what is happening and get them to crack down on it straight away.'

'Which, of course, carries the risk of whoever just did this having a pop at us,' Orion added.

'Thank you, ghost, I was just coming to that. That is of course the draw-back. How powerful is our enemy? I am assuming very. So, our other option is to stay in the shadows, make enquiries, be subtle and not take any risks till we know more about whom we are dealing with.'

'I'm for the latter,' Orion said.

'There's a surprise,' Apollo sneered back.

'I think the Company should be bold. We should be fearless, we should cut down evil in its tracks and smite them where they stand we should...'

'I think Orion's right,' Quin cut Ethan off, just as he was warming to his monologue.

'I think so too,' Elwood agreed. 'This situation is big. It covers, what, four towns and cities now and involves seriously powerful shadow gnomes and who knows who else is helping them on the surface. We must find out as much as we can so when we do strike against them, we strike hard and true.'

Ethandril gaped at Elwood for a few seconds. 'I like the sound of that, strike hard and true. Yes, I may use that myself. You have grown up since we were last together, haven't you?'

'So I think we're agreed, as much as it pains my Solar elven sensibilities. Let's just observe this and make further subtle enquiries before we act. I don't know, I remember when the mere sight of me and my brother was enough to send humans scattering from our path like overgrown bald rats, 'Apollo lamented.

The following day, after several hours rest in a well hidden rope trick of Ethandril's making, the Company arrived without incident at the main Council building on Main Avenue,

the House of Marr. The large double doors were guarded by two humans dressed in plate armour and holding large poleaxes. Elwood approached the guards, the company perceiving him to be the least unusual of them for making enquiries.

'Good morning, would it be possible to see the Speaker?' Elwood enquired.

The taller of the two guards standing by the right door looked down at the elf of modest height dressed in a grey cloak.

'S'unlikely. Wha's ya bizniz.'

'I am an emissary of Yllana and wish an audience with the council to discuss her role in your city.'

'Anyfing that might bring in more elven gals is worf a chat I s'pose,' the guard chuckled. 'Dan't move. I'll go and see if ee's araand.'

'Thank you,' Elwood said in his most amiable manner. He tapped his head twice, the signal to the rest of the group that he was having some success, and stood patiently.

Five minutes later the brute returned. 'He'll meet ya, just froo ere,' the guard said, pointing at the double door.

Elwood went through to be met by a human of less than average height and grey hair. Did they all look the same he thought?

'I believe you wish an audience with me or the Council' the

Speaker said quickly. 'What do you have to say and I'll see whether it's of import to us.'

'As an emissary of Yllana I come with a warning.'

'Oh really! Go on.'

'There is a terrible plague, one afflicting the towns and cities along the southern coast and maybe further afield. It is a powder for imbibing, a highly addictive powder, we believe manufactured by shadow gnomes and..'

'OK, hang on a moment. We are in the grip of a terrible plague, but not a disease,' the Speaker said, rubbing the back of his neck. 'Something that must be taken, you mean like a drink, so it's voluntary.'

'Well yes, but those distributing it are..'

'Like grain beer or fruit wines or spirits. There is choice. And how has this come to your noble attention, emissary?'

'We have come from Findon, where the problem is much more widespread but we have seen signs of it here too, especially in the tavern district. It is referred to as Spice and...'

'Emissary, while your tales of woe in Findon are, I'm sure, deeply concerning to you, I can assure you that we, as a democratic council here, are able to look after our own affairs, perhaps a lot better than that bumbling fool, Sir Theobold.'

Elwood raised an eyebrow at the description. He was unaware

of any animosity between the cities and Sir Theobold had indicated that he knew the Speaker. He stared hard at the man, looking for any hint of, of anything. He certainly wasn't addled with the Spice, so what was wrong? Could he be in on it?

'I thank you for your time, Emissary, but I think that there is no need to worry either yourself or the Council with this.'

'But we..'

'Who is this 'we' you keep referring to Emissary? You seemed to have come alone, yet you use 'we'.'

'I have friends. We are trying to solve this problem together.'

'Yet you do not feel you can bring them before me? Emissary, I think it is time you left. If you wish to parlay more I think a little honesty on your part wouldn't go amiss. Good day. Guard!'

The Speaker turned and walked off through a door and the front door opened.

'Ahht ya come! Time's up,' the guard called

A slightly stunned Elwood walked through the door and linked his hands behind his back, the sign that he hadn't been successful. He turned and walked off down Main Avenue, shadowed by his five friends some distance away.

Back in the tavern district and under another cloak of mass invisibility Elwood recounted his meeting to the others.

'Something's not right,' Orion said, when the tale was finished. 'I've spent a lot of time in human cities since we were last together. Something like this should cause panic to a Council unless they are hiding something.'

'Indeed, these humans are becoming increasingly devious,' Ethandril added with indignation. 'Perhaps I should just raze the town again and teach them a lesson?'

'Again?' Quin asked.

'Ah! Oh, never mind, it was only an accident,' Ethan replied.

Just as they were wondering what to do, a shambling creature started towards them.

'Uh Oh!' Cat said. 'Spice alert!'

The man stopped and squinted in their direction and began to advance more quickly. He looked dishevelled, wearing a cloak that looked like it was also his bed and having several days of growth to his beard.

'Stop right there urchin!' Ethandril called to the man, now no more than ten yards away. 'You'll find nothing on us, you'll only get hurt.'

The realisation that these were elves seemed to appeal

further to the addled man. He leered at the Company. Then he charged. Having faced addicts before the company knew there was really only one response. Quite whether it was Orion's dart or Elwood's magical arrow that killed the man it was impossible to say, but the impact blew him back ten feet. A small sparkle of orange fire faded on Ethandril's finger tips as he stopped his spell, while the other three resheathed their swords. They all just stared at the dead man, another victim of the Spice.

Unfortunately, there were also witnesses to the event, as the drawing of swords and loud spell casting had attracted attention, and the invisibility spell was broken. A woman in the street saw the six standing over the body and screamed for the guards, while a young politician had witnessed the whole thing as he made his way back to a local tavern. Garth ran down the alley to the Company and was abruptly stopped by Apollo's sword an inch from his chest.

'You don't seem under the influence, unlike this poor unfortunate. It was necessary to end his suffering quickly, I'm afraid. We've encountered a few like him and sadly they're not stopped by any easier means,' Apollo said, by way of explanation.

'You've se-seen more like this?' Garth stammered. 'I mean elsewhere?'

'It's why we're here,' Apollo replied, 'but we may need to

leave as we're attracting attention we didn't want to attract, so if you'll excuse...'

'Come with me, I can get you out of here but I would really like to talk more about this.'

'Listen boy, we really don't have time.'

'I am Councillor Garth Miller,' Garth said standing straight to his full height of a little over six feet. He looked directly into the ancient indigo eyes of the solar elf who was holding a slender shining sword to his chest. 'I could have you arrested.'

Apollo just smiled as the others gathered round Garth.

'Quickly then, Councillor!'

They left the alley from the opposite end from where they had entered, dashed down another small street and on to the tavern where the dwarves were staying.

'I made some new friends the other day and they stay here,' Garth said. 'Somehow I seem to be making a lot of non-human friends at the moment.'

'Non-human?' Quin asked.

They entered the tavern and soon realised what Garth was talking about. Nearly thirty dwarven faces looked at the seven non-dwarves as they entered and the raucous tavern sounds all died a death in an instant.

'Oh! This day is just getting better and better,' Apollo said in utter dismay, as he looked back at those staring at him.

A burly thunder dwarf near Apollo stood and was about to challenge the slender elf when another thunder dwarf rushed over from a back table.

'Garth,' Alto said in his deep and phenomenally loud voice, 'what trouble have you brought to our door now?'

'What I was telling you about this problem, crazed people. Well, these elves know something about it.'

The whole room was now listening and staring at the still cloaked and hooded elves.

Ethandril spoke next. 'This should be conducted a little more privately, I think,' he said with a smile at Alto. The dwarf nodded.

'Go to our rooms, Garth, the others are there,' Alto instructed them. Then, looking round the room, said, 'all of you forget about this, it's for our own good.'

Noise of an unbearable cacophony for sensitive elven ears started up again almost immediately as the Company followed Garth to the back stairs and up to the dwarves' rooms.

Garth had never felt an atmosphere like it. You would need a two-handed sword to cut it, he thought, not just a knife. He was standing in a large room with four beds, with six squat,

broad muscular dwarves on one side and six slender elegant, and with their hoods pulled back now, colourful elves on the other. They all just stared at each other. They couldn't have looked more horrified had the Abyss opened up there and then in the middle of the room. The dwarves were repulsed by the elves pointy ears and vivid colouring; how could anyone stand to be so gold as the solar elf or orange as the flame elf?

The elves found the dwarves repugnant. The bedraggled appearance of the two thunder dwarves with their dreadlocked hair and beards, the slightly mad-looking lightning dwarf with his white streaked beard and hair all standing on end. The chalk dwarves were the most ordinary looking, all creamy and soft in appearance, but the last creature... the obsidian coloured one. An image went through Quin-Helwig's mind of a normal-sized dwarf being repeatedly bashed over the head with a war hammer till he had been shortened and widened to look like that.

The silence was broken as Alto came through the door, nearly barging into the back of Quin-Helwig and Catarina as he did so.

'OK, Garth,' he boomed, 'explanation time.'

Garth explained what had happened to the dwarves and turned to Apollo for further confirmation.

'Indeed,' he added, looking down his slender nose at the

dwarves. 'This is a serious problem and it is certainly here now.'

'I think you should try again at the Council, Garth,' Elwood suggested. You have further evidence now and perhaps they will listen to you a second time. It is a concern that they knocked both of us back when we brought it to their attention though. They couldn't be in on it could they? I mean, being paid or...' Elwood paused. 'They weren't under the influence were they? I don't think it's possible to act even remotely normally if you have this stuff.'

'Definitely not,' Orion added 'I tried a bit when I was analysing it and I could feel little waves shudder through me and that was just a pinch.'

'What do you think is the best way to combat this?' Downna, the chalk dwar, asked.

'Well, personally, I would go for an assault on the shadow gnomes,' Ethandril began.

The mention of the shadow gnomes elicited a deep growl from the granite dwarf, Barakello.

'They are our sworn enemies. If it is them then you have two things I can tell you right now. A very serious problem and any help I can offer. Many years have granite dwarves and shadow gnomes battled unknown to the surface world. Raging wars that

last years, I have lost three members of my family to those evil spawn of Hades.'

The company were all quite taken aback by the offer of help. They looked from one to another before Orion spoke.

'We will leave Salvington. We stand out too much here anyway to operate effectively. So we'll go back to Findon and work out a plan from there. If you can assist Garth here and work on the Councillors that would be of most help. Inform all your brethren about the Spice and how evil it is. There are tell-tale signs, the moaning and hissing of the word. People who look like they've been awake for days. If you can find out who's selling it on the streets even better; they tend to be humans, as we captured one in Findon but he wouldn't say much.'

'We will do what we can,' Alto offered. 'Though it is unusual to work with elves, this would appear to be a problem for us all to solve.'

'In fact we were brought in to help by my charming daughter, so it's already spreading out across the races, humans, elves and now dwarves,' Ethandril beamed. He received only grim nods in response from the thunder dwarves, though the lightning dwarf, Clement, seemed a little more excited.

'We'll cause a few sparks to fly around here, don't you worry,' he said as he clicked his fingers, which sparked

lightning, a look of mischief on his face. Ethandril smiled back at him, delighted by the display. That was his kind of dwarf!

'I'll take you out of here so you can travel back then,' Garth said. 'These rooms are magically sealed against travel.'

'Probably not mine,' Ethan grinned, 'but I'll humour the proprietor.'

The elves and dwarves nodded to each other in grim mutual respect, then Garth led them out of the building to the back street.

'Good luck, Garth' Elwood said. 'Yllana will watch over you. We will contact you soon.'

The Company circled up as Ethandril cast his teleport spell and they vanished.

Darios is on the Trail

After attacking the four elves outside Yllana's Idle, the wrong ones as he subsequently found out, Darios decided to make contact with his Clan wizard. Mentza was very informative during their brief magical communication and gave Darios the location of the warehouse in the heart of Salvington. Still under cover of darkness, he arrived at the warehouse being used by the Shades to store and then to distribute the Spice. He could see several human guards on the doors and two more on a roof top opposite. He kept to the shadows, melding into them as he waited for the doors to open to let someone in or out. He was rewarded when, only a few minutes later, the doors opened briefly to allow a man out. Simultaneously, Darios used his innate shadow jumping ability to move into the shadow the doors had created and then move silently into the building. No one had seen him; no one had heard him. Once inside, he silently crept around, taking a good look at the operation. There were no shadow gnomes as far as he knew in the warehouse, just some human lackeys and an old friend. He skirted the inside of the warehouse and arrived at a small room in one corner. Two men were holding a conversation there. Darios listened in and recognised the voice, Lord Djemmini of Nyrex.

The two humans were startled when their conversation was interrupted by the intruder. Djemmini started the first four words of a holding spell when he recognised the newcomer. The height, the crossed bandoliers holding very small but lethal shadow gnome darts.

'Why, Darios, not here for me, I presume, or you would never have alerted me to your presence,' Djemmini said, smiling at the gnome.

'Greetings again, Priest. No, I am not here for you. I have other targets; perhaps you know of them?'

'Not that I'm aware of. Who has crossed you this time?'

'Clan leader has sent me after a group of elves that he believes are trying to follow our movements. They are to be eliminated before they cause any trouble. I have followed them from Findon to here.'

'From Findon! We lost one of our street dealers in Findon in strange circumstances. He hasn't been heard of for some time and all attempts to scry him have been thwarted.'

'Then perhaps we have a common enemy, Priest.'

'Indeed. What else do you know of these elves? We can keep a watch out for them.'

'They are a mixed group, not all copper elves. There are at least four of them but in all likelihood more.'

'They shouldn't be too hard to find in Salvington; there are almost more shadow gnomes here at the moment than there are elves,' Djemmini laughed.

Darios was unsure of the humour and let out a small hiss, his version of a chuckle, so as not to feel out of alignment with his associate.

'I will tell the street dealers to keep watch. In the meantime, stay here as the day comes closer. You are quite safe in this place, it's well warded against intruders.'

'I did not find it so, but I will accept your offer. I must also congratulate you on how well you have done for the Shades. Mentza has been most impressed as has clan Leader Kymru.'

'I accept your most gracious praise, Darios. They will be even more pleased to know that their plan is working. We have infiltrated the top end of society here too. Two members of the Council and the Speaker are all now using the new Spice at the behest of a certain red-headed 'woman' they entertain regularly.'

Darios smiled. He was impressed with this unusual human, an emotion he had never felt for one before.

In spite of their attempts to remain anonymous, the Company were not too difficult to spot for those actually looking for them. Word reached Darios the following day that a group of

elves were moving, possibly in the direction of the House of Marr, and although it was daylight he should try to follow. Darios left the warehouse and stuck to the shadows as he made his way across the city. It was to his advantage that it was autumn and not too hot and sunny but he still wore his cloak and hood. He arrived at the House of Marr Council building just as a copper elf was being escorted out by a tall, burly human guard. Staying well hidden, he followed the elf as he walked nonchalantly down Main Avenue towards the tavern district.

Was this one of them?

The copper elf crossed over the street towards his side of the Avenue, one street further down. Darios moved swiftly to intercept him. As he reached the next alley he nearly gave himself away as there were now six elves all openly discussing a meeting with the Speaker. They must have been with their friend all along, or were following along also hidden.

This was definitely them. They were his target.

Shadow gnome hands moved to poisoned darts in the bandolier. At that moment a man, clearly a Spice addict, wandered into the alley and began to advance on the group.

What an excellent opportunity!

He flung two darts just as the group reacted to the Spice-addled human. The addict was blasted backwards by a magical

arrow and perhaps a dart thrown by one of them. His darts meanwhile had failed to harm the group at all. The dart aiming for what he could now see was a female copper elf had been clipped in flight by another magical arrow and knocked off course. The second dart had hit the broadest of the elves and simply dropped to the floor. He hadn't even noticed. Darios was surprised but strangely pleased.

A real challenge then!

At that moment an alarm was raised for the City Guard while a young human arrived and took the elves away with him. Darios followed, staying well hidden in the shadows. They ended up in a dwarven tavern and remained there for some time. It was nearing dusk when they eventually reappeared with the human from the back exit of the tavern. They then vanished almost immediately using a teleport spell. Darios stared long and hard, angry at his inability to finish them off and at his stupidity in not getting to them before.

He watched as a thunder dwarf came out after a few moments and put his arm around the human before escorting him back in.

So, dwarves colluding with humans and elves, whatever next?

As darkness fell, Darios again used his innate ability to shadow jump to get into the tavern. Once inside, he hid under an unused table from where he observed the young man and his

dwarven friends. He counted seven in all. Not wishing to be found as the numbers in the tavern grew, he shadow jumped back out to stay hidden. He waited and watched, moving in and out of shadows past the windows to keep an eye on the group.

He was rewarded when one chalk dwarf left the table and went to the flight of stairs at the back of the tavern.

Darios stepped into a shadow outside and shadow jumped back inside the tavern again; he then silently followed his new mark up the stairs. The dwarf stopped at the first door and, using a key, opened it and let himself in. Acting quickly with years of practice at his disposal, the killer shadow gnome rushed in behind. Two poisoned darts were flung into poor Chedda's back before he could react, but his dwarven resistance to poison stopped him flopping instantly to the floor. Chedda began a prayer to the dwarven god Kronk while turning to face his attacker, as the shadow gnome drew out two wicked blades from his hips. Using his innate powers again, Darios shadow jumped to the other side of the room and rushed forth, plunging both blades into the confused Chedda's back. The chalk dwarf's eyes rolled back into their sockets as Darios pulled and twisted the evil blades. Chedda felt the cold pull of death as his soul was destroyed forever. Darios yanked the blades free and searched the room. There was very little of interest to him but the

dwarves had left some of their weapons in there. He hid them out of sight and dragged Chedda's body out of immediate sight from the door way. Then he waited.

In the main tavern room, the dwarves were discussing the day's events and the meeting with the elves.

'Are they to be trusted though?' Alto asked his brother, Rialto.

'I have met some continentals before and, though they are different to us, they are a good race. They have slightly different rules by which they live but I believe them to be trustworthy,' Rialto replied.

'I have learned some magic from a flame elf before,' Clement added. 'Mad as a box of frogs he was but not evil or malicious. I think they are speaking the truth and their story certainly matches what we are seeing around here.'

'Then I think we sit tight here and work with you, Garth. Find out more and perhaps be ready to help,' Downna, the chalk dwarf priest of Kronk, added.

Garth shrugged and nodded agreement. There really seemed to be little they could do except observe for now.

'Chedda's bin a while,' Handle, the third thunder dwarf broke in. 'Was he OK, not ill or nuffin?'

'Not that I was aware of,' Downna replied.

'I'll go see where 'e is, check on the room.'

Handle stood up and crossed the tavern to the back stairs. Having climbed the stairs, he entered the room and was dead forever as a small shadow gnome dropped on him, plunging twin daggers into his neck. The blades sunk deep and fresh dwarf blood sprayed out as the arteries carrying the blood from a strong pumping heart fired it across the room. Darios licked some off his face, savouring the taste. He jumped off the deceased dwarf, and dragged the body out of immediate sight from the door. He didn't try and clean up any of the blood, only wiping a little with his finger and enjoying the taste again.

After ten minutes and some idle chatter about the state of the rest of Salvington and the Dwarf Kingdom of Danbury from which they came, the group and their new found Councillor friend realised something was wrong since neither dwarf had returned.

'Something's wrong, boys. Weapons ready!' Alto said. The five remaining dwarves stood up abruptly, causing many in the tap room to look at them warily at first and then with concern, as they hurried to the stairs at the back.

The five gathered round the door and on the third nod of three burst into their room. Alto was first and nearly slipped over on his third step as he slid on the blood of his dead friend, Handle. Rialto barged in next followed by Barakello,

Clement and Downna.

'What in the name of Kronk?' Rialto began but lost the rest of his sentence as a small dart found his neck.

'Bah!' he cried with the volume only a thunder dwarf could manage. The noise could be heard down stairs, down the road and across half the city. The assailant seemed to materialise out of thin air across the room from them. A shadow gnome!

'Shadoowww GnOOMmee!!!' Barakello yelled with the full force of his racial hatred rising within him.

Clement was first to react firing off some of his excess static in a small blue bolt of electricity. It hit a magical field inches from the body of the evil looking, grinning, deep purple gnome. The gnome reacted by throwing four more darts. Another hit Rialto, who sunk to his knees fighting with all his will against the poison. One hit the breast plate of Alto and rebounded leaving a dark spot on his armour. The other hit Barakello in the leg.

'You know full well that has no effect on me, you vile spawn of Hades. I'll send you back to the dark depths from which you came with your evil skull split into three,' he yelled as the usually lethal gnome poison only seemed to enrage him further. He charged across the room, his black adamantite hammer in both hands and death on his mind.

Downna was torn between attack and defence but it was clear Rialto needed him. He said a prayer to Kronk to stop the poison and laid his hands upon the stricken Rialto. A green glow engulfed the poor thunder dwarf and the look of pain on his face eased somewhat.

Darios side stepped the onrushing frenzied granite dwarf with ease. He had fought many before and though fierce fighters they were no match for his agility. Barakello gave a furious swipe just as the gnome moved inches out of reach and shattered the bedstead he had been standing on. The gnome drew his wicked daggers as he moved and nipped towards Alto who had drawn his own hammer. The experienced dwarf didn't rush forward and held a defence against the gnome, who decided to back up to a darker corner of the room. Barakello came rushing in from the side but Darios had backed into the shadows and once again shadow jumped, reappearing in the doorway, just behind Downna and Clement, who was preparing another spell.

Clement released a bolt of lightning into the corner of the room just as Barakello swung into it to hit the gnome. The lightning bolt hit Barakello, the force knocking him over into the wall. Though wounded he still managed to lift his head to see what had happened. Alto stared ahead unsure where the gnome had gone. He was rewarded with a gurgling sound from behind. The

evil creature was bent over Downna's back, both blades bedded deep into the genial chalk dwarf's throat. Downna slumped on top of the grievously wounded Rialto as his life force was sucked away forever.

Alto stared at the malevolent creature, who smiled back.

'Don't mess with me, Dwarf!' was all he said. Darios hopped off the back of Downna and out of the door before Alto could react. Darios shadow jumped out of the building to the street outside and called upon his other more powerful ability to shadow walk.

'No sense staying here,' he said to no one. He slipped into the realm of shadow and headed back to Imar, City of the Shadow Gnomes, to report to his clan leader, Kymru Galavan.

In the room there was only silence. Alto rolled the body of his fallen comrade off his brother, only to discover that he had lost his battle against the shadow gnome poison. He too had been a victim of the assassin. Barakello was slowly getting back to his feet after recovering from Clement's lightning bolt, his hair still on end. Clement was trying to help Alto while also weeping away tears for two his friends. The granite dwarf staggered over to the thunder dwarf and lightning dwarf.

'This will be avenged!' his deep rumbling voice said. 'We

will travel to Kronkton, my home in the very depths of the Shuddering Peaks, and move our forces once again to do battle against the shadow gnomes. They have blood on their hands and we will avenge it.'

Just then there was a very timid knock at the still-open door and the horrified pale face of Garth Miller, the city's youngest Councillor, appeared.

'What have I got you into?' he asked.

'It's not you, though you will need to take care, young human. There is great evil in this world and it is at work as we speak. Let this be a lesson to you Councillor, so that you may act wisely and know these things,' Alto replied, still staring at the body of his dead brother.

Renegade Meeting

The Company arrived back in the gardens of Sir Theobold's palace and immediately made their way inside, heading for Sir Theobold's private audience chamber. It was evening and they had much to discuss with the ruler of Findon and the Castleford Kingdom about the serious nature of the Spice problem. There was no doubt in their minds that the malevolent group, known as the Shades were behind this, most of whom would appear to be shadow gnomes in this instance.

Sir Theobold was already in his audience chamber, meeting with his closest advisers, the light gnome Argyll and the half-elf Lorian Thililisfarne, the court mage. They were busy planning the own rumours which would counter the rumour that the halflings were responsible for bringing the Spice to Findon, when the door burst open and the six elves glided in.

'Don't you ever knock? I know you're important and all that but surely I deserve a little more decorum from you?' Sir Theobold moaned.

'You do still need our help, don't you Theo?' Apollo drily asked.

'Well of course. It's why we're all here.'

'Then decorum, as you put it, can wait. We've had an

eventful time in Salvington and it's not much better than here,' Apollo went on.

'We met with dwarves you know, extraordinary they were, all squat and bristling with indignation,' Ethandril continued.

'They are really fascinating, you should have more of them around in Findon, they'd soon let you know a thing or two about your city, ha!'

Sir Theobold merely scowled at the flame elf before continuing his own story of events.

'Well, things have moved on apace here since you left. Yet more troubles.'

'It seems to be the way of things,' Elwood responded.

'Halflings!'

The Company simply looked at him.

'One was beaten and left for dead on the river boulevard with his pockets stuffed with Spice.'

'A set up, surely?' Catarina interjected.

'Of course, a set up we know it's not them. They'd have too much to lose here now anyway.'

The last statement drew only blank expressions, so Sir Theobold thought he would tell the story of how he gave away the Royal lodge at another time.

'We brought the poor fellow here for his own safety and,

obviously, to ask the relevant questions and he protests his innocence. We accept that but, of course, the rumours have started. Bad situation it is. The general populace think that halflings are now the source of the Spice and there is bad feeling in the air,' Sir Theobold finished.

'Are you suggesting another Persecution could be on the cards?' Catarina asked, her face one of utter horror.

'Well, the Shades have clearly tried to implicate them, if it is them behind this.'

'We're running out of options,' Orion spoke for the first time. 'Maybe we should let you loose a few meteor swarms down in those tunnels, Ethan.'

The flame elf's face lit up in absolute delight.

'Just what I've said all along. There's not much arguing with a meteor swarm.'

Loriana, not for the first time, stared at her father and seriously began to doubt her heritage.

'Ethan, no meteor swarms, they're just too destructive,' she said to her father.

'When you have reached my level of competence, my darling daughter, then feel free to lecture me. Till then, keep your advice for him!' Ethan said, waving a hand in Sir Theobold's direction.

Catarina tried hard to stifle a giggle, since the words Ethandril and competence were rarely used in the same sentence.

'No matter, Lorianana, we need drastic action, and our many years of experience tell us that you must go to the source of the problem. In this case that means we must go and visit the shadow gnomes and put a stop to their fun and games,' Orion stated in all seriousness.

'Direct action, ghost, the best proposition you've almost ever managed. Well done!' Apollo added in his usual condescending tone.

'Enough, friend!' Quin-Helwig interrupted. 'Orion is right. We must go back to the under-dark and deal directly with these gnomes, however powerful they may be.'

The conversation was stopped by Lorianana suddenly shaking her head and putting her slender finger in her ear.

'Ooh, some insect or critter has flown into my ear or something. It's buzzing right through my head,' she moaned. The buzzing stopped and Lorianana heard a whisper right inside her head.

'Meet me at the old hanging tree outside the city. Come now. Bring your friends.'

She looked dumbfounded.

'A voice just said to meet it at the old hanging tree now. We're all to go,' she said, shocked that any external uninvited message had managed to penetrate either the palace defences or her own.

'A trap?' Orion enquired.

'I.. I don't think so. We should go, but let's be prepared,' Lorianana replied.

'Wait just a moment. Ethan,' Quin suggested 'who should go? All of us, or should some stay?'

'It said bring your friends,' Lorianana answered.

'I wish to come, this is my Kingdom after all and if there is some strange force trying to help I wish to know who or what,' Sir Theobold said boldly. 'However, I think Argyll you should stay here, even though you would be useful, but if anything goes wrong, you'll be in charge. OK?'

'Agreed then. We all go, but let's be ready,' Orion said, looking at the Company, Lorianana and Sir Theobold.

After several minutes of spell casting the members of the Company were ready. Elwood had attempted to scry the area first but there was nothing visible except a large, ancient tree with a few thick, low-hanging branches. All weapons were drawn, Quin's fine-bladed a long and short swords, while Apollo had his

sword out pulsing green light. Catarina had enspelled her sword with electricity, ready for the first strike, and Elwood had his bow at the ready.

Ethandril cast his teleport spell and they were instantly under the ancient oak tree as daylight was fading. They looked around, searching for their contact, but there was no sign of anyone. Orion started to blink, in and out of sight of the rest of the party, but he too could find no one.

'Well, I hope they hurry up,' Sir Theobold said 'We've things to do and if..'

His mutterings of displeasure were rudely cut off by the thunderous noise of the earth all around them moving. Out of the ground on four sides of them, elementals rose and surrounded the company. Towering earth elementals, some sixteen feet or more high stared down at them and the buzzing of an air elemental or two could be heard above.

A deep voice coming from one of the elementals spoke.

'Wait, here comes the one you need.'

Two of the elementals stepped slightly apart and the Company stared hard, still all on tenterhooks, weapons drawn and ready for any strike by the elementals.

They could make out a small person flying towards them. It was merely a silhouette as it flew in from the east, with the

fading sun behind it. Now only twenty yards away they could make out the red cape flowing in the wind wrapped around someone the size of a halfling.

'Is that a halfling?' Sir Theobold asked.

'I'm guessing it is and there are probably more judging by all these elementals,' Orion replied.

'I knew they could do this but I never realised they could summon such big creatures,' Catarina added.

'They're capable of a lot more too,' Apollo said. 'Before your time there were stories of them doing more damage than even you have managed, Ethan. There were even tales that a water halfling created a giant whirlpool that sank an island.'

The Red-robed halfling approached and the elementals gave way further. The small creature was riding some sort of floating disc, with his right arm drawn across his face. He stopped in the middle of the group.

'Greetings, long lived ones! It has been many years since I last worked with any elves but now the time has come. You will soon learn that it is I, the Red Baron, who holds the balance of power on Vallilea.'

'Now that's what I call an entrance!' Ethandril squealed.

'Delighted to meet you, Baron. I am Ethandril Thililisfarne, mage extraordinaire, and this is my adventuring group, the

Company of the Compass.'

'I am aware of who you all are. I have been observing you all for some time as part of my ongoing operations.'

There were a few raised eyebrows at this.

'Greetings, Sir Theobold! May I say thank you for the Royal lodge; my lieutenants are finding it most comfortable for their work.'

'You are behind that then. So the halflings are involved in this after all!' Sir Theobold began in indignation.

'Whatever has been done is now of no consequence. We face a much greater threat from a more sinister enemy. I believe you are close to the answers you seek but I find, after the recent attacks on my people, that I must help speed up the process.'

'What do you know?' Sir Theobold said abruptly.

'Everything, good ruler. The Shades, led by a contingent of shadow gnomes, are supplying the surface world with this Spice. They have now infiltrated four places: Findon, Abinger, Ingles and, more recently, Salvington. They aim to bring down the surface world as much as they can. They are working with summoned devils in the two other towns and, I have recently found out, followers of the god of Death and Murder, Nyrex.'

'Yllana spare us!' Elwood said. 'Of course, Nyrex must love all of this death, all being aided by his followers.'

'We should try and shove them back into their hole of a Citadel,' Quin-Helwig growled. 'I remember when it was being built; we should have stepped in back then.'

'All in good time, Quin, all in good time,' Apollo said with an air of compassion. 'I still believe we must attack the gnomes at source first, just as Orion said. Destroy that mushroom crop that produces the Spice, then see what happens on the surface.'

'You are right, wise golden one,' The Red Baron said, swivelling to face Apollo and changing his arms over as he did so. 'I have decided the same and am willing to accompany you on the mission. It will be dangerous but for all halflings of Vallilea, I will avenge them. Nothing will stop the Red Baron from his vengeance!'

'I do so love the way you refer to yourself in the third person, too,' Ethan said after the Baron's dramatic statement. 'Don't you think it adds such drama? Ethandril Thililisfarne will help the Red Baron blow away the evil gnomes ...'

'Lava lips, shut it!'

'What of us in the city?' Lorian asked the assembly. 'What should we do?'

There was a pause as the group thought. It was the Red Baron who answered the conundrum.

'Shut the city down. No one in, no one out,' he said, as he slowly rotated on his board so as to stare at each one of them. 'Weed out the dealers and rid your precious city of this Spice. You are powerful enough to do this and I will give you all the assistance that you need. Go to Nilo at the Royal lodge and tell him to help; tell him I have said so.'

'You think it will work?' Sir Theobold asked tentatively.

'All the city's exits will be blocked by the likes of these' he said gesturing at the summoned elementals. 'You and your guards, court wizards and such should be able to do the rest.'

'I hope you're right,' Lorianana replied.

With a hint of amusement in his voice, the Red Baron replied: 'Never forget where true power lies, young lady!'

'Back to the palace then for final preparations,' Elwood suggested. 'Then we should teleport directly to the stalagmite cavern and begin from there.'

'Agreed,' Orion said, 'and what of you Baron?'

'I will find you there. I know where you speak of and shall follow.'

Again there were raised eyebrows but the Red Baron did at least appear powerful enough to do such a thing. Ethandril cast his final teleport of the day and the group arrived back in the

palace gardens, ready to begin what might possibly be their
final preparations.

Darios Reports, the Dwarves Descend

Darios Galavan, his Clan's most lethal assassin, arrived back in the shadow gnome city of Imar and headed straight for Clan Leader Kymru's private home. He had a great many things to report and was even mildly anxious with the way things were proceeding. Too many people seemed to know what was happening for the liking of the secretive killer. He walked straight through the magically warded false door to Kymru's main receiving room, where he found his Clan Leader and Clan Wizard, Mentza, enjoying yet another glass of whelf. How ironic, he thought. They may soon have more base ingredients to add to their crystal decanter.

'I presume your mission was a success, Darios. Whelf?' Kymru asked.

'Not entirely Clan Leader, though I return with more information about the surface world.'

'Then continue, trusted assassin,' Kymru urged, as he handed Darios a large glass of the elf blood spirit.

Taking a large draught, savouring the taste and admiring the colour in his glass, Darios continued.

'I tracked down those trying to observe us - a group of elves - and followed them from Findon to Salvington. I observed

them for more than a day as I waited for the ideal opportunity to strike. When it came I was foiled by Tuke's will, though a clean shot on one, an island elf, made no impact whatsoever. I presume he has some type of magical resistance, though my darts are enspelled to pierce such things.'

Mentza couldn't conceal his surprise; he couldn't remember Darios ever failing to hit a target. 'They are powerful, then,' he remarked.

'Indeed it would appear so. I struck during a brief street fight and the weaponry they pulled out in an instant was quite considerable. They were then commandeered by a human who took them to meet with, would you believe, a dwarven adventuring group? They were a mixed bunch even including a granite dwarf.' He spat after saying the words. 'I was unable to follow them into the building and only saw the elves leave and teleport away some hours later. I decided to meet with the dwarves a little later and their numbers have now been reduced from seven to three,' Darios finished.

'Excellent work, Darios. Perhaps we should take a look at what these two groups are up to and how that may affect us,' Kymru said, turning to Mentza. 'If you would be so good, Clan Wizard, and attempt to scry our newest foes.'

Kymru stood and left the room, returning several moments

later with a crystal ball. He placed it on the cloth-covered table, where he and Mentza had been sitting, and indicated for Mentza to begin. The Wizard, wearing his familiar black cap with gold sigils, moved over to the ball and began to chant arcane words of great power, summoning the strength of the world's magic to guide him in his sight. After a short moment a fog appeared roiling in the crystal ball, which slowly dissipated to reveal nothing but a distant view of Sir Theobold's palace in Findon.

'Well well. Then the elves are meeting with old Theo again,' Kymru said, not in the least surprised. 'We have no further need to scry them then, if that is the best we can get. I shall pass a message on to Djemmini's people in Findon to keep an eye on their comings and goings and to inform us should anything change.'

'Indeed, Clan Leader, I met with an excellent subordinate of his in Findon,' Darios said with a wicked smile.

'Oh really?' Kymru inquired, surprised.

'A human by the name of Kollin; the best compliment I can give him is that he would make an excellent shadow gnome! We can contact him; he'll do the job for us.'

'If you say so, Darios; I have the utmost faith in your judgement,' Kymru replied.

'Mentza, see what you can of the dwarves, a thunder, a lightning and the, peuh, granite,' Darios suggested to the magician.

Mentza refocused his energies and babbled more arcane words and the crystal ball clouded over again. As it began to clear an image formed, that of three dwarves marching in the foothills, heading with determination for the mountains in the distance. They all had faces set in stone with scowls that could be seen quite clearly even from afar.

'That's them,' Darios said, 'what's left of them. So clumsy they are, so predictable. How we've never managed to best those granites once and for all I shall never know.'

'They are a fearsome foe down here, Darios, especially in tunnels. They always lead major battles out of the caverns and into their tunnels; they are more cunning than you may believe,' Kymru chided the assassin.

'Indeed, they are fearsome opponents, very resistant to our magic too,' Mentza added. 'Judging from this they're headed somewhere in a hurry but even if they go underground those hills are nowhere near here - but we shall keep an eye on them.'

'Indeed we shall. I feel it is time to call on our brethren of Clan Puttnik. We need to make everyone aware of how things are progressing. We knew it would never all be fair mining but

they must be made aware of these developments,' Kymru informed his two henchmen.

Three hours later the Clan Galavan counterparts in Clan Puttnik arrived at the Galavan house and were led in to a meeting. Braden, his chief wizard Akkron and his silent but deadly assassin, Vander, all nodded their greetings to the contingent of Galavans.

'Our scourge upon the surface world is progressing very well,' Kymru began. 'Findon is in chaos and the halfling rumours are well established, Abinger and Ingles are starting to crumble with the level of Spice use and those unaffected are baying for halfling blood.'

The whole assembly chuckled at the devious plan's success. They all liked nothing more than hearing a halfling squeal!

'The city of Salvington is also firmly within our grip following the new approach we tried there.'

'Oh really, Clan Leader?' Braden asked. 'I was not informed.'

'It's just details, Clan Leader, but we have made a slightly less strong version and are using it to infiltrate the upper classes. It has the gnawing long-term affect of regular Spice but without all that shuddering and growling. It is

proving most effective.'

'I should have been informed, Kymru,' Braden said, decidedly unamused.

'You just have been,' Kymru retorted. There was a brief moment of tension as all six stared at each other wondering, just wondering how well their alliance would hold.

'Let's not be silly. It was my oversight for which I apologise Clan Leader,' Kymru said. 'We are against them on the surface, not each other. Besides, it has been a resounding success.'

'Apology accepted,' the mauve leader of Clan Puttnik began. 'So what is next on our mutual agenda?'

'We are under investigation by a group of elves working in conjunction with Theobold in Findon. They appear to be able to travel easily around the cities and Darios, who tracked them in Salvington, believes they are powerful,' Kymru stated.

'Then let us eliminate them,' Akkron said matter-of-factly.

'It is not as easy as it may seem,' Darios interrupted.

'You have already tried? And failed?' Akkron said.

'You're slipping, Darios,' Vander added, a hint of mischief in his voice. 'I hope no one else gets to hear that you missed a mark.'

'As I said, they are powerful. Now I know them, they will

not survive a second time,' Darios retorted to the barb.

'I believe we should recall our prime devils, Leileilii and Cheragai. I would like a report face to fang. Then we can perhaps use them to aid us against these troublesome elves. Besides, I fear my whelf stores may be running a little low; it's time they were topped up,' Kymru said, looking at his near empty decanter on a shelf to the side.

'A good suggestion, Clan Leader. Shall we go somewhere quieter, the cavern by the mushroom fields?' Mentza enquired.

Kymru nodded as did all the members of clan Puttnik. With no further words they all disappeared through a multitude of magical means and reconvened in the cavern they had used many times to plan and instigate their plot.

Akkron was already casting his spell and Mentza followed soon after. Two large black portals appeared and soon after the two devils, both still in human form, stepped through.

'Greetings, my lady Leileilii!' Kymru said addressing the beautiful half-dressed succubus. 'I assume your work for us is proving satisfying?'

'As much as I should hate you for your frequent summoning, working with Clan Galavan is always a pleasure. Mentza does set me the most entertaining of tasks,' she purred.

In contrast, the handsome man who stepped through the other

portal was already transforming back into his natural state. Soon, the real eight-foot tall bearded Cheragai stood, towering over his summoner, Akkron Puttnik.

'Yes, gnome,' he growled.

'Behave, Cheragai! I could make this a lot more painful for you if I chose to. Now, what of Abinger? Tell me how you and your cohorts have fared.'

'The town is in chaos, halflings are being chased out of the town, and...' he paused 'I believe my work there is done.'

'I'll decide when your work is done, Cheragai,' Akkron answered the fearsome devil. 'Still, you may be right, which is why you are here. We may have some problem elves for you to get to grips with.'

The grin that split the devils face left everyone in the room cold. The look of utter evil and excitement could only appear on the most malevolent of faces. Even Leileilii was slightly taken aback.

'You may have saved your own skin Akkron. Where are they?'

'Don't dare to threaten me, Cheragai! We are just in the process of tracking them down. You can remain here till I say,' Akkron said with finality.

'Leileilii, what of Salvington?' Mentza asked, his relationship with his enslaved devil being far more cordial.

'I have infiltrated the Council as you asked. There are now ten Members using the new Spice, including the Speaker. At the same time the rest of the city is slowly starting to fall to the regular Spice. Distribution is being handled very well. I do like that Djemmini human; should you ever wish him dealt with, you will let me know, won't you?' she pouted.

'Whore!' Cheragai muttered at the succubus, disgust on his fanged devil face.

'What can you expect when my choice of devil partners consist of the likes of you,' she replied, looking Cheragai up and down as though he was something a dog had regurgitated.

Kymru stepped into the middle of proceedings to ease the obvious tensions. 'Enough, all of you! We will continue to scry the elves and the dwarves, and react as we need to. Till then, anyone out of step...' and the gnome Clan Leader waved his staff at them all.

'Er, what dwarves?' Braden asked.

'Probably nothing, Darios killed a few in Salvington that may have been aware of what we were doing but there are only three of them now. They've left the city and they're not heading anywhere near us,' Kymru answered.

The statement received an accepting nod from the Puttnik Clan Leader. Dwarves could be troublesome but no real threat to

shadow gnomes.

The three dwarves reached a small cavern in the foothills that ran into the tail of the Shuddering Peaks only a few hours after they had been scryed by Mentza Galavan. They were indeed nowhere near the shadow gnome city of Imar but that was not their destination. They were off to Barakello's home town, the granite dwarf city of Kronkton, in an attempt to get help from the dwarf elders to battle against the shadow gnomes, their most hated enemy.

'I know these passages like the back of my hand,' Barakello said in his low rumbling voice to his two companions.

'And roughly how far is it?' Clement asked. 'I know my spell made us go quicker and the journey seem easier but I'm still exhausted. My constitution is no match for yours, Barakello'

'A day's travel if we're lucky. Then we will hit our outer mining tunnels. About another half day from there.'

'Then there is no time to waste,' Alto boomed, slapping the smaller lightning dwarf on the back.

'OK. Look, can we do an hour? Then I must rest. Besides, I'm almost out of spells and isn't it dangerous down here?'

'That it is. You are right, little friend,' Barakello

conceded. 'I'll find us somewhere defensible and we can rest. Then, we press on hard. I can't stand the thought any longer that shadow gnomes are ruining the world. I must get to Kronkton.'

'Agreed then,' Alto said. 'I'll take your pack, Clement.'

The smallest of the three dwarves gladly gave his small pack to the biggest, his friend Alto, the thunder dwarf. The three headed into the tunnels that would lead to Barakello's home, following the granite dwarf with his amazing sense of direction.

After a little more than an hour's walking the three found a small cavern with two exits.

'Perfect,' Barakello said. 'We can rest here. We can defend either tunnel and escape through the other should we need to.'

'Clement, get your rest,' Alto said trying his best to whisper. As much as he tried, Alto's attempts at quietness and stealth were not very successful and the group had soon attracted attention. Their stay in the cavern was uneventful and a half day or so later, once Clement had rested and learned some more spells, the three continued on, only this time, they were not alone.

Barakello set a good pace that they could all just manage to keep, Alto trying to be as quiet as he could, Clement moving

as quickly as he could. After two hours of fast walking with few obstacles, the group came to a large cavern where they could hear running water at the far side.

'The underground river,' Barakello said. 'We call it the Troll'

'That's a strange name for a river,' Clement said. 'Why would you...'

His question was cut off by the answer. Four large spindly-legged, warty, rubbery creatures were making their way towards the three of them.

'Oh!' Said Clement. Small as he was, however, Clement was a most capable mage. He muttered under his breath and released a forked lightning bolt at the onrushing trolls. The blast knocked the first two flat on their backs and staggered the next two.

'Good work, Clem,' Alto boomed, the excitement of battle ending his attempts at silence.

He pulled out his large dwarven axe and rushed in after his friend's magical bolt.

Barakello pulled out his hammer and charged in too, hot on the heels of the eager Alto.

The two trolls still standing waved filthy clawed hands at the onrushing dwarves, eager for the battle. Alto arrived first, roaring to Kronk, god of the dwarves, and taking a mighty swing

from right to left at the first troll. The blow clean severed a grasping hand and sent it flying some ten feet away. The troll screamed and swiped back with its right hand. It raked its claws across Alto's studded leather but failed to tear through.

Barakello rushed in low and swung hard for the knees on the spindly legs of the other troll. He connected with the trolls left leg and it buckled instantly. The troll toppled to the floor, swiping for the granite dwarf as he did. The claws raked the obsidian skin of Barakello's face but failed to cut him. Barakello swung again hitting the back of the troll's head as it toppled. There was a welcome plop-splat noise as the skull was caved in. The creature was dead, for now.

Alto reversed his swing and went low. He cut clean through the right leg of his attacker who over-balanced and fell over. Just as it did so, the first two trolls hit by the lightning bolt began to stir.

'They're regenerating, damn them!' Barakello yelled.

'Get back here, I'll finish them,' Clement called back.

The two dwarf fighters began to retreat as Clement began his spell. They had just made it back to their friend as he released a pea-sized ball of flame at the trolls. It exploded in searing hot magical fire, burning away the flesh of the previously regenerating trolls. The foul creatures screamed in

rage and agony, knowing that their lives were at an end. The two standing were running about flailing their arms, the two dismembered ones on the floor twitched and writhed as they died permanently.

Unfortunately the fireball had perfectly illuminated the three dwarves and they came under attack from the opposite side. Their stalker, a fearsome beholder, who had been on their trail for nearly half a day, decided to strike.

A huge gaping wound appeared in Alto's back and the tough thunder dwarf roared in pain. He turned to see the eye tyrant floating towards them.

A second beam struck Clement who gasped and sunk to his knees as his mage's body did it's best to fight off being turned to stone. A third beam struck Barakello only to be turned aside by his natural resistance. The green beam bounced off his shoulder and struck the cavern wall blasting a large chunk of rock away. The beholder lifted the chunk of rock with another beam and bashed it into Barakello sending him staggering to his left.

Alto charged forward, axe raised in two hands, as he rushed to meet the orb. He was struck again, this time by a cone of freezing cold. Shards of ice fired at him, penetrating through his armour and magical defences, freezing him as he

rushed on. His charge slowed as his knees buckled and nearly gave way.

Clement regained his composure, having won his battle against petrification, and managed a simple quick spell. Five missiles of pure magic launched forth from his finger tips and swerved unerringly at the orb. They all struck home causing the eye tyrant to roar in pain.

Barakello, blood boiling with rage, marched towards the orb, hammer in both hands, ready to swing. Meanwhile, Alto managed to stay on his feet and stagger forward too. The beholder let rip its cone of cold at Barakello and aimed to disintegrate Alto. The granite dwarf was assailed by the cold but his sheer rage helped him shrug off the worst of its effects as he marched on, icy shards bouncing off his black armour and tough obsidian skin. Alto was even luckier as he staggered again just as the green beam reached him and missed his head by less than an inch. Another chunk of wall behind him disappeared.

Clement steadied himself and prepared another spell but was interrupted as a huge gash appeared across his torso as the wounding beam hit home. He crumpled in agony as his spell was lost.

Barakello suddenly rushed forward and hurled his hammer with all his might. End over end it sailed striking the

surprised beholder hard on the side and wobbling it towards the cavern wall. As it tried to right itself it was attacked by a steadily recovering Alto. The mighty thunder dwarf swiped with all his might, slicing a great chunk off the bottom of the orb. The noise as it yelled in pain could be heard for miles in the underground cave system as its life blood and ichor gushed out of its bottom half. Seizing his chance, Barakello picked up his hammer and rushed in again. He hurled the hammer once more using all his strength and momentum as he threw it at the eye tyrant. The head of his whirling hammer crashed into the great central eye with a squelch and a hard gush of fluid rushed out of the wound Alto had created at the bottom.

The dead orb dropped to the floor as Barakello retrieved his hammer. He patted Alto on the back.

'Well done, friend, one of the troubles of life in the tunnels. I hate those things,' he said puffing and winded.

The pair staggered to the still doubled over Clement, Alto pulling open his magical belt pouch as he went. He pulled forth several bottles and handed them to each of the others as well as unstoppering one for himself.

'Downna is still helping us,' he said, as he toasted their dead friend and quaffed his healing potion. The two others drank theirs too and instantly felt better, though not a hundred

percent.

'Come, we must get to Kronkton. This is too hard as only three,' Barakello said, still breathing heavily.

'Lead the way, friend!' Alto replied in his best effort of a whisper. 'Lead the way!'

The Company and the Red Baron

The six members of the Company, rested and ready with their heads near bursting, having memorised almost their full repertoire of spells, arrived in the depths of the Shuddering Peaks. They found themselves in the large cavern where they had spent time in before, only a few yards away from where they had been in their rope trick.

'Very impressive, Ethandril,' said Catarina in awe. 'You must let me in on your secret for mastering teleports this well.'

'He's only this good at it out of necessity, Cat, so he can run away from all the messes he creates,' Apollo interjected acidly.

'You may take lessons from me anytime, Catarina, especially if it means you aren't wasting time with him and metal sticks,' Ethandril replied.

'Hey, let's keep the noise down,' Orion reprimanded the bickering pair. 'We know which way to go, let's keep quiet and go down that way,' he said, indicating the path from which the wagons had come.

'Wait a moment,' Quin stopped them. 'Where's the Red Baron?'

The Company looked around, scanning the area with their full attention, but there was no sign of their new accomplice.

Several minutes later he materialised and floated towards them on his little hovering platform, red cape flowing behind him.

'About time,' Orion said coolly.

'Do not underestimate me, elf. My power is enough to drop you stone dead right here,' he answered, his left arm drawn across his face.

Orion just laughed off the threat. While he did believe, as they all did, that this Red Baron was indeed powerful, they sincerely doubted he had enough power to harm any of them. 'Come on!' he said, waving them all down the path.

The Company left the vast stalagmite and stalactite cavern, heading down further into the bowels of the Shuddering Peaks and on to the shadow gnomes. The path was around ten feet wide and sparkled in places with veins of minerals and gems. These were of little interest to the elves, though, since they were surface creatures first and foremost; deep mining issues were for dwarves. They passed several slick walls where lichens grew and several side tunnels, which Orion or Quin-Helwig silently checked before they moved on, but they were not interrupted in their progress.

Mentza Galavan stood over the Clan crystal ball in a private room in his Clan Leader's heavily fortified home. The

roiling clouds had just begun to disappear and an image formed. Three dwarves, a thunder, a lightning and a hated granite dwarf, were all now underground in the tunnels of the Shuddering Peaks. They were still nowhere near the City of Imar - the outer warning systems would have been activated if they had been - but Mentza was surprised by how much ground the three had covered since he had last scryed them. The three had obviously been in a battle, zooming in closer he could see that they were all carrying wounds and the huge double-bladed axe carried by the thunder dwarf still had some fresh blood on it. They were marching with a purpose, too. Hmm, Mentza thought.

'I shall be keeping an eye on you,' he said to no one in particular.

Just as he finished talking to himself, an alarm did go off in the Clan Leader's house. Mentza jumped as it happened, since it was most unexpected and clearly not caused by the dwarves who he could still see in the crystal ball.

He rushed across the room and knocked on the door to the Clan Leader's private room.

'Yes Mentza, I heard it too. Come in and take a look,' Kymru said in response to the knock.

Mentza entered the Clan Leader's private room. There on the wall was a large hologram map of the city and the surrounding

tunnel system. There were a series of small green dots all over it, places where the Clan had set up alarm spells to warn them if they were under attack. One of the outermost dots was flashing red. The system only reacted to groups of more than three and only reacted to certain bipeds so as not to be set off regularly by the numerous under-dark denizens wandering the tunnels.

'Mentza, back to the ball and scry that area! Perhaps we have guests.'

'Certainly Clan Leader,' Mentza said deferentially and left the room to go back to the crystal ball. He concentrated on the area he knew well and the rolling fog in the ball cleared to reveal a group of four elves, two continental, one solar, and one island, the last with the widest shoulders Mentza had ever seen on an elf. 'Could be a dwarf,' Mentza muttered.

Apollo's sword pulsed at his hip. 'We're being scryed,' was the telepathic message.

'Are you sure, brother?'

'Certain. And I think we're being followed; there is some sort of intelligence around us that I can't explain.'

'We're being scryed,' Apollo whispered to the Company.

'Ooh, yes I can feel it too,' Ethandril whispered back. He

cast a spell that took a few moments before saying: 'that should be that, for now,' a beaming smile broad across his face.

Back in Imar, Mentza's crystal ball had just gone blank, his scrying terminated.

'Hmm, this bunch is powerful,' he said to himself.

He went back to Kymru's room to report.

'Darios' meddling elves appear to be on their way here, Clan Leader. I have just seen four of them but they are obviously powerful enough to pick up on being watched. They cast a counter spell, some sort of non-detection and the ball went blank.'

'Very interesting, Mentza. I suggest we watch our little map from here and mark their progress. When we get a better idea of their movement we should send a welcome committee. Do you agree?'

'Most definitely, Clan Leader. I'm sure Akkron's devil would love to rip out a few fresh elf hearts; we should invite him to go, along with a few of my better underlings. We should ask Darios to send some of his apprentices too. With the aid of surprise we should be able to end their little expedition before they get anywhere near here.'

'Excellent planning, Mentza. Contact those that must be

involved, including the Puttniks. Then, tell them to prepare for battle with a surface group; you should have no shortage of volunteers. Tell them to be ready; we will give them the exact location just as soon as one becomes apparent.'

'Yes, Clan Leader.'

'Well, someone or something knows we're here now,' Apollo whispered. 'I didn't think we could be located, Ethan.'

'Maybe we went through a trap or something. I'm sure we can't be seen now anyway,' Ethandril replied.

'They will never have seen me,' the Red Baron chipped in. 'They will only become aware of my presence when it is too late for them.'

'You are without doubt the most confident person I have ever come across,' Catarina said to the Red Baron.

'Why thank you, but it is not misplaced or arrogant, as you will see, Catarina.'

'Brother, he is not all he seems,' came a telepathic message to Apollo. 'I can't get any sort of mental reading from him, I am totally blocked from him. I can't remember that ever having happened before'

'You think he's using some sort of spell?' Apollo sent back.

'I'm not sure but, if it is, it's a hugely powerful one. He

positively radiates magic and yet is completely undetectable to any other means.'

'I don't quite understand.'

'Neither do I. Just keep an eye on him.'

'Do you wish to share your brother's thoughts?' Orion enquired, staring at the pulsing green sword.

'No, ghost, you just concentrate on your job.'

'Has he found anything?' Quin asked more congenially.

'We're not sure, he's probing around,' was Apollo's reply.

The group came to a fork in the path, both tunnels appearing to be of a similar width.

'I believe this is your territory, Quin,' Elwood said, encouraging the ranger to use his skills.

Quin-Helwig duly examined the cold stone floor of the tunnels looking for the wagon tracks that had guided them so far. He didn't like being this far underground; it felt very unnatural to the elf born on a small remote island. After several minutes and a few sighs in order to prompt him from Apollo, he made a decision.

'Definitely right. There are track marks that are just discernable,' Quin informed them.

The Company trusted their ranger implicitly and headed off down the right hand tunnel, with Orion leading the way, followed

by Quin and Apollo.

In the private room of Kymru's house in Imar a second green dot on the magical hologram map started to flash red. The Clan Galavan Leader and his chief wizard looked at each other and smiled.

'Let's send the group then. Use gate twenty eight, ambush them in the Korash cavern.'

'Excellent, Clan Leader, I will send the message to leave immediately.'

'And how many do we have going? Enough, I presume?' Kymru asked Mentza.

'Ten of Darios' crew, all proficient assassins, accompanied by three of my mages, one of whom is particularly able. Cheragai was delighted to receive the message from Akkron and is most eager to leave, Clan Leader.'

'Well done, Mentza. Let us sit back and watch shall we? Bring the crystal ball in here. Whelf?'

'Thank you, Clan Leader.'

Sir Theobold Takes Control

Sir Theobold stood on the raised dais in the large audience chamber of his palace, the very same room from which he had summoned the Company of the Compass some five weeks previously. His court mage, Loriana Thililifarne, stood on his right hand side, resplendent in a red gown. On his left stood his most trusted advisor, Argyll, a light gnome of untouchable virtue who surveyed the gathered throng.

Before them, seated in the pews, were almost the entire City Guard minus a few that had been strategically left on the streets so as not to arouse too much suspicion among the local populace. The front pews were occupied by new friends, including Nilo, the water halfling who was currently resident in the Royal lodge, and several of his friends, Sederic and Graanti, the earth halflings, Etnus a fire halfling and Icari a pale, almost translucent air halfling. There was also a collection of the most trusted priests of the good gods: Johna, the high priest of Keelee, was there having already been dragged into the crisis, as well as several priests of the god of magic, Lorin, and the nature goddess, Daphnia. At the back were a group of some forty human adventurers, carefully vetted by Argyll for their pureness of heart, from all parts of the continent; elves, including

Lishiana and her brothers and cousins; a few earth halflings and thunder dwarves and, much to everyone's amazement, a huge cyclogre, an extremely powerful and rare three-eyed specimen.

The room had been by magic completely cut off from prying eyes and ears by several hours of hard work by Lorianana, as Sir Theobold stood to address the assembly.

'Firstly, may I just say thank you all for being here. As you have probably become aware, these are troubled times, troubled times. This city; my city; your city - is in grave danger. 'Spice', as it is called, is causing mayhem here and, as I have discovered, in several other towns and cities across the southern coast as well. It is not coincidence. It is not luck. We have discovered the perpetrators and are closing in on them. Shadow gnomes are our enemies; the enemies of all of us.'

There was an audible gasp from the room at the mention of shadow gnomes.

'We must act now. We know how Spice is being supplied and I am about to put a stop to it.'

A murmur went round the room.

'Total lockdown of the city, with your help.'

The murmuring grew louder as guards and adventurers turned and whispered to each other.

'We will close all the gates. No one in or out! My friends

at the front, the halflings, who, I must reiterate to anyone who is still unsure, are not involved in supplying Spice in any way, will prevent anyone from leaving, whether via the river or the gates, with the help of their elemental friends. We will take a soft approach to the quieter residential districts; go door to door as much as we can to keep those obviously not involved out of harm's way. We will then sweep in, coming from all sides, into the dock and tavern districts and the slums and round them all up. Anyone we suspect is on the Spice we will subdue, by whatever means necessary. We will capture any dealers till we have the information we need to weed out those responsible within our city, and drive them out or lock them away.'

There was a tinge of both excitement and trepidation in the whispers.

'Guards, my loyal Guards. You will be teamed with a priest and an adventuring band in all your normal watches. That way we can combine local knowledge and my authority with the extra power and protection I'm afraid to say you may well need. These people are dangerous, make no mistake. We have captured one before and he was an unremarkable human but strong and fearful of his superiors. We are after the ringleaders here. Beware of anyone you think is distributing but stop them at all costs. It's them we really need. Now, my court mage will split you into

the groups you need to be in, so please show some patience and good luck. The City, in fact the whole of Vallilea, needs you to be successful. May Tuke be with us!'

Sir Thebold turned to Lorianana. 'How was I?'

'The Blackstone family will be looking down proudly upon you, Sir Theobold. We will not fail you.'

Argyll back-handed a tear of emotion from the corner of his right eye 'You are just like you grandfather, Sir. This will work, I can feel it.'

'Thank you Argyll. I couldn't do it without you.'

Lorianana stood forward on the dais and addressed the crowd. 'Guards, please split into your normal ranks of six.'

The Guards promptly stood and filed to the front of the hall just in front of the dais, where they split into twenty teams of six.

'Please, priests, if you would be so kind as to pick a Guard rank and accompany them.'

The priests stood and shuffled forward introducing themselves to the captains of each of the ranks.

'Adventuring bands, please, I know there aren't twenty bands, but if you could sub-divide yourselves as you feel best, that would be a great help. The adventurers filed to the front to join a rank, several of the bands discussing how they would

divide themselves up. The huge cyclogre left his two companions, an earth halfling and a thunder dwarf, and presented himself to a rank captain.

His three eyes stared down from his head some nine feet up and he smiled.

'Fear not captain. We cyclogres are not all murderous savages as you humans would believe. I am not even a warrior; I follow Marr, the god of Law and Order. His authority is my weapon. I wish to help end this evil scourge in your city for his name, just as much as you do for yourselves.'

'Then welcome, friend, and thank you,' the captain managed in response.

Loriana raised her voice to address the crowd once more.

'Please, as you leave, Argyll will give you your instructions as to where to go in the City. You will have a first mission which will expire in four hours. You will then be given a meeting place, one of three, where we will reconvene for the main push into the worst affected area around the docks and the slums. Good luck and be safe!'

The reinforced ranks slowly left the main hall, each listening intently to Argyll as he gave them their instructions and meeting point.

When they had all left, only Nilo and his halfling friends

remained.

'Fabulous speech, Sir Theobold,' the ever jovial halfling said as he walked up to the dais. 'Shall we go and do our thing now?'

'Thank you, Nilo. If you are able, keep the elementals out of sight for about three hours or so. But keep watch; just because you are staying out of sight doesn't mean trouble makers won't catch wind of this and try to get out early.'

'You can count on us, Sir Theobold. But just one thing. How will you stop magical transport? I mean surely anyone powerful enough to be a major part of this can just hop in and out of here by magical means.'

'Yes, thank you for your concern, Nilo. We have a way of combating it.'

'Really?'

'Yes, but I'm not at liberty to say.'

'Oh!' said Nilo, a little downcast.

The halflings representing all the elements trooped out of the hall and off to the main gates in and out of the city. Nilo made his way to the docks and was delighted when a particularly large elemental heeded his summons. There was no way anyone would be able to even swim past it, never mind get a boat past.

Once alone, Sir Theobold turned to his court mage.

'You're sure of this spell, Lori. Nilo is right, it's definitely a risk.'

'For all his faults, my father is a genius at teleportation spells and naturally he devised this counter,' she replied.

'So, when any type of transportation spell is cast or activated...'

'...it activates his shield spell, becomes wrapped up in a sticky net and is delivered to a location of the caster's choice.'

'Which you have set as this room, where we can monitor who's really trying to get out of here.'

'Exactly.'

'And the net restricts any further spell casting...'

'...and movement or just about anything else,' Loriana finished. 'Ethan thinks it's one of the funniest spells you'll ever see, as it usually captures quite powerful entities. It's the last thing they expect when they think they are about to flee an area.'

'It sounds just like your father' Sir Theobold said, with a sigh.

'Part genius, part lunatic,' Loriana finished.

The next four hours in the city of Findon were ones of fervent activity as twenty ranks of Guards and their new colleagues slipped around the town, mostly in the wealthier parts, quietly closing down the better taverns and shutting inns for the night. They were closely watching everyone they came in to contact with but there was no sign of the Spice. Several captains went door to door warning people to stay in and that all travel had been suspended for now. It met with a mixed reception by some, but was grudgingly accepted as a necessity, as the state of the City was a concern for even the most wealthy.

After four hours the separate groups began to coalesce at the three meeting points: one at the top end of the riverside boulevard, one at the bottom, where the group made ready to come up, and one to the east of the dock and slum district.

The meetings now made it very apparent that something was up. Sir Theobold had decided to act early in the day so as to use the daylight to his advantage; the thieves and dealers liked the darkness to hide in. As the groups began to assemble a buzz was going around the slums that something was happening. Addled Spice addicts didn't care, they continued to sit and rock back and forth muttering to themselves and occasionally hissing for Spice. Others started to look for exits from the area and began to try to move with purpose.

The three assembled groups, each some eighty or so strong, began to fan out from their positions so that every road in the area was blocked by a rank or part of a rank and an adventuring accomplice. Slowly they began to move in.

The initial skirmishes were brief. Those still with the wits to want to escape were generally not under the influence of the Spice. Although they put up a fight, they were relatively easy to subdue. Those captured were either bound and gagged and left where they were or magically held depending on their captors.

In the docks the crew of one small ship loosed its moorings, having decided that this was enough for them. They slowly manoeuvred into the now free flowing river Fin and began to turn down river and head for the sea. They slipped past the dock district pleased to be leaving the city and whatever authoritarian action was taking place. They continued for several minutes, leaving the last of the city buildings behind and picking up pace in the swift river. Suddenly there was a judder and nearly everyone on board fell over as the boat stopped dead.

'Rocks!' the ship's captain yelled. 'We've hit rocks! But how..?'

His question was answered as the boat slowly began to lift

up from the water. The captain rushed to the side to see what manner of creature had done this, fearing serpents or who knew what.

The gargantuan water elemental slowly rose up from the river Fin, the escaping boat in one of its massive hands. It rose to a height of nearly twenty feet, towering over the modest sized ship.

Slowly the elemental moved back up stream towards the city and the docks. There were gasps and shouts coming from all the crew, as well as those on the river bank who could see the ship being carried back to the docks. The elemental placed the small ship back into its original place in the docks and held it there, whilst several crew members jumped off and retied the moorings that had only been released a few minutes previously. The elemental loomed over the boat for several moments and then moved in a small circuit of the docks, towering over all the other ships moored there, several of which had crews aboard that had had the same idea of departure. All work on leaving appeared to stop immediately, while the elemental slowly sunk back into the water. On the far bank of the river a small, three and a half foot blue-green halfling was crying with laughter at what his friend, the water elemental, had done. He almost hoped another boat would try and escape; it had been ages since he had

seen such fear on the face of a bunch of humans and had laughed quite so hard.

Word had also reached some more important people in the slum district. The street sellers working under Kollin could hear the buzz of excitement and trepidation and started to look for a way out. Several men in plain dark clothes were flitting from shadow to shadow, observing the tightening noose of City Guards as they swept inwards towards the slums, rounding up and subduing Spice addicts as they went. Already the clean-up had seized over a hundred desperate creatures, all talking complete nonsense and addled by the Spice. The majority of addicts were yet to be engaged, though, and all the street sellers had come to the same conclusion; that it was time to make a break for it.

The City Guards and their helpers swept ever further in, in a tightening circle, battling against desperate and frenzied people. They would be ever grateful for the forethought of the City's leader, Sir Theobold, for adding adventurers to their ranks. More than one guardsman was injured but there were as yet no full casualties.

At the same time as the press into the slums, the effects of Lorian's spell, the one her father Ethandril had been kind

enough to share with her before he left, began to take effect. First to be ensnared were a wealthy merchant couple. They arrived in the middle of the great hall, dressed in country clothes for travel, with a look of utter dismay on their faces.

Sir Theobold walked over and peered into the two separate sticky nets.

'My apologies, Sir, Lady Goodhume. But as you were made aware. There is a curfew in place. No one in or out.'

'But we only tried to take our private portal to our country house,' Lady Goodhume wailed.

Sir Theobold raised an eyebrow. People in his City had personal portals to other houses. This was going to be an interesting day, one in which he would find out a whole lot about his City.

Another sticky sack appeared and an irate looking man, clearly a mage, stared out.

'Theobold,' he bellowed 'how dare you! What have you done? Release me now! How dare you! I could raze this palace, I could!'

The ever elegant and virtually unflappable Lorian sauntered over to the mage.

'Oh dear, Dragen, our apologies, but for someone as educated as you are not to understand the instructions doesn't look good.'

'Why, you miserable half-breed I'll...' he tried to move and begin a spell when Sir Theobold stormed over.

'When this is over, Dragen, you will be leaving my City after remarks like that. I'll make sure of it personally!' he said, dark brows knitted together with anger clearly etched on his face.

Over the next half hour an assortment of the wealthy and magically capable all arrived in the hall, trapped by the magical sticky nets. Sir Theobold and his advisors were amazed at the numbers but there was still no sign of those they were really after. No shadowy men, simply dressed.

In the slums, things were beginning to get much tougher for the clearing crews. They had managed to get pretty much through the tavern area, which thankfully due to the time of day was fairly empty, with just a few patrons finishing a late breakfast and a few of the usual early regulars with something of a drink problem. They had all been easily dealt with since there was no sign of Spice being involved.

Now they were into the slums. On all sides, the ranks pressed in, compressing the area into four streets by four, covering about a quarter mile square. Strewn behind the ranks were now some four hundred or so people bound or held by the

side of the road with just a few Guards roving to keep an eye on them. The adventurers moved to the front of their respective ranks. All around the hissing of the word Spice could be heard as the true horror of what had been happening in the slum district became apparent. Adventurers drew weapons, mages readied spells and in they went.

The battles were vicious; there was much less chance to subdue these poor frenzied men and women, as the Company had found many nights before. Blood was spilled all over the streets as Spice addicts attacked out of desperation and the adventurers and Guards tried to protect themselves and the whole city from the onslaught.

The addicts were also being prompted by shadowy figures, unseen but watching the whole show. Kollin and a pair of his dealers were right in the middle of the final push. They were trapped. Well, at least it would have appeared that way but as the noose tightened Kollin made his decision.

'Lads, it's time to leave Findon behind. We'll go back to Lord Djemmini and give him a full report but our work here is done for now.'

His two accomplices nodded agreement.

The three stood in a near derelict house and moved over to a blanket covered mirror. Kollin pulled it off to reveal the

portal, the one that led to safety, the one which had been central to the shades moving the Spice into Findon, and now the dealers' means of escape.

'Back to the Citadel, boys,' Kollin said, stepping through first and uttering the activation words to take him back to the Citadel of Nyrex.

Another sticky net appeared in the middle of the main hall. The thirty-fifth so far.

'How many more?' Sir Theobold said to Lorianana.

The pair were still in shock from the arrival of a vampire in their midst. The look of surprise on the undead's face would be remembered for ever by the pair, even though it had only lasted a split second before the daylight robbed the vampire of his three-hundred-year-old life.

'Hang on a minute. I think we may have someone here. Lori, come quick!' Sir Theobold called to his court mage.

Two more sticky nets arrived then, next to the most recent, and Sir Theobold and Lorianana stared at the baleful and confused faces of three ordinary looking unshaven men, wearing dark yet unremarkable clothes.

'Who are you? Speak up man, I don't have all day!' Sir Theobold barked at Kollin.

The main Spice dealer in Findon kept his council. He wasn't sure what had happened but he chose to say nothing. It could just be a loyalty test by his superiors.

Argyll walked over and began to stare at Kollin and his two fellow dealers. He cast a spell.

'Ooh! They are certainly radiating evil, Sir. It's positively oozing from them,' he said, taking a step back.

'Who are you men? Nothing to say for yourselves?' Sir Theobold enquired again in a stern tone.

'Not to you, Theo,' one of the underlings said.

'Aah! So you can speak. Excellent!' Sir Theobold replied.

Kollin shook his head at the stupidity of his man. He wouldn't see another summer that was for sure.

'We know it's you, of course,' Sir Theobold went on. 'We've been watching your operation for weeks. We're even now going into the under-dark to destroy the source.'

'Impossible! You'll never succeed,' the other underling said.

'Shut up!' Kollin growled, unable to contain himself.

'Ah, good! Thank you. Now I see the hierarchy. So, boss, leader, whoever you are. What would you like to tell me? You work for the shades, the shadow gnomes. Lesta, your colleague has already been most forthcoming.'

This statement, the name Lesta, did cause Kollin to flinch.

'Bet you were wondering where he had gone aren't you?' Sir Theobold said, goading Kollin.

Kollin shrugged. He wasn't about to give away anything.

Loriana had been quietly casting spells while Kollin's attention had been taken by Sir Theobold. Suggestions, charm persons and her own favourite, a powerful beguiling spell. That coupled with her natural beauty had often helped in the past with interrogation. She leant forward to speak to Kollin, her tight red dress heaving as her bosom pushed forward. Her bright red eyes bored into the human rogue.

'It's been easy hasn't it?' she said playfully. 'I mean all this. The Spice, the selling. Can't have been hard for a clever man like you?'

Kollin didn't want to say anything but he couldn't help himself. He chuckled before replying.

'No. It's been quite easy really?' he said coyly, looking down so as not to stare too hard at the heavenly body before him.

'We're quite a soft touch here too. Old Theo over there, he's a bit of a fool really isn't he?'

'You can say that again. We knew he would be, though. That's why we targeted here,' Kollin added with a shy flirtatious smile.

'Still, it's not worked out too well for you now, has it?'

She paused prompting for his name.

'Kollin,' Kollin said. 'No I don't suppose the boss will be too happy, or his associates.'

'The shades?'

'Who else?' Kollin replied. 'Lord Djemmini says.....'

Those were the last words Kollin ever said. The mere mention of Djemmini's name activated a contingency that he knew nothing about, a safeguard for Djemmini that he placed upon all his subordinates.

There was a deafening boom and in a split second the entire hall was engulfed by a massive wave of magical fire. Kollin disintegrated instantly as did his underlings next to him. Lorianana was launched back across the room, her various magical defences stretched to the limit by the force of the explosion. Sir Theobold's own contingencies were activated by the blast and he disappeared from the hall the millisecond that the first bit of magical fire touched him. Argyll was not so lucky. He was blasted across the room and badly burnt, even with his protection in place. He slumped against a wall with his right arm bent at a very unnatural angle.

The thirty-five captives had fared little better. Dragen, the mage, clearly had contingencies of his own and vanished too,

but there were another thirty-one smoking bodies in the room, as well as a lot of new real estate in the city. Three others had vanished too. Fortunately the Sir Theobold's palace was made of stone and, although all the pews had been incinerated, the integrity of the building was unaffected.

There were several minutes of silence with just the wind blowing through the empty windows, the shattered glass lying in molten chunks on the stone floor, before Sir Theobold came rushing back in.

'In all the gods names!' he said as he looked at the scene of utter devastation.

He rushed over to his court mage as she was just starting to stir. He knelt beside her as she opened her red eyes.

'Wow!' she said. 'Even dad would have been proud of that one.'

'Are you hurt, dear Lori?'

'I, I think I'm OK. Just bruising, but I think,' she said as she scanned the room, 'I may be the luckiest one.'

She slowly rose to her feet and the pair of them made straight for Argyll. Lorianana held a hand in front of his mouth.

'He's still breathing.'

'Excellent! Get this down him, and get that arm straight. No hang, on I'll do it,' Sir Theobold said as he lifted Argyll

and pulled the mangled arm back into something resembling the correct angle.

Loriana tipped a healing potion into the barely open mouth of the light gnome and within a few seconds he opened his eyes.

'Didn't see that coming,' he said.

'None of us did,' Sir Theobold replied.

Argyll's arm straightened and knitted together with an audible crunch. He winced but then felt immediately better. The three of them looked around the rest of the room, taking in the devastation of the fireball.

'I suppose that's it for here, then,' Loriana said. 'I mean, he must have been top dog here. I caught the name too, just before he exploded. Lord Djemmini,' she repeated, half expecting another explosion.

'I know that name,' Argyll said, tapping his fingers to his mouth. 'Where have I heard it? It's not good, I can assure you of that.'

'Well, just think on it, Argyll, and we'll see what we can do about him. I tell you, at least I know that my contingency works, and a stroke of luck it takes me to my chambers too,' Sir Theobold, said trying to raise a smile. Loriana returned his smile before replying.

'I just hope they're having more luck in the city clearing

the slums.'

The battle in the slums had been raging for over an hour. The final street was now nearly clear, though there had been a high price. The Spice addicts had killed over a score of City Guards, while many had been badly hurt but healed by the priests. It was now down to a few adventurers to finish the remaining addicts.

Two thunder dwarf brothers, Caddogan and Stannard, stood side by side. Lishiana, fighting in memory of the poor boy Rollo, her brother Eldon and behind them the vast nine-foot three-eyed cyclogre, Pwellin, stood with the dwarves. The clutch of Spice addicts, now down to five, milled around in front of them. These seemed to be the final five, the blood of more than a hundred was splattered about the streets of the slum district.

As one the addicts charged, all hissing 'Spice' as they rushed forth. The dwarves readied their axes and braced for the superhumanly strong men. They rushed in with abandon, meeting the strokes of the dwarves with knife chops of their own. A human arm went flying as Caddogan hacked off a limb. Stannard buried his axe in the leg of another but still they fought, their strength penetrating the dwarven armour and inflicting grievous wounds.

Lishiana fired off her bow and slowed another as her brother impaled the fourth on his long sword. The man just laughed and ran down the sword seeming not to notice as he stabbed at Eldon repeatedly. Three, four, five, six times he plunged his knife into the face and chest of the now weaponless elf. His life blood began to spray everywhere as he sank to his knees his grip still on the sword that had impaled the man with seemingly no effect. Again and again the addict slashed and stabbed at Eldon. But he too began to slow as no matter what the Spice masked, he could not continue with a sword impaling him. The pair dropped to the floor simultaneously into an ever growing pool of blood as their hearts pumped their lives away.

Lishiana screamed in horror and stepped back to her brother, now quite dead. The last Spice-addled man reached for her, a dagger in each hand and a dark look in his eyes. He got no nearer than a foot as, from nowhere, a huge wooden mallet, some six feet long and weighing two hundred pounds, came crashing down on his head. The skull exploded, showering Lishiana in brain and blood, and the body crumpled. She turned to look at her saviour and looked along way up to the gentle face of the cyclogre priest of Marr.

'Law and Justice are not always just spells,' he said.

With tears in her eyes she smiled back and mouthed the

words, 'thank you'.

The dwarven brothers were making short work of the last men. Their razor sharp axes now hacking away in tandem; the dwarves were bleeding freely but were in such a frenzy of blood lust that neither could stop.

Then it was all over. The dwarven brothers turned to each other as the last piece of human pulp they had been hacking fell over.

'Mnnaahahahha! Aahhaa!' They yelled. The thunder dwarven voices deafening Lishiana and Pwellin for the moment. Pwellin bent over and picked up the body of Eldon and the four of them left the slums that were now free of Spice addicts

March of the Granite Dwarves

The three dwarves continued on from their mighty battle with the beholder, even more determined to get to Kronkton and the granite dwarf elders. The further they went the more Barakello convinced the other two that this was all the fault of the shadow gnomes; they would be made to pay. The dwarves continued down twisting winding corridors for another half-day by which time the tunnels had noticeably changed shape. Alto noticed because he could feel his head occasionally come very close to hitting the top of the tunnel while the sides were now further away.

'Spotted the difference, have you?' Barakello asked Alto.

'The tunnels are lower and wider than before,' he replied.

'That's because you're in our territory. The tunnels' shapes are an indicator of how far into our territory you are; we've been inside our area for about an hour now. It's hard to spot at first but you'll see it becoming more obvious now.'

'Is there any other reason for it?' Clement enquired, slightly less bothered by it than Alto as he was considerably smaller in stature.

'Of course. Look at me! Me and all my brethren are wider than we are tall, that's the way we make our tunnels. It's of

most benefit to us when defending our territory. Very few other creatures have our dimensions or know how to fight properly in our tunnels.'

'Oh,' Clement responded, 'what about the shadow gnomes, they're smaller than you though, aren't they?'

'Indeed, but not by much, and they have to adapt their fighting style to the low ceiling.'

'Is that why you always swing at opponents across your body, then?' Clement asked.

'You catch on fast. But don't go telling everybody,' the obsidian-skinned granite dwarf said.

'Don't worry I won't. I was just thinking about how well a lightning bolt would ricochet down a corridor like this. It would be amazing!!'

'Indeed, just don't try it when I'm in front of you!'

The three continued on for another hour and the tunnels got lower and lower, wider and wider. Alto, being nearer five feet than four, had to stoop regularly now to keep going. Eventually, Barakello stopped them.

'Just ahead lads. Welcome to the glorious city of Kronkton. Just beyond this bend is the secret entrance and the Hallway of the Elders; we'll be met there by a guard. Just stick with me.'

They turned the corner and the tunnel continued with no

doorway in sight.

'You are in the right place aren't you?' Alto enquired.

'That beholder hasn't befuddled you overmuch, has it friend?'

Barakello stopped another two paces further ahead and turned to face the unremarkable stone wall. He said a short sentence in the ancient language of the granite dwarves, one long forgotten by everyone else. The wall slid apart and a draught of warm air, with the smell of a city attached, wafted into the tunnel.

'Quick lads - in you go!' Barakello indicated.

The three entered the Hall of the Elders. In front of them the ceiling certainly did rise. Up and up they looked, though they couldn't see it. Ahead was a wide corridor, flanked by a series of plinths spaced three feet apart. At the top of each plinth was the most amazing life-like carving of a granite dwarf. All were seated on a high-backed throne, looking serious and thoughtful.

'I had no idea,' Clement, the lightning dwarf, said in awed tones.

'Me neither and I'm pretty well travelled,' Alto replied.

'How come I know so little about my fellow dwarves?' he asked.

'We keep our society quiet. Only a few chalk dwarves really know much. You two are probably the first surface dwarves to

come down here in years.'

'Are you sure we're welcome?' Clement asked a little apprehensively, somewhat overwhelmed by the splendour of it all, little sparks of electricity dancing in his eyes.

Barakello turned quickly and stopped Clement with an outstretched hand. He stared hard with his huge pitch black orbs for eyes. Clement flinched.

'You are a dwarf, Clement. All dwarves are welcome.'

They continued their walk down the Hall, passing in excess of a hundred sculptures. When they reached the end they were met by a group of four granite dwarf guards.

'If it isn't Barakello,' one said, a particularly broad specimen.

'The adventurer returns...and with friends,' rumbled another.

'Brothers, I have returned but not with good tidings. I must meet with the Elders; it is a matter of urgency.'

'Really? Something from up there will affect us down here?' another enquired in disbelief.

'Shadow gnomes!' Barakello said emphatically.

There was a brief pause as the granite dwarf guards digested the fact that their mortal enemies were once again causing problems for them.

'I'll summon the Elders, Barakello. I'll try to arrange a meeting immediately.'

'Thank you. We need a brief rest too and some food. We, my friends and I, have travelled hard for several days to get here and fought hard on the way. I have many stories for you all but they must wait for now.'

One guard turned and went his own way, off to arrange an audience with the Elders. The other three guards led the three adventuring dwarves through the city streets to a tavern often frequented by the guards.

'I no longer have a family home here,' Barakello said, turning to Alto and Clement. My parents are no longer with us and I have lost my only siblings in the tunnels around here. It is why I left to adventure all those years ago,' he explained.

Clement and Alto were still marvelling at the architecture surrounding them. The quality of the work was beyond extraordinary. Fabulous columns with intricate carvings upon them depicted all aspects of life in the tunnels and the city. There were row upon row of perfectly symmetrical houses, with only a few carvings to distinguish between them.

'I'd get lost very quickly here,' Clement remarked.

'You're not alone in those feelings,' Alto replied. 'Make sure we don't lose sight of Barakello.'

Inside the tavern the three were shown to a perfectly round table with four stools.

'Order what you like. We'll arrange a room for you too,' a guard informed them.

'Thank you,' they said in unison as they slumped onto the stools.

'It would be my pleasure to order some food for you, my friends. It has been a long while since I have had home cooking,' Barakello said.

Ten minutes after ordering three bowls of steaming liquid arrived.

'Under-dark soup and a lump of lichen bread,' Barakello said excitedly. Tuck in!'

They did, and in spite of their initial apprehension it proved to be delicious.

'What was in that?' Alto asked.

'It changes daily but, essentially, whatever the mining crew have killed in the tunnels during the day they bring back to the kitchens for everyone. I believe I recognised behir, kobold and, if my palate remains true after all these years, the chewy bit was otyugh tentacles.'

Had it not been so dark Barakello would have seen both his friends go green in the face.

When they had used the room and refreshed themselves, one of the guards arrived to inform them the Elders would see them, since it was a matter of urgency. They followed the guard along the streets of the city passing numerous granite dwarves, many of whom stopped to get a better look at their two strange-looking surface brothers.

'They all look the same,' Clement whispered to Alto.

After several minutes they stopped at a large double door with another guard on each side.

'Welcome Barakello. The Elders will see you now. Follow me!' the guard on the left said.

The heavy stone doors opened inwards to a dark corridor and the guard set off, being closely followed by the three friends. They arrived at a second stone door.

'Through here are the four Elders of our society,' the guard began. 'Surface brothers, do not be alarmed by their appearance; what is happening is completely normal. They are the special ones of our society, remember that.'

The doors swung open and the three walked forward. They entered a room wider than it was long. There was a faint illumination in the room coming from magical faerie fire on each side.

Clement and Alto could only see four more columns, four plinths in front of them. Barakello looked up and swept into a low bow. Alto and Clement looked up too and their jaws dropped open. Atop the columns or as they now realised, plinths, were the four Elders seated on thrones, the same type of throne as those on the plinths in the Hall of Elders on the way into the city. More remarkable, though, was the condition of the dwarves. Though it was hard to see clearly, they were all undergoing some sort of transformation. The two to the right were the furthest along. Their skin now more rock than flesh. Large parts of their faces were now solid as were their fingers and large parts of their arms.

'Welcome back, Barakello,' they said in unison, 'and welcome, friends. Do not be alarmed by our appearance. We are the chosen ones, ones that will live on forever and help the granite dwarf people for all time. It is a mark of how out of touch we dwarves have all become from each other that you do not even know of this transformation. Indeed, we can't even remember the last visit we had from a surface dwarf. So welcome with open arms and tell us the nature of this problem.'

'As you will remember,' Barakello began, 'I left here after the last war with the shadow gnomes. I had nothing left and felt I had to leave.'

'We all remember well, Barakello. We felt it was right for you to leave, and also for our surface brothers to reacquaint themselves with the granite dwarves'

'Well, after several months I met up with my new friend here, Alto, and his brother and their adventuring band. My lightning dwarf friend, Clement, here joined us too on our travels. We crossed much of Vallilea and I saw many extraordinary things that I shall never forget. For nearly two years, with a few battles, some treasure piles and some monsters I can't even begin to describe, and all has been well. Until now. We came back south and ran straight into a most dire situation, something much bigger than just an adventuring band could deal with.'

Barakello continued to tell the tale of the group's time in Salvington, meeting the Councillor Garth, the elven group of adventurers and, lastly, the encounter with the shadow gnome Darios and the death of the four other members of their team.

The granite dwarf Elders listened intently. They rarely had decisions to make concerning the surface world and they turned, as much as possible due to their rock-like condition, to each other to discuss it.

'Barakello. This situation is most regrettable. No one knows better than us what the shadow gnomes are capable of.

Alto, we are very sorry for the loss of your brother and your other friends.' They paused.

'However, we do not feel it would be in the best interests of the city of Kronkton to engage the gnomes yet again in war. Granite dwarf numbers are low at this time and we could face a virtual wipe-out. We have to think to future generations.'

Alto, Clement and Barakello looked to each other in dismay.

'Hold yourselves. We said we cannot engage in a full war, that was all. Barakello, you and your friends and twenty of our best will go and attack by stealth the city of Imar. Wage your own small war with the shadow gnomes and, before you go, make sure you have every available weapon we have at our disposal here. Use the maps, drop tunnels in and out of their city, set up traps, kill any of their scouting parties and cause as much chaos to the fiends as you are able. You have our blessing and that of Kronk himself on this.'

A smile broke upon the faces of the three companions.

'Thank you Elders for your aid and wisdom. The whole of Vallilea will be a better place for this,' Barakello said.

'Thank you Elders. It has been a pleasure. Consider surface brother and deep dwarf reacquainted,' Alto boomed.

'And meeting you too, Alto, Clement. Remind all dwarven brethren not to be strangers.'

'Indeed we will,' they replied together.

The three gave a low bow and turned and left the room. They met the guard, who helped escort them out.

'Can you get us the recruits we need?' Barakello asked the guard.

'Oh yes. Beats guard duty for a while. Leave it to me. I'll have thirty ready for you in no time. The name's Novakello, and I'll meet you with your new crew at the inn when you're done with the maps.'

'So be it, Novakello. We'll see you there shortly.'

Barakello replied.

They then split up as Barakello led his friends to the famed city map room.

'Weren't we supposed to take jus twenty?' Clement asked in a hushed tone just in case the Elders could hear.

'Don't you worry about that, Clement. They know what they're doing.'

In short order they arrived at the city library and information store where the under-dark maps were kept. Barakello explained his purpose to the attendant and the three were led to a private room with a large flat table. After ten minutes in which no one spoke, just waited with patience, the attendant

returned with a roll of magical parchment. He unfurled it across the table to reveal the whole known tunnel network from Kronkton to Imar and the surrounding areas for both.

'By Kronk!' Alto said. 'These are extraordinary!'

'They were necessary during the wars; we had to try to keep track of everything as we lack the magical ability of the gnomes. They just seem to flit about through magical portals and shadows everywhere, so we marked all the gates we could and dropped tunnels around them to trap them. We were very successful since most portals only go one way and then you have to find another to move on.'

'Don't they just escape by using the shadows?' Clement asked Barakello.

'Firstly, it's risky shadow walking, as any cleric will tell, but not all the gnomes can do it. It seems to be a power that they only acquire if they are already quite powerful,' Barakello answered. 'Their shadow jumping only works when they can see or know where they're going. Anyway, they can't get through walls of rock!'

'Right then,' Alto said, examining the maps more closely. 'We've got work to do.' He looked up at the others. 'For our fallen friends,' he said. The other two just nodded and they began their project to work out where they would be going and

which tunnels they should drop to cause most difficulty to the hated shadow gnomes.

Djemmini's Fate

Lord Djemmini, high priest of Nyrex, fifth in command at the Citadel and contact for the Shades, was not happy. He had just felt a tremor pass through his whole body, causing him to shudder involuntarily, and it wasn't a feeling he had enjoyed. At first he was unsure of its source, wondering whether he was perhaps mistaken. However it only took a short prayer to his Lord and Master, Nyrex himself, to confirm his worst fears. Kollin's contingency had been activated and his mortal body blasted into oblivion. Nyrex, though, was most pleased to have Kollin's soul for the rest of eternity; there were several tasks he had lined up for the evil human and he couldn't wait to put him to work. Djemmini's communing also revealed the status of the city of Findon. He was surprised and very deep down slightly impressed that old Theobold had had the nerve and will power to shut down his beloved city. At this moment it appeared he had succeeded in his aims and that the Spice epidemic would slow and perhaps even end.

Djemmini paced around his room in a large town house in Salvington, one that doubled as a centre for the worship of Nyrex with a small temple, altar and sacrificing table in the basement, and pondered his next move. The contingency only

activated if his name was mentioned but hopefully anyone who had heard it would have been obliterated by the fireball. However, he couldn't take that chance. The missions in the cities had all been going smoothly but he couldn't be involved anymore. It was time for him to withdraw and allow the Shades and, more importantly, the shadow gnomes to take over.

He felt for the platinum piece in his robe pocket as he walked over to the mirror on the wall. He began to cast his spell while thinking of his contact, a certain Mentza Galavan.

The mirror clouded over and, as it cleared, a dark purple face topped with a black hat with gold sigils appeared.

'Lord Djemmini, so good to hear from you. I trust all is well,' Mentza said, tipping his head in greeting.

'Actually no, Mentza, all is not well. Findon has been brought under control by Theobold. He's shut the city down and my head distributor is no more.'

'No more?'

'He resides with my Lord and Master as we speak. This is not a good situation for me, so I must insist that I remove myself back to the Citadel for a while.'

'You must do what you feel is right, Lord Djemmini. You have proven to be most valuable to us and your withdrawal from the front lines would be a blow, but things seem to be

progressing well with the Spice in Salvington, especially the new version. So, please take your leave with our blessing.'

Djemmini wasn't sure he liked the way he was being spoken to. Why should he need their blessing?

'Thank you, Mentza. Our relationship has been an excellent one and I hope it can continue in the not too distant future. Nyrex is pleased with the number of souls that have come to him of late due to our actions.'

'Keep the platinum coin with you, Lord Djemmini; it will aid our communication for future projects. There are other large cities in Vallilea that I'm sure would enjoy the Spice.'

'Until then,' Djemmini replied.

Mentza nodded, the mirror went black and then returned to being a mirror. Djemmini stared long and hard at his reflection, with its smoothed back blond hair and good looks. He looked closer into his own eyes and wondered. He walked over to the small window looking out into the street and spoke a word to deactivate the wards surrounding it. He took the platinum coin and hurled it into the street; best if some street urchin had that for a while.

Braden Puttnik, leader of his Clan, and his chief wizard, Akkron, received a summons to meet with the Galavans in the

cavern they used regularly for their clandestine meetings. The meetings were happening more frequently and the pair were beginning to suspect that the overthrow of the surface world was being derailed. They arrived through magical means and found their deep purple counterparts, Kymru and Mentza, were already there.

'A meeting so soon, Kymru; are we having troubles from our surface forays?' Braden asked.

'Djemmini of Nyrex wishes to remove himself from our service as he feels slightly threatened after Theobold acted. One of his main contacts, Kollin, a man Darios became acquainted with, was found by the guards and murdered.

'And the death of a subordinate worries him so much that he has to go running off back to his Citadel?'

'It would appear so. However,' Kymru paused, 'we are not in the business of allowing people with a full understanding of our affairs to continue to run around telling anyone they feel like. Especially someone as powerful as he is.'

'I agree entirely, Kymru. What do you have in mind?' the mauve leader of the Puttniks asked.

It was Mentza who answered. 'Leileilii is still in the city of Salvington. I have just contacted her and given her a new mission. Her pretty face should be the last Lord Djemmini ever

sees!'

'Excellent thinking, Mentza,' Akkron praised his wizard counterpart.

'And where are we with the other situation?' Braden enquired. 'The elves and the dwarves. I assume they are being dealt with.'

'Let's all go back to my house. I believe the welcoming committee have just arrived at the Korash cavern and are awaiting the elves, even as we speak,' Kymru replied.

The four extremely powerful shadow gnomes departed that instant, arriving back at the main house of Clan Galavan ready to watch the action unfold in the Clan's crystal ball.

Djemmini finished rounding up the last of his things that had been scattered around the room he had been using for the past week. He wouldn't miss Salvington. He longed to return to the Citadel and get on with other plots, such as rising further up the chain of command. His master, Nyrex, actively encouraged progression through the ranks of the Citadel and he had his black heart set on being number one in the not too distant future.

There was a knock at the door to break his reverie, an unexpected one. Djemmini paused, many thoughts racing through

his mind, the main one being that the shadow gnomes had sent an assassin for him. He wondered whether to answer or not then almost laughed at himself. He was more than capable of dealing with any of their stubby assassins as they would soon discover.

'Come in!' He called.

The door opened and his visitor casually sauntered into his room. A wide smile spread across Djemmini's face. So they have sent an assassin for me, he thought, except they don't want to do it themselves.

The visitor eyed him up and down through half-closed, seductive eyes and smiled with just the left side of her mouth curling upwards.

'Hallo Priest! I presume you know why I'm here,' Leileilii said in a voice more like a purring cat than a human.

'I imagine that only one of us is supposed to leave this room,' he replied.

'Something like that,' she said, shaking out her flame-red hair and running a hand down the side of her gown onto a thigh that was being increasingly revealed by the split in the red silk.

Djemmini stared hard. She was a stunning creature but a devil, not a human, and one highly capable of causing him harm, possibly even ending his life for a while.

'Like what you see priest?' she asked, leaning gently forward to fill out better the top of her dress. He merely smiled.

'Of course you do. All human males like what they see, but you're not like all human males are you? You are a powerful one; I can feel it emanating from you. Your god loves you and what you do.'

Djemmini was slightly surprised to hear from another that he was held in such high regard by his master.

'You're right, of course, you're not going to leave this room,' she continued. 'Mentza told me to take care of you. Do you know, Priest, I quite like Mentza, he gives me the most wonderful assignments.'

'How kind of him. But I fear that you may not win this battle,' Djemmini replied.

'Battle? Priest, you are powerful, but you need to examine what is being said more closely, the subtlety in my words. Can't you feel it between us? The attraction,' she shuddered. 'This is more than just seduction, Priest. I can do that to any man. No, there is a purpose behind this.'

'A purpose Mentza has given you?'

'I am under his control, for now. But it can be broken.'

'It will be when you die at my hand when you attack,'

Djemmini responded coolly but intrigued.

Leileilii smiled. 'You're catching on Priest. You can open gates, can't you?' she asked the rhetorical question. 'I know you can. Open a gate for me then, so I can see my home.'

'My Lord will not grant me that power now. It is a powerful spell that requires preparation and a reason he approves of.'

'Oh, you see I think he will.'

Djemmini looked confused.

'Pray for a gate Priest, to the nine hells, my home,' Leileilii purred.

Still unsure and ready for the attack he believed imminent, Djemmini started his spell and found, to his astonishment, the power of his god flowing through him. There in the middle of the room he produced a portal to the nine hells. He stared at it, then at the beautiful succubus opposite him. 'And?'

'I can't step through of course. It would break my binding to Mentza.'

'But if you were to die here then that would break the bond and you'd be banished for a hundred years.'

'That's true, unless of course someone knows my name and can summon me or if someone would care to visit me,' she smiled as she indicated the portal.

'And the purpose of all this? I feel my master is involved

so I am intrigued,' Djemmini said, still unsure.

'I have produced a son before but many centuries ago. I believe I am ready for another and your master believes it would be most useful to us all,' she said, now running both hands seductively down her front and resting them on her belly.

'A cambion,' Djemmini said.

'A cambion,' Leileilii repeated, 'and it would be special if he was yours. Your master knows that too.'

Djemmini paused a moment and stared at the devil before him. There were no guarantees that she would stay in this most alluring form but the benefits! He would have a son, a half-devil son to work with him. The possibilities assailed him. He smiled at the succubus and produced a long, wicked-looking waved dagger from his hip.

'I suppose this is something of a ceremony,' he said as he approached her.

She laughed and threw her head back exposing the exquisite creamy skin of her neck. In one strong blow Djemmini slashed the razor sharp dagger across her throat and then thrust it into her midriff and up towards her heart. Blood, a dark black devil blood, sprayed across the room and Leileilii gasped and roared at the pain. She slumped to the floor as her life blood on this plane ebbed away. She died smiling as her corporal body

disappeared. Djemmini stared at the blood and the silk gown left on the floor of the room.

'Interesting,' he said. He walked the four feet over to the gate to the nine hells and looked through it. He waited patiently for several minutes before he was rewarded. Now in her demon form she was no less beautiful, virtually the same in fact, but with large feathered wings protruding from her back. She smiled, a noticeably more fanged smile than before, and beckoned him forth.

Djemmini shrugged, said a quick prayer to his god asking for protection, and stepped through.

The succubus launched herself forward as he stepped through and held his head with both hands as they locked stares. She leant forward and kissed him passionately, their lips locked for what felt like an eternity of bliss to them both. She took flight, still locked in an embrace with her Priest, heading for her lair. They had a cambion to produce after all.

Ambush

The Korash cavern was nearly a mile in diameter, one of the largest in the under-dark that didn't form the home of some tribe or other of under-dark denizens. It had once been the home of a great and fearsome deep dragon, Korash, who had terrorised the population below for many centuries. The cavern was perfect for the dragon as three tunnels converged on it, one coming from the surface, one to the deep gnome city of Imar and one further in to the under-dark where, if you took the correct turns, it could lead to the granite dwarf city of Kronkton. It had some stalagmites still but virtually no stalactites as Korash had removed them all to aid his flights around his territory. The centre of the cavern was uneven and rocky; the path through to any of the tunnels was some twenty feet wide around the edge of the cavern. To the west, between the tunnels to the surface and the under-dark, was the great depression where Korash had slept and hoarded his treasure, a little of which still remained. His demise had led to a power struggle between the gnomes and the dwarves, each race fighting to make it a strategic outpost from which to help keep the other at bay. Even a shadow dragon had tried to claim the cavern as his own. The gnomes had put a magical gate, number twenty-eight, on the eastern wall of the

cavern. Using this they were able to travel to and from the cavern far too easily for the granite dwarves to be able to take the cavern. However, the dwarves had fought back by trapping the gnomes' gate at every opportunity during the last war, leading to a huge loss of lives for the gnomes. In the end the cavern remained unoccupied, too hard to hold for either gnomes, dwarves or anyone else.

The gate put in place by the shadow gnomes was still there and currently untrapped. Through it now came the great devil, Cheragai, and a select group of ten assassins and three wizards sent out by Clans Galavan and Puttnik to intercept and kill the elves coming their way. They moved into the cavern, concealing themselves behind the stalagmites and behind walls, with the assassins hiding in the dark areas, the mages using spells of concealment and beginning another fearsome spell between the three of them. Cheragai merely leant against the wall on the eastern path; he couldn't wait for a good battle. It had been far too long and now that he was no longer constrained by his human form he could use his full eight feet of height and his beloved sword that Akkron had returned to him especially for this ambush.

The Company of the Compass were slowly and cautiously making their way down the tunnel that ran into the cavern. Orion

led the way, never making a sound, occasionally stopping the others and moving ahead before blinking back. He came to the vast cavern first, wide paths leading left to the east and right slightly west. He stopped the group again so they could discuss their options.

'This cavern is massive,' Orion began. 'Do you want to check it for tracks, Quin?'

'Sure, I'll go to the left, do you want to check right?' Quin replied.

'OK. Anyone else?' Orion asked.

Apollo's sword pulsed. 'My brother informs me we aren't alone, be careful,' he said gravely. 'He can't read what it is, but something powerful is lurking in here.'

'Shouldn't I just clear the way?' Ethandril asked, trying to suppress his excitement and whisper as best he could.

'Not a good idea, Ethan,' Cat said. 'Stay with me till we know what's out there, then we can act together.'

'Like a team? We've never really done that before have we? Are you starting to eschew your steel stick now then?' Ethandril replied, with a slightly mad smile of hope on his face.

'Not yet, Ethan, it's just sensible for now.'

The Red Baron hovered into the middle of the conversing group, face covered by his right arm 'I shall smite our enemies

from wherever I consider it best. Have no fear for me, since I fear no one!’

‘Let's go quietly then,’ Quin said as he moved off to the left. Orion, as stealthy and silent as a wraith, moved off to the right.

Giving them both a good lead to discover what they could, the pair were each followed by one of their own, Elwood behind Quin-Helwig, Apollo behind Orion.

Examining the path for signs of tracks, Quin's senses were on full alert and it was he who first picked up on soft chanting. Realising the seriousness of it as some sort of summoning and with more than one voice involved, Quin took a major decision and blew the silence completely.

‘Mages!!!’ he yelled. ‘Sounds like they're opening a gate! Slightly to my right.’

Quin was right. The three shadow gnome wizards had just finished their summoning when a large black portal opened to the abyss. They called a name and waited for their demon to arrive.

Elwood moved swiftly to within ten feet of Quin on the eastern path, now his cover was blown, bow in hand. A figure, a huge eight-foot figure, peeled itself away from the cavern wall some thirty yards ahead, a huge sword in its right hand. Quin-

Helwig drew his long and short sword and prepared himself.

Elwood knelt and let off five arrows in quick succession. The fiery magical bolts left tracers through the darkness and each hit the devil full in the chest. The devil roared, but it was one of pleasure, not pain.

'Your puny mortal bolts cannot defeat me, elf! Nothing you have can defeat me!' Cheragai roared.

As Orion stalked along the other path he saw a quick movement from his left and two shadow gnome darts hit the wall next to him. He instantly blinked back ten feet and then dashed forward to come at his hidden assailant from the other side. He just made out the little gnome and threw his own dart. It struck the creature in the leg and it cried out as the force of the blow broke its femur. The gnome managed to use its innate shadow jump power to move further back into the middle of the cavern and away. Orion continued forward as stealthy as a leopard and saw another gnome ahead. He blinked again right in behind the unwitting creature. This time he had his dagger in hand and plunged the brutal blade into the back left side of the gnome. The position and force he used forced the blade straight into the gnome's heart killing it instantly. Orion smiled as he felt a new power course through the blade in to him. Shadow jump was

all he could hear.

The mighty Cheragai stalked forward, still being assailed by Elwood's barrage of missiles. They stopped abruptly as Elwood's fiery shield flashed four times in quick succession. He was under attack himself from shadow gnomes and turned to look into the stalagmites more to the centre of the cavern.

Quin readied himself for the devil, aware that he had been struck several times by shadow gnome darts but they had not penetrated his defence, the lion's paw scabbard blocked all missiles. The great devil advanced, swinging his huge six-foot long blade from side to side, swapping hands every so often, a leering smile on his bearded face.

'You hope to do better than your little friend with those two knives, elf. Pah! You'll soon get to know what a real sword feels like!' Cheragai bellowed. Quin smiled, more to himself than at Cheragai; he had several hundred years of experience on his side.

Apollo began up the right path following an invisible Orion. He saw two darts hit the wall and kept full alert, sword drawn and pulsing. He heard Orion off to his left now in the stalagmites and the death of a shadow gnome. 'Brother, there are

demons here, they have been summoned,' the sword pulsed green.

'Then let's send them back to the abyss shall we?' Apollo
emparted back.

Sure enough, the three shadow gnome wizards had been
successful in their summoning. The female face appeared first at
the gate, and then her torso and the accompanying six arms came
through too. She smiled at the gnomes and slithered the rest of
her snake body through. The marilith did so enjoy working for
these evil little critters, they always gave her such enjoyable
tasks.

The summoning complete, a wizard decided to open his own
personal hostilities and cast a common spell sending a pea-sized
ball of flame whizzing across the cavern. It exploded as a
fireball in a perfect globe just in the entrance of the cavern.
The Red Baron, Ethandril and Catarina were all standing right in
the middle of the blast. When the instant detonation had gone,
the three looked at each other, all completely unaffected.

'Our turn,' Ethandril said, 'and I can do a whole lot
better than that!'

The flame elf mage pulled a small ruby from one of his many
pockets. 'Give me a minute or two please, Cat,' he asked. 'Send
them back a little something in the meantime.'

Catarina began her spell; an enlarged missile of magical energy left the palm of her hand and whizzed back across the cavern. The super missile blasted into one of the mages and knocked him over. Although uninjured by the missile the force of the blast had been enough to knock him down.

Cheragai gave a long firm swing at Quin and the elven ranger hopped back out of range. The serrated blade oozed venom and acid, leaving small holes in the path as it dripped. Quin dashed in behind Cheragai's next swing from his right to left. He swung hard with his long sword and stabbed hard after with the short. The long sword narrowly missed, but the shorter blade struck and slid several inches into the devil.

'Aaah! Yeess! More, little elf, really try and hurt me, it feels sooo goood!' Cheragai roared.

He swiped at Quin, left to right then back. Quin blocked with his long sword the second stroke and was knocked back by the devil's strength. Cheragai followed in with a low sweep which Quin jumped then quickly jabbed at Quin instead. The point struck the ranger in the chest. The blow was hard enough to open the flesh in spite of his scabbard. Quin gritted his teeth against the pain as acid burnt him too. The wound started to

heal immediately but Quin knew a full blow could be serious.

Having been assaulted by several darts, Elwood turned to the centre of the cavern and thought of his goddess Yllana. For several seconds, while his barrier absorbed more, he prayed to her. His spell came down with loud screams coming from the two gnomes caught within the blade barrier. The sound of blade on rock could be heard all around as well as the death cries of those caught within.

Ethandril finished his third spell and looked up. 'Right,' he said and promptly hurled the gem in the direction of the wizards. The gem seemed to fly of its own accord and flew on till it was over the top of the three purple gnome wizards. It hovered there for a split second before it unleashed the three spells simultaneously. Three orange bolts of lightning, five orange magic missiles and three strokes of magical flame all shot forth from the gem as it struck the gnomes. The three gnomes absorbed and deflected the incoming magic with varying degrees of success, only one of whom was injured, the others unaffected.

'Very impressive, elf, if it's worked at all,' the Red Baron said in Ethandril's ear, 'but you may need something a

little better than that for this bunch.' And with that he floated up high into the cavern on his board and disappeared.

Orion stalked on, blinking where he could see. Around him some now nervous shadow gnomes were doing the same with their shadow jumping ability. Orion stopped and decided to use more traditional methods. He slipped between two stalagmites and using sideways pressure quickly climbed up the twelve feet to the top of them. He waited, hidden in shadow and silent, watching the floor below. Sure enough a gnome appeared directly below. It looked all around but saw no sign of its target. Orion dropped like a silent bat onto the gnome, dagger in both hands. He landed atop the gnome and drove the dagger through the creature's skull with his full body weight. Their bald pates almost act like a target from above, he mused. Blood sprayed high, wetting Orion as he fell to one side, still holding the dagger. The movement caused the skull to split open with an almighty crack and spill the creature's brain. The dagger still had time to impart something else, gnomish sight. Suddenly Orion could see everything, no longer limited to his elven infravision which only extended sixty feet or so. It was like being in daylight and he could see all the hidey holes, all the other

gnomes, everything.

The marilith slithered out onto the path and saw the shining elf with the pulsing green blade walking calmly towards her.

'Here's your demon, brother,' the sword imparted.

Apollo stopped, took three deep breaths and listened for the rhythm to begin, tick,tick,tick. Not too fast, two a second would do for starters against a marilith. The marilith with her six arms and blades moved forwards closing the gap, eager to take on this foolhardy elf. She swung with her top right hand, the elf parried and rotated clockwise back and slashed at her from her right. She just got a blade up in time to deflect the blow which only sent the elf spinning back the other way to slash at her from her left. She reared back away from this dangerous opponent and reassessed the situation. She said a word, a name, one which Apollo didn't quite catch and smiled. 'Dangerous, elf. Maybe I need to show some of my sisters your skills.'

'To me Cat,' said Ethandril. 'Let's pop over there and take a better look at these supposed wizards. I so hate random hurling of spells. I like to be able to see the results.'

'OK. Let's go,' she said, as she grabbed his arm just as Ethandril finished his teleport spell. They arrived in the middle of the cavern where they were now only fifty feet from the gnome wizards. Ethandril smiled. 'Give them something then, little Cat!' he urged her. Cat blew the strongest spell she knew. A streak of lightning leapt forth and smashed into the first gnome then carried on to the next and the next.

'That's my girl!' Ethandril yelled and pondered his own spell. Just then a prismatic spray came right for them, Catarina reacted quicker drawing her sword and holding it into the rainbow of lights. The whole thing, all seven colours, was absorbed by the sword. She turned to Ethandril. 'It's not just a stick,' she smiled'

'Indeed!' he sneered and said a few short words; a thin green beam shot forward at the gnomes. It just missed one and blew a huge chunk out of the stalagmite he stood in front of. 'Pah, that's always the problem with that spell. I must find a way to make it wider or seek out the target,' a frustrated Ethandril muttered.

Apollo stood five feet out of reach of the marilith, holding his pulsing green blade lightly in his right hand. The marilith was smiling at him as a black hole ripped the air apart

several feet behind her and a female head poked through.

'Excellent, sister,' it said and a second demon, another six-armed marilith slithered through.

'Oh brother!' the sword imparted. The ticking in Apollo's mind continued at the same rate; he didn't feel a need for an increase just yet, after all he had clearly bested the first marilith, which was why she had summoned help. The pair slithered forward, rising to their full seven feet in height and waving all six blade carrying arms at Apollo. A wry smile crossed the ancient elf's lips; if only they knew, he thought.

'Knew what, elf?' the first marilith asked.

'ESP brother, they're both using it.'

'Yes we are, clever sword,' the second marilith said. 'I'll look forward to using you in future.'

'Unlikely, demon, I wouldn't work for you,' came the sword's retort.

The first marilith lunged in again, two right hands swinging in from Apollo's left, one high one mid-waist. He met the mid-height blade and spun clockwise to counter. The marilith's lower right hand chopped in to catch him from behind but the ancient elf moved his sword to his right just in time to catch the blade and continue his spin. Once more clockwise he was now past all the demon's right hand blades and he slashed

across with all his momentum into the scales of the demon.

'Yyaaarrgghh!' she screamed, as a huge wound opened in her side, spraying demon blood out in a great fountain. The second marilith slid in to aid her sister. She flanked Apollo to his left leaving the wounded demon on his right. The pair both turned to him smiling.

'They're synchronising, brother' the green blade pulsed.

There was a brief pause, then they struck, blades rushing in on all sides, some stabbing some slashing, all slightly after each other as the demon pair acted as one. The ancient elf left his sword out for the first blow and the ticking in his head speeded up to four ticks a second. Each swipe of a blade each stab of a venomous point connected with the elf's shining blade. Apollo barely stood allowing his weight to go with being flicked around by the force of his assailants. To an outsider it would have looked like he was being flipped around like a rag doll, but the ancient warrior was never out of control. High parries leading to back somersaults, clockwise spins, counter-spins, front flips, every one being propelled by the demons' fury and weight of strike. Apollo took a chance, he jumped up to parry and was flipped higher, he parried a second incoming to flip higher still, and then he was above all the second marilith's arms. He slashed down hard slicing through the marilith's face,

slicing her nose clean off and slashing further down into her chest. She screamed loud and slithered back, her stunned sister giving ground too to the golden solar elf, still standing, his shining armour spattered with demon gore. He just smiled at them, all the while the tick continuing at four per second.

Cheragai roared and rushed in again his great sword coming in an overhead arc at the top of the broad island elf's head. Quin-Helwig thrust both swords up to meet the blow and deflected the giant venomous sword to his left. It smashed into the floor creating a shower of sparks. Quin seized his chance and slashed in with his long sword. It struck Cheragai on the thigh with an almighty bang. The devil hadn't felt such pain in centuries, a huge lump of flesh had just vanished, cauterized from his left thigh. He cried out in pain and slashed his sword across, from Quin's left, at the elven ranger. Quin was too close in now to the devil and moved even closer, he rolled around the wounded left thigh, stepped back and slashed again at the leg. Another almighty bang nearly burst his sensitive elven eardrums and a huge lump of hamstring was removed. The left leg couldn't hold the weight of the huge devil anymore and Cheragai toppled over to his left, screaming as he did so. The devil landed on his left side and flipped himself round over to his right side as

hard as he could, still holding his evil blade. He whacked it down onto Quin with all his might. The ranger just got his short sword up in time to partially deflect the blow but it caught his left shoulder hard. A chunk of his shoulder was sliced off and his arm dropped to his side the short sword falling out of his useless hand.

'HaHa!' bellowed Cheragai as Quin reeled away in pain. 'I can chop bits off too, elf,' he cried, but his joy was short lived. The shoulder was already healing fast, new flesh regrowing where his shoulder had been. The elf stalked over to the now prone devil who, unable to get up and his sword clenched only in his left hand, lifted himself with both arms to face Quin. The elven ranger calmly lifted his long sword and swung for the back of Cheragai's neck. There was a third huge bang as the neck vanished and Cheragai's bearded head dropped off his body and rolled a little way down the path. Quin took several deep breaths and picked up his short sword with his now functioning left hand. The devil's body turned to smoke, as he departed the material world for another hundred years, but not before Quin had managed to remove the fierce blade from his hand.

Standing only yards away from the ferocious battle between Quin-Helwig and Cheragai, Elwood had continued to cast his god

given spells and his bow now shone like a beacon in the cavern. He knew more of the little shadow gnomes were around and he waited; they would try to attack at any moment. He walked further down the path, just as Quin finished Cheragai, and a dart struck his holy body armour, although it fizzled to nothing. He immediately fired in the rough direction it had come from, drawing the bow back with three multi-coloured arrows on it and released. The arrows shot off and veered in flight, turning corners like a magic missile and striking their target unerringly. The assassin who had been struck immediately shadow jumped to the path behind Elwood in a last attempt to catch the Priest by surprise. Elwood drew the bow again with another three arrows and fired for good measure. The arrows shot forward a few feet before arcing in the sky and coming back round over his head and into the same unsuspecting gnome. The last thought that went through Rondan Puttnik's mind before he was blown away by the fourth, fifth and sixth arrows was that he wished he had access to such fantastic weaponry.

'Well done, little Cat!' Ethan encouraged, after she had absorbed the prismatic spray, 'but I grow tired of this.'

Catarina knew what was coming but was powerless to resist, and, in all honesty, should they risk dying at the hands of

these gnomes or allowing them to summon through any more demons or devils? Ethandril spoke the words of his favourite spell and four meteor-like balls shot out of his hand, growing in size and spreading out to form a square in the air, parallel to the ground about six feet up.

'Wait for it!' he beamed.

BOOM!!

The four balls exploded with such force it knocked all three shadow gnome mages to the floor, even though they had some protection against the fire, the sheer force of the meteor swarm had knocked the stuffing out of them. Ethandril's own protection flared as it shielded him and Cat from the blast. One gnome was now dead as he had been directly under one of the balls. The other two, having defended against the lightning before, were wondering how much more they could take. Zarbald Puttnik thought better of the situation, nodded to his colleague, called on his innate ability to shadow walk and left the cavern ready to fight another day. The last mage, Grinta Galavan, had other ideas and returned fire with a spell to which there was little defence. He made the hand gestures for his spell and, before they knew what was happening, the ground under Catarina and Ethandril had turned to quick sand and Cat had slipped under completely as Ethandril floated just above.

Ethandril loosed another spell and a thin dark blue beam shot forward at the gnome who was in the middle of casting the reverse of his spell to seal Cat in forever. He hadn't a chance to dodge before the freezing beam struck him. His hands stopped moving, his spell was lost, and slowly his body began to freeze outwards from the spot where he was struck, as though he was turning to ice. From overhead Catarina's salvation came in an unexpected form; the Red Baron swooped down from the cavern roof and plunged a staff into the quicksand. After several seconds he felt a tug and slowly rose back into the air and brought Catarina along with him and out of the suffocating sand. She gasped desperately for breath, glad to be alive and coughed and choked on all fours before she looked up into the red-irised black eyeballs of the Red Baron, who simply said in his hoarse whisper:

'I believe you now owe me, little girl.'

Orion was beginning to enjoy the hunt, and especially the rewards. If he could continue to kill with the dagger who knew what strengths and abilities would be bestowed upon him. But he was not greedy, though it was tempting. The darts were always his first line of attack and his strength, which a frost giant had so graciously bestowed upon him, ensured that they now sank

into their targets with far greater ease to deliver their lethal poisons. He enjoyed the new powers but he also liked his own skills honed over years of practice. So slowly he started to move around the stalagmites like he always would have, leaping, dashing, tumbling, with the grace of an acrobat, never in one place for more than a few seconds, swinging up high, slithering low. He saw another gnome appear from a shadow jump and it saw him, both made swift flicking movements and a pair of poisoned darts crossed in the air whizzing towards their targets. Orion arched his back and the dart missed his slender neck by a hair's breadth. The shadow gnome was not so lucky. The weight of the throw had pierced the enchanted armour it had paid an extortionate amount of gold for, and the dart was now sticking out of his belly pumping its poison into him. He screamed out in frustration and anger, both at being hit and the failure of the armour. The scream only attracted the attention of his stalker, Orion, who, realising the gnome might be able to fight off the poison, threw a second dart at the now sitting gnome. It hit him in the temple and fairly exploded the creature's skull. More shadow gnome brain splattered across the cavern floor as the headless body toppled over to its right.

Apollo stood sword upraised and ready; he could sense

something more was afoot.

'They're talking to one another, brother' the sword sent.

'Oh no, there's another one coming!'

Sure enough another black hole appeared and a third female head poked out. At her sisters' bidding the third marilith, with another six arms and six blades slithered into the Korash cavern, a wicked smile on her face. The three stopped moving and continued their telepathic conversation some feet out of reach of the agile and dangerous solar elf. They slithered apart and began to try and circle Apollo, the second one, with an ugly facial wound, went to his left behind a stalagmite and past him to come in from behind. The new arrival stayed to his front gently weaving patterns in the air with her six blades, as his first adversary moved to his right. Apollo remained unconcerned, ice cool, all the while listening to the ticking rhythm in his head. The three managed to surround Apollo far more easily than they imagined they would and slowly their noose tightened. Three against one, eighteen blades against one all working in unison. The tall, almost regal solar elf took a deep breath and settled himself. He momentarily closed his eyes and sank, for the first time in several decades, deep, deep, deep into the rhythm. Everything around him had slowed; the only thing he could hear was the beat of the fighting style, the one at which he knew he

would best these monsters and send them back to the abyss. Eight beats per second, almost impossible to anyone, anyone except the master of the art. The mariltilhs' ESP was picking up a faint ticking but they all dismissed the noise. Then they struck.

High chops to low flipped Apollo into forward somersaults, left and right caused him to almost ricochet off the next incoming blade, his reading of their attacks immaculate. They worked together to try and create openings, but at any one time he was only ever being directly assaulted by one blade. Slowly but surely the three demons began to fall into the trap, the greatest part of the fighting style. They were being drawn in to Apollo's rhythm, the noise of blade on blade as he deflected every blow began to create an entrancing noise. On and on it went, the tireless demons hacking and chopping and slashing with all their might and fury, but the nimble elf leapt and pirouetted, parried and blocked their every move. He knew he had won, when for over five minutes they had been in the trance zone. They hadn't even realised that working together it was easier for the dance to hypnotize them all. He geared himself up for the finale as a slash came in from his right. He blocked gently and allowed the force to spin him anti-clockwise. He ducked low, past the next blade which he could have parried, and used the momentum to slash the demon in front of him. He carried

on and held his blade high to catch an overhead chop that propelled him into a forward roll and a quick in and out thrust of his sword into the same marilith's tail. He jumped the tail and rolled in front of the first demon. Two blades came on from his left, he jumped up high while holding the tip of his sword down, it just caught the first lower blade and spun him side over and over the second higher blade, his downward momentum allowing him a hard slash at the creature's lowest arm. It fell clean off at the elbow still clutching tight the blade in its hand. He turned and back slashed the stricken demon using his own strength for the first time and the combination of injuries was enough to finish her. A huge gaping line in her back caused her to shriek again and she dissolved into smoke, sent back to the abyss. The regal solar elf quick-stepped forward to the facially injured demon; she obliged by slashing with her two high hands together. Apollo caught the left hand slash with his blade and shifted his weight forward so that the force of the blow made his sword slash into the arm coming from the right. He ducked as the blade continued on over his head, released from the arm which was now spraying demon blood. Two more blows came on from the left. The elf stepped back and took the blow, giving him the momentum he needed. He spun away once and half way through the second spin, to the utter surprise of the third

demon, his blade came across low and slashed her scaled snake belly for a third time. She hissed in agony at Apollo but was powerless; she had been too badly wounded and turned to smoke and so returned to the Abyss. Apollo turned to face his last gravely wounded opponent and held his sword high.

'You are formidable, little elf, but maybe if we met on my terms you wouldn't be so,' she hissed. 'In the Abyss you'd find it much harder..' her words were cut off by a gurgling noise and look of horror as she realised someone else had gotten to her. Orion held on for all he was worth as his greedy dagger sucked the life out of the demon; it remembered the taste of demon blood all too well. It tried to convey power after power onto the assassin, but Orion refused. It was a show of strength and will. He didn't want a demon's power, who knew where that would end. He jumped off the back of the now dissolving creature and walked over to Apollo.

'Very impressive for an old elf.'

'Thank you ghost, you should try them from the front sometime. I'd enjoy watching you try.'

Suddenly from behind them they heard a cry, one that sounded like the demise of yet another shadow gnome. Apollo and Orion ran further up the path and were met by a small figure hovering on a board at face height.

'As you can see, I took the liberty of clearing the path ahead while you were enjoying yourselves with the snake girls. I believe those two may have had a surprise in store for you had your guard dropped. But as you can see, it was I who dropped them,' the Red Baron said in his whispering voice, indicating the two slumped bodies further up the path.

Ethandril and a very bedraggled looking Cat came walking through from the stalagmites.

'Got the wizards, I even managed a meteor swarm too and it didn't take out any of us,' Ethandril beamed.

'What happened to you?' Apollo sneered at Catarina.

'I saved her from certain doom,' the Red Baron butted in. 'She is now indebted to me.'

'Oh really?' Apollo said quizzically. 'I think you'll find that we work together, not alone; we all cover each other so there is no indebtedness here.'

'For you maybe, but not I. Remember, I am here to help you and by my own volition. Little Cat there is now mine till I say otherwise.'

Apollo looked at Cat who shrugged and admitted, 'I might have suffocated, I certainly couldn't get out myself.'

'There you are. Always remember that it is I, the Red Baron who holds the balance of power here!'

The four of them shook their heads in amusement at this ridiculous but obviously powerful self-styled Baron.

'What have we missed?' came the familiar voice of Quin-Helwig as he emerged from the stalagmite field, with Elwood just behind him. 'Can anyone beat a devil?' he said proudly.

'Just three mariliths,' Apollo replied.

Preparing the Battlefield

The leaders and chief mages of Clans Puttnik and Galavan watched the events unfolding in the Korash cavern through the crystal ball with mild surprise. They had expected the elves to be tough but they didn't think they would get past Cheragai and the demons too.

'They are very powerful,' Mentza observed. 'The flame elf knows spells of the highest power, though maybe no more than we do. The solar elf is also extraordinary; he should be assaulted magically not physically. The others have weaknesses we can exploit.'

'I agree. We must lure them here and use our magical powers upon them,' Akkron added. 'I am displeased to have lost Cheragai too; he was proving most useful to me.'

'Very well, wizards,' Kymru stated firmly. 'Go to our side cavern and prepare the battleground. I want gates in and out. I want assassins ready to come through them to catch them unaware. Prepare your best spells, as I shall mine, and make sure your wands and staves are fully loaded if you intend to use them.'

'I think we should send Darios and Vander out to shepherd them this way,' Braden Puttnik suggested. 'They could strike first and take any of the easy pickings like the girl and the

island elf.'

'Agreed, a good suggestion Braden. We shall stay here a little longer and monitor their descent on our little map here,' Kymru said indicating the hologram of the tunnels. More green dots had turned red up to the Korash cavern and they waited for more to change on the tunnel down to Imar.'

A short while before the battle in the Korash cavern, thirty-three dwarves had left the granite dwarf city of Kronkton. They travelled in groups of three, some fifty feet apart, communicating by occasional whistles, only too aware of the shadow gnome wards that would detect groups of more than that number.

'Why threes?' Clement asked Barakello.

'Their patrols travel in threes - assassin, priest and wizard. Any group larger than that sets off an alarm to their city and they investigate, so we travel in chains with three in each link.'

Clement and Alto nodded sagely at the wisdom of this as they continued on, in the fifth group of the eleven travelling to the outskirts of the shadow gnome city. They were joined by thirty able dwarves, mostly warriors but with several priests. They all wanted to have what revenge they could against the

shadow gnomes and each was ready to give up his life for that cause if it came to it. Barakello was hoping it wouldn't come to that. Granite dwarves were almost part of the rock below, expert miners who had a way with stone unlike any other race. They knew how to bring down a tunnel in the blink of an eye with a pick strike here, a hammer blow there, all hitting the right places; tunnels and rock could come tumbling down in an instant. They cautiously wound their way along the tunnels never encroaching upon the three ahead, never giving a chance to set off any alarms, always getting nearer and nearer to Imar.

They pulled up in a small cavern and closed in together. Novakello opened the map Barakello had borrowed from the library in Kronkton and pointed.

'We're here. There are six exits from this cavern and we're going to drop these three,' he pointed to the relevant ones. 'We will then circle around by using this tunnel here and drop here, here and here,' again pointing to the map. 'We will have then cut off these four gates that we know they use regularly as well as meaning they have to detour to get out of Imar to the west. If we are up for a battle we may be able to ambush them if any come that way.'

'What happens if they use the gates?' Clement asked.

'They'll still work won't they?'

'Oh certainly, but without any magical means to get back they'll be stuck in the tunnel. We've found more than a few bodies in the past after doing this, don't you worry!' Novakello replied.

The three adventurers nodded to each other and many of the other granite dwarves gave a grim determined smile. The thirty three then split into three groups of eleven and went to the entrances of the three tunnels. With speed and precision the groups worked to loosen stone and find cracks in the rock. They all stopped when they were ready to drop their own tunnel. Several priests stepped forward and cast the same spell, one of silence on the area.

'It just helps muffle the crash a wee bit,' Barakello said, turning to Clement and Alto.

Novakello let out a high pitched whistle and one member of each team struck hard at one peg. There was an almighty tumbling of rocks and some noise could still be heard, even with the silence in place, as all three tunnels dropped simultaneously and tons of rock tumbled loose to seal off the tunnel and with it the gate several hundred yards down it.

'Now, back in to threes,' came the order. 'We move swiftly to loop round these tunnels and cut them off from behind!'

The dwarves began to march again, ready to cause more

trouble for the hated shadow gnomes.

Cheragai rematerialised on the seventh plane of hell, his home, and was not pleased. While he had craved to escape the will of Akkron Puttnik and his endless tasks, he had hoped to destroy the filthy, evil little mauve gnome before he returned. To add to that, he had been bested by an elf of all things and had lost his favourite sword as well. He threw his head back and let out a long, loud roar of anger and frustration. He was unable to return to that prime for a hundred years and the little gnome would have to wait. Still, he could at least plot in that time, a hundred years wasn't so long for a devil. He looked at his beloved tower of bloodstone and bone and smiled. He would have his revenge on Akkron, and that elf if he could. He would find a way, perhaps by getting them to pay him a visit; now there was a thought. Cheragai entered his home, his mind racing with plots and plans to lure his nemesis to his plane of hell, and the torture he would inflict upon him once there. Akkron certainly wasn't safe just yet.

Darios Galavan and Vander Puttnik, the two leading assassins of their Clans, met in the main tunnel leading to Imar, about a mile away from the city. They nodded to each other

in greeting, one of mutual respect, but not friendship.

'We are to await this group of elves,' Darios said first. 'Track them before we attack. They are a formidable group, as I have witnessed firsthand. I am inclined to believe that our darts will not have any effect, so we will have to use our knives from close in, if you think you have the skill,' he said, challenging his counterpart.

'I'm sure I have the skill, Darios, just don't give me away will you,' he smiled after his retort. The pair slunk into the shadows and moved swiftly further along the tunnel to two side tunnels. There, cloaked in shadow, they awaited the Company of the Compass.

The Company left the Korash cavern but not before taking their time to refresh themselves. Elwood looked over Quin-Helwig's shoulder, which now seemed to be perfect once more, and cast smaller healing spells on Catarina to aid her recovery from the initial fireball, that had seeped a little through her defences, and the inhalation of the sand.

'Anyone else?' Elwood enquired.

'I think we're all fine, good Priest,' Ethandril said jovially, always feeling better for loosing what he considered proper spells.

'Then let's take a minute and get any protections up now that will help us. If we're caught like that again we may not have time to react,' Elwood continued.

'Good idea,' Cat replied. 'I need to put a few things in place now.'

'Indeed you may well do,' the Red Baron said in his harsh whisper, as he flew down from the roof on his hover board.

'You'll be pleased to know the cavern is clear; we must leave by an exit way over there,' he said, indicating the far side of the Korash cavern.

'Thank you, Red Baron,' Catarina replied, not entirely comfortable with the title she had to use for her saviour.

The Company spell users spent the next few minutes casting an array of protective spells on themselves and their friends, from god-given blessings and protections to more individual shields and cloaks and travelling spheres against hostile magic. There were numerous flashes of colour and shimmering of luminous magical flame before it was all done. As they went about their spells Apollo moved to Orion's side.

'So what did the demon bestow, Orion?' he enquired quietly.

'I took nothing, though the dagger would dearly love me too,' Orion replied.

'I'm sure it would,' said Apollo. 'Just be careful then,

Orion. My brother has had a few conversations with your dagger, none of them good.'

'Thank you for your concern, Apollo. I believe I'll be OK though.'

'Don't believe Orion; know,' Apollo replied in utmost seriousness, 'I'll keep an eye on you too, just in case.'

The snow elf, all shaggy white hair and translucent skin, smiled at the taller, regal solar elf, a smile of condescension and perhaps a little fear.

The Company left the Korash cavern with Quin-Helwig leading and confirming the Red Baron's directions by the tracks in the floor, occasional chips of the rock where a steel wheel had made a mark. They continued down the cavern, cloaked in invisibility and non-detection spells, unseen by any who would try to see them, well almost any.

Kymru Galavan and Braden Puttnik stood in a private room of the Clan Galavan house watching more little green dots on the hologram map turn red. Not all, however, were on the same path down to Imar from the Korash cavern. Several had been triggered on the opposite side of the map. The Clan Leaders looked at each other thoughtfully.

'More than likely kobolds,' Kymru said first. 'They have a

habit of setting off the alarms. I can't imagine our elves have split up; they don't seem to have that type of knowledge of the under-dark. Pay it no mind for now, we can always send out someone to deal with the humans at a later date, once we have finished with the elves.'

'If you are sure, Kymru,' Braden replied. 'We don't want to take any chances.'

'Look, it must only be a small cluster of critters. They have missed one alarm and set off another; they must be joining and separating in groups of three or more, it happens all the time. We often go and capture a few to keep as slaves or for experiments. Relax, Braden, stay focused here, we'll need all our wits about us dealing with these meddlers. Let's continue to watch for a while, then we'll check how our wizards have been getting on in the side cavern,' Kymru replied.

The look of fury on Novakello's face was plain for all to see in whatever spectrum of light you cared to use to look at it.

'No more than three, anywhere, unless I say so,' he said in the most strained voice imaginable to a group of three granite dwarves. 'We've probably set off alarms now, so we'll have to act quickly and go. Come on.'

'What was that?' Clement asked Barakello.

'A three linked up with another when they weren't supposed to, so it may have triggered a shadow gnome alarm,' he replied.

'Oh. Where next then?' Clement continued.

'We'll drop these tunnels then head off. That'll seal off these gates and annoy the gnomes.'

With that the Priests cast more silence spells and the roofs of three tunnels, the back ends of the ones already dropped, came crashing down.

The dwarves melted back into threes and stomped off to continue their work as quickly as they could before anyone caught wind of what they were up to.

'We're still being followed brother,' the shining green sword told it's wielder.

'I feel it too, but by what I don't know. What of the Baron?' Apollo responded.

'Nothing. I can't get any reading from him other than strong magic.'

'Hmm. Anything from Orion, any changes? I can't tell if he's telling the truth over that demon he killed.'

'He seems the same. He is well in control of the dagger for now. I believe that as he becomes more powerful the more control he has over it. It hasn't spoken to me in some time.'

'And Ethan?'

'He has calmed. Much more like he used to be about, I don't know, five or six hundred years ago.'

'So, he's mad, but now of his own volition as opposed to totally unpredictable.'

'Exactly!'

'Good. And the other three?'

'Elwood is in almost constant contact with Yllana, seeking guidance wisdom for what we are doing. Catarina is still at war over her abilities; she wants to impress both of you but is finding it hard to drop into the zone and spell cast.'

'Not surprising, we know how hard it is, brother. After this she must come with us and let us help her on her journey. And the dwelf?'

'He's looking at Cat's backside! You don't want to know the rest.'

The descent to Imar continued uninterrupted till the Company were about a mile out from the city when two shadows silently picked up the trail after the Company passed them. It had been hard to spot them as they passed, so well cloaked in magic were the Company, but this was where the shadow gnomes lived. They felt the disturbance in the air and the smell of the

elves. Silently, Darios and Vander followed, blissfully unaware that they too had picked up a tail.

Showdown

The two Clan Leaders arrived in the middle of the fifty-yard wide side cavern as their mages were just finishing off their gate spells. Four large black portals were now evident in the cave; two escape routes created by Mentza to other areas around the outskirts of the city and a gate each to the nine hells and abyss created by Akkron, the master summoner. Mentza had always been impressed by Akkron's ability to summon denizens of the lower planes; whatever it was he did, they seemed to simply pour out of his gates. As long as Leileilii followed his instructions, though, he didn't really care.

'Mentza, what have you done to prepare for our imminent arrivals?' Kymru asked his high wizard.

'The gates, as you see Clan Leader, as well as several wards both against good beings and elves or those of their ilk. I don't believe they will trouble us once they have been assailed by these five spells,' Mentza stated with a wicked grin.

His mauve counterpart, Akkron, indicated to two spots on the floor where he had placed wards. 'Just a little something to warm them up or cool them off,' he explained to the Clan Leaders.

'Excellent, wizards!' Braden congratulated the pair. 'Then let us wait behind it all for the arrival of this intrepid group

of elves. Perhaps they will really challenge us,' he finished with a smile.

'And let's see what weapons you have brought to the party,' Kymru added, drawing forth a staff, with the small likeness of a beholder atop it, and a wand that looked like a miniature flail.

The other three produced an assortment of unique staves, wands and rods as well as rings and amulets. Kymru recognised several and raised an eyebrow.

'Glad to see we're not underestimating them then,' he said to the others, impressed by their collective arsenal. The group of four just looked and smiled to each other, enjoying the feeling of anticipation of a real battle to come. It had been a long time since any of them had been truly stretched in battle and all of them were keen to test themselves against these elves.

With all the discipline associated with their race, the granite dwarves continued their march towards Imar, intent on reaching two more gates that would severely inhibit the gnomes movement around the under-dark, according to their maps. Novakello set a brisk pace in the lead with two trusted lieutenants. They turned a sharp corner not far from one of the gates when there was a ripping noise in the air and a black gate opened only a couple of yards ahead of them. Novakello held up

his hand to stop the following dwarves and waited for whatever entity was about to step through. They waited, barely making a sound for several minutes, but nothing came through.

'New gate,' he said turning to the dwarf to his left.

'Let's block it!' he finished with glee.

The three didn't waste any time examining the rock tunnel and driving hard iron spikes into the cracks to widen and loosen them. Novakello pushed his lieutenants back and smashed hard on the last spike. He jumped back as nearly two tons of stone dropped around the gate making it impossible to exit. A dust covered Novakello walked back to the other two with a beaming smile. 'That should surprise someone,' he said as jovially as a dour granite dwarf could.

The Company, led by Quin-Helwig reached the end of the tunnel they were following as it opened out, overlooking a vast cavern. Looking over Quin's shoulder, Orion could see the city of Imar below only too clearly with his new, shadow gnome deep vision.

'It's an impressive place,' he whispered into his ranger friend's ear.

'I can't really make it all out,' Quin replied.

Ethandril stepped forward and gazed across the city, his

true sight allowing him a similar view to Orion. 'It'll be a shame to reduce it all to rubble,' he mused.

'Don't be too confident of that, mage,' the Red Baron said as he floated down next to Ethandril. 'The shadow gnomes are remarkably powerful magicians; it is only their aversion to the sun that stops them ruling this rock we call Estrella!'

'Little halfling, may I remind you that I am the greatest mage alive on this so-called rock and I shall demonstrate my power and skill to you imminently!'

'Don't be too hasty, Ethan,' Elwood said as he approached. 'We want to find the mushroom fields and the source of the Spice, not just blow the place apart.'

'I'm sure it'll amount to much the same thing,' Ethan replied to the Priest.

Catarina and Apollo, standing behind, just shook their heads in resignation.

The tunnel formed a T-junction with paths going around the edge and down the cavern to come out somewhere by the city gates, from what Orion and Ethandril could see.

'Left or right?' Quin asked.

'Yllana suggests right,' Elwood quickly spoke up before the others could answer.

'Not her again,' Ethan whined.

'Come on furnace-face, stop your moaning and lead your adventuring band to the right and on to greater glory!' Apollo said, goading Ethandril into action and filling him with pride.

'Yes. Company, right it shall be!' Ethan said quickly and with that hurried off down the descending path to the right.

Darios and Vander watched them go from some twenty yards behind.

'That will take them right to the side cavern,' Darios muttered to Vander.

'If we let them get that far,' Vander replied, his fingers playing over the handle of his assassin's knives.

'We'll let them find the cavern and see the Leaders; that'll draw all their attention. Then they'll be even easier pickings.'

'Agreed. Let's give them a little more lead though; I wouldn't want them to notice us before.'

Vander and Darios set off down the path following the Company, still unaware of the presence following them, flying slightly above the path and invisible to everyone.

The dwarves had to back track somewhat after Novakello dropped the tunnel. This time Alto, Clement and Barakello were only one group of three away from the front. Just as they were

heading down another tunnel to get to their target there was another ripping of the air and a second black portal appeared. The first group of granite dwarves now leading the way had gone past it and stopped to look back at the three of them. All six waited for the creature or creatures to step through, weapons drawn, ready for anything.

The Company quietly and stealthily descended on the winding path around the edge of the cavern. They were almost at the level of the cavern floor and the city of Imar when they noticed a vague light coming from a cave entrance ahead. Quin held up his hand to stop the others where they were. Orion tapped the ranger on the shoulder and blinked forward. The most silent and nimble of assassins reappeared only a minute later.

'Four gnomes in the cavern,' he said in a whisper. 'Mages, including the one with the black and gold sigiled cap, the one who destroyed Eclaine's mind.'

'Any warriors?' Quin asked.

Orion shook his head and added 'there are four gates, too, and only one other way out. I suspect they're waiting for us.'

'Well let's stop whispering then and go and say 'hello'' Ethan declared impatiently. 'I'll soon show them who's boss.'

With that Ethandril Thililisfarne walked the thirty yards,

bold as brass, to the entrance of the side cavern and walked straight in. The rest of the Company hurried after him, with Orion and Quin next, then Apollo and the siblings bringing up the rear. The hasty movement caught their pursuers off guard and they suddenly had to quicken their pace to get in position to strike at the right moment, which would be any minute now. The presence behind them also knew that the time was near but he decided he would stay out of sight for a little while yet.

The Clan Leaders turned to face their guests as a tall, red-haired flame elf with a manic grin appeared at the cave entrance.

'Greetings, shadow gnomes!' he said. 'I believe you are the source of all our recent problems. Explain yourselves or face the consequences!' he boldly stated.

'Only Ethan could address a situation like that,' Cat whispered to Apollo as they followed in behind.

'Greetings, elves! We've been expecting you,' Kymru replied to Ethandril's opening. 'We have nothing to explain to you. In fact, perhaps you would like to explain what brings you to our city, and issuing threats too!'

'Corruption of human cities on the surface world with a powdered mushroom that you grow somewhere around here,' Ethan

rushed out, much to the surprise of his friends. 'As peaceful surface dwelling beings we cannot stand by and watch the cities, even if they are human, being brought down in such a manner. We have decided to take matters into our own hands and deal with the problem, namely, you.' As he finished he rattled off a spell, his favourite, in double quick time and four dark grey spheres shot forth from the end of the index finger of his right hand. The meteor swarm went straight for Kymru's body but stopped short as an invisible shield flared in to life and the spell rebounded, whizzing straight back for Ethandril.

'Ooh!' he said.

Fortunately the Company were prepared and Catarina lunged forward thrusting her sword into the path of the incoming meteors. All four spheres were sucked into the sword of absorption, building up its power ready for Cat to unleash later.

'A spell shield,' Ethandril yelled excitedly. 'I have just the thing,' and he began rummaging around in one of the numerous pockets of his robe. The shadow gnomes smiled and one of them issued a call.

'Vander, Darios, now!' Braden called.

The master assassins heard the call some twenty yards away from Elwood who was the last of the Company standing in the entrance. They also both then heard the word 'hold' as they

tried to move forward to strike. Neither could move a muscle, even breathing had suddenly become very difficult. The presence floated up behind them. Unable to move, the two assassins could feel small hands deftly and delicately removing items of their armour, their rings and amulets. Darios' baldricks holding his darts were removed, his two knives lifted from his hips. His magically protective leather unbuckled and lifted off him. Vander knew something was happening to Darios but could not see. He heard a heavy flop as Darios' armour fell to the floor. Then the little hands began on him. Knives removed, rings and amulets taken, armour unclipped.

'Vander! Darios!' called Braden again but the assassins could not answer the call. The company and the Red Baron looked about but were unable to see anything. The shadow gnome leaders looked briefly confused.

After only a minute, the presence floated behind two naked shadow gnomes, both the masters of their craft, both held completely immobile by a powerful word. The presence drew a short sword from a scabbard, a black blade, unnaturally hot, forged from the molten rock native to the elemental plane of fire. Vander was first to feel the heat coming from the black blade, a bead of sweat appeared on his brow.

'Goodbye,' a whisper in his ear said. The black blade was

pushed hard in to the spine of his neck and a pain, the like of which Vander had never felt before, engulfed his whole body. A searing hot pain consumed him as he breathed his final breath. The blade moved unerringly behind Darios and slid into his kidney. Elemental fire burned through his very soul; he tried to yell, he tried to defy it, he tried to hold onto the mortal realm but to no avail. He died in utter agony, a thought that would have pleased countless of his victims.

The presence re-sheathed the sword and slipped back into the shadows taking care not to be seen by the Company.

While the corpses of the two most skilled assassins were held in the tunnel just outside the cavern, their souls appeared side by side before a huge creature made of fire, an elemental Prince of Fire.

'Excellent,' he said in a language the pair did not know before yet could now understand. 'More slaves to serve me, for all eternity, hahahaha!!'

'It would appear that your back-up has deserted you,' Orion said as the Company moved further into the room. The shadow gnomes simply shrugged at their adversaries.

'It matters not,' Kymru replied. 'You won't last long

against us, scrawny elves.'

Just as he finished speaking one of Akkron's wards was triggered as Quin-Helwig stepped further into the room. Fire engulfed the party as the ward exploded, hurling Quin against the cavern wall. The fire rolled around the cavern but was stopped by the shadow gnomes' shields. It stopped as quickly as it started and the two sides stared at each other. Catarina was slightly scorched as was Quin, who managed to stand up even after the force of the impact against the wall. Apollo and Elwood's protections had held while Ethandril had barely noticed.

'Ah ha!' he yelled excitedly, as he held up a small pair of silver scissors. 'Now, I hope you're ready for this, it's one of my own spells, Ethandril's Barrier Slicer.' He then began his spell as everyone just watched, fascinated by the crazed elf. Seconds later a large three foot long pair of magical scissors appeared in the air in front of him, which Ethan guided forward towards the gnomes. As they reached the first magical barrier the scissors opened and began to cut the barrier like cutting cloth. The gnomes suddenly realised the danger and all four began casting their spells as full battle began!

A bolt of blue white lightning shot forth from Kymru and exploded into the Red Baron who was sent flying back into the cavern wall. He fell down and slumped to the floor. Braden

released a series of dark magical bolts, one each for the remaining six. Cat sucked hers into her sword, magical shields on Elwood and Ethandril flared. A bolt struck the gleaming armour of Apollo and appeared to have little effect. Orion blinked out of sight and Quin took one full in the chest, the broad ranger roaring in pain as the evil necromantic bolt assaulted him. He felt weaker but fought the sensation hard, trying to rid himself of the lethargy that was beginning to consume him.

Orion had blinked into the gnome area, much to their surprise; protection from good did not appear to have worked against the assassin. Orion flung four darts, one for each target, all stopping well short thanks to stoneskin spells, but he blinked away again before they could respond to him.

Elwood fired shot after shot from his bow, nearly ten in all, but all were being deflected by barriers, though it did look as though they were reducing in their effectiveness as the arrows were getting nearer their intended targets.

Ethan continued to cut away at the first line of defence and smiled happily as he appeared to have cut a sizeable square in the shield. Cat held her position while Ethandril cut away, hoping to strike when she could have more effect.

The lightning bolt jumped from the Red Baron to Elwood,

knocking him into a sideways roll. He was unharmed by the electricity but the force of the blow stopped his arrow barrage temporarily. Quin started forward eager to engage the gnomes close up and really test their defences when he stepped on Akkron's second ward; an icy blast of cold, sharp icicles assailed the Company. Quin was knocked off his stride but was nimble enough to stay on his feet. An already off-balance Elwood was knocked flat again as his god-given protection flared once more to protect him. With several deft flicks of his sword Apollo deflected the icicles coming for him, his armour protecting him from the worst of the cold. Ethandril ignored the blast and continued with his cutting, now working on a second barrier. Cat's fire shields and stone skins stopped any serious damage from the blast; she lifted her sword and let go the prismatic spray stored within. The rainbow of colours whizzed through the first defence and glittered brightly against the next shield, but the magic held and the spell was gone.

'Keep cutting Ethan,' Cat yelled, 'we need to be able to get at them!'

Apollo stalked forward but stopped at another invisible barrier, the protection from good. 'Interesting,' he mused, 'the ghost wasn't affected, though. I wonder if Ethan will be?'

Mentza spoke a word and suddenly Cat was knocked

senseless. She slumped to the floor, unable to think or move, her sword falling from her hand. As she hit the floor the chain lightning jumped to her and battered her senseless body sending it jiggling and writhing around on the floor.

'Cat!' Elwood yelled as he tried to rush to her. He in turn was hit by a bright red bolt, one he could have dodged had his focus not been lost. The thin beam caused his shield to flare and wink out leaving Elwood vulnerable for the first time. Akkron smiled at his success and began another spell, one more deadly than before.

Apollo turned to see the damage that had been caused and wondered on the state of the Red Baron. The supposedly powerful halfling had been blasted hard by both the lightning and the cold and all Apollo could see was the red robes on the floor.

Elwood touched his sister's neck to feel for a pulse, but could feel none. In a rage he turned to the gnomes and invoking Yllana's name dropped his blade barrier upon them. The spell appeared atop a barrier a few feet above the gnomes, but Elwood kept up his concentration, he would not be denied. He continued to control the barrier as it assailed the wall of force. Blade after blade slashed at the magical barrier weakening and thinning it. Then, he was through. The whole twenty-foot diameter of whirling slashing slicing blades dropped onto the

four gnomes. More protections flared but the blade barrier spell winked out.

'Nice try,' Kymru called, waving his staff with the beholder head, 'but you are no match for us, elves!' He held the staff high and a green beam shot out straight for Elwood, who dodged just in time. The beam continued on striking the back wall and removing a sizeable chunk of rock.

Orion appeared behind Kymru and stabbed hard with his black dagger, confident the blade would pierce the gnome protections. He felt for a second that he had succeeded before he realised something was wrong. Kymru turned quickly to regard the elf, a huge smile on his face. 'I'm going to enjoy this, elf,' he said.

Orion's hand was held fast, he tried to pull free with his enormous strength but couldn't. He tried to blink again but couldn't, he was held in place by Kymru's evil stone skin. There was a ripping sound and Orion yelled in pain as a red line appeared around his wrist, his own blood starting to pour out. The skin on his wrist then curled back, and then went right up to his elbow. He was being flayed alive!

'Company, help!' he yelled.

Ethandril wasn't used to helping, it wasn't something that came very naturally to him, he was far too self-centred, but

something in the voice of his friend Orion caused him to react. He stared hard at the almost translucent snow elf and knew something was deeply wrong. He finished cutting through his second barrier and watched as the skin on Orion's right arm rolled up to reveal the muscles beneath. There was another ripping noise from the other wrist, and the same thing happened, skin rolled back to the elbow. Although fascinated by this extraordinary spell Ethan knew he had to act; he thought he knew the best way. He glided the scissors over to his friend and in a flash, cut through the spell holding Orion. Orion screamed as he jerked free, both hands still stuck to the stoneskin trap, and his handless arms pumping blood freely. He had enough presence, in spite of his agony, to blink then and came back just behind Ethan, blood spraying everywhere.

'Oh, so nearly,' Kymru said to Braden.

Elwood rushed to Orion and sped through prayers to Yllana; the blood stopped and the wounds healed. But there was no let up from the gnomes. The lightning bolt jumped again, striking Apollo. His armour absorbed most of the blow, and caused the remaining strength of the bolt to dissipate. He sneered at the gnomes and tried to advance again, but the protection held.

'Ethan, get rid of that blasted protection, will you!'

Another green ray came at them, this time for Ethandril. It

hit him fair and square and rebounded straight back at Kymru.

This time he was the one who had to take evasive action.

'So, you don't like disintegration then?' Ethandril said, more to himself than anyone else, and proceeded to cast the spell himself. Another green beam went for Kymru but he avoided it again. Elwood meanwhile prayed hard to Yllana to remove the protection from good and was rewarded when the semicircle on the floor flared and was gone.

'Quin, Apollo, get in!' he yelled.

A huge fireball then rocked the room, knocking Elwood and the badly injured handless Orion flat. Elwood screamed, his usual protection having been removed. A searing pain from the fire, the sort he hadn't felt in years, assailed him and he writhed in agony and rolled back to the far side of the cavern, next to the robes of the seemingly dead Red Baron. As he rolled over he felt a squish under his hand. He removed the robe to find the body of a frog, now quite dead, in amongst the robes.

Orion, too, staggered back, unsure how to contribute. He felt a lot better after being healed by Elwood, but with no hands couldn't help.

Quin-Helwig rushed the gnomes, Mentza first, and attacked whole heartedly with both his long and short swords. Mentza was well protected but hand to hand fighting wasn't his thing. He

stepped back from the enraged elf and called for help.

'Leileilii, come through this gate now, I need your assistance with something,' he called.

The succubus and her lover, the priest of Nyrex Djemmini, heard the call loud and clear come from Mentza. They lay beside each other on her large bed in her home on the sixth plane of the nine hells. Ordinarily she knew she would have to obey the summons, the magic was just so strong. But she and her lover were protected, Nyrex looked after his most valuable priest and hence, his lover. They had a cambion to produce, and Nyrex wasn't about to let a snivelling shadow gnome stop it from happening. Mentza's voice faded and the lovers stared at each other, smiled, and lustily continued with the business at hand.

Apollo stalked forward, well aware of the dangers, his gleaming green pulsing sword in hand. Braden fired a red beam at him but with a sway of his body he avoided it. Kymru raised his staff and a dark black beam shot forth. Apollo flicked the beam off course with his sword, unaffected by the magic.

'Impressive, elf, perhaps you would like a fair fight,' Braden called. 'Densta, come forth, we have someone for you!'

The gate to the abyss swirled and an ugly dog-faced demon

appeared. In moments he assessed the situation and positively ran through. The seven-foot demon, trident in hand, faced the ancient solar elf, smiling a great slobbering, drool-ridden smile. He launched forward trying to impale the elf with one mighty blow. Apollo jumped so he was sideways in the air, the trident striking his sword and spinning the nimble elf so that he almost rolled down the shaft of the trident, over one hundred and eighty degrees. The shining blade came down with the full force of the demon's blow, slashing straight down the demon's head and into its chest. Densta didn't even have time to roar in pain or triumph before his time on the world was over. Apollo gained his feet and he too smiled at the gnomes. The smile was short-lived due to his friend, Ethandril's, intervention.

Now he thought the shields were down, Ethandril Thililisfarne thought he'd have another go at the meteor swarm, just to see. He watched the shortest fight he had ever seen as Apollo killed a demon in one blow just as he unleashed his spell. This time eight small spheres shot forth from his open palm and formed a box pattern over the gnomes. Apollo just caught sight in time to drop to the floor. The explosion rocked the whole cavern, blackening the rock and melting stone in places. More magical defences flared on the gnomes but they were clearly shaken and somewhat singed.

'Oh yes, get a load of that one, boys. Just wait for the next one, then you'll be sorry you ever crossed Ethandrill Thililisfarne!'

Elwood had just about managed to recover from the fireball when the meteors went off, the blast sending him from the room. He rolled down the corridor and crawled a little way away, trying to bide a little time to compose himself and be ready to aid those still in the cavern. He thought he felt something pass him by, a presence of something. He began praying to Yllana for guidance as he came across the immobile dead bodies of the assassins, Vander and Darios. 'What is going on?' he wondered. Just then Orion crawled out of the cavern badly hurt by the blast. Elwood slowly moved to his friend and began a prayer of healing.

'Never mind the wounds, Elwood, my hands, can you bring them back?' he hissed.

'It'll need a powerful spell, Orion, but I can try,' he replied. Elwood fell deep into prayer to Yllana, asking for the spell, pleading with her to reward her servant. He felt a surge of power and he had his answer. 'Come here, Orion, I can help.' Orion approached and Elwood chanted the spell. He held his friends stumps as the power of their goddess poured through him into Orion. Immediately bright white bone began to poke through

Orion's wrist area, then some ligaments appeared and held more bones that began to appear, then the fingers. It was happening very quickly, more ligaments, then tendons and muscles and veins. Within a few minutes, Orion was staring at his new bright white hands, just like his old ones. He held them up to admire them and inspect Elwood's work.

'Not bad friend, not bad at all,' Orion said drily.

'You owe her,' Elwood replied.

Orion nodded. 'We'd better get back in there. What spells do you have?'

'I will try blessing my bow, it may well weaken their defences enough.'

'I'll blink in again. I may wait first, though, and use the darts; I don't want to go through that again.'

In the cavern everyone was still recovering from the blast of the meteor swarm. Quin had been badly hurt and was trying to get close enough to the mage he was facing to be able to hit him before any more magical assault. The broad ranger rushed the gnome wizard, who shadow jumped away to safety, leaving Quin swiping at fresh air. The ranger was then blasted from behind by Braden Puttnik who had jumped too just as the meteors exploded. A stream of mauve fire shot forth from Braden's finger tips and

engulfed the ranger. Quin was powerless to resist this powerful magical fire. Already hurt the ranger cried out as he fell to his knees. He toppled forward to the ground, a huge smoking hole in his back, a happy looking mauve gnome standing behind him.

Elwood reappeared round the corner, bow in hand and began firing arrows of power two at a time. The first barrage of ten hit shields and defences, but the gnomes all sought to find cover from the unnervingly accurate assault. Apollo tried to track them in retreat, but the gnomes shadow jumped to different parts of the cavern and away from him. Ethan, delighted by the effect of his meteor swarm, struck again, this time letting off his famous orange chain lightning. He released it just in front of Braden Puttnik and it blasted the gnome Clan Leader off his feet. It then jumped to Mentza, who merely smiled as a ring on his finger absorbed the full power of the bolt. Mentza used the power to release a stream of dark bolts all aiming at Ethan who was in the middle of another spell. They blasted the mage in the chest knocking him back. 'Oh no!' he said. The magical assault was so severe it nearly killed Ethan, and at that point his defensive contingencies reacted. He vanished from the room in an orange puff of smoke.

Elwood continued to try and shoot the gnomes but was now

hitting fewer targets. Only Apollo was left alive in the room. Suddenly a huge three-balled flail appeared in front of him and swung all three balls at his head. He rolled away backwards, but was clipped by one that exploded on impact. He yelled in pain only to hear the chuckle of Kymru Galavan as he played with his flail wand. He flicked the miniature flail this way and that and the huge one in front of Elwood responded. Elwood avoided the next sweep but now Akkron joined the game from the far side of the room. Apollo looked on, desperate to get at the gnomes. He spotted Kymru and rushed over to try and stop his evil game.

Akkron fired off more of the black missiles each one striking Elwood. The blessed of Yllana fought off their horrendous affects but was so busy trying that the flail swept in from the side. With no defences left, all three balls connected solidly with the sturdy copper elf priest. There were three loud bangs as acid cold and fire were simultaneously discharged into the priest. Elwood collapsed to the floor ready to meet his mistress.

Only Apollo was left. Three appeared to be dead, four including the Red Baron. Orion had left yet again and Ethan was gone, no doubt to some safe house. Whether he would return Apollo doubted. The gnomes all jumped back together, some ten yards from the solar elf warrior of extraordinary skill.

'You fight well, elf' Kymru stated, 'but you have inconvenienced us enough. Akkron, Mentza, you may leave, Braden and I can handle this one.'

'Yes Clan Leader', Mentza replied and, with a smile almost of pity to Apollo, vanished from the cavern.

'If you're sure,' Akkron answered. 'I shall use the gate and close it once I'm through.' Akkron tried the first gate to a tunnel but couldn't get through. Strange he thought, it appears blocked, I'll try the other. Akkron stepped through the other gate and disappeared from the cavern.

The two Clan Leaders stared at Apollo. 'So what were you then?' Kymru asked. 'Some fabled adventuring group no doubt.'

'The Company of the Compass and I'm not finished yet,' Apollo sneered his reply.

The gnomes looked around at the three obvious bodies, 'I'd say you were,' Kymru stated. 'You weren't bad, though, I'll give you that.'

'Yes, you seem quite powerful but we must end this now. We have work to do and more Spice to be sending to your beloved surface world.' The two mages began to cast spells and Apollo tried to lunge forward to reach them.

Kymru activated his beholder staff and lifted Apollo into the air with the telekinesis, holding him immobile, three-feet

up. Braden finished his long necromantic spell and waited while a huge black hand appeared from the floor and rose up towards Apollo.

'It was nice to meet you, elf, but I'm afraid it's now over. They'll enjoy you where you're going,' Braden warned.

'Goodbye, solar elf, it's over!'

Before anything could happen, the very next moment Apollo was standing on the floor again, with both his foes standing before him completely naked, no clothes, no jewellery, nothing. The hand had gone and hovering just over the pair of gnomes was a small red-robed figure brandishing a dark black sword.

'I think not, nasty shadow gnomes. I think this is very far from over. You assaulted my people; now I will do the same to you. It's going to be a very hot eternity for you pair,' he whispered into the ears of the held gnomes. The Red Baron swiftly plunged his blade into Braden then Kymru, both feeling pain like they had never felt before. Their insides immolated by pure fire from the elemental plane. They died there and then as their souls were sent to spend eternity at the beck and call of the Prince of Elemental Fire.

Apollo raised an eyebrow. He had lived over two thousand

years and it now took an awful lot to impress him but this time he really was.

'Don't just stand there, Apollo elf! We still have work to do. We must destroy the mushrooms and get your friends, what's left of them, out of here,' he ordered, with his right arm drawn up across his face.

The pair left the cavern as quickly as they could. They followed the path they had been on for another hundred yards till they reached the vast underground field where the mushroom crop was being cultivated for only one purpose. 'Those that may die are already lost,' the Red Baron said as released a huge fireball right into the middle of the field. Again and again he sent red balls of fire and they exploded with violence burning away the mushroom field. He then summoned an elemental able to feed on the flames and turned it loose with the instruction to burn the whole place, any mushrooms he could see and any shadow gnomes who tried to stop him. The elemental ran amok, burning everything in its path.

'Back to the cavern! Let's get you friends and leave!' the Baron ordered.

They dashed back to the cave. Apollo raced about dragging the smoking bodies of Quin, Elwood and Catarina close to himself. The halfling Baron on his magical hover-board cast his

spell of teleportation and they all vanished in a twinkle of red lights.

Orion saw them leave from the cavern entrance. He looked cautiously around the room scouring it for any sign of any other gnomes. Certain there were none there, he blinked over to where he had attacked Kymru and searched the ground. There it was, the black-bladed dagger. It called to him. With a smile he picked it up and sheathed it. He'd better leave and fast, that bonfire would attract every gnome in the whole city.

Akkron Puttnik had left the cavern with victory assured. He stepped through the second gate into a tunnel on the outskirts of the town, thinking only of returning to the Clan Puttnik main house. The granite dwarves had been waiting patiently ever since the gate had ripped open in front of them. As Akkron emerged he was assailed by three magical picks from his left as three dwarves assaulted him. They knocked off his stone skins with the first four blows and seemed oblivious to any type of kickback that his fire shield was meant to be delivering to them. Alto swung his axe and caught Akkron's arm, removing a slice of his forearm. Clement, highly charged after all his recent exertions, touched Akkron with a small hand and delivered one of the most

powerful shocks he had ever done. Akkron jumped into the air from the electrical attack; as he landed Alto swung low, removing a foot with his axe. Akkron didn't even have time to utter a spell in defence, such was the ferocity of the attack. He fell to the floor under another hail of pick blows, now bleeding profusely. He tried to reach up to turn his magic ring, but another axe blow came down on his hand severing it and any chance of escape he had. He died seconds later as a particularly strong blow landed on his head, splitting his skull. He had been foolish. In his arrogance he hadn't assembled any further defences, believing that the portal would be enough to get him out of trouble if it had come to that.

The spirit of Akkron Puttnik began its journey to the afterlife. He was sad to be leaving his world but confident of joy in the afterlife with Shylar his god. He had served the lord of the Shadow gnomes well for nearly a century he was sure he would be well received.

A tickle ran down Cheragai's back. Something had happened; the cursed gnome had been killed and was now on his final journey to the afterlife. Cheragai had to seize his chance. He cast a spell, a powerful one, and teleported through the planes to the river, the one which everyone had to cross to die, never mind what their race. He stood on the bank and waited as spirits

passed him by, some sad, some happy, many not even looking around. He was in time; he could see the gnome coming now. Akkron was lost in his own little flights of fancy about what he would be up to as a spirit. Would he be able to become a spectre or worse, could he attack the dwarves that had killed him? He was happily drifting along when he was abruptly stopped by a large immovable object. He looked up at the sharp-toothed smile of a bearded devil he knew all too well. If he had still had a beating heart, it would have skipped a beat.

'Hello Akkron, your coming with me,' Cheragai boomed in a voice so filled with joy and malice that Akkron began to sob. The devil grabbed the shadow gnome and teleported away, back to his castle on the seventh plane of hell. Eternity was going to be a very long time for the spirit of Akkron Puttnik.

Mentza arrived back in the main Galavan house and went up to Kymru's private rooms. He cast a spell to activate the crystal ball to watch the denouement of the battle. There in front of him he could see Apollo held high with the black hand underneath, ready to crush the life out of him. The next thing the elf was on the floor, the gnome Clan Leaders were naked and a small red-robed creature had stabbed them both, killing them instantly. Mentza was about to rush back when, in a moment of

clarity decided against it. What a moment of opportunity. He continued to observe as the red-robed figure and the solar elf left the room. Moments later he became aware of the commotion coming from the mushroom fields. He didn't care; it hadn't been his idea after all. He continued to watch the cavern, and sure enough the red-robed floating halfling and the elf gathered up their fallen friends and teleported away. He then watched as the sneaky snow-elf came back and collected his dagger.

'Interesting,' Mentza said to no one. So that elf has only limited loyalty and he passed the protection from good wards. Mentza absorbed and sorted in his mind all the information. He kept watch for a while longer but no one else came through. The crystal ball winked out and he sat quietly considering his next move. He would distance himself from this failure and consider a new way to strike at the surface. But it would take time, and he would have to consider more closely those elves, what was left of them, but at least he now knew his enemy a little better.

Mentza Galavan, the new Clan Leader of Clan Galavan, sat back in his chair, his hands linked together, index fingers forming a steeple as they touched his chin. He sat for a long while thinking as the mushroom fields burned.

Epilogue

Sir Theobold, Argyll and Lorian sat in Sir Theobold's private chambers as Apollo told them the story of the battle. Mikalis the wanderer stood in the corner of the room, scribbling down the information frantically, barely able to believe he was getting such amazing information straight from the hero himself.

'So you don't know what happened to Orion, then?' Sir Theobold asked.

'Ghost never likes to see out the whole battle and last I saw he had lost both his hands, rather ironic really. I couldn't find his body though so we came back without it.'

Orion stepped from the shadows into the room, causing the others to jump. 'Such consideration, Apollo,' he said sarcastically, 'but I found my own way out when we were being slaughtered.'

'I see you have restored your hands,' Apollo sneered.

'Actually, Elwood managed it before he died. I never got to thank him properly.'

'Well you should be able to soon,' Lorian butted in. 'Your friends are being seen to by Johna, they may be able to return, we don't know yet.'

Orion raised an eyebrow. Resurrection was not always warmly

accepted by elves and he was unsure whether his three friends would be coming back when offered a chance to play in the Elysian fields.

There was a hard knock at the door just before it burst open. Ethandril Thililisfarne rushed into the room dramatically waving his arms.

'Greetings all! Theo, Apollo, Orion, my darling daughter. I'm afraid I was waylaid by my own contingencies. Those gnomes caught me with a rather fine and, if I may say, painful spell. Before I knew it I was back in my safe house on Wye, with various potions being poured down my throat by unseen servants with strict instructions. I will really have to reconsider using it again or change the wording of the spell. So what happened? Where are the others?'

'Dead. Well it may only be temporary,' Apollo said.

'But how, we're invincible?' Ethan squawked back.

'The gnomes were very powerful and we were done for. I was the last one left when the Red Baron saved me and all of us.'

'But he was already dead; that lightning bolt blasted him from the sky very quickly. I was a bit disappointed in him to be honest,' Ethan said

'A simulacrum. He was following us from some way behind having animated a simulacrum to travel with us and act like him.

He is more power than any of us realised. I am afraid to admit it but I was about to be engulfed by a huge crushing hand when everything stopped. He used a time stop, then stripped the two leaders of their clothing and weapons, before killing them and sending their souls to the elemental plane of fire.'

'He was never that powerful, surely?' an open-mouthed Ethandril asked.

'It appears he is,' Sir Theobold added. 'And we are just glad that he is our friend, for now.'

'So what happens now?' Orion asked.

'The Red Baron also finished off their two top assassins who were following us. Remember the shout at the start of the fight? Well, he had already dealt with them, and both leaders are also dead. We burnt the mushroom field so there will be a lot less Spice for now,' Apollo stated.

'What of that nasty gnome with the black cap with gold sigils?' Ethan asked. 'I really didn't like him at all.'

'He left before the Baron struck so we had better assume he is still at large and capable,' Apollo answered. 'My experience tells me that we have decapitated them for now but there will be more trouble to come. We must be wary of these gnomes and their plotting as well as the priests of Nyrex with whom they worked.'

There was a knock at the door and Johna walked in. 'I have

good news,' he stated in a flat voice. 'All your friends chose to return, though they will need some time to recover. I believe the pull of your friendship and unfinished business was enough to bring them back.'

'Excellent, excellent!' Ethan squealed in delight. 'When can we see them, can we go now?'

'Lava lips you're draining at the best of times. They may wish they hadn't come back if you go rushing over there now. Give them time and a bit of space,' the ever wise solar elf said.

'Apollo's right, Ethan,' Orion said. 'Give them time. We need to work out our next move. What has happened to the other towns and cities?'

'Well,' Sir Theobold began, 'we have cleared the scourge from our city and sent word to the towns of Abinger and Ingles as well as an offer of help. I believe we may go in there any day now and sweep those towns clean. It will of course help if the supply dries up after your handiwork.'

'And Salvington?' Orion asked with concern.

'I spoke with the Speaker and he believed the problem wasn't so serious there but he would discuss it at their Council and get back to me. He's a good man, so I suspect he knows what he's doing. We'll send help if he says he needs it.'

Apollo and Orion shared an anxious glance; they weren't so

sure but left it at that. Perhaps they would pay a visit to their young friend Garth and see what was really happening. At least with the supply cut off any Spice problems would lessen.

'Well done on the cleansing of your city, Theo,' Ethandril piped up. 'I'm glad you enjoyed using my spell so much, I've always found it to work brilliantly.'

'Indeed, Ethan, it did work well and as a result we now have a lot of spare luxury housing in the city. Perhaps you would like one of the houses?'

Loriana stared hard at Sir Theobold; the thought of her father living in the city was almost too much to bear.

'No, no. I'm looking forward to going home for a while. I have a few things I need to work on and my son Thelandril has recovered from his accident so his education must continue.'

Loriana breathed such an audible sigh of relief it caused a chuckle to escape from the usually serious mouth of Apollo Shiningblade.

'When the others have recovered we should make our decisions. This isn't over yet,' he said.

The granite dwarves filed back into Kronkton, pleased with their work. They had killed a high ranking shadow gnome mage and word was coming through of a major disturbance in the city of

Imar. It was a job well done. The three companions, Alto, Clement and Barakello, decided to say their farewells. They were heading back to the surface to continue with their adventures, and to check on the welfare of their human friend Garth.

'Novakello, thank the elders from me, but I shall leave again. I have unfinished business on the surface and perhaps more of our fellow dwarves to meet,' Barakello said as he embraced his newest friend.

'Go with our blessing, Barakello and your friends, as they are now ours. Any time you have more friends that would benefit from meeting with the Elders feel free to bring them to us. We are not a closed community, you should know that, just a hard one to find!' Novakello replied as he began to laugh.

Alto and Clement laughed too and waved their goodbyes as the three left the main gate of Kronkton and headed back to the surface.

In a small cavern, almost impossible to find by any means physical or magical, the fire halfling unloaded the latest treasures he had procured. The Red Baron stared at the rods, wands, rings and particularly the beholder stave he had removed from the shadow gnomes.

'These should do nicely,' he said to himself. His hover

board floated just in front of him as he began his spell, an enchantment to make the board open and receptive to the new magics. When he was done he picked up the pieces, one by one and placed them on the board. A ring of regeneration, a ring of shooting stars, a ring of protection, wands of fire and numerous other trinkets he had pilfered from the gnomes. Then the staff of the beholder. One by one they disappeared, consumed, absorbed and assimilated into the hover board. The powers would all be his now, ready for him any time he wanted them. He smiled at his good fortune at meeting up with the Company. They had been useful travelling companions and had helped him get into a place he would never have dared to go on his own. Perhaps he would meet with them again for another adventure, but of course, he would always have to remind them who truly held the balance of power!

--The End--