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Alexandra Tales of the stormthrower

Part I: The earth elf twins

Part I: The earth elf twins

Ι	
Ш	
ш	
IV	
v	

Part II: The kings daughter

I	
П	
III	
IV	
v	
VI	
VII	

Ι

Early in the night she had a weird distinct feeling something was wrong. So much she had packed her stuff and lay on the couch in her traveling clothes. Was she getting paranoid?

She heard the shriek of the top window, but had never heard a thump of feet landing on the roof. Thanked the insight of staining the window hinges, till they made some noise. She scanned the house and the near surroundings, watched for changes, something out of place from one instant to the other, smiled at the image of the family of mice living in her basement, then counted three mages. One upstairs. Two just outside. A tiny bit of magic on both ends of the house meant they were just now picking the lock with some air. Got ready en wove some nets in the living room. Knew all drapes had been closed, as she did every night, just to have no secret onlookers when she practiced her magic.

A surge of air blasted a part of the inner wall towards her. Just jumped out of its path and used wind to move the floating nets a few yards over towards the trespassing mage, watching him burn off the incantation sticking to him. Blew small fireballs, catching them with whirlwinds, to make them slowly close in on the three mages. So close they managed to take over one, using it to destroy the others. Conjuring up a screen to divert the blast in her direction. She let it burn up in one of the protecting cloaks she had put around herself, just stepped through the rage, used it to heat up a new twister, a bigger one. Let it rip through the ceiling and watched the mages sidestep the rubble just picking up her incantation nets as the twister destroyed the rest of the ceiling, circling back to her. Used up precious time to yank out the connecting wires of the web running the twister, letting it slowly die out. Recycling the remnants to hurl her up into the remains of her house.

Standing on the landing of the first floor she quickly pushed three fireballs with incantation nets, in between her and the mages, keeping them busy, while checking her options. Fleeing now would leave a half burned house, with too much to tie her in, at the inevitable investigation. Killing three elf mages was, besides very messy, absolutely no option, considering the advanced state of the forensic science in the human world.

Slowly breaking down the floors and inner walls and directing the remains towards the mages she opted for the third option. Limiting their possibilities to attack as she tore down the roof.

Three gusts of wind catapulted the mages towards her. Standing on the high ground she used fire screens to block their advances, bashing them back down to ground level. Making them bolt themselves through the space that once was her house to gain a higher vantage point than her, unwillingly picking up more of her incantation nets, having to stomach them in fear of losing more than only this fight.

In the end the mages had grown used to her defenses and finally managed to get one of them onto the little ledge, left of the second floor. With fire and wind they hacked at her foothold, slowly chipping away at it until it collapsed, leaving her stranded in mid air. Standing on a twister she slowly descended to ground level, watching the ledge, weakened by her much earlier, give in, just after its attendant had decided he needed to evacuate his foohold.

3

With the house safely in pieces she bolted through the space picking up the loose ends of all the incantations spread over the mages, slamming the resulting spell in place, leaving them unable to use magic for a while. Began forming a huge iceblock around a core of fire and ice, separated by a failing air net, pushed the three attackers towards the back door, started a slow moving whirlwind, added fire and heated the air some more with a firestorm. Put out some nets to hem in the whirl and added some ice to let the containing web shrink over time as the ice melted. Picked up her stuff. Wove over herself an invisibility cloak. Followed the mages out the back door, and left them to their own.

Walking down the road, she said goodbye, in her mind, to all the kind people. Crouched when the volatile core mixed, exploding the iceblock in the ever closing blaze. Looked over to see the walls tumbling down, the water vapors violently seeking a way out. Then walked on. Looked in the square on the street clock and picked up her pace. If she hurried she could catch the night bus.

Still laughing she retired from the drunken girls and boys when she stepped off the bus at the station. Fortunately there were still taxis in the queue waiting for business. Slipped in the back of the first taxi and named the destination. The taxi driver protested, it was very far. She took one hundred euro from her bag, streched out on the soft back seat, and asked if he wanted to hurry, getting off at the center of a city, one hundred kilometers away.

When the taxi had driven off the square, she picked up her bag and started walking. She had been idle for too long. It would take a few day before her muscles were used to life on the road again. At least her new shoes were holding, expensive, one of a kind, only for sale in her own world.

The call came when she entered the country road towards a brand new bungalow. She nodded approvingly. Just looked at the number on her phone and texted back, to look outside. She nodded again when the elder opened the door, asked him to watch the news and find a

new place for her to live, then walked straight to the for her most important room. She looked around, the room was slightly bigger than before. However, the same markings populated the walls and the many shades of green crisscrossed by sand-colored drawings seemed not much different from the previous space. A large black circle indicated where she should stand. After giving her a brief update on the job she apparently had already started at, the elder began the incantation, and with a little of her own magic she helpt him to open the portal. The transition always gave her a light feeling in the stomach. Slowly the area known so well to her came forth. She prepared herself mentally. Washed the dark makeup, serving her so well in the human world, from her face and let the Sign of Light, earned with blood, sweat and tears, be painted on her cheek. It could best be described as a sun, but the layered paint made it much more than that, especially if you knew how to let the light run over it.

Encouraged by the sign on her face, she walked into town. Two women followed her. These were good. Slowed her pace a little. Although she felt vulnerable without her sword, she knew her two guardians would ensure her safe arrival at her appointment.

Looking confident, she walked into the square in front of a stately old building with no decorations, crossed the square and walked into the dark low hall of the building. She blinked to adjust to the darkness, walked down the hall and entered one of the corridors. A clerk bowed slightly and followed her. She stopped at one of the many niches in the hallway, grabbed a flower-shaped medallion from her bag and laid it on the notch in the niche, muttered softly the belonging incantation and silently the safe opened. It contained a large box inlaid with a mosaik of silver and precious stones, representing a small marmot-like creature. A gift from her grandmother after finishing her first magic exams.

She opened the box and took her sword from its stand. Grabbed a small bottle and applied the oil to the leather wrapping of the hilt, until it was as smooth as when she had applied it. Slowly she lifted the sword into the smudged light and tested it. The soft blue glow

5

told her the sword was in perfect condition. She took the sheath out of the box, put the sword in and swung it on her back. A small wooden staff about as thick as her wrist, and as long as her forearm had emerged, enabling her the use of every Moon incantation. She hung the staff on her belt, took one of the purses out of the trunk, closed the box and put it back in the vault, which automatically closed when she took the medallion from the slot. She turned and walked towards the bank clerk, who all that time had faced away from her. With a short cough she announced she was ready. The bank clerk turned and bowed again. She payed him for his services and strolled out of the bank, back on to the square.

The silence of the bank was traded for the cacophony of the market on the adjacent square. She walked through the arch which separated the two squares. A row of trees shaped into a small tunnel with the leaves as a parasol against the sun. She inhaled the scent of the blossoms, and again knew why she so missed this.

The marketstalls here differed from the human world. The goods were lying on blankets on the floor. A thin rope, filled with magic lay round each cloth to keep pests from the exhibited goods. She knew the sellers and walked blindly to the ones selling the fresh fruits and herbs she needed. Walked past the stalls with clothing. The dresses and shirts neatly draped over artfully shaped dwarf trees making them come out beautifully. Could not resist to give the occasional dress a closer look.

She startled, thought she heard something familiar through the noise of shouting men. Getting curious, she squeezed through the crowd, just in time to see one of the men climbing into the pit. The big cat, a sandcat, gave a long raor and circled around the man. She searched and found the missing line on his left flank and smiled. Beheld the arrogant approach of the man, shook her head and yelled to approach him with respect. Her advice was taken over by the public and after several fruitless attempts to impose his will onto the cat, he changed his tactics. He bowed to the cat, who standing on his four legs came to shoulderhight of the man. Walked over to the man. stood on his hind legs, roaring loudly. Falling back on four legs he slowly moved forwards. The man drew back, keeping the distance between him and the cat the same. Moved left as the cat stepped right and was so steered back to the entrance of the pit. Felt his back pushing against the fence, shook his head and climbed, with the crowd teasing him, out off the pit, towards the merchant. Turned to the audience and shouted, requesting for the person kind enough to give advice. She thought about it, saw the audience in front of her split open, then walked confidently forward. Bowed slightly for the merchant, and paid the introduction price. Walked the stairs down towards the fence and entered the pit.

Cheerful thoughts danced through her head. Janu, as was the cats name, asked if she wanted to join in a demonstration. He told about his stay here in the city and the contempt which prevailed here for sand cats. She nodded, but also asked for his help. Not long ago they had many adventures, when they worked together for the same client. The little information she had been given seemed to point at a long ride, a sandcat as beasts of burden and protector would be very welcome. Janu agreed and rushed at her, braked, slid by and gave with one of his paws a swipe in her direction. The audience held its breath and the merchant stammered excuses. She jumped up, took advantage of the power of the sandcat, set off on his back and landed behind him in the sand. Janu turned around roaring and rushed back to her, changed his course suddenly and just rushed past her, pushed his front legs deep in the sand and stopped while turning, with his head towards her.

Never losing sight of the cat she looked at him and gave him a gentle tap on the nose. While the market trader shouted hysterically she just forfitted her life and he could never be held responsible for this irresponsible behavior, she moved closer to Janu and looked him straight in the eye. He stood up on his hind legs and only came down to all fours when she was with him. Laughing, they fell into each other's arms. A mild pain through her body made

7

her search his coat, burning several large leeches of his skin, threw them angrily in the direction of the market trader, stomped up the stairs to the pit, walked past the salesman and threw the buyout money to his head, after which he miraculously still had the nerve to count it. She glanced sideways and saw the market superintendent also slowly shaking his head, nodded in his direction, and walked off onto the market with Janu, leaving the merchant at the mercy of the superintendent.

She bought a nice collar at the last stall, dug from her bag a gold plate and asked if she could put it on him. Janu grunted curses, but allowed it. She told him the route to the floatcar harbor and gate of the city, took leave of him donning this picture and walked towards the square of the setting sun.

Almost immediately she was approached by one of the drivers who took care of flights through the city. She shrugged him off, strolled on and looked around. Elves rushed from left to right through one gate into the square and leaving through another. Rushing towards wherever they were going to. The parks around the square gave it that little bit extra. She inhaled the scent of the flower gardens, looked around and shrugged off another driver. Breathed a few times, put a smile on her face, nodded at the fourth and stepped into his floatcar. The long journey would bring her to her sponsor. She let herself slide into the cushions and closed her eyes briefly.

Offcourse she was late. Offcourse she had to come earlier. She just smiled. The room was empty, only two chairs with her sponsor and a stranger. The man was presented as Jean. More was not needed or just to dangerous to know. The contract, bringing him to the capital of the elven world. She looked at them, why not just fly to Rio and then through the eleven main road to the capital? Jean stood up and beckoned her. They walked down the hall to the bedrooms. Jean was a little bigger than her. His muscles betrayed him to be an adventurer like her. Jean slowly opened one of the doors, revealing two girls asleep on the bed. Gently

squinting with her eyes she said an incantation. The elven power and resulting glow made her nod. At this age they could not travel in the human world without betraying themselves. She tiptoed into the room and bent over the two girls. Stroked through their hair gently as she muttered an incantation. Slowly, the glow faded. She rose and turned slowly around to take in the room. Above the bed hung a simple lamp, the soft light reflecting in the stately mirror on the wall, illuminating the room just enough. The clothes of the twins were piled on a bench next to the only cabinet, as high as the ceiling and just as wide. Satisfied with the room she slipped off and sealed the door with an incantation. Jean relaxed a little. Around the door, she put up more incantations and a net in the corridor leading to the hall. Only then she relaxed too.

Back with her sponsor, Jean finally got a piece of paper from his pocket. Two names, Natasha and Valentina told her something. Twins had been born years ago with the Queen of the earth elves. She made the earth sign. Jean nodded. She grabbed her bag and walked to the room of the twins. There was still some time to sleep.

Right when the first seal broke she was awake. Quickly but gently she woke the twins and grabbed her sword and staff., to see a moon wolf sneak in. Squat, it was not higher than her knees, black with gray cheeks and tail. Not really dangerous for someone like her, but this meant they really should be on their way. With the flat side of her sword she hit the wolf out cold. Softly sang a lullaby, a trick of the moon elves, making the wolf sleep for about one hour. Keeping her sponsors house clean. She got dressed and motioned the twins to do the same. Then lifted her bag. The twins both dived into the closet and pulled out theirs. She hesitated, but speed was now important. The door opened and her sponsor walked in. Bowing over the wolf he mentioned, any information coming from it would be made available to them during the trip. Jean was already waiting for them. A young lady, one of two following her in the city, broke away from the shadows. She put her finger on her lips and motioned them to follow. Alleys and narrow paths, all overgrown with vines, followed in quick succession, and soon she was lost. Only the position of the moon told her she still walked toward the floatcar harbor. Footsteps and voices in front of them. She wondered if the young woman had heard them too, she did not adjust her pace, but she stopped suddenly in the middle of the alley, and pointed towards the sound, wriggled through the hedge and walked onwards. They were now in between the gardens of the rich. The path dropped rapidly until only their heads were above the surface. Above them the hedge that separated each of the gardens. Like everything else in the world of elves, this path too ran the way of the green landscape. A puddle of mud, small enough to jump over, indicated why it was built.

Stone steps indicated where they could climb out of the ditch. The young woman raised her hand and laid her ears upon the curtains of interwoven vines made from the twigs of the hedge above them. Waited long before she was satisfied and waved them through the curtain. She recognized the signs of the craftsmen. The neighborhood was quiet around this time, the owners of the shops still sleeping. Street after street followed, each devoted to a different specialty. The twins sulked a bit, but bravely ploughed on. The street had become wider and eventually spread out into a square. Only gates of houses where there to be seen. The fence running around the square, only interrupted by a few crooked trees.

The young woman nimbly climbed one of the trees and stuck out her hand halfway up. She lifted Valentina high, where she was pulled up. Closely followed by Natasha and Jean. She climbed up and found the rest on a small platform in the canopy of the tree, nodded, after which the young woman carefully slipped through the foliage bending like there was a path. With the trees close together she could not see the thick branches, but they surely were there forming a pathway.

A frantic signal made it clear something was wrong. The young woman waved and pointed through the foliage to the group of men, just visible. She could just recognize the fence around the floatcar harbor, and understood they had to cross over the square. A faint sound like a crying baby, meant there were wolves too.

The young lady stepped back and bowed. She answered the greeting and thanked her in gestures, jumped from the tree and turned to catch the twins, who at the urging of Jean dropped from the tree. The group was out of sight through the hedges surrounding this little round piece of road, as Jean tapped her on the back, indicating they could move on.

The square in front of them, which was surrounded by hedges and on one side by the characteristic, more than man-high barrier from the floatcar harbor, showed some passers-by quickly walking along, minding their own business. When she saw two suddenly stop, wolves came rushing around the corner. Pushing the twins with one hand behind her and with the other hand pulling her sword she waited for them. Slowly she moved her lips letting her sword burn with intense fire, until she eventually pointed it towards the wolves, making them cower back onto the square. The flames fell apart on the ground now she stopped saying the incantation. A quick check confirmed no harm was done, Jean protected the twins and indicated they could move on towards the square.

A gust of wind wanted to push her from the twins. Turning around she saw the two mages who were pressed against the fence. Stopped and send a gust of wind herself, split it and made it hit the mages. Following it with a small shot of hail. Throwing them out of balance, making both slide across the square. Jean, with the twins, followed her. The group of men pulled up the mages and all uncovered their sword or battle ax. A command made the wolves attack, terminating abruptly when Janu tackled them, and in a short fight, hit them unconscious. The nearly man-high sandcat focused on the group of men who were already busy dodging the small balls of fire, she shot at them. It put them in motion. fleeing from the

11

square. Janu ran after them, clearing the way in the direction of the floatcar harbor. She grabbed the hand of Valentina and dragged her across the square, heard the footsteps of Jean behind her and focused on any magic to be discovered. Walked through a screen and felt the incantation nestle in. Unraveled it, only to cut through next. Stopped, treated the other three, removed the incantations, quickly introducing Janu to Jean and the twins.

Through the gate in the fence, they ran onto the plain. Long lines indicated where the goods, the city needed, were unloaded. An elf with a red band around his head motioned them and pointed them to the line where a cargo platform was ready for departure.

Surely they were followed. From a distance. But once every now and again she could see the same float car. Janu suggested to go over the mountains instead of past them. The thought had crossed her mind. They just passed the last tribute village, and the next inhabited place would only come in view close to the harbor city.

At the sight of the rocky leads of the mountains, Janu shared some images of the trails of the mountain cats, he had to travel over so often, during his stay here. It toppled the choice in favor of the mountain roads. Although they had to go on foot. If they could get on the trails, there was a good change to disappear into the forests and only surface close to the Rock Elves capital city.

Janu directed her further and further away from the main road. The sheer cliffs gave her thought, hoping Janu had taken the twins in account. Just for a short while. She had faith in him. Loaded as much gear on him as he allowed, packing on his flanks, not on top of him, hurrying the others along when Janu went on the move again. Jumping on small boulders, climbing higher. Turning to see everyone was following. Then disappeared. She jumped after him and caught Natasja and Valentina as Jean was lowering them down into the cave. The low cavern, showed a path going up. She whistled softly, before igniting a soft glowing ball

of fire, and pushing the twins after the climbing Janu. Crouched and using one hand for support, scurried after them. Sometime she had to use air to lift the light high up steep inclines, needing two hand negotiating them. Always catching it just in time.

When the slow pace of the climb almost grinded to a halt she quickly quenched the light. Shushed the twins, however quiet they were, and climbed over them to take a look through the dimly lit crack Janu was staring through. It stretched all the way from floor to ceiling, blocking their path. Looking down she found a huge boulder wedged in, forming a bridge between them and the next cavern. Some wind made her hear the voices alarming Janu. Complaining the mage had vanished again, deciding to camp out, as no mage they knew could camouflage such a group and move at the same time. She thanked them silently for their warning, and carefully weaved a blanket over Janu, then slashed one thread just before he started crossing the bridge, letting the spell fade out very slowly on its own.

Valentina whispered they too could be as patient as Janu, she nodded, but still speeded up the process, as both were still quite small anyhow. Made them promise to sit still and tell her when Jean was sufficiently camouflaged, before she gave both a hand, walking slowly over the boulder, bridging the crack, ever throwing quick peeks into the chasm to see if there was any reaction outside.

Again slashing only the single thread they waited until the magic had fully dissipated, before they moved on, negotiating the twisting path in the twilight shining from above. Watched Jean and the twins follow Janu out of the cavern mouth up a grass covered ledge, squeezing past lonely trees and bushes, just as Janu had described during their long break. Followed them, and could not resist to turn and wave goodbye to the small elves down below pointing towards them. Stepping back into the forest on top of the cliff they had reached.

13

After a long climb through the forrest, they reached the meadows and followed one of the valleys through the mountains. Where the valley stopped they climbed over the ridge and followed the next. Suddenly Janu stopped and pricked his ears. She looked around and muttered a sound incantation, turned slowly and the moment she heard a plaintive cry, she received an image from Janu of a small Mountain Cat in distress. Shortly thereafter followed by a picture of a small Mountain Cat in a cage with screaming men. she nodded to Janu and shifted their course. Along the way she explained to Jean and the twins what she had seen. They needed to help. Janu kept to a route, steeply downwards. Soon she could see the men with the small caged Mountain Cat going downhill. Just then one of them lost his grip on the cage and the poor animal fell four meters. Cursing and screaming the men jumped after the cage and dragged it further down the mountain. Janu sent enraged images to her, mirroring her own thoughts. Yet she rallied. Grabbed her sword and made a few circles above her head. A small tornado appeared. She waited until one of the men stood still to look around and threw the whirlwind in his direction, dragging him into one of the nearby cannions. Janu had not waited, made an attack on the cage. Broke it in pieces and snatched the little cat out of it. She occupied the other men just long enough with her wind tricks to allow Janu the chance to escape. The men chased Janu. She grabbed her sword firmly and stood astride on the path, bent over when Janu jumped over her and waited. Saw one of the men perform an incantation on the other men. She was not surprised, knew all the movements and said an incantation against it. The man was fast but compared to her hopelessly slow. His attack broke down on her screen, and his sword had barely moved when her sword cut into him. She wiped her sword on his jacket and stood up. The sun shone on the drawing on her cheek and it glowed.

Jean was hunched over the small mountain cat, who still had her spotted coat, and she could see he already had a leg splinted and was healing several wounds. She opened to the small cat and was only receiving a mournful picture of her brother. Jean looked at her. "Do you know where her brother is? I get nothing else from her." She nodded. "Are you still busy with her? We must try to contact her parents before tonight." Jean dabbed the last wound. "It is not complete, but it will be all right for the time being." She lifted the little cat and placed her gently on the back of Janu. Grabbed her bag from his back and turned to Natasha. Who had already guessed this, and walked to Janu, to climb on behind the little one. Gently putting her arms around the small Mountain Cat and Janu.

Janu started walking. Back to where they had first heard the lament. Along the way she was busy with some strings. Eventually forming a basket the size of the small Mountain Cat. The cries were softened. She hoped they were still on time, and located the cat twenty meters down into a gorge. The little animal was not moving, but still had a soft moaning sound. She took some strings from her purse and tied her dress around her legs, put off her cloak and took a rope measuring about thirty meters. Small rope, but strong enough for a small Mountain Cat. Tied the rope to Janu and threw it in the ravine. The end touched the floor one meter from the cage. From ledge to ledge, she climbed down. The cage was already in pieces by the impact. Carefully she took a final step down next to the small Mountain Cat. She touched it gently to determine how to put the basket around him and got straightaway an image of his little sister. She told the small cat, his sister was safe. Slowly progressed with the basket, could not heal the creature like Jean. A call to Janu, who passed it to Jean was enough to tell the little mountain cat was ready for his flight. She put herself between the rock and the rope and began to climb. The rope on her back and the dangling little cat behind her in his basket. Occasionally she felt the rope scrub down her back, sometimes a little bit higher, sometimes lower, as Jean tried to avoid a cliff. Eventually she was on top. Jean had lifted the little mountain cat already and was gently massaging it. His sister close by, in the lap of Natasha looking at everything happening to her brother. After a first roundup Jean looked up to her and shook his head. I can help him but it will take all night. She nodded and prepared

for the night. She ignited a fireball and put the twins around it. The path on which they stood had three exits. Each path she entered and lay down some seals.

Suddenly Janu twitched his ears from side to side. She looked at him for a few seconds, and had grabbed Natasja even before he warned them to dive for cover. Jean followed her into the nearby stream, holding Valentina. They pushed themselves against the rocky bank and wiggled their legs so, no extra foam was giving their location away. The twins kept the baby cats wonderfully quiet even though the cold stream was licking at their ankles. She checked Natasja again, then concentrated on the info shared by Janu.

Sound an vibrations revealed a group of seven men, following a classic search pattern over the mountain meadows. With her eyes she followed the man in black passing them, trusting on her camouflage.

After the men had passed Janu opened his eyes, and shared the images of the group fading behind the rollers in the distance. Immediately she pushed her charge onto the riverbank and used air to join her on the sun warmed grass. Scanned the road ahead and finally focused on a patch of long grass a few feet up the rock cliff in the distance. Shared her feeling with Janu, then walked just so fast Natasja wouldn't have to run, trough the boulder filled meadow.

Behind her the footsteps of Jean and Valentina kept up with them, and halfway to the cliff Janu agreed a small kitten was hiding in the grass. He indicated to the plateau a few meters to the left of them, took the difference between them and the grassy patch with one jump, picked up the kitten in his jaws, and in the same movement jumped on towards the plateau. Positioning himself in between the drop down and the twins flying over the edge past him.

Still the little fur ball kept dead still, and she needed to blink twice to discern it between the many rocks on the plateau. Janu translated the images coming in quick 16

succession, telling the tale of the kidnap. A large group invading the mountain cat lair, in a valley past the veils of the waterfall, jumping the walls, all of her family had made it past the falling water. Finding a trap. She had rolled down the bank escaping the grabbing hands and threatening nets . Kept running until her little paws had brought her onto the hidden lookout point halfway up to the lake.

Hair dancing in the mountain breeze far away in the distance, meant a sudden end to the tale. The seven now swerved from valley wall to valley wall, jumping onto every flat spot, checking every crack, big enough to hide a young mountain cat. Protected behind Janu, the little ball of fur moved her gaze revealing hideouts of other family members. She understood the gesture, but waited until the group was closer.

Lightning flashed over the wet rocks of the noisy stream, followed by the loud distinct growl of the sandcat. Still she did not move. The reaction of the seven was surprising, sidestepping the lightning they just went on, keeping on their hunting grid. Another lightning bolt chipped away the foothold of one of the men, trying to jump the stream. Soaking wet he appeared again, greeted with another growl of Janu.

Slowly the seven, crouched on all fours, side stepped, until they were next to their wet companion, their weapons drawn. Everyone facing a possible hideout on the slopes. One by one she let the strands of her cloak slip, and walked down towards a big rock just below her, the huge shadow of Janu keeping her out of the sun, now he stepped free of the rocky valley wall.

The display had it's effect on the seven below, stepping back as she advanced onto them. She heard the muffled complains about how they were now paid enough to take up a high mage and a full grown sandcat. Also short queries to their resident mage, ever resulting in his frantic reply, "still nothing." Finally their resolve broke when she let the lightning going back and forth between her hands, shoot out and disintegrate a boulder inches away from their feet.

Again they waited until the rolling hills had swallowed the seven. Janu had heard similar tales of kitten kidnap on his trails and urged them to start for the lake. It was the center point collecting all the streams down the mountain, and most likely the place where the raiding troop would have stashed its cages. She just nodded.

The valley walls seemed to move, as the hidden cats followed Janu and her, keeping in the shadows. As the noise of the falling water grew, an adult mountain cat stepped out in front of them. Showing images of the lake down below. She stepped up her pace, and did not stop until she stood on top of the cascade, bringing their stream down to the lake.

The voice of Janu made all that hadn't stop, look up and step back. Some even openly counting their numbers, then hurrying to fasten the cages onto the rafts at the far end of the lake. The plan was clear and she jumped shooting fireballs at the cranes, lifting the cages, using the last one to boost herself back up into the air, bridging the distance to the cages in seconds. Crashing through one of the rafts, using the lake water to rip apart others, as she shot passed them, up the river. Diving under the barge splitting it, then returning with a huge wave, pushing elf and cat alike back towards the lake shore. Using precious time to make sure all were save on the golden sandy beach.

The cat bolting for cover, the elves spitting water into the sand coughing too much too care about the cats. Air blew the bulk of the water off her onto the rock beneath her, as she watched Janu herding the soaked elves. The biggest mountain cats hissing to every side step of the raiders. Bloody ripped pants on some of them explaining their seemingly docile behavior.

Her voice thundered over the lake, echoing back for a long time until it reached the small pockets of escaped raiders hurrying down the river path. A large mountain cat stepped onto the lake shore, and she jumped towards him. Notices the little feline jumping after him, and praised her courage to her father, then showed the images of the advancing militia, she had spotted from her high vantage point. The king bowed his head, and thanked her, turned, swung his daughter onto his back and stepped along the lake shore towards the misty veil of the waterfall. Standing guard until all but one of its kin had disappeared into the mist. She and Janu bowed, and then the king was gone too.

A lonely horse and rider, finally reached the beach they were sitting on. Tried not to sound too surprised, but revealed he had expected a bigger party. Still; the mountain cat emissary stepped towards the rider and showed the tale of the passing day. The rider kept repeating his apologies and promises, to step up their guard this part of the mountains. Finishing with a bow to her, Jean, Janu and the twins.

It could have been a nice change, waking up in the sand, but she dreaded the chatter of this raid, and so hurried all onto the river road, urging Janu to find them a more secure way into the city. Janu delivered and took them up to the small paths into other valleys around the city of the rock elves.

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A valley very much like the dozens they had crossed in the last few hours. She tried to stay on the meadows as much as possible, but the valley rose and fell. The river, they were following, had bitten a hole through the rocks and she dared not go under the river bridge to wade through the river. The twins concerned themselves with the butterflies fluttering all around them. Ran after them and came back panting. Luckily Janu carried them occasionally, otherwise they would never had gotten this far. The hills became lower and from the top of one she saw the city of the rock elves. Situated in a large circular valley it was an impregnable fortress. From this height most of the city was hidden from view by the massive centuries-old forest giants. Shaped by the elves to completely overshadow the city. Only the tips of the towers around the city and a huge building, the palace, reached out above the canopy.

She had found out the twins only carried travel clothes. This town was as good as any to buy them some beautiful garments. She stood still, remembered something and consulted with Jean, who nodded, sent a signal to Janu who then went to the back sulking. Natasha and

Valentina just before him. Jean in front and she in between them. Friendly farmers and merchants greeted them as they walked through the fields towards the town. From this level you could see the strips of light running along the avenues. They walked into the shadow of the city. The market was on a small square. The trunks of the trees like pillars in a large room and beating their branches over the entire square, protecting it against the merciless sun.

The twins quickly became fustrated because of fitting so many dresses. She went from stall to stall with the twins sauntering after her. Dress after dress she made them fit. Jean had wisely taken to the side of the market with Janu and waited. Eventually she found a dress. Red with dark blue neck and arms. The disappointment was readable on the little faces of Natasha and Valentina when she reported, they still needed one more. Fortunately for them it was quickly found. The seller also had seen the faces of the twins and redirected them to an acquaintance of his. There were two bright yellow dresses shining in the sun. The glass beads woven into the fabric reflected the few rays of the sun falling on them, to all directions, as if the dress radiated light. They fitted. The negotiation about the price meant she was forced to take the matching jewelry. But after that, to the relief of Natasha and Valentina, she steered in the direction of Jean and Janu. Jean had purchased four horses. Born and raised in the mountains, accustomed to cats, they responded little to Janu. She helped the twins on their horses, took one of the reins, got from Jean the reins of her horse and walked with both through the town. Slowed every time they needed to cross a square in order to get the horses used to the hustle and followed the signs towards the lower gate, where, along the river, a road was hewn out of the rocks. Well guarded.

With the gate in sight she halted immediately after crossing a square, gestured to Jean and Janu. Turned to a young man who walked behind them, nodded at him and waited. The young man bowed, took a coin from his pocket and gave it to her. She showed it to Jean and both nodded. Let the young man take over the two free horses and followed him back into town, where he finally stopped at the stables of a large house, situated on top of one of the hills. A colonnade surrounded the house. Each column a straight tree, its branches covered with an array of ever flowering climbers who kept the living quarters in the shade. The horses were taken over, and the young man waited just long enough to lift Natasha and Valentina from their horse, before he took them to the reception room. Then bowed as farewell.

A richly dressed man did not let them wait too long and introduced himself as regent of the city. As deputy to the king he was entrusted with the security of the land. Few what was going on was not known to him. In confidence he was told of their passage, normally a message directly forgotten, were it not for an unusually large amount of robberies and assaults were reported on the southern roads. He had stepped up patrols, with their counterparts from the harbor city waiting on each other, but still traps could be made easily.

She told of the attacks in the floatcar harbor and described a single attacker and the wolves, asked if there was a route avoiding the gangs, but the regent shook his head. He was not surprised over the gangs using wolves. They helped with the communication and the gangs had spread themselves, so each high pass or narrow passage could be an easy trap. Their journey would be the safest and fastest on the roads along the river, however he would not allow travelers in his domain to be attacked. The reputation of his region was at stake.

Along with Violet, a rockelf, she rode out of the city. Both were dressed in the standard uniform of the militia of the rock elves. At each high point on top of a hill or on a bent with a view, they stood still and searched the landscape. With her magic she made incantations which enabled her to view the area better. A group of shepherds suddenly became a potential threat when it showed a dozen men laying on the ground in between the sheep. Violet took a pebble out of her bag, marked it and threw it on the path, far enough from

the side to be visible, but save enough from passing travelers. She looked back and saw Jean, Janu and the twins just leaving the city. A rockelf had taken her place and looked at this distance even a bit like her. They disappeared from sight into the gorge of the river. Nodded to Violet and gave the sign the group had started their journey. According to plan, four members of the militia would shadow the group.

Except for the group in between the sheep this side of the mountain was clean. A few oncoming travelers greeted them kindly, after which Violet boasted, when they were out of reach, the profession, residence and sometimes even the name of the traveler. It brought them on the road meandering out of the valley. They could hear the river fall in a deep gorge and the road took a more friendly route. On the back of a hill between two peaks they stopped, looking over the landscape once more. The hill where the two militias normally met, was occupied by a group of men. Here and there wolves darted through the green fields below them. Being sure the group down below had seen the two militia members on the hill, they walked back a bit into the shelter of some rocks, she wove two nets, large enough for elf and horse. Threw one over Violet, who took over the threads, neatly draped it over her and her horse and just before she completely disappeared again threw a pebble on the path. Whistled as a sign her camouflage had succeeded. Because she did not see Violet either she whistled back in answer, and together they climbed the hill a second time descending with the road on the other side, until they had meadows lying on both sides.

Violet rode away from the road against the wind. She followed, listening intently not to sounds indicating her progress. They surprised a wolf, made harmless with air and ice, and at a soft hum she stopped behind a large boulder. Found why Violet had warned and scanned the area. Saw the mages, felt their power and counted the gang members. Thirty in number, two mages, two with bow and arrow, the rest with ax or hammer. She studied the pace of the men looked at their body language and oversaw the order in the camp, gave a gentle tap on Violet, and they drove back through the pasture, until they dared to whisper. Violet wondered about the order and suspected to have seen a regiment of soldiers, not a gang with axes and hammers, as they pretended to be. She described Violet the mages, and adjusted the plans. Violet recalled from memory the road and its surrounding pastures, while they took the harness of their horses. They were strong enough to spend some time grazing on their own.

The guise on Violet needed some work, before they walked back towards the camp, had just installed themselves when the twins came into view on top of the ridge. The camp began to move, took their place behind large boulders. Only the leader and four soldiers stayed on the road.

She waited and followed the meeting and the bravado-ridden speech. Set off just when the leader was finishing his speech. Sprinted across the lawn, pulled her blue glowing sword, knew the gang members had seen the glow and saw the despair when it came down. Dodged a single attack, to see, out the corners of her eye, one of them fall. Violet was much better in stealth then she. Dropped flat on the ground to feel two arrows whizzing over her. Burning them to ashes with fire balls, fended off a small hail storm and now she had betrayed her position, torn her cloak and threw a huge hail storm over the two mages in response. Jumped, with a fireball in front of her, through her hail storm, rolled over twice, while her sword struck goal and landed on the grass behind the now dead mage. Saw the last soldier of this group die by the hand of Violet, while the leader of the gang stepped back reacting to Janu striking twice in an attack on his side. Two soldiers lay on the grass, the other two ran to the safety of the group. The leader hesitated, was not really afraid of the sandcat, but was clearly alarmed by the shouts of his men behind him.

He pulled back slowly. Saw the burned bows, her, the overall tranquility that was not supposed to be, bowing mockingly, dodging her fireball, spinned around, and lost his sword when Violet struck. Made an evasive jump, only to be bowled over by a well-aimed attack of Janu.

Air tied him down and she walked over to the second group of attackers, offered to let them live and made a man-high fireball when nothing happened. One by one the members of the gang surrendered. Bound by Violet, who had let go of her cloak, she gathered them on the road and started to drive them towards the rock elven city, helped until they found the four militia members guarding the rear. Took leave of Violet and thanked her for the help. However, she fended it off, and insisted to travel with them to the harbor. Looking at the dust on the road to the Rock Elven city, indicating help was on the way, she could accept the offer.

Their horses already came strolling towards them. Janu talked to the two cats who drove up the horses and took his time. The king and queen of the mountain cats wanted to thank them for their help. The two children were well. They also thanked the militia for the possibility to give their young warriors some extra training in interracial fighting techniques. Violet looked at her and they both nodded, had no sympathy for the wolves.

Two small lady cats stayed behind, lying in the grass, watching their every move. Violet stared at them several times, then finally came over and whispered if she would mind her altering the plan. Did not like the uncertain odds. Counting on them to spot every trap, before it slammed shut. She turned her head a little indicating Janu. If it would differ from traveling through the scorching river canyon she had no objections.

A dust cloud turned their attention towards the road leading down from the city. A few commands was enough to get the row of prisoners moving, lining up on the middle of the road. As the city militia circled around them the promised to keep this scum out of the fields for a long time.

She loaded her shiny ornamental armor on the lookout's horse, balancing the one Violet ha bound up on the other side. Pulled two black shirts from her bag and handed one over. Slowly moved over to Janu, liberating a large blanket from his back. No sooner had she spread it out, and the twins disappeared underneath it. Sensing an opportunity to get out of their uncomfortable dresses. She stared at the disappearing column, until first Natasha then Valentina reappeared in their dusty traveling clothes.

Still she hardly moved, Slowly folded the blanket back onto Janu. Then crouched to pick up the two bundles left bij the twins, storing them as the girls left them. The last trailing scouts entered the city protection, blending in with bushes around the giant trees, descending back into the valley. Valentina and Natasha already accustomed to her weird ways kept quiet petting the little mountain cats, until suddenly both sprang in action gathering speed. Scaling the high grass, to jump towards the only thorny bush on the plain. It moved, staggering back away from the cats. A small explosion hit the low level mage out cold, springing all in action.

Following the biggest of the mountain cats, they hurried off the grass plain, into the mountain foliage. Ever amazed as it bended like they held onto an invisible well traveled path. Up and down, hugging the sides of the valleys, they moved slowly south, Now and again waiting for their other guide, relaying information about the moving troops.

They had waited for the contact of the knocked out mage to go and report on them, moving off the stone road through the canyon. Their companions now where plotting their route adjusting directions as their opponent was plotting new traps on the mountain roads.

Pictures of two legged on all four limbs clumsily ruffling the bushes made them stop. The following pictures describing the upcoming trap, made her agree with their companions. The trails were not made four them, So although the cats would have no problem sneaking past the trap. It would take too long for the whole group to pass. Discussing their options, not

eager to be trapped between two militia troops, she was won for the plan the little cats had hatched.

She and Violet stepped into the shadows, following the images by the mountain cat keeping up with them save on the trail. As the militia was holding to the ancient twin strategy, meaning every militia member should be in contact with at least one other member, they knocked out each pair as they passed them. Keeping away from the ones far enough from the trail.

Leaves moving out of synch with the breeze, meant the twins had almost made it through, and she could join them further on where the trails crossed one of the mountain roads. The cover the rocks gave them was enough to safely dispose her cloaking magic. A slowly reappearing Violet was accompanied by loud screams. They followed the twins already running up the mountain road, turning when the road gave a see through militia back down chasing after them. Distracted by the sight she needed Violet pulling her back on the trails running through a cavern cutting into the mountain.

They rested looking out over the southern facing side of the mountain, watching the chasing militia explain to the troop down at the mouth of the pass, they were near. Having sneaked past them up on the mountains. It gave for some interesting insights in the structure of the militia troops.

The troops had split up again, and a sizable number had gone searching up the mountain road. Climbing up to every weird looking rock they could find. They were still watching the movements of the soldiers down below, when she suddenly adjusted her pose. Looked into the sky, staring at some green dots . Pointed them out to the others, then said an incantation to look far over the rolling hills they still had to cross. She could not count them

27

all, but estimated the advancing harbor patrol at three times the size of the group left down in the valley.

They could not inform the green birds of their whereabouts without revealing themselves so they waited.

Saw the harbor patrol closing in as the soldiers below where searching the steep rock faces. She build up power and jumped when the patrol was almost visible for the sentries down below. Lightning and fire drove the scattered militia into the arms of the advancing patrol. Landing behind the lines she warned for the militia members still up the mountain road. The captain nodded, their birds had shown them too. Then asked about the two girls. A vague gesture up the rocks was enough as the militia came running out on the plain, steering away from the harbor patrol as they spotted them. Big flaming rocks thundered from the mountain road not much later followed by violet, leisurely walking onto the plain as if nothing had happened. She whistled and about ten meters from the valley floor, Jean appeared, carrying Valentina, slipping and sliding down the cliff. Safely down Janu traveled the same path with Natasha, catching up with a few large jumps.

They were not paraded into the harbor city, instead they were taken through a huge green gate, comprised of thorny bushes, formed into a five meter long tunnel, wide enough for the garrison vehicles to glide through. The thorny walls both protecting the stationed soldiers as protecting the posh neighborhood, closing in the dust and sounds of the training ground.

After a nice meal, and a chance to change, a young girl, a bit older than the twins, came to collect them. Whisked them out of the front door, over the long driveway into the traffic, telling a thousand and one of the city gossip. Even able to exchange some more with friends hanging out on every major square they past, still never slowing down. The smell of the sea teased their noses, when the narrow alley emptied out onto the market square. The girl however steered right, entering one of the two stone spires hugging onto the market. Introduced them with the guard and then was gone.

As they probably were supposed to meet someone here she started to climb the stairs, finding the spire open up many steps higher. Huge columns taking the place of stone walls, giving them a view of the harbor and sea for miles and miles. A man clad in important clothes introduced himself as the harbor master, apologized for the unusual transport, but with so many eyes looking for them, the gossip circle was the best intelligence in his city. Especially faster than anything he could ever come up with. He hoped his daughter did not bore them too much with the insignificant city events.

In the back of the platform a muscular elf scarred by the salt winds of the everlasting oceans got up from one of the desks offering passage to the Moon Islands, requesting a sharp price, and some help in the doldrums blocking their route. Both she and Jean shook his hand thanking the captain, who pointed to his white ship. Telling them they would sail as soon as their cat companion and bags had arrived with garrison transport.

The harbor master waited until the captain could be seen walking down the docks, then asked if they could see the groups of sailors, dotted over the harbor and the market? Continued telling according to his intelligence most were new to his harbor. It could just be a coincidence, with the ship captains changing crew. Still wanted to point them out.

He had a small request. Hoped they would be willing to board their ship on high sea. Had a flat bottomed beach craft on standby. Their cat companion and goods would be delivered in crates. Pointed to some of the bigger ships, couldn't afford any form of battle in his harbor with these ocean crossing passenger liners.

The harbor master nodded as another girl entered his office. Again they seemed to be randomly crossing through residential areas. One time even entered one of the longer driveways, to circle the house, and reappear through a gap in the hedge overrun by climbers on street side. On a silent road, close to the dunes the girl stopped to open a garage on the side one of the houses. A slender craft appeared, used for races. She asked the girl if she had the magic for the boat's trailer, but she just nodded to two men appearing out of nowhere. They lifted the craft from its stand and started to climb the low saddle in the dunes, giving access to a secluded beach. The small bay in front of it sheltered by two small islands a few yards in sea.

Five people just fitted on the craft. Jean had the twins on his lap, while she and the girl both sat next to one of the raised swords at the bow. A stream off air and water lifted them into the surf, quickly gaining speed as the girl shoved the swords halfway in, and used the current to her advantage. Clearing the breakers, she released the air keeping them stable, and helped to speed up racing through the waves. Soon the islands were no more than dots in the distance, and they changed heading, setting course to intercept the white ship in the distance.

A big wave of magic woke her. Quickly she scanned the ship, then dressed in tight shirt and short pants, weaved a cloak around herself, and sneaked through the mayhem to the closest mast, climbing it, spending a few minutes crouched on the lower sail.

Two ships were boxing in their much bigger vessel. Every time their captain, making use of their size, was able to drain one of the attacking ship of the wind. The slender ships used their superior speed to close in fast.

Using a higher rope for balance she stepped over the yard to its tip, and launched herself into the sail of the closing ship, climbed it it to the top, and held her balance, waiting. The big white ship moved to a slightly different course, and the sails, for a moment slacked. She cut the riggings with one slash of her sword, and floated, guided by the falling cloth, down to the deck. Used the confusion to slowly move over it towards the bow, and watched,

hiding next to the statue guarding it, the big white ship making its escape as the sister ship turned to give aid.

She let herself fall over the rail, letting the waves gobble her up, and used some magic to get to the far side stern of the closing sister ship, moving under the boat, gaining speed, guiding waves to just reach the fringe, climbing up from there, stretching out on the bowsprit.

Both ships where joined as the sailors tied them down, and connected their rudders. The wind filling the remaining sails, brought back some speed. The steering wheel set to chase the white sails far on the horizon.

Still in the net over the bowsprit she waited, noting the triumphant cheer, accompanying the raising of the slashed sail, only barely. Just kept an eye on the distance between the twin ship and its quarry. Her attention focused on short waves creating some drag. She however could not get them on the right line traveling in between the two ships. Felt the ocean protest against their speed, and needed two hands to keep her in balance every time the ships raced through some huge wave. Keeping her busy until the sails at the horizon had become three times as big, and the sea calmed down again.

The flow of the bow waves was now tangible for her, using them as guidance for her small waves. Eventually finding a way through, testing it with some ice. Hitting home. Then threw in fire, encased in ice, slowly chipping away at the wood of the twin rudders.

The three white masts detached themselves from the horizon when both crews were ordered to stand ready for breakup. Counting down. Shouting orders. Unwinding half. Loosen the remaining. Ten, the five seconds to go. A big crack, shaking the ships, accompanied the separation of the rudders. Disintegrating them, leaving the captains without control. She slipped over the side deck. Jumping in one of the dinghies. Kicking out its back with the same slash as she freed it from its prison, just when it again swung outwards. The thump on the sea making her bounce, getting her legs over the void at the back end of the raft, speeding it up. Increasing the distance between her and the drifting ships.

Toughing out the winds, using them to chop up her tiny vessel, until just the bottom of it remained, and she finally was able to ride underneath the winds, always keeping her back to the twin ships. At long last she made some headway. Adjusted her style, now slicing through the waves, keeping the bow in the water. Gave up some distance, checking her whereabouts on top of an enormous wave, then adjusted once more, riding the next wave at full speed, feeling the grip of the storm slowly dissipating.

As she glided closer to the big white ship a large cloth was thrown overboard. She headed for it, finding the rope attached to it, and just needed to hold on, to be hauled in, getting a hand of Jean for the final tug. She nodded to the captain, then collapsed to the deck, catching her breath, as the orders rolled over her head to get the crew back in motion. Straightening the sails into the wind.

Instead of helping with the ships speed, the captain had asked her to be the lookout on the platform, high up on the back mast. She regularly weaved the threads to get the far and misty look clear for her, but being miles of the common shipping lanes, the only thing she saw was the flight of the seabirds adjusting on trade winds at certain times of the day.

As the wind picked up again, she checked the flight of the birds. Looked at the waves far in the distance, and decided to get some sleep, trusting the winds to take them safely to the eastern harbor, now they were in the reach of the Lords of the Wind. The eastern harbor, to her eyes, had always been the most beautiful. A large arch marked the harbor entrance. High enough to sail underneath it. Two narrow columns illuminated the port day and night, and a marble quay ran around the circular port. Behind the quay piled a series of terraces to the top of the cliff, boasting a beautiful flower fence separating the city from the harbor. Where every other port, unrest and junk always prevailed, here rest and almost unnatural beauty was the norm.

She had put on her traveling dress once again with her sword strapped on. She stood proudly next to Janu, waiting for Jean, Natasha and Valentina. The twins in their perky yellow dresses, made the sun reflect in their jewelry, and the many glass beads on their dresses. Many heads turned around. Admiring glances, but also greedy, quickly changing when their eyes spotted her. She was still known here, so much was certain. Jean paid the captain the requested amount, who took the money, and made a stately bow to her when she walked onto the quay.

The terraces brought them up into the city. Imperceptibly she gave Janu a message to look for suitable transportation. Lunar island was the domain of the moon wolves. Although slightly larger than the one who attacked them at the beginning of the journey, they were still no threat to Janu. The horses were a problem. They were unaccustomed to the wolves. On top of the highest terrace before entering the gate through the hedge you already could see the inn. A large open building filled with elves. She saluted the innkeeper and a servant followed them to their rooms on the first floor. After she checked if the twins and Jean had installed themselves, she went downtown with Janu. No high build towers in the cities of the wind. Yet they were among the most beautiful in the elvenworld. The lords of the wind had water and wind at their disposal and using the coarse coastline with cliffs and caves, the eastern harbor city had arissen flowing up and down with the coastline of the island. Climbers of all sorts grew along the walls and floors of the city, getting enough light even in de caves by ingenious dwarves craft, which transformed them into beautiful gardens. Janu stopped for a walled off space. she looked at him in astonishment. A picture of Valentina and a great fighter flew through her head. This was the only one who he would trust with Valentina. Gray with black stripes and yellow cheek, a sand cat stood proudly in the pit. As big as Janu and maybe even a bit more impressive. Once Janu fought with him for control over their people. Janu had lost and had chosen the path of adventure. Now years later the sand cat, Daku, was succeeded by a younger and stronger leader, and he too had chosen the path of adventure. Janu jumped under loud protests from the merchant in the pit and tested Daku. Though older and grayer, his reflexes were still as sharp as her sword. Just as the merchant was about to have a nervous breakdown, the two cats stopped and bowed. Daku had accepted the assignment if he could cope with Valentina. She paid the merchant.

Back at the inn, Daku was introduced to Valentina. She bowed to him and stroked him through his manes. Daku licked her hand, and gave an approving image of her. She left Valentina with Daku to get acquainted, went to her room and began an inventory. The list got longer and longer. Eventually she gave the list to the landlord, who nodded and said it would be ready the next morning.

On her advice Jean had sold the horses. She packed her belongings and those of Jean and the twins on the sand cats, took the hand of Natasha and Valentina and led them through the city out the island gate. At the beach, she told how the people of the Moon Islands traveled. At certain times the Lords of the Wind made a current flow around the island group. Everywhere on the beaches lay low wide boards. You simply got on one, paddle through the surf and let the current carry you to the island you wanted to visit. For the lucky few with some wind or water magic, still a quarter of the population, the journey was not restricted to those times. With a simple sail or sword they boosted their vessel through the water.

During the trip over see she had doubted long between the official ferry to the western harbor, and traveling over the roads of the Lords of the Wind. Eventually she chose to hide among the thousands of small and big islands and only emerge close to the western harbor.

At the end of the story she put her shoes in her pack, grabbed a plate, got it in the surf and sat on it. A small movement in the water made her plate go forward. Perfected a demonstration circle, dropped back and stranded herself on the beach. The twins had already thrown off their shoes and stood with a plate in both hands dancing in the surf. She helped them on their plates and let them ride through the surf, after which she let them practice getting on and off. The first few times they did not immediately address the middle and tipped the board. Soaking they got up out of the surf to directly make another try. Eventually they had the sea legs to make the mount and dismount appear all too easy.

Jean had undressed, needed several tries to tackle the technique and was now drying up. He nodded to the sand cats, and asked how they would make the trip. She was not worried. Previous adventures had proved the winds in the desert required the same technique as the waters here. She had bought them especially larger cattle plates. The shepherds used them for transport of the short-legged sheep from island to island. She pointed to the stack at the edge of the beach.

Without hesitation, they got their paws on their plate and waited for the rest. When Jean and the twins were out of the surf she stepped on her plate, and launched herself in the surf. Janu and Daku gave push and joined her through the rough surf. The roads of the Lords of the Wind were open and slowly it got hold of the plates so they would float along with it through the archipelago.

The lagoon contained many brightly colored fish and soon Natasha and Valentina lay down with their heads over the sides to look at everything happening beneath them. Occasionally she corrected one of the plates to keep them together, but mostly she sat and looked at the islands wondering.

She finally sent the plates in the direction of a small barren island, they could continue with her magic, but moving six boards took quite some concentration, which she also needed to scan for trouble. From her bag she pulled a map of the archipelago, showing Jean and the cats what her plans were. She wanted to use the night wind to sail across the current, every time divided into three stages. Natasha with Janu, Valentina with Daku, and Jean with the rest of the stuff. During the day they could ride the roads of the Lords of the Wind to reach the west side.

One day slowly flowed into the next. At fixed times on the day they drifted along the roads of the Lords of the Wind. At night she used magic to put themselves into the wind to move to another island. Had anyone seen them, the next day they would be somewhere else. Everyone drifted in the same direction at the same speed. Every time they saw a speck on the horizon drifting somewhat closer, she sped up the plates a bit.

Suddenly, she felt danger. On the horizon a boat shot through the water, transverse to the direction of the current. A sharp turn meant they were spotted. She herded the plates to the nearest island, but was too late. The bow wave of the boat was pounding the boards on the water. Natasha and Valentina who were already flat on their plates had just become wetter. The two cats used to some turbulence had turned into the wave, and surfed out the rough water. Jean however had tipped over and hung on his plate in the water. She glided toward him and helped him back on his plate.

The boat had made a big loop and came racing back, stopped, and she saw two mages mumble some incantations. Large waves pulled up between her and the twins. She glanced at Jean who made a gesture he could survive, after which she concentrated on the twins. Still flat on her board Natasha now lay half in the water. Valentina had slid off and struggled to find her plate again. The boat started moving again. She too was now lying on her stomach. With two hands free a fountain of water spewed. The boat could barely dodge it. The snake still hanging in the air, turned and hit one of the mages into the water. Suddenly the boat dived in a hole. She held the walls for a little while, after which she let them collapse on the boat, which broke and sank.

She stood up, dropped her dress with a quick move onto the board and slid into the water. Using her magic shot beneath the waves towards the twins, with Valentina, splashing in the water as a reference. She seized her and pushed her back on her plate. It turned and accelerated toward Daku, who was holding her plate so Valentina could jump over and climb right on his back holding tight to his manes.

The mages were as nimble as she and had reached Natasha. One grabbed her plate, the other tried to grab her ankles. natasa, however, jumped over their heads into the water. A wave pushed her away from her attackers. Countering the mages with an ice wall gave Natasha enough time to reach her, pushed her onto her back and pulled her arms around her waist. Pushed her up, to let her breathe, all the time keeping track of their assailants. Small stabbings underwater kept them busy enough for her to reach Janu. Trembling like a leaf Natasha joined him.

The mages now tried to get Daku from his plate. She grinned, dived underwater, but A big wave ended the struggle. Two ships shot behind it, adjusting to pick up all that could be found. The mages aboard welcomed them onto their ship, and told their presence was required by the Lords of the Wind.

Many intrigues on the islands currently revolved around two little earth elves and their companions. Reaching from the brutal, requesting able souls for several assaults. To the

bizarre, telling she had abducted the girls and were en route to sell them as slaves. The lord of the winds would gladly remove the source of these intrigues from their domain. She nodded, accepted their invitation, and walked to the back of the ship to explain it to the two cats, still on their boards, accelerating them to keep up with the already moving ship.

Their shadow was quickly found, picked up, and the ship headed for the residence of the Lords of the Wind. Knowing local rules, they would be brought before the court. The Lords had settled on a large island completely overgrown with towering trees. When she walked through a corridor filled with fragrant blossoms, it slowly ran down to ultimately empty out on a large open space, running on many stories below them. The palace spread itself out over the funnel. Hundreds of statues, windows and terraces were carved in stone, bleached by the sun and then overgrown with creepers, so the whole palace seemed green with white, red, pink and purple stripes, where the flowers had bloomed. They were taken off the terraces to the huge with grass overgrown space at the bottom of the funnel. The throne room.

The Lords of the Wind thanked her for coming, and at the same time requested for her aid. As ever they kept a watchful eye on the world and did not like the current affairs in the earth elf realm. Had for a very long a stable governing system in the Lunar Isles, still it upped their vigilance.

She nodded, knew the layout of the island realm, and there were enough spots to startup some kind of movement. Understood now it already had arisen, and thought it would be a good opportunity to study it up close. She pointed towards the twins, requesting save transfer to the mainland for them. Told about the affairs befallen to them on their travels through the mountains. Concluded that she thought the road down the royal road towards the capital would be too big a risk. A short deliberation was followed by a warm welcome for the twins, and the promise they would be delivered safely to the port beneath the black mountains. She bowed in thanks. The port was the only under the control of the Lords of the Wind.

One of the Lords asked if the sand warriors would join her. Skilled in using the heavy winds they would be an asset to the party. He waited a bit, then stepped back to confer with the mage who had been walking up to the dais. "Good news from the mainland", we can offer you to set up a bigger party to get you through the Black Mountains, with the expertise needed..

It was not polite to ask where the Lords of the Wind had found a dwarf to help them through the ancient dwarf city underneath the black mountains, but it was a flaw in het plans. So she looked at Janu and Daku, and after their consent, accepted the offer gratefully. Counting on some interesting tales during their trip through history.

The Lords now changed voice. "It is most likely known to you how our society has come into existence. Still it needs to be told, to get the extend of what you are up against. Far outside the archipelago, in the busy sea lanes lies the island of myths. Long ago our ancestors build up an empire from there, to control the seafaring nation gaining influence. Now their palaces and gardens are mere ruins, and we respectfully leave them to their former occupants, only gathering there on out holiday, celebrating the founding of our empire."

"Last year many of us had an itching feeling on the island. Nothing could be found that would have caused it, still we kept a close eye on the island since then. Some movement is violating our ancestors well earned peace. Ships sailing close enough to the Island of Myths however do not account for the level of activities we have monitored on the island surface. Activities violating the ancient laws of separation. The small ship was gathering crew by the hour as the Lord's mages gathered, racing from all the corners of the empire on their slender boards. As they entered the Lords roads two mages were shadowing them. Small flashes of light reflecting on the intricate markings on the skin of the one high up in the air. She nodded as the cats made her aware of them. Had heard of them in the tales down every inn close to an ocean faring harbor. The fabled nursery was in the vicinity of the Island of Myths. So it definitely was one of the stakes in this joust.

When she tried to follow the girl speeding through the water. She changed her markings fading in favor of a bluish gray, and soon she blended in with all other fish circling the reefs around this island.

Hours passed until one of the Lords mages suddenly jumped up, and stared at the coast of the Island of Myths. In the end pointing to a small sandy beach, declaring it their rallying point. Daku and Janu, still on their boards were cut loose from the main ship, and picked up by mages already in the water on their narrow race boards. She wove a net, used some air to fill it and chose to fly over the lagoon. Not as cunningly disguised as the lightning girls, but adequately cloaked nonetheless.

From above she kept an eye on all crossing to the tiny beach, and only descended when all had landed safely. Circling down, a picture landed in her head. She adjusted according to the information from the girl, still high up in the air. The cut her chute. Plunged down to the sand, not caring about the dust cloud she created upon landing. With quick words she described the threat watching them from out of the island foliage, and even before she ended, all were in motion, climbing or jumping the rocks, aiming for the sharpened rock spiking into the air. She helped the cats for the last big jump up. Then ran after them into the dark tunnel.

Crisscrossing through the maze of caved in tunnels they finally ended up next to the underground basin, the primary water source in the islands heydays. One of the mages

explained the route through the water channels, adding where they could, and could not, breath. The nodded to her to take point.

Slowly emerging into the icy waters she put on the water goggle she had been given, and propelled herself into the described tunnel. Waiting at the breathing spots just long enough to relay all was still save. Just before the climb up, magic could be felt blazing freely on the other side of the wall. She relayed back, the palace floor being occupied. Cloaked herself then climbed up to the big hole, once being the huge nozzle of a impressive fountain.

Peaking over the edge of the wall she searched for the light source, finding it to be the caved in ceiling, and positioned herself into the hall without making too much of a shadow on the walls. On a huge pile of rocks and dirt, four pillars had been erected, holding a portal in place, opening and closing as humans rushed through it bringing in goods, throwing it down as if they were hiding it from someone on the other side of it.

A flickering in the open ceiling like a bird flew by, made her climb up onto the second balcony, and got the images from outside, where discussions where flailing, over which course to take. All humans outside had donned their weapons, and stayed close to the palace entrances, searching the valley's foliage intensely.

"We are keeping to the plan", the girl whispered. Then a gust of wind, and she was gone again. She whistled a few sharp notes then moved over the balcony to the other side of the hall. Then whistled again, though this time another song, watching the crowd below react.

Fire and ice swept all from the portal mount, and with air she jumped to land in front of it. All knew the risks of the portal as none of the resident humans used their guns, just turned around the mount using the bigger rocks as cover. She kept their attention on her with her magic until two mighty roars announced the presence of the huge sand cats. For a second all stood still, then an order was should, and one by one the humans dashed the palace ground, chasing up the ramps leading to the valley outside. The magic of the portal behind her surged, making her jump. On a screen she looked down on two humans clad in simple clothes. The badge in the hair of the woman however she recognized. Both humans had crouched down upon entering the hall. Also using the portal as a shield, and looked bewildered at the fleeing humans.

Almost back down at the mount she cut the strands and landed in front of the two, saluting in the fashion of their military order. Her name was known to them, as both bowed deeply, and gave her time to draw out what she had been witnessing in the last minutes. Got a description back from what was happening on the other side of the portal. Thanked them for the information, and motioned them to stay put close to the portal.

From the moment of the salute all mages had focused on the crouching humans, closing in slowly as certain as areas of the palace grounds had become vacated.

A small fire ball through the open roof kick started a set of high pitched noises. All counted down how many of the pillars of the wind the two girls outside had started, then waited for the wind to pick up. Channeling it through the roof, until it was strong enough to propel them all, up the ramps. Surprising the militia outside. Fire and Ice rained down and twisters uprooted every pocket of resistance, until all humans had thrown down their weapons, surrendering to whatever was causing this mayhem.

Still the winds held strong, pushing the militia away from their weapons, only to die down suddenly when they had been gathered. She send a picture of the one giving the orders to Janu and soon he was staggering towards her, keeping his distance from the fierce cat.

The two from the portal had followed one of the mages out of the palace, when the two girls descended from the valley crest, fading out their disguises. They landed close to her, and her captive. The tallest demanded to know, out of the name of the Lords of the Wind, who the humans were, and what their business was in the empire of wind and water. The commander snorted, refusing to cooperate. Laughing at the two girls, telling them to go back to school. All the mages stepped back a few paces, and the commander shifted uneasy from one feet to the other. Looking from the girls to the mages and back to the girls. Finally deciding to bow slightly, demanding the Lords of the Wind to step before him. A gust of wind picked up the commander, bouncing him in the wind like a ragdoll. He kept a straight face, until lightning shot past him, missing him by just a few yards, disintegrating the rocks beneath him. Then the words came swift. Telling about establishing a foothold and safe haven for his organization. Keeping it for more than a year, training recruits, to get them accustomed to magic. More information did not pass his lips, as he kept repeating he did not know his commander, and the bigger picture, or where the recruits were sent.

The two girls turned, discarding the commander, and welcomed the two emissaries from the human world, requesting kindly to give their version of this illegal siege of land belonging to the empire of wind and water.

The woman introduced herself as Lisa, emissary from the United States of America, then introduced he companion as the emissary of the islands of the Caribbean, upon which the land in the human world belonged. Lisa explained her agency had been searching for places where militia's had been training. Stumbling on this island by chance, when they interrogated some young recruits they had captured. Her commander on the other side had set up a taskforce to eliminate the threat, but now probably could use some help dismantle the portal.

Both the girls nodded to her, and thanked the two for their insight. The tall one paused for a short time then focused again on Lisa, requesting if there was enough room for all to join their own world. Lisa nodded, turned from left to right, stating loudly her terms of surrender in several human languages.

Shortly after the humans got up from the ground, walked in single file towards the palace entrance, picking up their commander when they passed him. The girls walked up with

her, following the line. A boat was already en route to pick up her and the cats, for the trip over the ocean. A second one would be sent when they were save at the mainland harbor. She nodded and thanked them and the Lords of the Wind, they communicated with, and promised to close the portal. Asking if the mages could dissipated the turbulence keeping the palace save for their ancestors

Before she started the procedure she asked Lisa to meet up at the royal palace of the Queen of Elves, to discuss the disturbances she was currently dealing with.

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It was the second day at an inn on the coast of the Black Mountains. They had spend a long night talking about their adventures and she was confident the two dwarves were an asset for the group. Although the tales were of course greatly exaggerated for the romance of adventure. They had found a swamp cat willing to guide them. She knew her tale and agreed she had to come along with the group. Her black and green fur had the markings of a leader Daku told her, though they seemed to her just as any other. Negotiations were underway with one of the strongest rock mages on this side of the ocean.

She lay on her stomach on a bed. A painter was busy at her skin painting various incantations. The sign of light on her cheek had returned, of course, but her whole body was now covered. Two brown and white snakes curled around her arms, with the mouth and eyes on the back of her hands. Two cats with markings, similar to their companion, stood guard sitting on her feet and the painter was busy with an eagle, lying on her back with his wings protectively beaten around her. Quietly she enjoyed the brush running over her skin. The

sounds of an incantation made her wake up. The artist was activating her work. She felt the snakes around her arms, crawling a bit around her arms before they finally settled down. The cats moved slightly, allowing her feet a gentle movement. Finally she felt the wings of the eagle curled around her body when occupying his protective position.

The artist gave her a towel. She wrapped it around her and got up. At that time the twins came storming into the room and energetic showed her all the drawings and characters painted on their skin. She recognized the signs, the runes would protect them against most incest bites, the drawing would do the same against other underground horrors they would find. The painter had already left the room and when she got dressed, the twins went silent for a moment. Natasha and Valentina gently let their fingers glide over the painted snakes. She dressed slowly.

There was knock at the door. Just dressed, she walked to the door and opened it. Jean came in followed by the dwarves, their contact and the rock mage. The mage was introduced, and everyone waited for her to vote if he would get the job or not. She walked toward him and embraced him. It was too long ago that she had hugged her brother. He was big and strong now. It seemed yesterday that she had hugged her eight year old brother to bits when she left her family. Of course he would do. Yet she was worried. She knew how dangerous the roads were.

The mage introduced his sister as a rock and striving for every right-minded adventurer. She smiled shyly. It was strange not to see her brother as the little Luc, but this almost two meters long mage who could split rocks on command and deliver sand storms from a small breeze.

The great stone gate towered above them. They just embarked from a floatcar and followed the road that led towards it. It indicated the importance of the Dwarf City, the Black

Mountains were, once, before the breaking of the world. The road was 50 meters wide and boasted ravines on both sides slowly snaking toward the gate. On a flat stretch of road they beat up camp. Once when the dwarfs were still living here, all roads in the mountain were heavily guarded and safe. Now the rock elves passed through the mountain once a month to make repairs and deliver save passage. The corridors were now the domain of nocturnal animals, which had developed full subspecies. Hundreds of thousands crowded the corridors living on fungi, mushrooms and each other. The voyage of the rock elves was the only option for lone travelers to cross the mountains. With the knowledge of the dwarves and Luc who had walked the route many times, the trip might just succeed.

Alexandra had sent the three of them ahead. Deena although she clearly was much smaller than them had the stance and the pace of a leader. Daku and he therefore had absolutely no problems taking her. He even felt a little responsible for her. Alexandra had asked Daku and him to watch over her a bit. He grinned, if she needed help they would have to deliver it without her knowing.

At the end of the path to the entrance they scanned the rock on every corner for exits. Ultimately, only the main entrance gave access to the cave behind it. At the entrance Daku gave him a picture, followed almost instantly by Deena. He too had felt it. A pack of wolves was lying in the space behind probably enjoying the spoils of the hunt. Carefully they crept towards the gate and Daku could not resist a mighty roar. The wolves, which were already alert to see what was out walking about, jumped back. Ten wolves launched an attack to enable the pack to flee. He knew the tactic and kept them busy, had nothing against these wolves. Occasionally he gave one coming to close a good whack, sending it bouncing through the room, just to show there really was no fooling with them. Daku, he saw, had the same attitude. Together facing most of the wolves. The few who broke through, towards Deena got a worse deal. What she lacked in strength, she made up for by speed and ferocity. The wolf pack had now reached one of the bridges and slowly the ten wolves pulled back, following their families. Daku led the way and they ran to the other side of the huge space. He felt much in the rooms they passed, not much bore him great concern. A single smell gave some cause for concern, but there were always only two. Nothing Alexandra could not handle. Something to report.

It was already dark when they came back. Daku reported to Alexandra. Images of a pack of wolves at the entrance, followed by a picture of three cats at the entrance and finally a warning for something bigger than wolves, but traveling in pairs.

The next day they broke camp and walked the final stretch to the gate. Two immense dwarves were guarding both sides of the gate their axes crossed over, so forming the roof of the gate. Luc sent a warning through the gate. They saw black shadows dive in even darker holes. The hall was huge. Thanks to the light holes in the ceiling, she had reasonable view of the hall. As large as the square of the setting sun, and a church tower in the human world, would easily be able to stand in the hall without touching the ceiling. One of the dwarfs told them, once, this would have been the market hall of this great city of dwarves. Gold, silver, coal, iron and diamonds were traded for the goods which the dwarves needed. Mainly wood and food but also clothing was brought in. During the tale he repeatedly pointed to a driveway leading to the section of the hall these goods were traded in. On the arches over the driveways you could sometimes still see the signs representing the trade. The thick stone driveways looked like a multi legged spider lying on its back. Despite the many centuries, only the decoration of the driveways had worn.

One of the legs ran back down into the mountain. They walked towards it, and stepped on the big bridge into the hopper providing access to the spiral. The drum of stone on stone echoed through the hallways, as they walked down the funnel to reach the main road through

the mountain range. Luc started telling about the wildlife they would encounter, and how they normally would get their food. Believed the noise was from someone deep in the mountain protecting himself with earth magic against one of the vast wolf troops.

They discussed this extensively, and unfortunately the nature of this mountain meant there was no way to figure out where the noise was coming from. It meant the dwarves straight away deviated from the main road, going up a steadily rising road, entering the portal it ran through. Following the road, until they entered a huge square with a void on the far end. The first of the great halls. So deep into the mountain range, all was dark, and it took the dwarves, circling the square two times before they found the road, taking them into the maze of driveways, connecting both sides of this huge space.

A few hours in, a faint light appeared in the direction of the main road. Some noise, then more lights. Staying there as long as they had a view on them. The road they traveled on, had started to wind down. Gradually working itself into the wall. It emptied out on a domed, circular space. The dwarves took the widest road, and let it bring them towards the next great hall.

This one was running parallel to the main road, and because they had to travel it from end to end, they took a gamble. Staying on the wide central road, even though the cats warned about the abundance of wolves inside the hall, flashing through their lights as shadows.

Some time traveling on the road, suddenly the wolves started to howl, and bunched up, running up and down ramps. They followed them with their lights and soon saw the reason of all the commotion. A huge lizard was walking after them, tracking them, according to Luc. More would be on the prowl.

Her fireball changed into huge fire spirits as the wolves got closer. They had settled themselves on a square, hoping to give the raging troop options. The wild dance of the spirits slowed the flow of the troop enough to react to the howls of the ones finding a way off the

49

square. Slowly backing out protecting those running on, behind them. Taking up the rear of the troop as it passed.

The huge lizards never stepped onto the wide road, turning on its tracks. They used the standoff to make haste chased by the echoes of the wildlife behind them.

The rhythmic thumping of stone on stone, now and again arising from the usual echoes, made much more sense now. She questioned the dwarves the next time they rested. They nodded there were parts of the city, especially connecting roads between the great halls where they could be trapped. Giving stampeding troops no option but to fight the obstacle, fight them. They went over the layout of the underground city and adjusted their route. Leaving out the some of the long connecting service tunnels, opting for the wider roads. Discussing long about the complex in a unstable part of this mountain, and the winding road down to the lower reaches of the city.

Carefully they entered the road into the complex. The cats running ahead, and waiting on them, smelling for danger, sensing no troop this side of the small stone maze. The dwarfs led them into the maze, carefully plotting a course, giving the most crossroads intersecting their path. A single wolf racing past over the upcoming intersection, made them stop in their tracks. She conjured up some fire spirits, and slowly they she stepped onto the square. The cats each took one direction to scout, but not long after Deena came running back, showing pictures to defend themselves. They didn't even have time to negotiate a different path through the complex as both Janu and Daku came running back with wolves in blind panic chasing at their tails.

She was pushed back on the road they came from, with Deena like a whirlwind around her feet. The square in front of her black with the passing wolves. Not able to see the others she used her magic only to split a path through the flow of body's. Slowly she progressed back onto the square, to show the dwarves, Jean and Luc, hugging the walls. Swinging their weapons as barrier for the moving stream. One by one she gathered them and together they fought their way out of the square into the hallway the dwarves had seen Janu and Daku disappear into. Not willing to wait for whatever was driving the herd of wolves through the city maze, they went on in search of the sandcats.

Here and there she saw a seal. She sighed. The twins took a chance even in this fight making a track for her to follow. She walked ahead down to the next intersection in the road and read the stamps. The fight had the two sand cats driven backwards. In some places were fewer seals. She suspected the two cats occasionally got some space between them and their attackers. Two hundred yards away the seals suddenly disappeared. Apparently, the cats had penetrated into a corridor.

She told what she had seen. The dwarfs told what to expect in these tributaries. The only entrances were here. So eventually the cats would have to come back here. Luc frowned. The labyrinth here was large, and covered many miles. This was also one of the places where they occasionally encountered rock iguanas. He also asked if the maze had exits out onto the rocks. The dwarves were surprised and said that this was indeed the case. Only they were vents which came out on steep cliffs. Luc told them of the rock iguanas. Lizards as large as the largest sand cats and hunters in the mountains. The dwarves nodded worried.

It was now clear they would search for the twins and the two sand cats. They decided to cross the maze twice. Hoping Janu and Daku would cross their route and eventually find them. As the most powerful she would follow the seals. In any case, they would return here at the end of the day.

She said her farewell and walked to the doorway where the seals had stopped. Deena walked after her. She welcomed the company. The sand cats were running quickly. She still

saw two types of seals, a sign the twins were still together. Stepped through corridor after corridor, occasionally placing a seal of her own. The seals let her criss cross through the maze. Occasionally she saw traces of fights, always with wolves remains. Sometimes she came to passages with stamps up and down the corridor. She left them alone, hoping for a dead-end corridor, or a trick of Janu and Daku to get the wolves off their track, anyway Deena never gave them a second look. Deena suddenly grunted and cowered back. She too stepped back. Pulled her sword out and went in cautiously. Hit the corner and stood face to face with two rock iguanas. She had just enough time to raise her shield, before she was thrown backwards. In her mind hugging Deena, she used the wall and stood with her sword ready for the next attack. It came hitting her only just, still was thrown back a few meters, but her sword was dripping with blood. Not waiting for the next attack she sent out a fireball. It would not harm the iguanas but gave her enough time for the next attack, to take the iguana head on. A whirlwind half-strangled one and threw it into the corridor. The second one she hit into the ground, her sword catching it full. Its tail writhing on the floor. She was knocked back, again just reacted a little too late on the next attack. Felt teeth in her arm, then no more. She raised a shield expecting the next attack. The iguana, however, had been gutted by dwarve axes. Jean came running to her. She bared her arm for him and let him see the wound. Surprised she could get hurt, he felt her arm, pulled out the poison and healed it. Then she noticed the other iguana. A big snake was thrown around the animal and had strangled it. She stared at her arm. She would have to be more cautious. Time to thank Deena.

Her sister stuck seals to the ceiling and the wall. Small and awkward because she held on with all her strength, but Alexandra would definitely be able to read them. Now they got used to the flow of attacks, block and dodge, she began to weave a few too. Janu and Daku were slowly driven back into a corridor. She could barely discern the rest in the big tangle of bodies and wolves. Ever further back the pack pushed them. Janu and Daku occasionally voluntary gave up a few meters. She got each time a warning of Daku and gripped him tighter. They then had a little more space and threw a few wolves to the ground and trampled them. Eventually, she was warned by Daku. Their position was hopeless. Enclosed on two sides and no prospect on an ending of the attack. They wanted to look for a place that offered more opportunities. She looked at Natasha, who nodded and pulled herself tighter onto Janu. She pulled the washers once more around her wrists and then felt Daku launch them into a side hall, with Janu panting in her neck. Occasionally one of the two ducked into a corridor, and turned back. So they stayed until they got into a hall. Both sand cats flew apart, almost ran over the wall and came to rest at the other end. She saw two large iguanas tackling the pursuers. Daku stayed briefly, but then followed Janu into the next corridor. Many doors passed until they slowed their pace. The wolves were not following. She sent a sign asking Daku, who agreed. Dismounted and checked Daku. He had accumulated quite a few scratches. She hugged him long and then looked at her sister, not surprised that she was doing the same. Zigzagging through the corridors, Janu found a track. Not much later they saw the dwarves, and Jean and Luc, but Alexandra was not there. Fearful she heard her sister ask the question, but Alexandra followed their route. At the same time they should: "Iguana". Janu and Daku were already on their way to the spot, the rest followed. They were just in time to see the fight start. She saw Alexandra dodge attacks, held her breath when Alexandra was hit, and only breathed again after the dwarven axe had cleaved through the iguana.

Safely through the complex on a far away platform they could rest, and spy on the soldiers camping on the central road shouting directions to their compatriots still trapped on the many ramps close to the it. The lights illuminating occasionally something looking like a dead wolf.

It made for a daring plan to get on the central road. Accessing the funnel leading to the lower end of the mountain range. She asked the dwarves to lookout and plan for such an opportunity. The dwarves took the front and lead them through the labyrinth. Unfortunately they had to cross the great hall, but a few levels higher than where the highway ran. They stepped cautiously out of the hall upon a terrace. Sand and hail storms swept the patio, so Luc made a shield in protection. She scanned the activities below. A hundred men stood on the square and held a pack of wolves at bay. She got a picture of Daku with a man who killed a cat, he found familiar adversaries. She asked the dwarfs to search for a suitable camp site nearby. They had to do battle with this group and the hall had a lot of advantages. She asked Janu and Daku to look for rock iguanas. Where a pack of wolves were, iguanas would be found too she reckoned. Daku with Valentina and Janu with Natasha both patrolled the hallways and made a circle around their camp, avoiding the great hall. Both gave images there were three pairs of iguanas slowly moving towards the great hall. She put it to the dwarfs, along with the plan to drive iguanas toward the hall. The dwarves understood the advantage, but grumbled about the dangers. Yet they made the calculation two pairs would come close together some corridors from the camp. They broke camp and she sent a message to the cats in which direction they went. The dwarfs led them, with a flanking movement, to the right point. When they were almost behind the iguanas, Janu joined them. He confirmed the proximity of the two couples. They slowed down and waited for Daku. Only then she walked faster, overtook the first pair in a hallway opening onto the great hall. One of the iguanas had smelled them, turned around and headed in their direction. Suddenly it stalled. Two dwarves axes and a sword where in the air, dispersing dead iguana sent. The iguana did a mock attack and went the other direction.

The second pair was harder to seduce, but a severed tail and a disk of iguana meat cut off by a dwarven axe made again for the desired effect. The dwarves led them to the main road on the other side of the hall and they waited.

The domino effect began to work. The pack of wolves on the side of the rock iguanas, had smelled the two couples. They were stuck between two evils, the people they feared the least. The attack on the troops became more frantic and the troop gained ground toward an exit for them. More men were deployed to halt the attack, which gave other wolves an opening and made them attack more fanatically. Briefly creating a new balance, broken by the two couples of rock iguanas attacking the pack of wolves. Four wolves were captured and slain. As a result, the rest of the gang ran past the iguanas on the road to freedom. Alexandra had been waiting for this. A fireball from her and a hail storm of Luc split the group of men into two. Janu and Daku lunged at the group each time injuring or killing one of the men. Slowly the men were forced towards the rock iguanas, which were not served by this attention and attacked to protect themselves and their loot. The well-organized troops now fell apart and a few of the small groups were easily dealt with by her and her friends. They walked to another exit of the hall and disappeared into the labyrinth led by the dwarves. Only when they were deep in the labyrinth she signaled a stop.

The scouts had found them fast, but dared not come too close. They were in a stalemate position. They had to go through the great hall to get on their way. But she did not want to take that risk, and the men could not get close enough to set up a full attack. A mage had tried. She had felt him quite early, surprised and slain him a good distance from the camp.

Already for two days they were stuck in one of the smaller halls. The hall had two levels and they were sitting on the middle plateau on the second level. With only two entrances to the plateau they were reasonably safe. The rest was searching for a way out of this trap, without having to go through their opponents.

55

One of the dwarfs came running up. They had found an emergency corridor. Not understanding, she looked at him. She had checked herself. The only way out was through the great hall, but familiar with the mechanics of the dwarfs, and the cities age, she still listened. An emergency corridor was a piece of wall much thinner than the rest. The corridor connected two labyrinths with each other and could fairly easily be cut through if a labyrinth was no longer accessible because of a cave in.

She went with him. Could not distinguish the corridor the dwarfs pointed at from the rest of the wall. They had calculated they would enter the main road about 500 meters from the great hall. If they could cut through the stone with little sound it would be possible. The following hours gathered them about the possibilities and impossibilities of the escape. Luc thought he could crumble the wall without too much noise. The twins had discovered the soldiers were doing their rounds every half hour. At most there would be twenty minutes before an attack would be launched. Again she looked at Luc. How far was it to the next defensible space. Luc thought. "After this hall there were still five more. Between each hall was a small piece without side-passages. Only after the last great hall was a long corridor with no side passages." The dwarves nodded. "The descent to the marshes on the other side?" Luc nodded. "After the descent there are four of these halls, but we should make speed through them, because they are usually packed with small vermin. Rats, spiders, anything you can imagine."

They slept undisturbed, probably for the last time, before they quickly broke camp and hurried to the passage. With an incredible noise in their ears, the passage opened up and ran them through the labyrinth adjacent to the main corridor. She scanned the hallway and sensed no danger. Racing over the road they reached the next great hall, where they encountered a sentry. she acted quickly and got rid of the three men, but not before the mage could send a warning signal. Arriving between the two rooms she quickly scanned the aisles, took the gamble and together they ran through the next great hall. Rested and ran in succession. She slept badly, but little happened. The frontal attack was apparently not an option for the attackers. They just followed, but at their own pace. Only when they had rested in front of the last great hall she got a warning from the cats their attackers were coming very close. Her response was enough to get the rest on their feet. She called the two dwarfs in the rear of the group and urged Luc to go on as fast as possible. They rushed across the great hall until they finally were released in the corridor leading up to the downward winding road.

As soon as she had cached up with Luc hail stones were flying around her ears. Luc had raised a shield against them, just in time. Wave after wave pounded on the shield of Luc, so they could do nothing more but watch the rocks becoming a growing heap. This alarmed her. The rock mages had some intend in it. Could Luc handle this? She asked him. He shook his head and indicated that if the stones were half high in the hall the mages would probably shift it, so they would be buried along the way, or so busy with the stones they were easy prey for the guards.

She thought for a moment, and then motioned everyone to come close to the floor and lie down. Luc understood. "Can you keep us invisible?" She shook her head. "But enough for the guards to run over us. The rest understood the plan with a few words and thoughts. They were flat on the floor. She wove blankets around everyone and lay down beside Luc holding her sword unsheathed. Luc lowered the shield and slowly a layer of stone formed above them. Luc waited until she had woven a blanket over them and lowered the shield to just above the two cats. Time passed slowly until finally the pile of stones shifted over them. Just then she felt the guards passing over them. Thirty in count. She gave a signal to Luc. He raised his shield and the small stone layer above them slid back toward the floor. She had already raised her sword and when Luc let go of the shield on that side, let loose fireballs throwing them into the depths. Not long after, followed by three cats, two dwarfs and her. Jean stayed with Luc just in case.

They overwhelmed the guards chasing them downwards. After two turns of the spiral she stopped and held everyone back, to sent Deena back to Jean and Luc. They came running up with a load of stones on their heels. She looked at Luc. He looked tired. She hoped he could hold on for a while. They huddled close together and protected by the shield of Luc waited until the second avalanche had passed. The cats sent unpleasant thoughts in her head, about the scattered stones.. She scribbled them occasional through their fur. Could do little to help them. Ten turns lower, according to Luc about halfway, the remaining guards had gathered. She had no patience this time. Let herself disappear and ran forward to meet the guards. A soft blue light was all you could see when the first guards fell. Mages and soldiers alike. The counter attack smothered in the shields Luc had woven, and not long after, the resistance was broken. Four escaped down. The rest was dead.

Walking on she kept scanning above and below, but no more attacks were launched. The spraling road emptied out into a funnel, reveiling the gate to the main corridor, surrounded by a large lake. They regularly passed underground streams and in a Great Hall they even heard a waterfall. The humidity attracted a lot of insects. She had lit a fire ball and wherever they went they saw spiders, scorpions and scary vermin scurrying away from the light. The twins had took just one look at what they had to walk through, and immediately mounted back on Janu and Daku. Occasionally the cats send her images of rock iguanas, but none of the couples came near enough to be hunting for elves.

The dwarves had found them a small plateau in the second Great Hall to sleep on. Her fireball gave enough light to see there was only one entrance to the plateau. Luc blew all insects from the plateau and they made camp.

She heard footsteps down from her, coming from a scout who entered the main hall. Although his stealth was as no other the soft sound carried very far in this space. Through the knowledge of the dwarves, they were now on one of the higher plateaus of this great hall. A labyrinth of corridors and terraces had brought them here. The scouts would not dare stray so far from the main road. She studied the movements of the scouts, they occasionally could hear and see. Was wondering if she could surprise one, when on the main road a large group marched in. Their torches lit up the main road and enabled her to follow the scouts, who one after another were returning to report. She saw them point to the many bridges and platforms in the hall and caught snatches of the questions.

The commander ordered to make camp, and slowly silence entered the hall again, while he talked to some of the scouts around the campfires. Each question was answered by hundreds of objections, allthough they seemed to know where they were hiding.

Eventually the group set out. They marched over several bridges near and far. She woke the others and they followed the operations of the group, which eventually arrived back at the main road. Frustrated, they packed their belongings and marched down the main road out the great hall. They waited and soon after came out of one of the side walls the red glow of fire. Still undecided, she heard a new sound in the hall. Two dogs ran down the main road, followed by the group they left higher up the mountain.

Whispering to her companions, she was increasingly inclined to take on the opinion the dwarves had laid down. Finally she nodded and the dwarfs led them in the slow climb, bridge after bridge. She had created a little fireball so they could at least see the bridges and stairs. The scouts down on the main road followed their every move. They however were protected by the many bridges. It made, however, everyone aware to hurry along to the plateau above them, hung in the middle of the hall. The two dwarfs were hoping the passages for the supervisors were still present. In their search through the large hall at the top of the mountain, they regularly encountered collapsed corridors. The chances of collapses so deep in the mountain were slim, most galleries should still be intact. The plateau was well defendable. No access was shielded, so none of the soldiers would go unnoticed if they came close. For now she had to wait.

Hours passed. The scouts never got further than the lower bridges and platforms. Eventually the dwarves returned with the news, they had found a door. Rummaged through their pack and disappeared again into the labyrinth. She kept the twins busy with all the stories she still remembered from her childhood until all fell asleep leaving Jean on guard duty.

One of the dwarves woke her. They had managed to get the door open. she lifted the sleepy children on Janu and Daku and headed to the door. The corridor was so low Luc, Jean and she could not stand up straight. Making for shorter walks and more rest.

Just after one of these breaks they stumbled upon a door. Opening it, a soft light shone through the crack-opening to greet them. The mountains here were so low, light holes had been made. The many holes, like stained glass, illuminated the great hall so well, she finally could see all bridges, stairs and platforms. The ends of the hall, taken from view because of the many pillars holding up the ceiling.

They made camp again on the highest plateau and deliberated what to do. They had seen the soldiers on the main road and it would not be long before the scouts would find them on this one. Might have just enough time to reach the main road, but she did not like the feeling of being hunted in the marshes by more than just the swamp hunters. Light was necessary to set a trap for the troop. From Luc she knew about the forthcoming two halls, only the latter was equipped with light holes. This had the best lighting. After long reflection,

she however sent the dwarfs to find the next door. Another two days separating them with the gate. It seemed better to make this trip in the relative calm of the corridors of the supervisors.

They slept a bit and then went on into the next corridor. Eventually sneaked through the next hall to set up camp on a platform in the last great hall. She deliberately ignited a fireball, although there was still enough light. Arranged the guard and fell asleep. Luc woke her, and she used her guard duty to walk with the dwarves, and become familiar with the construction of the hall. They showed her the main passages and slowly she could predict where a helix would appear to rise or fall several levels. Where stairs were and how the bridges and ramps could lead you through the hall. On one of the stairs back to the camp she tested the air with a little magic and took it in a single leap.

Back in camp, the debate started. The dwarves were talking about the hold next to the funnel. They were now pretty sure they could find the doors bringing them directly into it. Hundreds of ideas were offered while they waited for the soldiers to arrive in this great hall.

She had lit some big fireballs at various elevated platforms. While she tended to them the rest observed the movements of the guards and adapted to this, although they tried to be unpredictable, Jean began to see patterns in their defense. Back on the platform she asked for the hundredth time if the dwarfs could open the doors to the keep. Still, the answer was in agreement. She looked at Jean, who nodded with a shrug, and began to pack. Jean, Deena and the dwarves went ahead. She put the twins on Daku and Janu and warned them to lie as flat as possible. made a fire screen and went ahead. Taking a different route. Carefully ensuring the glow of her screen lit up the road, but did not betray Jean, Deena and the dwarves.

The cats kept her updated with images. In the middle they had the most time to monitor the guards. The main road was slowly filling up with the group, just as she had hoped. All eyes were on them now for the fireballs on top of the plateaus had died out. Janu reported from time to time the progress of the dwarfs. She slowed down, to give them more chance. Strolled down a helix and was just in time to see one of the dwarfs enter the gate to the hold. Two images indicating the same from Daku and Janu meant the first part of the plan had succeeded.

reaching the platform they had chosen for lack of protection of bridges and ramps. She knelt at the edge of the platform and shot several small fireballs towards the main road, and to some scouts who had entrenched themselves elsewhere in the hall. She played with the guards and smiled as the scouts were looking for a new place better covering the driveways of the plateau. Behind her was a ball of hot air forming, she was getting ready, wove a screen and used the ball to launch herself far into the hall. Fire and hail lashed the soldiers making them seek cover.

Two soft screams indicated Daku, Janu and Luc had started their glide to the gate of the hold. Some scouts ran to the plateau next to the hold. She adjusted her flight and a big fire spirit swept them off the bridge. Used the bridge to launch her to the gate. Landed hard on the plateau, just before the two cats. Remained flat, waited until the two cats had jumped over her and pulled up her fire screen directly behind them, burning several arrows. Suddenly, a bolt from the gate jumped over her and tackled one of the soldiers. Came running back and together they dove into the gate. She followed Deena, gave a warning turned and sent a huge fireball back through the gate. Turned round, made a mistake, used some air magic and was back on track after Deena. Saw her jump over one of the dwarfs. The door was already closing. She protected the dwarf with another fireball and then heard the door close behind them.

The dwarfs had stirred up some vermin. She swiped the floor clean and took in the space. The room was high and had a variety of galleries, which presumably bent around the funnel to the outside hall. Many small holes, too small to crawl through, were scattered along the walls of the galleries.

She climbed one of the galleries and let her fingers glide along the walls. Luc came up beside her and shook his head. "Made from the hardest stone, it takes days to get through this." He then beckoned to her and together they climbed the galleries. The latter resulted in a long hallway and she looked now on the market hall. Near the entrance was a great camp. She understood the intention, made a fireball and pressed it through the many small openings. Luc who stood beside her had created a vortex which gathered the fireballs and threw them into the deep.

They could not enter the market hall from the keep but the corridor encased the market hall completely and enabled them to clean it from many infestations. Frequently they walked up and caused chaos in the market hall. In the meantime, she discussed with Luc and Deena what awaited them outside the hall, asked the dwarves if there were multiple entries in the keep and sighed when she got an answer she did not like.

The small holes enabled the dwarves to locate in the market hall where additional gates normally would be found, usually opening onto small platforms only accessible by long narrow mountain roads. She followed the bridges and ramps, they had to take and then chose one of the gates. The dwarves nodded. She memorized the route, and then concentrated on a patrol, marching across a bridge, in the back of the hall. Ran down the corridor until she had found the right hole and began to shoot small fire balls at the group. Mixed with some air they exploded when they hit something. She managed to shoot some off. The rest was now lying flat on the bridge, and crawled to safety as quickly as possible. Satisfied, she went back to the rest, curled up and tried to sleep.

She continued her sleep deliberately, dropped away now and then and saved enough energy to top up her magical powers. Eventually she looked up, saw Luc still sleeping and curled up again, waiting for Luc.

Again they looked through the plan, climbed down to the gate, opened the door and ran to the funnel. Wind, fire and hail hit the guard in the funnel, after which fire and steel put them to sword. Managed to reverse into the funnel and every time moved on a little closer to the market hall when she and Luc both got the chance to use their magic.

Eventually they came out of the funnel and Jean, the dwarves and the cats legged it towards the small gate she had chosen earlier. Luc and she stayed behind and waited for the attackers, killed some and then went after to rest. From two sides the attackers suddenly came up. Ice, fire, wind and hail kept them busy, but ultimately they got so close she had to draw her sword. Sowed death and destruction, heard barking behind her, warded off two swords, killed one of the carriers and was overthrown by one of the dogs. Used air to get on her feet again. Looked around to orientate herself and saw Janu and Daku fighting the dogs. They got rid of their enemies and quickly retreated back into the group.

The pressure of the attackers gradually grew less. Numerous lay scattered across the bridges and ramps. The residual was still fighting but clearly in search of a better place to land a new push. A cry of the dwarves meant the entrance was open. She looked at her companions, and saw they had arrived safely at the entrance. Counted, and together with Luc she jumped from the bridge via the ramp to the plateau of the small gate. They were not pursued, on the contrary the soldiers went back to the entrance of the market hall, because the mages were making a firestorm. She let it smash to pieces on her screen. Bowed and took leave of the dwarf city.

The door closed behind her. She ran down the stairs, catching up with the others. The steps were carved into the cliffs, shielding them from view. Occasionally they had to pick their way carefully over some treacherous stairs. They managed, and jumped into the forest. Slowly the ground got moist and Deena took over from the dwarves as lead of the group. They searched and found the hanging roads through the swamp, and followed it until they

found a driveway. Circled the driveway into the big giant tree, and arrived in the middle of the crown on a small platform.

The swamp contained many large and small hunters. Deena had warned especially for the thousands of small hunters. Only her fire balls held them at bay. She had made them a bit smaller and had them on strings like fire monsters gliding through the air. Ready for the next wave and as a deterrent against any other parasite.

The jungle made them fight for every meter they came closer to the elven capital. Deena looked worried. They now went through the domain of the water hunters. Large ratlike creatures as big as house cats. They lived in families of twenty or thirty induviduals and drove on everything moving. Deena gave images of attacks on her family by water hunters. She let her rerun them a few times to get an idea of their tactics and their build. After a while she gave her orders, and gave the twins a small dagger in case of any water hunter escaping the clutches of the sand cats. Half a day later Deena gave the signal one family got too close. The group had followed them for an hour and seemed sure of their case. They formed a circle and the wall of axes, knives and claws hit the scouts. She concentrated on the second wave. Where the best fighters were in accordance to Deena. She used her knowledge of water magic. Just before the water hunters struck she raised columns of water. Made them turn and sucked half of the family of water hunters into the air. Suddenly she let loose the water magic and a hurled a few fireballs towards them, roasting all trapped water hunters. The rest remained standing perfectly still for a moment, then fled.

She grabbed her things and walked on. The rest followed. An image of the marsh and several species talking came through her mind. News traveled fast through the tree tops of the swamp. For now they would be left alone. She asked Deena if that also was the case when they stopped, and after Deena confirmed this, they stopped in the middle of a large swamp tree. They could use the rest. Sitting in the canopy about twenty meters above the water,

65

supported by the large main branches of the tree. She sat on a mixture of interwoven branches and twigs of the tree and a special kind of stiff climber used as tacking, leaving the leaves of the tree as carpet on the road. While the trees were somewhat controlled, they had still a mind of there own, making the road snake through the swamp.

After the break, she found the road gradually running out from the treetops, and smaller trees now helped in support of the road, gradually sloping down to the march. She looked at Deena who walked beside her. All her thoughts looked nervously. She stifled a smile. For years she herself had walked with such thoughts. Knew of Deena's anxiaties. Deena halted by a pile of sand along the road. A path she named it, any way she could not find any. The swamp cats, however, had sharp smell and Deena led them through narrow channels and shoals in the swamp. Regularly Deena ran animals sometimes twice as large as her from the the path, and eventually, they stopped at a large island in the middle of the swamp. "Now wait for the escort" was the thought running through her head.

Not long afterwards reeds bowed slightly, and two small swamp cats joined them. Deena introduced them as their escort. The escort meant a large proportion of the population supported the plan of Deena, which along other actions would release them a day's journey from the elven capital.

A few minutes walking on the tail of their escort, they got a glimpse of non natural islands in the swamp. All of them lined with shrub vegetation, leaving at least two sides of the islands protected. The islenads soil at least fifty inches above the water level, and only covered with moss. She noticed the morning sunlight shining upon each island, with the vegetation keeping one small part of the island protected by the foliage, against the hot rays.

Deena hoped to go swiftly through the edge of the swamp cat kingdom. The guards along the border wanted nothing to do with the politics of the inner islands. They were born into families who lived for many years in the boundaries and life in close communes on the

islands they found too suffacating. Deena had spoken to many of them in her travels and all of them couldn't care less who led the empire, as long as they could keep their lifestyle, and were rewarded for their services at the borders.

The narrow paths opened out onto an open plain. The ground was covered with mud and water. Regularly distributed across the clearing, she saw islands of about one meter high grass. The boundary of the plain, thickly overgrown with bushes and vines making it look impenetrable. She had been in the realm of the swamp cats before and pointed the islands out to the twins. Now they got closer you could see only the edges were overgrown. Also they got a glimpse of the cat family living on the islands. Many were covered in scratches and a few even had large open wounds. Jean offered Deena his help and one of the residents led Jean towards all islands his help was searched for.

They sat down as their escort hurried off to hear what had happened. The news of Deena coming, her followers had been spreading, was heard throughout the empire. The settlements of the outer realm, full of rough induviduals which were already fed up with the current ruler, had without exception taken the opportunity to usurp the local puppet in their area and declare their independence of the central government. Answered by attack on this settlement to set an example. Fortunately the trees were favorable to them and they had time to bring their children to safety and with the help of border guards, they defeated the force. Deena acquitted herself well in her task. She had a nice word for everybody, and licked down the occasional kid who was now without a mother or father. Gestures which were quickly picked up by the trees for the whole empire to hear.

When nightfall came, one of the residents led them to an empty island near the edge and they were gearing up for the night. After Jean had kept them awake with stories picked up during the healing of the cats. Halfway through the night she awoke, still used to the guard. Quietly slipping off the island, greeted Daku and Janu and strolled around to drive off the

stiffness in her legs. She listened to the buzzing sounds of flying insects and the croaking of frogs and toads, which at night made such a racked. Suddenly she heard a lot of wings, and in the light of the moon and stars she saw songbirds take to flight.

She changed her heading. The guards walked around the camp at night not in the forest. And other predators, large enough for a flight of songbirds to get uneasy, there were not. Were simply not tolerated in the realm of the swamp cats. The guards had heard it too and were worried and vigilant, looking in the direction where the sound came from. She consulted with the guards and one of them send a picture indicating her to follow. Together they slipped through the woods. She regularly scanned the surroundings for magic and presence of humans or elves. Eventually she felt something big walking slightly left of them. She warned the guard, and send what she had felt. The swamp cat pricked her ears and listened intently in the direction she had pointed. Eventually she confirmed there was something, and it moved towards camp. She got a picture from the ground between them and the intruder. Impossible to get close without avoiding detection.

She proposed a plan. An image came back approving and the guard led her in a flanking movement around the intruder. The swamp cat whispered something to the trees. Not long after, a flock of birds in the foliage just before the intruder took to flight, making it adapted its course coming into their reach.

The cat was too big for a swamp cat, but too small for a Sand Cat. She scanned it and soon came to the conclusion it was an animal whisperer. Stopped the guard, wove a net around her, and sneaked ever closer to the intruder. Some streams of fire burned the intruders disguise to pieces, and the view of her blue glowing sword quickly made him surrender. She tied his hands and pushed him toward the guard, who sniffed him. A picture of one of the handsman of the ruler quickly shot through her head.

68

The dwarfs did not need much time to get some information out of the intruder. He had been dispatched to determine what was true of the rumors stating Deena being back in the empire and why there was talk of two-legged helpers. She was not worried about the size of the group who had sent him. It was however necessary to confront the group with Deena. Who had come to the same conclusion.

They woke the twins and the intruder was left in good care when they went out again led by Deena. She walked behind her, keen on any sound or image that seemed different. Deena occasionally translated what the trees had told her about the scout group and adjusted their route accordingly to take them along the rugged trails through the swamp until a small hill loomed in the night. Nearer they saw a group waiting. Some swamp cats, sand cats, and if she had sensed it right some high mages too, waiting in the shadows. Deena was puzzled. Wondering why there where high mages here in the swamps. Quickly she pushed Natasha and Valentina to Jean and prepared in advance for what was to come. A thought of Deena flew through her head. A sand cat standing before the king. She understood. These sand cats were on the kings guard.

Deena ran to the group, and was stopped by two sand cats. A wild roar and a few pictures so clear she could receive them even from the distance she was at. She was not welcome in the realm of the swamp king. Deena attacked a Sand Cat, and soon gained the upper hand, until a fireball threw her backwards. Daku caught her deftly and slowly they both closed in on the Sand Cat. The other two sand cats joined the fight, but before the battle could begin, the fire mage showed himself. He called a fire monster and played with it. She could follow the images send to the cats, shook her head and searched for other mages in this group. She had already found four. Fire, water, air and rock, but she also expected to find animal whisperers. Tested the cats one by one. Only the sand cats were real. She muttered an incantation, and held it ready. Deena and Daku stepped back to give some room to the fire monster. The images still were getting bolder. When the images were arrived at a mass murder of young swamp cats, she had enough and let loose the incantation onto the two swamp cats who sent the images. They transformed into humans. Not long after, two dwarf axes made an end to the images. She walked forward and gave a clear picture. Those in agreement of these images step forward to be punished. All cats and the fire mage took a step back.

Janu and Daku threw themselves on the three sand cats and showed how a proper sand cat fights. The fire mage disappeared as last of the mages, leaving the four remaining animals whisperers to their fate. Deena and the escort were about to pick a fight with them, but she stopped them. Muttered the incantation again and let them transform. Three men and a woman stretched out slowly. She walked to one of the men and began questioning him. Soon she saw the answers she had expected and although he was throwing around meaningless answers she now knew who the swamp king was. She motioned and left the four to the dwarfs. Maybe they would say anything about the size of the forces of the king.

The residence of the ruler of the swamp cat was on the edge of the swamp. The empire stretched in a semicircle around it. While the rulers power was absolute. In practice he or she needed help to govern the kingdom. Not far from the seat of the ruler was therefore a large settlement where the senior officials lived. In fact, the city government.

Deena pointed out this was their next target. The stories said the officials were ready for change. Tired of the new ruler who had tried to build a new power structure, they seized every opportunity to get a grip on what they found was their empire. Because the rest of the empire saw them as aristocratic and looked up to them, the new ruler had tried to silence them. His soldiers led the settlement with an iron fist, and the officials accepted in their fate, for now, but the restlessness was palpable. The aim was an attack on the soldiers guarding the settlement. With the officials supporting them she had chances to isolate the ruler of his kingdom. However it was a long time ago the swamp cats lived by the old rules. Feared most would sit and wait for fear of retaliation, should Deena unexpectedly fail in her mission. She understood the guards needed to disappear quickly and quietly, preferably without the settlement knowing it.

All the time Deena and the escort were being kept informed of what was happening in the swamp. Who were the guards, where they were. The location of all patrols. Nothing was hidden. For although their progress was also spread through the trees, the sand cats and animal whisperers clearly had problems understanding the language of the trees, and Deena and the escort usually led them around the patrols.

On a small hill, looking into the distance they could see a large clearing in the swamp, the settlement. She squatted down next to Deena and discussed what she planned. Deena thought it a good plan and gave an image of one of the islands and its inhabitants.

She said goodbye and walked down the hill towards the settlement. Wove a net around herself, and disappeared from sight. Some air magic pushed her in between the branches of the trees. Jumping from branch to branch she moved over the barrier around the settlement and established herself in a tree, overlooking it.

The size of the settlement, made she could barely see the border at the other end. In the middle was a small hill full of trees, surrounded by large high islands. Clearly the wealthy neighborhood of the settlement. The rest was divided by broad water channels, into smaller living communities. Each district had a few large islands with one or more trees. She looked down the water, counted the trees, and finally found the island from the image Deena had passed her. Only the water gave her the possibility of an secret approach. She undressed, took a greenish swimsuit from her purse and a leather skirt. Tied her staff on the skirt and buckled

on her sword. Used some air and landed next to the water in the settlement. Slid into the water and put the water in motion.

A single cat stuck his head out of the confines of his island to see what was going on, seeing only a duck swimming through the pond. Without problems, she reached the island, and crept through the grass surrounding it. Remained low, put her hand on the shoulders of the occupant and greeted him. He barely moved, but gave a short visual back stating she should remain silent. Many seconds later he rose and gave her a sign to come along. She kept walking close to him. He indicated that at night the soldiers patrolled only occasionally. The rest of the time they hung around at the five entrances. They had chased a few inhabitants of their island at the entrance and made them their own.

When they came close to one of the entrances, her guide was approached by one of the soldiers. Her drawn sword glowing freely, she jumped, with some air magic, amidst the soldiers. They had felt the wind and their noses told them where she was, but her sword was faster and no match for the five soldiers.

Out of the night came some swamp cats to take over the watch and they dragged the bodies of the soldiers and animal whisperers away and buried them. Her companion gave a soft hum and together they walked to the next gate.

Halfway through the fourth and fifth gate an alarm sounded. It did not help for the fifth guard. She just let loose of her disguise and attacked. While these soldiers were warned they too were too slowly for her. Nimbly she danced around them, hacking at them, and again, the watch was taken over. She said where Deena and her entourage were, and went away to get her stuff.

The puppet of the ruler and his entourage had left the settlement with silent drum. She found Deena, Janu and Daku back on the middle island. There was a debate about who should lead the settlement. The elders of the settlement held a silent succession tournament. The

previous leader was slain by one of the soldiers of the king, which hindered the case. A very young, pretty big swamp cat had won the tournament. Unfortunately, this cat being strong and smartk, also was very impulsive. And the old cats in the camp were afraid he could cause dwindling relationships between neighboring settlements. The pros and cons flew back and forth, until finally the cat in question decided the argument by naming his number two and three. An older and a younger cat. The first leader of two settlements in better times, the other a quiet young cat with potential. A logical choice according to Daku and enough for the meeting to give him a chance.

they broke up immediatly after , traveling to the seat of the king. The seat of the king was a small settlement. A large island where the king slept with his immediate entourage, surrounded by smaller islands for guards. Young cats were not around. Only the best swamp cats earned their place in court. Deena had declined an offer of troops, wanted to avoid a bloodbath. During the meeting, the elders had estimated, seventy-five percent of the warriors were fat up with the present king's reign. She hoped many warriors would support her, and would immediately change sides when they would see who ruled them. Deena therefore chose ten cats to help her chase the king of his island.

The twins remained in the settlement, accompanied by Jean and Luc. The dwarves wanted to come along and with them she went back to the cats. It was a half-day walk for them. As the cats moved through the swamp much faster, the battle was already in full swing when she came near. She said the dwarfs goodbye, disappeared, and walked around the settlement. Deena, Janu, Daku and the rest of the swamp cats were at the edge of the king's island. On the island were mages, the king, and a force many times larger than that of Deena. She understood Deena was making a speech to the soldiers, to convince them they were cheated. She threw a blanket over some swamp cats, to transform them into their original

human form. The turmoil was heightened when all were transformed back into swamps cats. She sat beside the king and waited, got an image from Deena and waited some more, until she got an image of the king himself. She muttered a stronger incantation and tied it to the king. Strong enough he could not easily transform back. Slowly appeared the man she knew and despised heartily. By his actions she was condemned to this life. She tied the incantation firmly and began to tease the mages. Pushed them and left a small incantation to boot. Each one had to disclose his or her place in the twilight. The effect on a large part of the soldiers was clear. The first walked over to the side of Deena, slowly many more followed. The king was now desperate. His impact on the soldiers was lost, but worse, the mages and animal whisperers began to murmur. They were used to giving the orders. But clearly this was a mage they could not fathom and in front of them were troops of swamp cats who had grown accustomed to magic, not to leave out the two Sand Cats and Deena. The king did the only thing he had left. He attacked Deena.

She had expected this and was already next to Deena. Deena jumped out of his path and gave the king a push with her front legs. At that time she put in a fireball. The king jumped ten meters back and looked at Deena. She had to give credit to Deena, she played her game well. Deena walked slowly to the King. A thought of a water column flew through her head. When Deena roared, standing on her hind legs. She made a column of water come up from the swamp, synchronizing with Deena caming back on her paws to send the column in the direction of the king, sweeping him of the island into the swamp. Deena jumped on top of him and pulled him out. The king badly wounded finally managed to throw Deena off him and fled, finally able to get rid of her incantation. She send an image to Deena and showed her where the king was. Deena saw it and went back into the attack. The big push he could dodge, but she clawed with her nails even more wounds into his body. She felt him run away towards the elven capital. They had two days before the wounds would heal completely. Enough time to expose him, so they let him go.

Now they had to save the swamp cat empire, or what was left of it. She saw Deena already consulting with several cats in her entourage. Not long after, some cats ran away. All in another direction. The announcement of Deena's accession to the throne. She went to Deena and asked her for an envoy who could oversee the trial of the former king. Deena nodded and sent a command. An old swamp cat came forth. Some images in her head denoted him as temporary ambassador. As soon as a new king or queen was chosen a new ambassador would be assigned.

The old swamp cat introduced himself as Zeenu. Commented by Janu with an image of a former king. She bowed slightly and asked if he could go right away. After an affirmative message they left to meet Jean, Luc and the twins. The twins ran inmediatly to Daku and Janu, and examined them with care. They had some scrapes and bruises, but nothing in need of Jeans healing. Jean had already started to fasten the rigs and not long after Valentina and Natasha were riding high on Janu and Daku, and they set course towards the elven capital. If they could walk on all day and night, with any luck they were only one day behind the former king, or the elven shadow, as she knew him.

Brushing away the last bush in front of the highway, gave her view on the Elven City. She was born there and each time she set sight on the towers of the palace she could do nothing but shed a tear. Two elves sat on the road not far away. Relief slipped through her body when she recognized the two. She whistled a peculiar song. The rest looked at her with questioning eyes, but the two were already up and walked away, but not before they had answered the melody. She walked on, following the two. Three images of questions raced through her head. She sent pictures of friend and troops back, to reassure the cats.

Not long after, the forces met them. She walked past the soldiers to the woman in charge and hugged her aunt, explained what was going on and led her to her companions, meanwhile, getting praise and pats on the back from acquaintances. She introduced Janu, Daku, Zeenu, Valentina, Natasha, the dwarfs, and Jean and Luc. Her aunt gave Luc a hug walked up to the twins, and introduced first herself and then her bodyguards. Two of them came forward and offered their services. Valentina and Natasha looked at her. She nodded that it was fine and very polite both accepted their bodyguard.

Her aunt had additional mounts for her, Jean and Luc and all ascended, but the twins refused to go on any other mount than Janu and Daku. She told briefly what had happened and her aunt gave in. They took leave of the dwarfs, who prefer walking, and agreed where they would meet each other again.

The city grew, and already a new district was planted. Swamp and the city grew slowly toward each other. In the city, the roads became gradually busier. Like everywhere, the wind here had ears and a mouth, and it was not long before the whole town knew that something important was going on. She rode beside her aunt to lead the procession through the many gates of the capital. Each district tried to be the most beautiful of the city, which meant that most roads were overgrown with the most fragrant blossom trees and only the greenest grass no matter how busy it was. Arriving at the gate of the inner city the public had packed in rows and all were chanting the name of their lost crown princess. She nodded slowly in all directions, as she had been taught. Many buildings she could find with her eyes closed, so she counted them down to the gates of the palace, to ride through it into a small courtyard. Her sister was already waiting for them. Without her royal robes, they looked very much alike, at least that's what everyone had always said. The twins too did not need much time to find the kinship. She took the armor of Janu and Daku and helped with the beating of the horses. Not really needed here, but a routine in which she got stuck. Yet it could not hurt to show to everyone she had peace with the situation. Her sister had welcomed everyone, and now walked up towards her. Calmly they embraced each other. She left her sister with a big responsibility. The tales told that she did a great job. Her sister held her longer than necessary. "Finally I can play again as the little sister," she whispered. She smiled put an arm around her and together they walked to the palace. They were led into the royal apartments, and all were assigned to a room.

She had changed her clothes and walked into the room of the twins. Valentina and Natasha were surrounded by a large mountain of tried and discarded clothes. Much to the despair of the dresser who clearly wanted them to wear the traditional clothes of the earth elves. She looked at the scene and waited until suitable clothing was found for both. After the dresser was gone came the questions. How it came to be her sister had so much power they could stay in the middle of the palace. In their home only the members of the royal family were allowed there. She nodded and looked sad.

"It was many years ago, she began her tale. I lived here in the palace and had just celebrated my ceremony of fertility. As the oldest of the royal children I would finish my education at one of the other elven races. In convoy we drove to the water empire I enjoyed the ceremony and all the attention that entailed. I learned quickly and soon I managed the basics of water magic. Other kingdoms followed, learning different kinds of magic: fire, earth, air. In one I was better than another, but in all above average compared to other students. Two years later, I was introduced to my future husband. A very handsome prince of the water empire. I had learned beside him during my time in the water empire and was not really madly in love, but thought I could build a good relationship with him. I was sent out and was getting better and stronger. But with the magic came the doubts. Until I wanted to surprise my prince with my skills in invisibility and caught him at the laying of incantations in

my room. I followed him and he could eventually be linked to an ancient sect. So I had a problem. Should I marry my prince, he became king and they would probably dispose of me directly, or persuade me into the darkness. If I would resign, the country would be in chaos and there would be the possibility of war or worse. One year I thought about it. Until my sister gave me a solution. She was pregnant of her future husband before the ceremony had taken place. I renounced the throne, since only the first born has the right to the throne. And that's my little niece. Immediately after the wedding ceremony of my sister I informed her of my reasons and I departed from the elf kingdom. Ever since I lived as an adventurer.

When she looked up, she saw Jean just leave. So he had heard it too. The twins had hundreds of questions, but she shook her head. It is time that we show up in court. Everyone wants to know what you are doing here and more importantly what I am doing here. She changed something in the jewelry of Natasha and then took them along the corridors. Jean and Luc joined the procession, and together they walked to the big door giving access to the court. A large garden where the Queen received visitors and where the government and the opposition held their meetings lay before them. They took to one of the paths, following the servants, passing the swaying palms, streams and ponds which made this such an enchanting garden. She allways had played here with her sister and could still point out the best hiding spots with her eyes closed. Now her sister held court on the spot where her mother had always been. The servants approached the meadow and stopped as they had learned. She nodded to her sister and got a smile back. She would have to wait. However the person speaking to her had seen them too, and what seemed to be an endless argument was suddenly truncated.

She took the hand of Natasha and Valentina, walked them into the court, and began her announcement. "With the help of the gods here are Valentina and Natasha, daughters of the earth elves empire and their guides Alexandra, adventurer, Luc, Guardian of the road through the mountains, Janu, adventurer, Daku, adventurer and Zeenu, representative of the queen of the swamp cats. Then she introduced Jean. Jean stepped forward. It was his task to explain why the twins were brought before the queen. He introduced himself, also as an adventurer, and explained the earth empire was in danger. The rulers of the empire had seen their two oldest children already falling prey to a mysterious sect that was clearly taking over the land. They had removed the ruler and his spouse from office. Therefore they decided to protect their other two children by sending them to the throne. Jean asked for help on their behalf. The queen stood up and walked to Valentina. She put an arm around her and turned with her full circle. "Let everyone see these two princesses, and know they are now under the protection of the throne. Envoys are already in the earth realm to see what is going on. "Then she turned to Alexandra. "Unfortunately, your journey in this matter has not ended. My assistant will join you to discuss the case and your role in it." She bowed politely, gave the twins a hug and walked out of the garden. Waited at the door and shortly afterwards the door opened and the servant brought Valentina and Natasha. The clerk glanced around until he saw her and walked toward her. "The Queen wants you to continue to protect them." She nodded and walked straight to the lodgings of Janu and Daku leaving the twins with them.

Sitting in the shade of a residence, looking for anyone in sight, she said one long incantation and waited until it was fully developed. Then she got up and walked a lap around the house. Nobody reacted. She was satisfied and walked into town. She had been told where the elvenshadow probably hung out, and there she began het search. Not long after, she found the first track. Piece after piece came together and led her to his shelter. The large complex in the city stood empty for years and many thieves and induviduals needing somewhere to hide, had made it their temporary home. She walked into the building and walked on until she saw the Elven shadow, waited until he was alone, then began a second incantation, knocking him out cold. A web slowly made him disappear from sight. Fortunately, she could see her own

weavings. She lifted him up and dragged him out of the complex. Pressed close to a wall, to gather her strength, then continued to drag her load street after street, until they finally arrived at the prison. She dragged him in and left him in custody of the warden on duty, an acquaintance from the past.

Back in the palace she searched and found Zeenu, and reported it was now time to issue his plight to the queen. She also told him where the former swamp king could be found. Zeenu nodded and began his long road to justice for his people.

The next day she found her time in the palace was almost over. It was not told directly, but born on court, she could already detect the first signs. She threw her bag upside down and started to check everything. Repaired what needed repairing and threw away what was irretrievably lost. The list to buy things grew steadily and became even longer when she thought about where the next trip might bring them. After her own stuff, the bags of Natasha and Valentina had their turn. Again, missing quite a lot. If only because the twins were still growing, and some clothes had become very small and inelegant. She walked to the guard service and asked if it was possible to shop with the twins, without making a lot of fuss in the city. The guard nodded and a few hours later, a dozen stallholders were let in the courtyard of the palace and she could calmly finish her list, and buy what she needed. The maids were already busy fitting Natasha in a hoist of clothes. Occasionally she gave a nod or shook her head, indicating something was approved or rejected. This time little protest, and Natasha and Valentina underwent their fate with few complaints, which focused solely on the sometimes hideous colors that were in fashion this year.

Along with two advisors, her sister sat at the table in her room. One obvious from the earth elves kingdom, the other from the human world. She gave a nod to a clerk and after a while Natasha and Valentina walked in. Her sister stood up and introduced the two consultants. The one from the earth elves kingdom began his tale. "For many centuries the earth elves kingdom was in fact divided in two. One part influenced by the ruler of the kingdom, the another part under the influence of the then strongest faction. Both about equally strong. For years this went well. What could not be done in one part was automatically been outsourced to the other part. This made for a lively trade between the two parts and all had few complaints. A few years ago, however, a dominant faction led by a number of humans came to power. It soon became clear what the intentions of these people were. Total domination at all costs. Entire families were killed or sold into slavery. Citizens began to sway increasingly to the rulers of the earth elves empire, frightened by blades and deceit. The balance began to falter, and the faction did the only thing they were good at. They kidnapped the eldest child of the emperor and demanded changes. Long negotiations by her and other envoys brought a monster of a contract, but the prince was never released. Not long after, the prince was killed. The balance was gone, now it was war. The other three children of the ruler were prepared to leave the country to flee to the capital. Unfortunately, a small commando force got to them earlier. The second child was murdered, the twins could escape. All members of the commando had been caught since. All human.

The second consultant took over. She told of an influential lobby in her world, slowly taking the form of a sect. In the human world dozens of communes were formed which served as training groups for the expansion in the other worlds. Regularly humans were found in the elven world who in the human world were missing for many years. Of those who were found alive only a few could remember his or her life in the human world.

Her sister asked the questions that needed to be asked. "Alexandra, will you take the twins back to the earth elven kingdom and fill the power vacuum there. Their lunar cycle is coming I'm told, which means they can begin training and traveling with them will become a lot easier. Until that time, there is a place for you in the swamp. Deena has won the leadership, and their ambassador has given the swamp at your disposal. "She slowly shook her

head. The question marks in the face of her sister ignoring. It is not good to wait. If the lunar cycle of Natasha and Valentina begins, we must be in the Earth elves kingdom. Then legally, they are the heirs of the trone and they should not be hidden somewhere in a swamp. Her sister looked at her then nodded. "The boat is ready for you to bring you to the other continent, from there you need to fend on your own, though I understand that all your companions will be with you. My advisors will both add a member to your posse. They are ready to leave tomorrow morning." They both gave the councilors a hand. Her sister stayed. Just one more night with her big sister and she had a lot to ask. She put the twins to bed, and walked with a smile on her face back to her room and her sister. The adventure was swirling around through her veins. Even the prospect of endless political intrigues at the earth elves court could not dim that.

Two young ladies were waiting next to the lodgings of Janu and Daku. They were slightly younger than her, but their eyes betrayed a maturity that might be expected from world travelers. The human girl introduced herself as Lisa, bowed and gave space for the earth elf named Marinde. Through both the magic flowed freely. Lisa had the hunters instinct of her race and its inherited magical powers. Few would be eble to evade her, and few would escape to her bow. Marinde juggled, the forces of earth and fire, and her name told of a noble birth.

IV

They were bound to be dropped on the high seas somewhere along the coast of the earth elves kingdom. Above all a lack of information. She devoured report after report involving the earth elves kingdom and spent hours with Marinde, questioning her about every event that had taken place in recent years, and sometimes much further back. A few days before they would arrive at the coast she put down another report. She had formed her plans. Risky, but feasible. She walked on deck and looked around for distractions. Natasha was sitting on the bowsprit, staring into the water and Valentina hung listlessly beside her. She felt a twinge in her stomach. Politics! Who was it, that said the politician really needed to substantiate his success to the happiness of his family. She had neglected her traveling companions greatly. She walked to the twins, sat down and was prepared to listen more to them. She asked some questions and quickly came to the conclusion that the lunar cycle of Valentina had already begun, and Natasha had her turn today. Marinde had taken precautions,

but this really needed to be a celebration. Valentina was now a mature elf, Natasha almost and the buildup of their magical abilities could now begin.

She scanned the two young ladies and found they differed considerably. Valentina donned the classic combination of Earth and Fire. Natasha however had in addition to Earth component, a considerable talent for air magic. She pulled them both close and gave them a last hug as a friend. Tomorrow would begin their training.

Marinde and Luc, very surprised, were keen to teach them the first principles of magic. The four of them sat in the front of the boat and the frustration was tangible on the face of the two teachers. She smiled, and thought back to the beginning of her lunar cycle. She had been staring for seven days into the fountain in the courtyard. Seven days she could think of nothing else but the water dancing so beautifully in the fountain. Because for years no strong mage was born at the court her supervisors believed her to have been madly in love. Only after two days began to dawn on them her lunar cycle had started and then it took five days before the teachers had brought her to her senses.

She went to the four and began the ritual that had worked with her. During the ritual, Luc and Marinde complained bitterly about the change in the twins. She nodded and smiled. A soft red glow began to form on the twins, Luc and Marinde reeled in. Shortly afterwards she felt the blockades in Natasha breaking loose. It took another hour before Valentina also responded normally again. The twins looked at them awakened from their intoxication, they had to orient themselves back into the world. She pushed Luc and Marinde to them and slowly reality began to sank in. Not long after the twins fell asleep in the arms of their teacher. She sat down and told the story of the beginning of her lunar cycle and what the scholars had said about that.

The training of Natasha and Valentina was now better, but children they remained. Mature elf or not. Frequently she heard a curse, as one of the two had done mischief. She took it all from a distance and figured out how to fit it all in her plans.

She ordered the boat to a small port. One of the sailors had climbed the mast and looked out into open. At the time he cried "Land ahoy" they reeled all sails and two small sailing boats were lifted into the water. They got their belongings and were divided on the boats. When everyone was on board a large plate was tied on each of the boats. Luc started a small breeze, and steered his boat alongside the ship. When he had enough speed Daku jumped smoothly on the board. She put her sailboat in motion and picked up Janu. Slowly they made the breeze stronger until it was ideal for the two cats to keep their balance.

A solitary figure slowly came into view. He stood on the boat ramp signing. Probably trying to warn them. Unfortunately they had to face the danger in this place. A little distance from the harbor they burned through the ropes, exactly when a large wave overtook them. Both sand cats adjusted their course and rode the wave onto the beach. In port Lisa and Jean reeled in the sails and glided the boats to the boat ramp.

The man looked uncomfortable at the strange cargo in the boats and the two cats who were walking up. Dwarfs and sand cats were not unknown in this part of the kingdom. The combination however was unheard of. She jumped on the boat ramp and introduced herself. Alexandra was enough for now. The first question from the man was whether they were against the new government. The response from her that she came from overseas did not satisfy him. After some talking back and forth he told them the human faction had successfully made a daring raid on the royal palace and had taken up power. She had expected it and hoped the staff had escaped in time. The man was inconclusive. He alone was here to warn travelers about what they could expect in this country. The village was deserted and regularly factional fighters called on the port to see if everything was as quiet as before. He pointed them to where the garrisons of the faction were, and advised to avoid them at all costs. After some persuasion, he told the tales he had heard about these places. Satisfied, she walked back to the rest. Composed herself and returned to the man. He could do nothing with the boats, but their presence could be fatal for him. A large wave made the boats beach on the quay. She took a few steps back and looked at Luc, he understood the hint and a whirlwind of sand and small stones hit all the moisture from the boats. A searing heat burned the boats to ashes, while a breeze dispersed the smoke and not much later blew the ashes into the water. The boards underwent a similar fate. With the words "You know nothing!" She left the stunned man behind, and the group walked out of the village into the wilderness, making sure their tracks were not too visible.

She looked at the hill far in the distance, tracking the guards racing over the roads down from the little stone houses, to get on time for their sortie out into the wide open delta. Noting the cargo float unloading at the bottom of the hill, followed by men pushing small carts up the winding tracks towards the big stone building at the summit.

Feeling her legs starting to cramp, she slowly loosened them, and climbed branch from branch slowly down until she was back in the canopy of the forest. Finding the weaker branches, letting air push them aside on her fall down to her friends. Jean spread out the map again, and she marked visible watch posts and possible guard routes throughout the neighboring forest. The twins already had climbed on the big cats, and she agreed it was time to sneak on. Trusting on the noses of Daku and Janu to lead them over game trails, ever finding gaps, even in the lower densely forested parts, they travelled through, to avoid the walking guards circling the camp from ferry to ferry. Daku stopped in the foliage overlooking an open spot paved with flat rock, slowly descending in one of the spinoffs of the upper branch of the delta. Already camouflaged she slipped through the leaves, making speed on the flat rock, jumping high, easily floating over the water, surprising the guard at the bottom of the forest elder, used as a guard post, knocking him out cold. Used some time to send a breeze over the sandy beach and waited for Luc and Marinde to negotiate the crossing. Gave Marinde a lift, jumped after her, together softly emptying the guard post in the crown of the tree, without any alarm raised.

The guard house was spacious enough for all to sleep, waiting for the guard to leave the camp. Surprising the four man group shouldn't be a problem, and they could don the clothes of the people of the guard post signaling the group had past. Instead the insight of Lisa told them to make hast splashing through the shallow water of the river, until the bushes made way for great rock trees. Negotiating a path straight to the eastern guard tower of the camp, they just made it, overrunning the tower a few minutes after the alarm was raised.

From high up in the tower they watched the soldiers fan out from the gates covering all terrain passable towards the guard post on the edge of the river. Again they waited preparing their magic. A flock of birds relocating to another roost was enough for Daku to give the signal to start. She jumped down. Huge fire spirits dancing around her. Tearing up the road and stone houses next to it, slowly moving up its twisting path, flushing out any inhabitants with the roar of the fire. Letting the two cats chase them up and down the hill. Natasja and Valentina looking like they were part of the cats.

Any resistance was dealt with from the watch tower where Jean and Lisa had found a considerable amount of arrows. Most of them flying overhead to the summit of the hill. She stepped up the pace, destroying the last of the houses, clearing the view onto the meadows leading up to the big stone building. When she felt the surplus of magic in front of her, she dived in the grass, weaving a screen as fast as she could, making it bigger as the two cats

dived for cover just when the outer walls above them crumbled leaning in to be blasted all over the hill in the resulting explosion.

Two figures calmly walked out of the inferno helping her to stand up, apologizing for the overkill, wondering why the faction needed so much explosives. She seized the fire spirits and handed them over to Marinde, who followed the western road down destroying what was left of the living quarters. Then turned to Luc to help him reform the inferno into a twister manageable in size, steering the monster by removing air from where it needed to go. Bouncing it back and forth between them, feeding it occasionally over the burning pile, being the faction headquarters just minutes ago.

A sharp whistle, followed by all the team members running up the hill, heralded the return of the soldiers. Jean and Lisa did not need to remain lookout as the fire spirits had nicely flattened any sizable obstruction of their view as well as destroying both access roads.

As the group started to climb the hill Luc and she both jumped down from vantage point to sizable rock, still bouncing the twister between them. Changing its route to collect anyone who thought to have a window of opportunity, dashing the rubble to meet the fire spirits of Marinde.

With the hill dotted with stone fragments, and all the rest burned in the cauldron of the twister, it slowly began to die down. Jumping closer and closer together as it became smaller. Luc finally fixed it above a broken wall, and she slashed the circling winds, freeing the air to go its daily duty in the evening breeze.

Several times the assembled faction soldiers looked up the hill, in the end the few remaining dispersed into the delta, without ever to try and take the hill again.

All night they kept watchful, only sleeping short periods. It however stayed quiet. The dawn, revealing the sight of abandoned ferries both on the far side of either river. Walking

down the stairs to each of the watch towers, she slashed at their walls, only needing to rip through one of its corners with a fire spirit, to topple the buildings.

They left the depressing hill soon after, heading back to the guard tower on the spinoff river, utilizing one of the ferries, traveling in style, back to the shallow crossing. The day ran along quickly, sleeping and staring down from the top of the tower, checking on the activities up at the hillside, and at the far side quays of both the ferry crossings, just visible from this high lookout point.

Waking up about an hour before dusk she started to get dressed in her posh black dress, when Marinde came storming in, declaring float cars, cargo floats and boats at the ferry crossing ramps, on both sides of the delta. Seeing her dress, she calmed, nodded and freed hers from its hideout. Waited untill she was dressed, then offered her blue and silver dress for some hot air straightening, getting rid of embarrassing creases.

Marinde counted down every important earth elf wanting a stake in helping free their land of the tyranny, describing the few she had met in her travels, until outside voices were arguing whether to climb up. She stepped out walking down the spiraling wooden walkway. Welcoming the visitors only when she set foot on the forest floor. Waited for the scouts to identify themselves, in the meanwhile enabling Marinde and Lisa to join her.

The scouts told them they were from the common freedom army. Teaming up all remaining forces from the two big cities of the delta. After introducing herself, Marinde, Lisa and the rest looking down from the guardhouse, she invited any individual having insight in the current state of the land of the earth elves. Again some silence, followed by another bow from the soldiers, requesting leave to report.

The two city regents, working together solved some awkward moments, as they both arrived on a big float car able to travel the sand paths connecting the guard towers. Introduced themselves proper, apologizing for the scouts, as it were turbulent times. She invited them to the table Luc had constructed earlier that day.

One of the regents asked for patients to wait for some officials he had sent for, killing time by telling them about daily life in their part of the empire, adjusting to the rule of the human faction. Threading lightly between demands of their citizens and the often patronizing behaviors of the occupying forces.

There had always been spies in the faction camp, reporting on anything they could get their hands on. Telling them of the forces moving to the royal side of the empire, leaving only enough manpower to scare off any uncoordinated attack. Still the reports coming from their progress, so far away on the other side on the land, were not favoring blind attacks on faction rule. Their cities living in peace for so long did not have defenses, nor did they have a large army, able to withstand the full impact of the faction forces, when they would come back to deal with their minor disturbance.

The other regent told of the horrors done to opposing small cities in the mountains, leaving none alive just to make an example for the remaining inhabitants of the empire.

When finally all officials, acting as officers in the rebellion army, had arrived and gathered around the table, she explained her ideas about the human faction. Knowing of the invasion of the royal part of the empire, and the estimated soldier count, she thought it possible to rally enough troops to overrun the current faction defenses, and make a stand in the pass through the mountains dividing both halves of the land. Knew the twins being alive would generate a lot of anti-faction sympathies, and she was hoping the magistrate could spin their arrival into the backlands and major cities.

One of the officials stood up, and after getting approving nods from both her and his regent, told of the fires falling from the heavens, and the wind dancing to the beat of the numerous mages assaulting the faction camp. Explaining these were the tales he heard on his way from the main city, where the rebellion was far better organized than here in the delta.

The coming of the twins could use some update though, as tales were inconclusive, ranging from statements about small mages riding on flaming cats of hell, until the gosts of the royals coming to take revenge on the faction. Marinde told the attending officials of the tasks the queen had bestowed on her. The tales traveling surprisingly fast only proved their mission against the human faction to be long overdue. She requested to start their campaign in the major city, only agreed with Alexandra, first they needed to gain some crucial support, and as speed was of an essence, Alexandra would only allow a small number of soldiers riding with them. Instantly trashing softly spoken wishes of triumphant parades through both delta cities, to promote the popularity of Natasja and Valentina.

Slowly the regents nodded, requesting some time, trusting the wisdom of the great Alexandra. Suggested some meeting points, not knowing her plans, settling on the northern one, as she described her help coming out of the mountains.

The next morning they were presented with the finest horses available. Hers was a fiery black warhorse, towering several feet above her. She calmed him with some soft words, and seeing his reaction to her magic, simply jumped on, weaving a blanket around her, just to check the tales told in her childhood. The manes and hair around his hoofs slowly glowed a fiery red, as both she and the horse removed themselves from view, leaving a ghostlike figure, according to Valentina. Who, just as her sister refused to ride anything else than the sandcats they came on.

She said her farewells to the officials thanking them for the extra eyes they had given to ride with them. Lead her horse through the water onto the ferry, his size enabling him to easily make the jump up to the loading area. Lifted the water, and turned the ship, to let the other members climb up the loading ramp. Nodded to the young mage inherited from the delta cities, and together they put a fast pace on the ferry, heading against the flowing water up to the river fork, where four tributaries from out of the mountains joined to become this mighty river.

Finding the water high enough to travel up one of the tributaries, they negotiated the ever faster flowing water until the first cliffs of the mountains heralded a wide lake with water flowing into it from several meters up, forming an eternal mist spray over the low waves. She left the ferry to the young mage and looked up to the sky. Softly and slowly forming words, until she nodded. Looking down again, seeing all looking at her, she explained they were welcomed in the domain of the lightning falcons. Their scout glad to be able to tell their tales of destruction, and more than willing to set up a meeting between them and his tribe.

On the early morning thermal winds the mightiest and fastest of the realm came soaring in, circling over the sun baked rocks she had chosen as their meeting place. Again the tales of destruction was the major point of interest, shared by most of the falcons, giving her more insight in the footholds of the human faction. All were written down by a delta official, giving promise to be his next priority. She explained again her progress in the empire, answered by the tales already reaching the mountaintops, and the willingness of the falcons to help in their quest, declaring all present to be free from duties down the slopes of their homes.

Overwhelmed by the eagerness of the group, she requested a favor of the delta officials. She could actually use so much eyes in the sky. Had hoped to beg off one or two youngsters to keep tags on spies following them. They would have to step up the invasion of the faction stronghold, somehow messing up falcon communications, to repay their kindness. If they would be able to get this point on top of the agenda before they connected with the rebellion forces? One of the bigger falcons swooped down, and landed in front of her on the barren rock. Talking friendly pictures to all. She showed Natasja and Valentina how to say hello in his language, doing it once more as she looked around the group, satisfying the big falcon. He whistled, and one by one the other falcons swooped by, each connecting with one of the mages. A youngster highly recommended by him for his speed, becoming her liaison. Lisa's hunting magic, suited more to that of their host, learning the language quicker than most, able to grasp their concepts of distance and sight.

Again on their way Lisa came riding next to her, explaining what to look for, to identify the whereabouts of the shadow already tailing them. Requesting to let this vital communications channel to the human faction intact. She nodded notifying Janu and Daku of the extra group member.

The twins continued to practice how to contact the falcons. Natasha already could ask one to go a certain direction. Like her, she almost could look through the eyes of the falcon. Valentina was not that far. She could attract the attention of her falcon, but no more. Jealous at her sister she was finally fat up with them and rode next to Marinde to get her to learn her some extra fire tricks.

The day saw the first contours of the great city of the faction realm. Their scouts high up in the sky heralded a small group riding to meet them, giving her also a view on the large encampment they were coming from.

One of the men rode on as the escort stopped. Bowing standing on his floatcar, displaying his abilities, keeping in perfect balance. He announced himself as the chosen general in charge of the rebel army. An hidden nod from Marinde allowed her to focus on the business end of this meeting. Questioning the general on the size of the army, and the proximity of it to the city. He never flinched. Approving of her choice of intelligence, surely worth the detour they had to make. Explaining the city was not completely free of faction

forces, but all leaders had already chosen a safer place to give their commands from. So he could indulge them in keeping his and their remaining forces busy until one of them could play the ace deciding this standoff.

The general paused a bit, just long enough to turn his vehicle, and started on the faction positions as she urged her horse to start walking again. Listened with one ear to the report, busy with the group in front of them. Both Natasja and Valentina stood up in their foothold, quickly adjusting to the steps of their carrier. Accepting both, as practiced, one part of the group as their personal bodyguard. The general just looked and nodded ever more resolutely.

Knowing his city, the plan devised was simple enough. She agreed to immediate execution, so the column behind them became longer and wider as they rode past the camp, heading for the outskirts of the city.

They were on their way to the largest square in the city according to the straightest road. The General had eased down behind her, the twins and the guard. She nodded approvingly when one of the bodyguards came with the report, her attention fully focused on one corner in front of them. Arrows flew through the air. Before they had reached the twins, they were scorched by some fireballs which subsequently destroyed the houses the arrows came out of. According to the plan the bodyguard spread out and charged the faction militia. The second wave came from the street. She caught them and countered the attack. Behind the attackers Luc and Marinde emerged from the shadows and caught the militia in between fire, ice and stone, which then immediately surrendered.

Satisfied with the accuracy of the intelligence, she rode on, staging a show with the twins in the leading role. As the roads became wider she held back letting the two cats bring her star actors to center stage. Just behind them, she utilized her horses abilities to both fade a bit and dramatize her presence.

Fading some more the fiery manes and hoofs of her stallion flared, as the twins each went round one half of the huge square, gradually moving in, meeting up with her in the middle, in between the protection of the statues of the city elders of past splendor. In the chaos of the past events some trash had gotten itself stuck in the dais of one of the statues. Valentina leaned over and burned it to ashes, for Natasja to disperse the remains with a cool breeze, addressing all attendants after. Officially taking the city and all its inhabitants again into protection of the royal rule. Begging all to keep up their tradition to tolerate the different, and support the weak and needy. For extra effect she let the square tremble. Just a little bit, but the whole square went dead silent, slowly bowing to their new ruler, eventually picking up the chant set in by the bodyguard, as they rode off the square following the city magistrate to the posh city inn, reserved for them to spent the night.

With the gathering of forces the next morning, the two dwarves commented on all walking past the twins presenting themselves. On their recommendation she divided the soldiers up in three groups. Looked round, and finally found the high ranking official she was looking for. Promoted him on the field as general in charge of logistics. His fast acceptance proving the truth of the dwarves intel. Still she apologized for the job being not the most glamorous. Waved away with a generous gesture, the same he used to indicate to one of the groups of soldiers, asking if he could use them to set up the lines of communication and trades to supply them in their advance. She nodded, glad he understood.

The general of the rebel forces raised his voice, taking command of the second group, leaving the seasoned fighters and the bodyguard for her to command in their assault of the human faction stronghold.

She led the group through mountains and valleys until they could only travel on by climbing over a high pass. The falcons had already spied on the castle and through their eyes,

she had made her attack plan. The human faction started here, had obtained the castle by deceit and deception, and gradually expanded their influence. Saw their chance when two factions almost declared war on each other. Founded peace, on hindsight by threats, and were suddenly one of the most influential factions. The castle in the mountains, however, still was their headquarters. There was a pass from this side that offered passage to the castle. She hoped on a little help in opening the gates. They would undoubtedly be locked with magic and she wanted to look on as it was opened and closed in defense of their advance. She hoped the animal whisperer did know how to do his job.

Bad weather kept them at the entrance of the pass overnight, in the meanwhile giving the animal whisperer more time to announce their arrival. At first light they broke up, all in single file as in some places the pass was really no more than a ledge. She had sent a number of mages ahead. Scouting, while walking in the shadows. They had found two points where they passed the castle wall, which of course, were the narrowest passages. The faction had made them even harder by scattering gravel and small boulders. Things a strong vortex could just blow away, but during the time required to clean it, they would be just a standing target, which made her sent Luc to already start the cleanup work and asked the dwarfs to look for options.

Luc tried to draw one of the faction mages from the shadows, however, through the effort he had too little concentration left to hold up his disguise. Gravel, water and wind blew him off the road, and only with air magic he saved himself by jumping to a lower level. As not even the dwarves found options past the well protected pass, she would have to protect the army.

She gathered the leaders and told the problem. Wanted to push for the gate during the start of the twilight. Took besides the mages twenty additional warriors and started their run. In the passage, she created a screen of fire and air, turned it and then slowly tilted it over the

pass. Cautious the fighters stepped over the boulders, while the gravel splashed across the screen off the mountainside. Occasionally, she held back a fighter, after a signal from one of the mages in the shadows already higher up in the pass. She stepped aside and waited until the rock had fallen, tilted her screen back in place and sent the next fighter along the passage.

The mages had placed fireballs in front of the gate and everyone was waiting for her. She was patience, the falcons kept her informed of what happened in the castle. Waited until everyone was in the right place, actually waited until the guards of the castle began to be impatient. Eventually she walked to the gate, opened it without problems and attacked.

The fighters spread into three groups, climbed towards the guard posts. She had silenced two mages at the gate and together with Luc and the other mages literally bounced into the palace, avoiding the main entrance, they jumped to the balconies. Hence, she shot through the palace collecting all attendees, until she felt a huge wave of magic. Looked around, saw the prisoners in save hands, and signaled they needed to focus on it.

By breaking open some doors, they found deep in the palace the origin of the magic and were not surprised to find a portal. The faction needed a connection with the human world. She tested the markings, it was still under power, had just been used. Wove a screen around the room and asked help to maintain it, made fireballs and had Marinde hold them at the ready. Opened the portal and shot one by one the fireballs mixed with ice and air through it, and closed the portal immediately after. The ice would melt quickly, letting the air make the fireballs explode. Marinde handed several fireballs and quickly she corrected the forces of exploding characters on their side of the portal. With the destruction of the last two corresponding characters the portal diminished and the palace floors slowly stopped shaking.

Knowing an attack from behind was avoided, they marched through the mountains to a valley directly below the highest peak of the country, where they were greeted by two mages of the crown. She ordered for a camp to be build, but took Natasha and Valentina, following

the mages into a large cave. Two stone blocks had both a short piece of wood encased in an iron standing on top of them. Both mages invited a half of the twins at one of the altars, urged them to grasp the timber, and after an encouraging nod of her the mages could start the procedure.

Fire and earth escaped from one rod and wind and earth from the other. Another incantation absorbed the forces back into the wood, all the while Natasha and Valentina grasped the staff with both hands. A large explosion indicated the procedure was almost finished. Valentina and Natasha were allowed to pick up their staff from the iron stands and on indication of their mages they absorbed the last remnants of the energy slowly into their staff.

One of the mages dug in his bag and showed two belts of braided rope and gold threads out, then presented them to the twins. The staff was primarily intended as a status symbol. Natasha and Valentina were mature by letter of the law. It said they could defend themselves, however slight or strong their power would be. Another advantage was, with the lessons they had, both could use the staff to repel an attacker. A comforting thought in a war zone.

The next day she led them up a steep incline. The grass eventually bowed to the rocks and the ubiquitous gravel. Looked around and found the rock formation, described in the document. Followed the hillside over an amount of gravel similar to a path. Meandered through stones small and large, but stopped at a by wind and weather shaped rock formation. They had worn away the ground under two stone slabs leaving them resembling the wings of a rockeagle. Walking to the formation she warned the falcons and asked if anyone followed them. With the negative answer, she stepped into the alcove under the left wing and hummed an, in all elvenrealms known children's song. A door slid open and she sent her horse into the depths. Beginning steeply, but like a driveway the road adjusted itself and began circling, drilling down into the mountain. Made her fireball shine more brightly when Marinde, last in line closed the door again, to lit the eternal circular route down. Focusing on the revolutions, counting down to the number that, according to the text, was needed to get on to the route through the mountains. Made everyone stop when the number was reached and searched on the outside for an hidden door. Ran unsuccessfully the winding up and down feeling every strange stone or ledge, smiled when she passed the twins as they were searching the inner wall like her. Suddenly froze a little farther up, ran back to the twins, asked what they had seen and pulled them along to the small slightly different round stone, which they described.

The road was somewhat lower, suddenly steeper, which indeed could only mean the corridor had a doorway on the inside. She turned the stone and a doorway opened, giving access to a fresh breeze. She led her horse into the ever widening cave. Waited for Marinde to close the door, mounted and together they followed the group out of the cave onto the moss of what once had been a meandering river bed.

The two steep walls showed only a very narrow slit of daylight, making her occasionally depend again on fireballs to light the way. Again counting and regularly scouring the walls until she found the path, ledge, actually, slowly rising from the river bed, leading into some overlapping rocks.

Gently she led her horse onto the ledge through the gate and let him go, assuming he would find the grass on the other side of the corridor. With the ridge occupied by Jean and Lisa she used magic, jumped from the ledge into the deep and ran back to Marinde. Both took one of the princesses by the hand and led them up on the ledge. Waited until both cats were safely through. and then eventually joined them with the rest of the horses. The valley in which they were now, turned slowly in the same direction as the river bed, but where that slowly went up, they stayed here almost at the same level. The broader valley brought her sight from the air when the falcons had found them. The twins used the opportunity directly to look for an exit and finally found a niche in a wall of the mountain, with something what looked like a pillar. They climbed the slope to the opening, and followed the colonnade carved in the mountainside. Crossing caves, running along precipices and occasionally breaking through the wall to take advantage of the next cave cluster, until the road suddenly went up and the stones became covered with moss. She dismounted and led them over the slippery route through the cave, with the sound of falling water growing louder in their ears.

A screen of water completely covered the cave entrance. Carefully approaching it by foot she wove some air through it and looked at the reception puddle, poked in the water, made a new doorway on the other side, tried it and found the promised flooded road. Increased the slot and pointed Lisa onto the path, held the gate open until Marinde passed her, handing over the reins of her horse.

The water came up to their shins, but thanks to the rough water the road was almost free of moss. It led them around several waterfalls, before the path crossed again into the river, which was wide and shallow easy enough to follow until the a narrowing of the gap and the sound of the next waterfall heralded a quest for the door or rather trapdoor. Slowly pushing a piece of rock just below the surface aside, another stone lifted, acting as a barrier against the water. The rest of the water seeping away through the grooves in the bed, after which a second stone moved, reveiling the corridor. Following it they walked towards the light, slowly decreasing the intensity of her fireball as the sunlight became more intense.

The road ran past the opening into a downward spiral, she looked carefully through the hole and had a view of the other part of the earth elven kingdom. In the distance the city, their

goal. Close by the two spires that marked the entrance of the pass over the mountains. She searched and found contact with the falcons and received an overview of the pass below them. Permanently monitored by the faction was this the base from where they performed their patrols. She sat down and took some time to study the movements of the faction members between the buildings, and understood the doors of the spires had stayed close to the faction.

Finally she walked back into the cave, told what she had seen and had the twins looking through the opening to view their land. Mounted her horse and followed the spiral down, until the stone turned into sand, pointed to the air intakes and put her finger on her mouth. Doused her fireball and walked onto the circular space. Marinde shook her head, whispered of the arch that connected the two spires forming a gate over the road. Not a word was said about a passage through the arch, let alone it was built to hide a secret road through the mountains.

As quiet as possible they led the horses on the sand, through the arch, to the other spire, continuously hearing voices of the faction members coming through the air vents. The circular space in the second spire opened again to a corridor going up, after which the horses brought them through a spiral into a vast cave complex.

The twins told of their vacations in the mountains. The city, which they were heading for, was mainly used as a holiday resort in the mountains. The richest elves, like the royal family had palaces and often they had walked for hours wandering in the caves nearby. They looked for landmarks, trying to figure out whether it was the same cave.

following the airflow, they got out of the cave on the mountain meadows overlooking the spires and palaces of the city. Although close to the pass, the city had only a rough footpath as liaison to the pass.

They followed the edges of the valley down towards the city, until a dog came running up the mountainside. The old elf walking behind the beast, apologizing for its behaviour, was beaten with astonishment when he recognized the travelers, now understood why his dog was wound up. Both Valentina and Natasha bowed gracefully to the old man, as he had taught them a few years ago. When he had recovered his speech, he introduced himself. He had been told in the city he had to look for people, and he had to keep them hidden as much as possible for the faction. Only to be rid of him they had sent him here to the higher pastures. He wanted to do something for the resistance, but the leaders came up time and again with something to keep him out of the fighting.

A soft cough was enough to return him to his proper task. He asked them to follow him through small canyons and valleys, brought them up to one of the palaces. Apologized the royal palace now was in possession of the faction and surprised a sleeping field servant. Let him carry off the horses, and led the group to the reception rooms of the palace. Bowed slightly, then left.

They heard two male voices saying it was impossible that the royal twins were here. Of course he had heard the stories about the other side of the empire, the twins single handedly destroying the main settlements of the faction. A revolt against the faction and more of that nonsense, presumably brought into life by the faction itself, to get the opposition at this side of the empire out of hiding. And to say, the twins here, in his home He got no further because they reached the door and she bowed and introduced her companions. Asked for confidentiality, a place to stay and an opportunity to speak to the opposition.

Again it took a while before the unexpected had sunken in, then he led them in person to some secluded guestrooms He needed time, and said that in the course of the next day all the leaders of the resistance would be in his house, but warned them that in order to get this done, he also had to invite members of the faction.

The next morning she listened with Marinde to the complaints of the leaders of the faction on the timing of the meeting, neatly parried by their host, this was the only place in

their schedule to plan this meeting on such a short notice. Briefed by her and Marinde he apologized again for the short notice and then told about the rumors everyone had heard. Justifying his tale here and there with information, which he had inherited through his large informal circuit, soon got everyone quiet by the details and then asked everyone his or her view on the rebellion in the other part of their realm. Many saw a revolt against the higher classes. An attempt to take over the faction and make a revolution not involving the ruling class. The leaders of the faction admitted, their actions might provoke revolutionary sentiments, but also indicated they had to settle some revolts with an iron hand. They would pass on this information to the rulers in the royal city, passed kindly on the offer of lunch and left, followed by others who had better things to do, than to listen to rumors and speculation.

Quickly they ran through the secret corridor back to their sleeping quarters and donned both their posh clothes, helped the twins in their yellow dresses, and were ready when they were called for lunch. Their host welcomed them and introduce all present. Marinde whispered over everyone some extra information, not appropriate to be included at such an formal introduction. She could portray her plans and requests, while the meal was consumed. One of them present assured them that during the entire occupation of the royal palace there had been eyes and ears inside its walls. Marinde told the plans and how far advanced they were in the other half of the empire. She further warned for the expected force the faction would probably send through the pass.

Accustomed to secret gatherings the members did not lose time with unnecessary questions, understood the plan and pledged to take escaped faction members early in the pass, but asked for a favor. To be not entirely absent they asked if one of them could go back to the other side of the mountain range. She nodded and Marinde accepted the offer with the necessary ceremonial. Their host offered a pick of his own arms so they could leave immediately, which ended the meal. One by one they took leave of the twins, with the promise to do everything they could to offer them the throne of their parents. Every time both nodded and Valentina asked them to spare her subjects.

That night they joined the army again in the castle at the other end of the path through the mountains, and introduced the leader.

V

Reports kept flooding in about members of the faction. Gathering in the mountain pass. Both from this side, and from the royal side of the empire. Opting not to spread her forces, she had send orders to spare their strength for upcoming battles.

Once a day she collected the strategists of her army, and climbed the mountain paths overlooking the pass, updating firsthand the strength of their enemy. She hoped on a confrontation on their side of the mountain range. After losing their stronghold, the human faction army however had really only one option left besides wage war on them. More in depth reports from their scouts were placing the movements up on the mountain passes, favoring that second option.

The general, however was not eager to fight out the war on open ground, willing to move their army to a mountain slope, some miles down the pass. Openly arguing with her. Questioning her lack of action. Slowly splitting the mood of the soldiers. Some favoring the plans of the general. Others still having faith in her expertise. In the end she allowed a party to go up the trail to scout the area.

One of the seasoned fighters came calling on to her, bowed and asked if she would come and check out the progress. She nodded, and let him show her how maybe half her

forces were following the general into the mountains. Then whispered what orders she had, since the general would never willingly leave his prized ballistics detachment, when battle was imminent. She smiled and nodded to Lisa for an update.

Most spies were trailing the moving army. She was waiting for them to get high enough onto the driveway up to the pass, to intervene her in camp. Giving a signal while talking. Watching the remaining spies being kicked out of their hideouts. She glanced sideways to the soldier next to her, who needed no more commands. Shouting his orders, heard all over camp, to get up, pack light and to be quick about it.

Ten minutes later the camp was empty. A mage appeared at the rock eagle as the column came into view, opening the passage into the mountains. Taking a different route, they ended up high above the pass. Already threading as light as possible she whistled like one of the songbirds. One of the generals soldiers cautioned them, pointing at the secret hideouts of his detachment.

The generals march had been slow, still not in sight of his first scouts. The faction, however had given a look inside their intentions, by sending many scouts ahead. He was actually waiting for the report the faction army would be on the move.

One by one the seasoned warriors stopped to get a look at the ledge they had to run down, for their trap to slam shut. Then suddenly she raised her arm, and all went silent. Looking through the eyes of the falcons, slowly her hand moved. Tensing her muscles at the sound of an army marching through the pass. Pointing towards the pass underneath them, when the last of the marching column had crossed the invisible boundary marking the reach of their archers.

Running fast they were halfway down before an alarm sounded below in the pass, making the faction army column stop, turn, unwillingly facing the giant ballista's shooting their projectiles at them from high up. The resulting chaos heightened with an hail of arrows,

after which she was down in the pass, ran through it with fire spirits dancing around her, as she turned and twisted, seeing her soldiers bunching up at the slope down the ledge, waiting for their numbers to grow, hitting the pass in large groups wide enough to span it several times. Each consecutive group racing out faster, picking up comrades at passing them.

The ballista's and hail of arrows off course had subsided. The sharp shooters still picking off their target however could not stop the back of the faction army make use of the meandering pass to protect themselves against the onslaught from the air and dig in, leaving their comrades in front of them to their enemies.

With mages all over the pass and its scaling walls, the faction kept an feeble balance, attacking in numbers, and retreating fast, keeping out of reach of the archers. She stepped back, several hundred meters, signaling a controlled retreat, as a thunder came rolling down the pass. Dust clouds as high as the low peaks rolling over her forces as they scaled the bend. One last time she looked at the faction forces, still only looking bewildered at their retreat, then jumped into the dust cloud to enable the general and his cavalry to overrun the remaining faction forces, trampling all foolish enough to make a stand.

Back, high up between the ballista's, it seemed the surprise attack had overwhelmed the faction army completely, and one after another the leaders came up to report on the troops, cleaning the pass, and capturing all faction members, left alive. Last to arrive was Marinde, giving her a view of two older elves, known to her and the twins, as part of the former palace staff.

Although the twins mounted on Janu and Daku had not much to fear, the elders had called for a small guard who could protect them. One hundred men being small in size. She groaned, but gave in to their demands. Seventy elves were left of the one hundred with which she had gone into the battle. She gave a secret sign to Marinde to approve those who would fit in to again complete the hundred. Strength and experience were the deciding factors heren so noone looked surprised, when two older elves were chosen among the hundred.

During the trip she made the two older elves riding beside her and questioned them about the state of the empire. One told many a tale. The other, designated by Marinde, only commented on the tales told. At the end of the conversation she lowered her voice and turned to the second elf. Marinde says you've worked in the palace. Can you get us in the palace? Imperceptibly the man nodded. She put a smile on her face and said "the birds see all". Imperceptibly the man nodded a second time.

The two elves were gone for three days. All the while her falcon followed them. A nod from her that she knew, was therefore sufficient to confirm everything was settled.

They were still two days away from the palace, but halfway through the day she said goodbye to the commanders and pulled out followed by the guard towards a strange rock formation. It was midnight when they arrived. The old elf put his hand on the rock, and a path appeared where two horses easily could stride side by side. Several fire balls were lit shining into the endless corridor. Just when she had calculated they would be underneath the royal city, a large cave opened up in front of them. In the light of the fire balls she saw stairs leading up to all sides. A young elf sat in the middle of the room. One of teh mages approached her, put her hands on her shoulders, and took over the incantation. The young elf got up and led them to one of the stairs.

They entered the palace and in groups fanned out on the palace grounds. The young elf motioned her to follow her. Along with Natasha, Valentina and Jean, she followed her through the palace to the throne room. They heard fighting in other parts of the palace, but the young elf led them through secret passages, apparently no one of the human faction had found. The few groups they encountered were quickly silenced, and arriving at the throne room, the young elf bowed and disappeared through a panel in the wall. Natasha and Valentina reported where she had gone. They had used this passage often, to take a peek into the throne room.

The battle for the doors of the throne room was in full swing. Twenty heavily armed soldiers of the human faction under heavy pressure and after fifteen minutes finally gave in. The room was empty. It was dusty, clearly out of use for some time. Yet she felt large quantities of magic flowing through the palace. She left the twins in the throne room, beckoned the young mage and walked back to the passage.

The young mage nodded when asked if there was more activity in the palace. Those who had ordered her to hold watch over the palace and spy on its inhabitants, however, had forbidden her to move outside the hidden corridors other than jumping between passages. When she just started spying the throne room was still in use. She had long observed them until she was discovered. Only after several days of waiting, she had managed to escape. Reaching the driveway below nearly starved.

The dungeons had no hidden passageways and when she was strong enough to once more explore the palace unseen, the throne room was empty and all the magic she could feel in the palace came from those dungeons. She had never dared to enter them. The mages she had seen in the throne room were too strong for her and would have no problem to pierce through her camouflage.

They needed to clean out the palace dungeons of any presence of the human faction. The dwarfs, accustomed to fighting in underground passages, gave their views on how the fighting in these dungeons could develop. Everyone nodded and agreed that Alexandra along with several other mages would take the lead, with half of the warriors occupying connected hallways in case their opponents might have ways to sneak around catching them in the rear. The rest of the soldiers would search through the palace and guard already captured faction members.

She moved over into the shadows. Nobody could tell whether there were prisoners in the dungeons so a frontal attack was immediately rejected. As they certainly would be used as a shield. Looked around and got the signal all were ready. Sneaked through the hallway descending into the dungeons, kept scanning the rooms coming up left and right and found nothing. Stopped when the hallway emptied into a large space, waited until everyone caught up and discussed the next move. The faction had entrenched themselves on the floor of the hall. They themselves were at the brink of the upper balcony. Large wide staircases connected the balconies with each other and the floor far below them. There was really only one possible action. She hesitated however. Downstairs, the faction had created a portal and often it opened for soldiers, hurrying in and out of the hall. However it could be a trap.

Eventually she passed on what would be her next action and left the rest to determine what their response would be. Took a running jump into the abyss. Shooting great fireballs into the depths of the hall. Her screen was shot to pieces. With a breeze of air she ajusted her course, bounced from a balcony and launched herself back into the air. Focused her fire and ice at the mages down below. A large fireball was hurled towards her, easily dodged, to look again down and let herself fall. Built fire, air and ice around her. Ducked when she hit the ground and let the three streams mix. After the big explosion she drew her sword and danced through the hall, utilizing other mages who now had reached the floor. Saw a group of faction members gathering, let a mage launch her into the air, collecting a huge bubble in front of her and bowled the group apart. Used one of the pillars to skyrocket again, and saw one of her troop in trouble. Shot a volley of ice hail into his direction, followed by a small fireball melting the ice in front of her ally.

A flash lit up the room, and made her crash into one of the stairs. She looked up and saw the faction members fleeing through the portal. Ran down the stairs and was just in time to shoot a few fireballs through the opened portal. Felt it closing, murmured the incantation to hold the process, creating balls of ice and fire, but was overwhelmed by a wall of magic pulling her through the portal, which then closed.

With a rain of freezing ice she managed to rid herself of the magic, long enough to spot the dragon in front of her. Repelled the fire balls and took in the big dark cave. High enough for the dragon to stand in, but not much higher, so he was limited in his room to maneuver. Focused on him and straightened without any bow or nod. Normally a big insult to a dragon. He however took a step back and looked around as if he sought a way out.

"You have brought me here to kill me. It would show little respect not to award you this fight. Small fireballs shot towards the dragon and burst apart on his skin. More and more, ever faster. The dragon continuously blew the hooks they left from his body and looked for options. Seemed surprised when she switched onto ice and air. Then remembered the incantation and was just in time to just rip off the already closing net. Great fireballs made him stagger and finally he went on the offence firing his own fireballs. She dodged them seeing the threads woven through. Jumped for another attack, felt the magic slam shut, used air magic to drop to the floor and had them figured out just in time to blast through the coming fire storm. Hit the dragon with an ice storm and now alternated fire and air vortices. Wove a new network around the dragon and pulled it tight before he could liberate himself.

She looked around, opened the portal to the main hall in the elvenworld, pointed towards it and slowly the faction members tiptoed through the portal carefully making sure to get as far away from her as possible. She quickly scanned the room while she put timers around the marks on the portal. Stepped through it and destroyed it. Along with Natasha, Valentina, and Marinde she stood beside the throne. Once one of the twins would sit here. She hugged both long. Promise me never to fight for the throne. You need each other. The one in the throne room, the other around. Help each other. Natasha and Valentina promised solemnly. After this she asked Marinde permission to leave. She was a worthy queen, while the twins still had no children.

Alexandra

Tales of the stormthrower

Part II: The king's daughter

Ι

The floatcar brought them into the mountains, when their driver took them to progressively greater heights. Unbelievable they already were above the dwarf capital for half an hour and still they couldn't discover any doors. Pastures with cows and sheep and wheat and corn fields, but no house or hut or elevator. The first rocks immediately meant the end of the trip. The dwarf got out and opened a door hidden in the rocks, enabling Lisa and her to enter the city.

She let the door close behind them before she ignited a fireball, had often been in the dwarf capital and more often than not she was asked to come in secret. Her arrival usually meant grave tidings.

She camouflaged both of them, and looking like small bearded dwarf women, they crossed the dark corridors to a wider lane, where they both could stand up. The avenue was paved with white pebbles, artfully arranged with the different shades set in mosaic patterns.

Here in the suburbs the doors were simple. A single dwarf had carved his door. It looked nice, but no more.

The road feeded them into a funnel taking them to lower levels in the town, where they had to shelter in a alcove for a passing large excavator. Many levels lower immediately meant they were in a better area of the city. The stones were replaced by black and white marble with at intervals beautifully decorated arches to honor all those passing by. The abundend traffic pushed them ever closer to the wall. She warned Lisa. As they impersonated two dwarfs women they couldn't be seen bending under the arches.

The walls of the avenue slowly moved out, and a, what the dwarves call park, stretched before them. An area, no bigger than a similar park in the realm of elves or humans. The gallery had walls inlaid with multicolored glass and the many bays were full of fragrant mushrooms. She looked over the railing into the depths to get her bearings and found them the spiral to bring them to the bottom of the park. Patiently waiting until the spiral was open for declining circulation she nudged Lisa gently, and gestured indifference, Lisa nodded and adjusted herself.

Lower floors had caves, each with a different theme and mushroom type. From the spiral she could see the dozens of ramps, bridges and spirals which connected the caves and allowed you to walk in the park for hours, without ever seeing a cave twice.

The end of the spiral landed onto a large square. Large columns in the center of the square acknowledged they were heading to the great halls. They rounded the square and walked into the avenue, on the opposite side. This avenue had granite pavers. Again, the different shades artfully processed in mosaic. Blows from stone on stone and metal on metal confirmed what the big signs on the doors had already indicated. The noble arts were practiced here. Axes, hammers and swords were manufactured. All high quality, for war or for decoration. The shrieks of the bellows battled with the hammering for dominance. They

passed through and followed the lane to the bypass around the great halls, turned left onto the the bypass, following it until they reached a kind of bus stop. The two dwarfs in the niche bowed slightly. They answered both the bow and she made an allusion about his beard. In a battle, where they both had fought, it had been mauled. A smile appeared on his face and they followed the two dwarfs into one of the side roads.

Ogrimar and Zagramar were employed by the dwarf king and together they had lived great adventures. Now the time had come to repay their aid. Ogrimar put a medallion in a notch in the wall, and a door opened to a staircase into the depths. She waited until the door closed behind them, before removing the strands of their disguises, then followed the dwarves into the labyrinth of secret corridors of the royal city. In the waiting room of the royals, a guard made a bow and walked away. They installed themselves in the big pile of pillows after the guard returned with a nod of his head, meaning they were announced.

About two hours later, they were brought to a large parlor, beautifully decorated with thick carpets on the walls, embroidered with gold and silver threads and a ceiling glittering like the stars in the night. Presumably diamonds.

She introduced Lisa, and the queen started the conversation, telling about a strange cult in their town. It had assumed the form of purists. In the centuries since the breaking of the world dwarves had taken over many habits invented in other worlds. Making life in the world of dwarves more pleasurable. Needless to say the sect was not very big and it looked as though they were not really doing their utmost best to get more influence. Yet there was a problem. Some senior figures had one or more children lost to the sect. Most of them had always embraced the joys of the modern world, but now they had turned one hundred percent, lived in simple caves some distance out of town and rejected all that was modern. In short it looked as if they were brainwashed. One of their daughters, Jinasin, too had fallen under the influence of the sect. She was of marriageable age and although they had expected their children to resist their upbringing a little when growing up, they had raised them to weigh everything that was brought onto them, preserving what was ultimately good. Yet slowly they seemed to lose grip on her. The contract for Alexandra and Lisa was to accompany Jinasin on a journey through the dwarf world and possibly beyond to prove the sect not worthy enough for their daughter. The king took over the tale and told them, their daughter was waiting for them in the extensive library of the town. She was collecting many reports, writing good and bad about the sect. He concluded hoping they could help show his daughter the evil way of the cult making her renounce it.

She told of the wanderings of her and Lisa through the human world. The sect from the earth elf kingdom had pulled back into America, where its was one of many. A long time ago, special courts were set up. America also had one. Top secret of course. They had searched and found the coup leaders responsible for the war in the earth elves kingdom, had argued their case before the court, and were vindicated. Not long after, a special unit of the tax authorities raided the complex of the sect. There was opposition and unfortunately there were some casualties. However none of the known leaders were taken, at least that was what the American newspapers said.

Lisa and she had thanked the U.S. government. Unfortunately they could not eradicate the entire sect. Interracial conflicts can only be brought in court against an individual person. They had, however, been provided with copies of the records the U.S. government had seized. The king and queen nodded. They had already received the reports.

It meant the end of the meeting. The royal couple left, and Ogrimar led them back into the secret labyrinth. The library was closed at the request of the princess, so Ogrimar

therefore did not hesitate when they reached the door to the library. As the door opened noiselessly, he announced himself with a simple: "Princess?".

Jinasin walked into the square area. The walls carved with elongated niches, where the books were displayed. They followed het to the table in the center back and introduced themselves as Lisa, envoy of the human world, in charge of interracial affairs and Alexandra, adventurer. More was not necessary as her adventures certainly would had reached the ears of a dwarf princess. Jinasin introduced herself and nodded to Ogrimar and Zagramar.

For days she sat in the library to read the documents which Jinasin had collected. Sometimes they got explanations of the princess, sometimes she or Lisa told additional information in response to a report. Eventually when they had worked through all the reports, Jinasin thought it time to tell them the real reason for their arrival.

She had lied to her parents to investigate where her friend had gone, who was well under the influence of the cult, and had disappeared. The authorities had searched and found nothing. To come closer to the secrets of the sect, she had started reading a lot about it and finally concluded the cult was a danger to her father's kingdom. She also found out only someone who had experienced the sect first hand could actually expose them. A friendly mage had tought her all incantations which could protect her against hypnosis and related subjects. Only then she dared to deal with the sect. Every time she had contacted the sect she made Ogrimar and Zagramar follow her. One time they had to intervene. The rest of the time she could identify the incantations secretly poured over her and gain control of them.

The magic started of lightly and slowly hundreds of different incantations were woven together. All loose almost invisible, but eventually if everything was merged it should be the strongest personality incantation there was, enabling the cult to give the victim any life they wanted.

Time to start at the beginning. The royal couple had made sure they could have a look into the camp of the sect. Who knows what they would run into which the cult had forgotten to hide. Jinasin sent a messenger and the next day they followed him.

The rode to the cult in a transport vehicle, the electric motor hummed quietly, now they had passed into low rolling hills. In the distance, the silhouettes of huts became visible. A large building dominated the camp, while the small huts were built randomly around it. She shook her head. There was clearly no dwarf who took care of the housing. She wondered how the sect would explain this.

A young dwarf came to meet them and the vehicle stopped beside her. They got out and Jinasin introduced them to her. Only the best for the princess she said. Alexandra, from the elven world. Lisa, from the human world and Ogrimar and Zagramar. The young dwarf bowed and beckoned them to follow her, never introducing herself.

Closer to the camp, she felt a tinkling sensation in her body. At the same time she knew why the camp was here. Quickly she calculated where the other end of the portal could be and came to the conclusion this was not somewhere in the human or elf world. She gave Lisa a signal, who sped up to until she walked beside her with her hand on her bow. The two dwarfs responded immediately guarding left and right of Jinasin, who looked puzzled. With her sword she scanned the area with little hope to detect anything. A portal to the outside world could only be made by some high mages. Every part of the environment she took in, and looked for differences. A vibration, someone blinked. Two fireballs shot out and the disguise was torn to pieces. More vibration, this time an ice rain and a second mage was withdrawn from the shadows. She felt something behind her, yelled a warning, and two dwarf axes swung back and found object. With a roar a drakeling appeared. Part dragon, part something. Ice, wind and rock threw it back and a dozen high mages let their nets fall. The transport vehicle was already in pieces, and she saw only one way out, grabbed the king's

daughter and pulled her to the big hut. Smashed the door and said the incantation. The portal opened. Zagramar jumped through it, and Ogrimar tugged Jinasin into his wake. Lisa followed, and turning around she stepped through it, leaving a fire storm, which tore the building to pieces, destroying the signs of the portal with it. It exploded on their side and she rode it dozens of meters into the air, looked around, did a somersault and landed back on her feet, crouched, ready to pounce. From the corners of her eyes she saw four figures flat on the ground. Where the portal had been, four stone stumps remained of the columns which before the explosions had helped form the portal. Furthermore, she saw only pasture. Nothing to make out on which outside world they had arrived.

Slowly, her sword still in hand, she stood up and saw Lisa and the three dwarves do the same. Jinasin was in a little shock, unaccustomed to the sudden twists an adventure could take, so she explained what had spurred her vigilance. The rest Jinasin filled in herself.

None of them knew exactly where they were, but given the drakeling, she feared for the worst. So they took to the road. If they were in the dragon world it would be better to be far away when the scouts came to investigate the remains of the portal. Lisa first, they walked a route that left the least of trace behind.

Hours later some peaks came into focus. Artificially, but high enough for a dragon lord. She borrowed a pair of binoculars from Lisa and studied the Peak. A smile appeared on her face. Bowed slightly and then motioned the rest to do the same. The dragon then spread his wings and he glided very gracefully down to their level. She looked defiant in his direction, while making reassuring gestures to her friends. With much noise the dragon landed next to her and bowed deeply. With a deep voice full of cynicism he welcomed the high elf mage in his domain. If she would had announced their arrival, he would have waited for her. She told of the portal and the sect. The dragon growled, his scouts had spotted the remains of

the portal, but found nobody. She asked for a favor. The dragon, which once, a while ago. Had been on the wrong side of her powers very quickly agreed.

Through devious detours they flew on the back of some dragons, to a friendly dragon kingdom. Their cariers did not dare go beyond the border, and straight after they disembarked the dragons made their escape. Not long after, scouts came investigating. Amazement could be heard in their voices. Sitting on an increase and playing with a few pebbles she told them what had happened and asked them passage back to her own world. She did not have to introducé herself. The name of the princess however did cause a bit of turmoil. One of the scouts bowed deep, jumped up and flew back to his dragon lord.

Lisa used to adventures wanted to know what was going on. She told them, a few years ago, one of her tasks had ultimately led her entering the tournament to elect the dragon council. The tournament in which one hundred and fifty dragon determined their pecking order. She had humiliated many a dragon lord, and made it into the semi finals, where she was narrowly defeated by the dragon king himself. Since then her name in this world was used sparingly.

The silence that followed was finally disrupted when a group of dragons landed. A great dragon invited her to mount and he appointed the others to the remaining smaller dragons. The flight took them over deep pits filled with a crawling mass of creatures, vast lawns with huge herds of cattle and the occasional peak. A sleeping place of one of the higher dragons in this kingdom. A low-hanging fog announced the residence of the dragon lord. Long time she could not see hand over eyes. Eventually a huge spire loomed up, flanked by a large deep hole. The walls of the hole lost in the ever-present fog. The great dragon started to apologize for his master, having little time to prepare, but the shadow of the dragon lord above them already became visible. With much noise the mighty dragon landed on the platform the were standing on. He bowed slightly, like her, welcoming them into his domain

and then complimented the great mage Alexandra with her perfect timing. He was just in a meeting with envoys from friendly dragon lords about an increase of elves, dwarves and humans in their kingdoms. The strange thing was the increase was not due to ownership of any dragon lord. Perhaps the great Alexandra could shine light on the matter. She agreed and asked to what level she would have to climb. The dragon lord laughed shortly. A brief hum made the great dragon reappear. She mounted the dragon and together with the dragon lord flew to the higher platform. The grumbling of the envoys stopped when they came in sight, they bowed their heads and remained so until she had taken place between them. She told of her adventures in the earth elves kingdom and her travels with Lisa in the human world. Finally she told of her journey through the dwarven kingdom, the encounter with the drakeling, their flight through the portal and the destruction of it. she concealed where they had come into the dragon world, and the dragons were wise enough not to ask.

She took leave of the envoys and stepped back on the great dragon, flying back down to her friends, followed by the dragon lord. He gave the great dragon orders to make sure the group would make it back into the dwarven world. She bowed slightly and whispered the place where they had come into the dragon world. With a nod and an apology the dragon lord flew back to his other guests.

The great dragon reported a few direct gateways to the world of the dwarf was available. She understood the hint and accepted the voyage. Back on the same dragons as before, the great dragon led them into the fog. During the trip the great dragon told the tale of the portal. they had found it in one of the neighboring kingdoms. In the pastures, away from any peak whatsoever. A couple of elves and dwarves had put some houses around it, but when scouts had attacked the camp they had stumbled on some mages and a drakeling and were defeated. Their dragon lord had to come to the portal himself to destroy the group, and take over the portal, in order to find out, the how and the why of this phenomenon. The hills and grasslands passed quickly beneath them and only after a long time the great dragon began to fall. In circles they came closer and closer to the ground, and the portal. A large dragon stood alongside and followed the flight of dragons. When everyone had landed, the great dragon introduced her to him and told about the mission from his dragon lord. He bowed and began incantations to open the portal. The great dragon sent the smaller dragons away, after which he apologized and said his dragon lord told him to ensure personally that everything would go as planned. She nodded and welcomed him into the group.

He wove a web around him and slowly transformed into a wolf-like man-sized creature. Completely black with the same designs on his coat as he had in his dragon form. Even the horns came back with some feathers behind his ears.

The portal opened and she stepped through it, and calculated they were close to the royal city of the dwarfs of the white mountains. Two mountain walls toweres on both sides. The valley in which they were now, covered with at least a meter of snow. The walls held the remnants of the caves where the group, keeping up the portal, had lived. Without much hope they started to search through the caves. The many pieces of clothing betrayed the status of their former owners, both humans and dwarves. Expensive clothes, only available to the top layer of the society. Valuable items such as jewelry were not found. Not uncommon for a place ransacked by a dragon. Some of the caves contained some papers, mostly diaries. She thumbed through a couple, hit them back together, and started to collect them.

A shrill whistle made her look up. Lisa had climbed to the upper cave and beckoned. Nimbly she climbed up and followed her into the cave. Hidden behind a large rock. In the back room was a table, covered with maps of the dwarf world. She sought and found the portal they had destroyed. Dragon characters were written on the spot. Lisa had found the map of the White Mountains and disappointed laid in down again. She now gazed at a map with just such characters. A third portal. According to the map in an archipelago of islands and volcanoes. Lisa looked at her quizzically, but she had never been there before. None of the major kingdoms of dwarves was located there. Lisa folded the map and put it in her bag with the other two.

The other four were outside waiting. She gave Ogrimar the diaries and the great dragon explained he had found traces of two drakelings, one of which he knew. Lisa showed the maps and drew attention to the signs. The great dragon growled he recognized the two places in the dragon world. The third portal was not in the dragon world. The dragon signs were the symbols for fire and tree, which meant the portal was somewhere in the elven world. She shook her head to indicate there was no place she knew with such a description.

To make their report. The three dwarfs had located an entrance to the city and went ahead. Along with Lisa and the dragon, she went back through the portal. She sought and obtained an audience with the dragon lord and told what they had found in the camp. At the end of the story the dragon lord gave a low hum and his servant came into the room with a basket full of jewelry. She looked at them. Many fashionable gold and silver, inlaid with diamonds. Nothing that could tell a story. She shook her head and gave the basket back. Maybe they could still serve a purpose to the fathers and mothers about the fate of their sons and daughters. One or more answers to the riddle, however, they were in the dragon world.

After some talking back and forth the dragon lord was convinced the portal had to be destroyed. Together they flew back to the portal. Lisa and the great dragon, into his wolf form, walked through it. She took leave with a nod, walked through the portal and counted twenty seconds down while walking to one of the stones holding the portal. Ice and flames disintegrated the stone. A ripple went through the portal, which was offset by an opposing force, caused by the destruction of its counterpart in the dragon world by the dragon lord.

Destroying a stone at determined intervals she walked around the portal. Eventually after all the signs were destroyed, the portal closed.

Following the valley down the hill, they came near the main entrance of the dwarven city where they only had to follow the traffic onto the access bridge, toward the waterfall. On top of the bridge you could see how a large rock cracked the waterfall in half. A waterfall underneath the gate again made the flow complete. The bridge plunged into the hole, where soldiers in ceremonial armor were guarding the passage. Most of the travelers knew them well and greeted to let them pass. She went to one of the soldiers, and made herself known. The soldier nodded and explained to them the way to the inn where they could wait for their friends.

Behind the gate opened the market hall in all directions. They took the archway down into the abyss and were eventually released on a large plateau with shops and restaurants. In the back was a large opening with columns and an inviting light. 'The White Mountains Inn' announced a plaque. Even before they were well and truly seated they had a plate full of steaming soup before them and they could eat and wait for things to come.

When the plates were cleared from the table Ogrimar came in telling what they had heard. Here too, the children rebelled against their parents to go to the sect. After the destruction of the camp and their leaders, they had returned into the city proclaiming their faith. The strands of the spell however could not be maintained without mages. Slowly holes fell into them, and the children came to their senses. One after another now threw the strands away. Jinasin was talking to some girls to find out what they knew and strengthen them with the news they had found out. Zagramar had found a son of a friend who was in the sect. Both Jinasin and Zagramar would join them during the evening in the inn. She stretched out and used the mandatory rest to go to bed early.

In the middle of the night she was awakened by Jinasin. Some guards had heard rumors near the destroyed portal and called for help. Quickly she dressed and followed Jinasin and Lisa, who came from the room next to hers, to the reception room of the inn, where the dragon was already waiting for them. Jinasin rushed them over the streets of the city to the side entrance, opening onto the valley. The guard opened the door when he saw them coming. They heard soldiers into battle with what sounded like a drakeling. The great dragon took a run and jumped into the deep, let go of his disguise and flew towards the site of the destroyed portal, just in time to see how the drakeling created an opening, jumped and flew away.

With ice balls she hit the drakeling from his flight, enabling the great dragon to snatch him out of the sky. He threw it against the ground and an uneven battle and short interview was followed by a high pitched death cry. She apologized about the killing of the drakeling. Waved away by the soldiers. Who then asked if the dragon lord needed any proof of past events. She accepted the offer, taking immediate leave of Jinasin, leaving her to setup a research party at the site of the ancient city of the dwarves. Jumped the mountain face, to gain height then glided after the great dragon, opened the portal, and had the fabrics dissolved before the dragon lord arrived. Waited for him to make a new one, then juggled ice and fire destroying the signs of the rogue portal.

Leaving the drakeling and the reports to the great dragon she jumped air several times, then glided off to the close by border, saving the messengers she had requested a embarrassing flight over foreign territory.

Although they only arrived one day later than her messengers the fact they could fly directly to the site of the rogue portal meant the dragon lord had not been idle. From far away

she could see his huge frame occupying the cliffs overlooking the grass plains. He lifted off accompanying her to the portal, informing her of its state and placement in both worlds.

A flight brought them over an ocean to a large island. From there they were requested to embark on huge wooden rafts, following the dragonlord, as he circled in front of them. It took a while, but out of the big blue ocean finally a series of islands appeared. The dragon steered them into the middle of the cluster, telling them to head for the sandy beach. A bit of air bridged the gap between the raft and the island. It really did not need exploration. It harbored two large rocks, besides the tiny patch of sand the dragon optimistically called beach. Wedged in between the rocks the signs to support the portal.

Some waves made the raft beach, some more drifted it far enough onto the island for the resident dragon to have a safe enough landing site. Lots of magic power still existed on the other side, enough to put the portal half way underneath the surface, when he had ordered to close the portal.

She understood only too well his problems. Destroying the portal with force, meant destroying the island outright, both sides of the portal. Why have a lot of magic without someone to control over. The implications could sever trade with the dwarves empire for centuries.

The two dragons opened the portal, and she stormed through it, finding another bunch of rocks, braving the ocean surf. Stepped back through, and took leave of their guide. Closing the portal with him, when all others had stepped into the world of dwarves.

The rocks lay on the edge of a lagoon, and several islands where visible from their vantage point. One huge volcano in the hazy background to complete the picture. Something moving in one of the neighboring island, made her get the view close by, by means of an incantation. Let go of the magic straight after. Why where humans surfing on islands in the world of the dwarves? She nodded to the great dragon, requesting to scout the lagoon. He

cloaked himself and skimmed the waves out onto the choppy ocean, to find a quiet place to rise up in between the clouds.

Waiting for information Jinasin an Lisa searched their brains for clues on this strange place, with Lisa the first to remember when the great dragon finally returned towing a small craft found on one of the islands, being the only deprived of human inhabitants.

The name Archipelago Mystica belonged to an exclusive resort for the very rich. Ten thousand dollar just got you onto the island. Every day you stayed longer there was another twenty-five thousand dollars taken from your account. Many journalists had tried to find the archipelago, in vain. Her office had ever tried to enter the island, but was not allowed. The people who had been there had no ill effects, so further research was put on hold. If she could remember well the advertising read: for every guest his or her own island. Laughing, Lisa looked at her and invited her into the high society of the children of men. Her bag contained still some clothes that could pass as a gown and the rest she might borrow from Lisa.

The dwarves wished them success, and with the great dragon as a messenger and explorer in the sky, they could always offer help where needed. Lisa lent her a bikini and oversized T-shirt, and together they walked down the gangplank towards the water. Waited for a signal from the lookout. Laid a plank on the water and surfed along the waves to the nearest island. The board was only a tool for her magic and was therefore very light and easy to carry. On the advice of Lisa, she had carved it in the shape of a surfboard.

They reached the house on this island and found a hiding place for their bags and studied again the map of the archipelago, before they went island hopping across the archipelago to explore it. Their act of duo surfing was appreciated everywhere. They had transferred to surf proven techniques. Usually she sat at the point and Lisa faked paddling. The questions of the men if they could join them they simply shrugged off because they were too heavy. True, she occasionally took a child for a ride on the waves. Enabling Lisa to learn

about the ins and outs of the islands. With a number of invitations for parties they ventured the leap to the main island.

Before they had landed, an employee was already signaling to them something was wrong. Their comments that duo surfing was totally hot and they were making a tour around the archipelago made him turn like a leaf. He asked them to make any kind of effort not to disturb anyone on the other islands and pushed them slowly to the marina, where he made a speedboat ready for them and begged them to race back to their villa. Eventually they let themselves be persuaded, stepped in, greeted friendly and rushed away laughing.

After a tour around the main island, they returned to the deserted house. Not much wiser, but at least with decent transport. They killed time with surfing and lying in the sun. Half and half expecting one of macho's, they had met that morning, would have tried to find them. While surfing they could wave a few times but no one ever arrived in the vicinity of the island.

When it was time to eat, they pulled straws which invitation they would honor. She blew the bikinis dry because Lisa really had no more than these two and went to dress for the evening. The semi-transparent dress she pulled from her bag was light and had always found a place in her bag on her travels. A bit of air magic to get rid of those annoying creases and she was ready. Opened her jewelry box and began to braid in a golden headband. Matching earrings and necklace perfected the whole. She turned to Lisa and lent her a silver headband with blood-red coral inlaid. It took some effort to make it perfect but finally saw Lisa looking like a million bucks.

They got a warm reception and they let themselves be carried along by the flow of the evening. As expected, they were taken to the party that night on the main island. It took some effort to find the right excuses not to drink alcohol. As elf she could not endure lots of alcohol. Some references to her slim waistline helped, but not for long.

The most striking aspect of the party was the service staff. As a classy party should have, they were all impeccably dressed, but all had a web woven around them. She sat down in a quiet spot and one by one the heads of the staff betrayed themselves as mages. Little clumsy movements, not noticeable for a normal person.

She saw Lisa had slightly less luck with turning down the alcohol, and picked her up to take leave of the party. Servants took them to the dock where their boat was already running for them to take off.

The great dragon was waiting behind the villa and after she had laid Lisa in her bed she discussed the day with him. She had precisely calculated the place in the human world where the portal would lead and told about the novice mages on the main island. His flight had revealed a vast encampment of the staff on the main island, but also an underground corridor. Under water he could sense nothing but the tunnels surely went through the archipelago ending up in the two volcanoes which were part of the scenery. He wanted to give the volcanoes further examination, but not without ground troops. She put all their stuff in the speedboat, lifted Lisa and placed her on the foredeck and followed the great dragon to the waiting dwarves.

The sailboat, led by the great dragon sailed a wide arc around the archipelago, until they were close to one of the volcanoes. When Jinasin woke her, Lisa was still sleeping off her booze. Together with Ogrimar and Zagramar she climbed into the speedboat and headed towards the volcano. With Ogrimar on the bow they slalomed through the rocks and stopped the boat under an overhanging cliff. The two dwarfs recognized some points on the mountain as dwarf craft and eventually found an entrance. The gate was closed with dragon characters. She got a disapproving murmur as reply when she show them to the great dragon . Cautiously, he landed flying low over the water. He recognized the characters as one of the dragon lords.

With the help of the great dragon they opened the door and a warm glow came to meet them. The passage ran straight downhill before they arrived at a large hall. They entered the main hall with their hand on sword or ax. The rumor awakened a dozen drakelings. She built up ice and air magic inside her, stopping the dazed drakelings in indecision. Long enough for the great dragon to come inside through the flight hole.

Fire was scarce in the dragon world and usually heavily guarded by a dragon lord. It was now clear to her where the drakelings got their power from to build portals and with what the people where paying them.

The great dragon pointed her to the magic strands around the drakelings. She tore a few to pieces and found an ingenious hypnosis shield. Despite the drawbacks, she tore the strands from drakeling after drakeling who then were questioned by the great dragon. A few he had previously encountered. All were rejected by their dragon lord for negligence or arrogance. In their search for a new lord, and access to the fire they needed, they were lured here. It took a while before they had found out it was a trap, but by then it was too late and they had to do what their leaders told them to do. Mostly they were messengers and occasionally they had to help make a portal.

The drakelings all needed to go home, however none of the holidaying humans could know, courtesy of the ancient interracial laws. So early in the morning she used the speeder to go back to the portal, opened it, and gave her orders to the waiting dragon messenger. Stepped back through the portal just in time to see the great dragon fly in low. She stepped aside, and he folded his wings, diving through the portal.

Counting the waves, breaking ion the rocks at regular intervals a drakeling soured in, from out of the open ocean, and jumped through the open portal. She had felt the mages sitting on the speeder, looking at her before they came into view. Still they were not interfering, and she had no time to spare to confront them, as the last of the drakelings had entered the dragon world, and the ripples in the portal meant an impatient dragon lord was awaiting her input. Answering the ripple, with loosening the weave around the first sign, she counted down, and perfectly in sync a weave was dropped from both sides. Closing the portal without any disturbance.

Fire and ice repeatedly bashed against the stones until all four signs had weathered away. Stone chips lost in the ever moving ocean. Felt the mages closing in, jumped, pushed off from the remaining rocks, and cut loose the screen, thundering over the waves heading for the speeder, gracefully landing inside it. Looked at them for a while, then stated the portal to the world of elves, inside the mountain would be destroyed next. Made them understand that would remove her from their site, but only start their trouble. Rolling over the tip of the speeder into the ocean, she blasted through the water back to her own speeder.

The portal inside the mountain was blown to bits, using brute force, needing some way to tell the mages outside there was no need to try and remake it. There was no entering the caves anyway, as the great dragon changed the locks before he had left, so dwarves would be save inside.

An envoy of the lords of the wind was already closing in when she finally had quenched the fires started by the explosion. She jumped into their ship, and was as dumbfounded as them, when they asked what happened on the silk traders island. Knowing her next task had already started, she asked the Lords for a favor. Informing the dwarf and human governments to pick up Jinasin and her companions, and arrange save travel for Lisa. Who no doubt would have found her way onto the main island, in her world. Accepted transport to the main land, and said her farewells promising to report back if anything substantial would surface. Lisa had found no trouble blending into the posh crowed of the Archipelago Mystica, as the smoke from the volcano and the explosions had caused quite a commotion, and quick but discrete all had been evacuated into the human world. Her message had come disguised as a messenger, debriefing her at the airport on the mainland, and handing over tickets for the next flight.

Π

The discussions with the local magistrate on the silk trade did not go smoothly. All traders who normally paid handsomely for the goods were suddenly gone. The otherwise vast market had shrunk to only a few stalls in number. The magistrate twisted and turned about the case, tried to answer questions with questions and for now she was still not much wiser than the fact the buyers and sellers came from all layers of the elven society. That he had long had the suspicion something was wrong, but trade was going on for so long, a large part of the economy was dependent on it.

She adjusted her questioning, began to piece the puzzle together bit by bit she could find. In the end had the magistrate roughly tell her, who sold here, and from where the silk originated. He complained the palaces of the kings were built with the duty on the transit and trade of silk, and referred her to the statue of the founder of the trade, many hundreds of years ago, which contained plaques, telling about the history of the city and the silk trade. Then apologized for he had another appointment, and reported a week from now he would have more time for her, hoping she had found out a bit more. Back in the archives after a tour around the city, to view the statue, Jinasin showed her a map depicting how, according to her, the silk trade was organized. The production of silk fluctuated every year tremendously. The success of the market was build on buying the silk up in the good years, and only selling it again highly regulated. The large trading houses could thus keep the price artificially high, but they all were in debt with a private bank who funded the purchase of silk by definition, were quite lenient with their customers and regularly took some crates of silk as payment. Used as new trading stock to give to newly started trading houses.

Jinasin explained she could not find any trace of interfering factions or humans in the trading houses, often starting with the arrival of rich elves, and ending if they were bored by it, or if a change in fashion made their stock not sellable anymore, becoming bankrupt. Only the financer could, unknowing to the elves, channel silk stock towards the human world. The rest of their time was spent searching through the archives of the city, to find the identity and origin of the owners of the bank. Only after comparing these individuals they got a clue how this trade could fit together. The bank had many branches in the world who helped finance the silk production and trade. The succession of the bank president, however, was invariably an one sided matter, where someone was brought in from outside the trade, with enough reference to be an asset, and so get a fresh look into the company. The current executive had left the bank for personal problems a few days ago, she heard at her next meeting with the magistrate. The bank would without CEO no longer do major financial deals, making the trading houses essentially powerless. The bank was busy appointing a new CEO, but needed unfortunately time. The magistrate remembered stories how once it lasted a full month, after the sudden death of a CEO, before the market would work again at full strength.

She helped the great dragon to make a portal to his world, and flew with him to his master. Keeping to the meandering borders of the dragon realms. As they should, they stayed far away from inhabited spires. A day of flying brought them back to the peak of the dragon lord. Their arrival was announced and still in the air a smaller dragon came announcing they both were expected at the meeting platform, where she greeted the present dragon lords and looked for her place in anticipation of more important dragon lords, and their host.

With everyone settled she started with a greeting, then introducing the great dragon. Not that he needed an introduction, but if she wanted the story told by him these were the necessary compliments.

The great dragon stepped forward and told of their journey, the destruction of the portals and ultimately the discovery of the volcano. Especially the dragon characters and the owner caused quite a stir. The dragon lord in question was highly respected and would certainly be allowed to explain why he left the dragon world to exploit volcanoes elsewhere.

She sat quietly on the floor waiting for the dragons to finish their discussion. The outcome was already determined. The host would refer the matter to the dragon king, but for them the how was just as important as the outcome itself. Although she did not speak the dragon language she could conclude there was bickering over a minor detail. In the end, the last dragon lord gave in and the host could thank her for services rendered. One by one the dragon lords took their leave. As the highest in rank she let the lower lords leave first. Looked briefly at her host, who understood the hint, and apologized to the remaining dragons and offered her the chance at an early departure. Higher dragon lords had always something to discuss.

High in the sky the great dragon growled a compliment about dealing with his superiors, and thanked her for not having to sit through the intrigues of the top ranked. Was curious about it, but could not afford letting slip a single word of it. This solution saved him a

lot of thinking. She got then a brief explanation what solution the lords had found, knowing the dragons would now want to find out all about the portals, it was arranged, each dragon lord would sent a messenger giving information on all portals found and destroyed, or found and still working for various reasons.

It was quite busy when they reached the residence of the great dragon. Representatives of lower lords, traveling with their master high up in the air came to make their report. Two smaller dragons wrote them down and sent the more interesting cases to the great dragon. Occasionally one of them came to give a short report. Most were about drakelings without owner flying over the borders of the dragon realms. The, in the end, the ten portals destroyed were mostly to the elven and dwarves worlds. In the human world, one was still existing. Housed in the catacombs under the great city of New York. She was asked to resolve this problem as soon as possible. Both she and the great dragon nodded, and said they would start on it as soon as all authorities had been informed.

The two dragons had eventually drawn and documented all reports. She checked the flight paths and thought to have found all the portals. Asked for and received a copy of the map, while the great dragon read the report meticulously searching for errors, finally approved it sending a messenger to bring it to his master.

She asked the great dragon if he could arrange for them to go to the portal connecting to the human world. When he hesitated, she explained how this portal was situated in the world of men, mentioning Lisa had her home base right there and was probably busy making her reports just there. He saw the advantages and nodded. Warned that he could not help her there and then called a subordinate. They waited for one day, then followed. Got halfway the word, they were welcome, but only at the portal, and were given the time they were expected at the portal. Only she and the great dragon were granted access.

With some straighter lines and at lower lords interpreting the rules a bit more in their favor, they just made it. Were just finished introducing themselves at the portal when the resident dragon lord landed with thunderous noise. They both made a comprehensive bow to the wise old dragon, just as he did for her. Silent he opened a portal, just yards from the stones forming the contours of the object under examination. It was just big enough for her, and she used her gift of reading the tissues to drape them along herself to enter, with the least possible amount of magic, into the space in the world of men. Helped to untangle and close the small portal and only then took time to look around in the space she found herself in.

The room was blackened. Everywhere in this round room, around a hundred meters in diameter, were torn pieces of machinery, crates and packing materials. The old dragon lord would have needed only a few minutes to accomplish this. Enough to seize all people and materials, too little to really get noticed by the observers in the city, but also to carry out a thorough investigation.

The portals at the ends of the room needed a long time to be studied. With one of the largest concentrations of cultures in the world of men, settlements in the elven and dwarves worlds had arose naturally, maintaining a permanent gateway to this world. Bringing together four portals to just as much worlds on this location was therefore not surprising. Each portal was outlined by writing on the wall, floor, ceiling and a large meters thick column. A space of about ten steps was left between the pillar and the wall, the angled arrangement of the portals prevented them of disturbing each other, making they all could be open at one time.

The floor of asphalt was distorted slightly in the heat of the attack, but clearly ran up through a large arch in one of the walls. She followed the road, circling upwards, along the outer walls of the room, to the big steel doors welded shut at three points.

The silence on the other side was disturbed by what seemed like an explosion. Instinctively, she used air to quickly shoot back to the main hall, where she checked her camouflage and patiently waited.

A second explosion followed by iron on iron announcing about twenty soldiers, who stormed into the room firing their guns. She recognized the label of the unit and let loose of her camouflage and parried the bullets with some condensed air, kept an eye at the portals, but the unit was well enough trained and aimed their weapons at nothing standing even close to them. The soldiers had seen her, and noted that violence and commands would not help them and she was not planning on giving this branch of Lisa's organization any training at all. Two men stepped back through the arch, while the rest was deployed on each side, their gun still focused on her.

The two came back and installed themselves in the lines, an older man flanked by two younger figures, a man and a woman walked into the room. She moved, waited for the soldiers to get used to the new situation, bowed almost imperceptibly for the three and noted that Lisa and military clothing were really not a good mix. The young woman grinned and walked over to her, hugged her and introduced her to her superiors. She answered the unasked question of them with a nod, and with a few gestures the soldiers were sent out the circular room. The two remained at their posts beside the pillars of the arch. She waited until the elderly gentleman started the conversation and told of the magical activities his unit had measured a few days ago and traced to this location. Lisa told her version of their adventures in the worlds of elven and dwarfs. Left out large pieces, but it left her sufficient points to finish the story.

She said she was called from the dragon world to solve an inter-global problem. Told that in a week the portal to the dragon world would be destroyed, and no matter how careful it would be done, it would render the other portals too unstable to maintain for a long time. The

lack of magical abilities in the drakeling world and the limited possibilities in the other two, meant quite a lot of magical power would be released that had to be camouflaged.

The young man protested about issues thrown down before him, thought and then asked if she could tell what had happened with the space. She shook her head wondering. If he wanted to know something about the dragon world he could go ask the dragon lords himself. The older gentleman, though lower in rank, put a hand on his shoulder and said that dragon lords and high mages will tell you what you needed to know. The young man responded like stung by a wasp, but kept himself in check with difficulty, partly because of the attitude of Lisa, who after his question had been looking at him with disdain. Finally had the introduction and the words of the older gentleman sink in and finally understood standing in front of him was not a simple messenger. Looked again at the older gentleman who asked if the space had any value for her. She explained that to achieve this feat she was bound to the earthly side of the portals. The young man nodded and recovered sufficiently describing the surroundings and possible ways out. She counted aloud the seconds needed to close the four portals and gave him space to plan the escape from what would probably be some explosions. This hint he did understood, and bowed solemnly assuring everything would be ready in time. Nodded to Lisa and walked out of the room through the archway, quietly followed by the older man.

She beckoned to the two soldiers gave them the exact time when they would come back through the portals, gave herself two days in the even world and two days in the dwarfs world, a day in the dragon world, to report all was ready, the rest was needed here to make preparations.

Both Lisa as she were known in the small settlements in the elven and dwarves world. Lisa often used the portals as a starting point towards a next assignment. Usually gave notice long before arriving. It took a lot of political wrangling, with spilling as little information as

possible to free the managers of the portals to help with the destruction of the portal cluster. With the dwarfs it helped to show where the portal was buried. Created by human hands, they were more than willing to destroy this anomaly.

The elves side of the cluster was buried under the small town. And though her status had made the rulers promise every effort would be made to help her, it took a lot of trouble to convince the residents around the cave, the ground beneath their artfully shaped houses had become unstable, and only a few days were needed, until the problem was solved. Aware of what had imperceptible been played out in their territory, they managed to win them over with some thin promises.

According to plan she and Lisa stepped back through the portal in the round room. Both soldiers were still in place. One nodded and walked a few steps into the driveway, the other picked up a package and opened it. She pulled out a tailored uniform and handed it to her. In this outfit she could freely check the plans of the Bureau of interracial affairs and store all in her memory. Was given the placement of the explosives and when they would be ignited, in comparison with the start of the entire process. She checked at the insistence of Lisa everything again, while the soldier kept track of the elapsed time and was then taken to the meeting where the democracy was explained what was happening and why the explosions had to take place at this location at this determined time. The procedures to inform everyone with the right amount of information or fictitious news would continue until just before the destruction of the portal. She was only necessary in the official meeting to convince all stakeholders the other worlds were in compliance.

Well before the appointed time she sat with Lisa on the edge of the large pit, in which the portal in the dragon world resided. Had sent one of the little dragons to convey that everything was in readiness. Lisa introduced herself at the arrival of the dragon lord, and handed the voluminous file, with a brief summary of the office, where everything was legally

described and confidentiality was guaranteed. Satisfied by the thoroughness, the dragon lord relayed some orders. She grabbed Lisa and jumped into the pit, opened the portal and stepped through it, Pushed Lisa towards the exit, where the soldiers followed her. One by one she opened the portals, after which she returned to the one to the dragon world. After making a small wrinkle in the fabric to warn the dragon lord she started to etch away the signs on ceiling, wall, floor and column and dismantled the portal on both sides despite some turbulence.

The destruction of the stones serving for the portal to the dragon world had caused as expected some turmoil in the tissues of the other portals. She checked the explosives in the characters on her side and shot fire and ice through the next portal, waited until the elders on the other side began to let go of the threads, copied the process and fired at the last second for each character a fireball through the portal, held the threads while the portal imploded away from her until they were dissolved.

The other portals were already slowly disintegrating. She repeated the same actions with dwarf portal and had to calm herself while the threads were dissolving. When she finally was able to move to the last portal she could only distribute the imminent explosion over the two worlds, tunneled through the first shock wave and turned several times around her axis to verify the inflammation of the explosives all had started, then let the next wave carry her out, pushed off from it and shot through the coil into the factory. Saw it had almost completely imploded, quickly wove a net around her and steered towards the pick-up promised to her. Landed in the back, and ducked under some cloth, while the car with screeching tires raced from the scene.

The wheels of the bureau had not stood still since the raid on the sect. Many buildings and objects were investigated and mapped under false pretenses. With the events of recent days, everything was checked again and the computer had spit out a similarity. When she was delivered in a hangar at the airport, employees of the bureau showed the map. The object was located on the site of the ancient dwarf city. She opted to apptoach the portal from dwarf territory, to the relief of the agency, since they were not really on friendly relations with that country.

Sitting in a hotel room in an inn in the most accessible meeting place next to the old city, she sat philosophizing with Lisa, to await the arrival of their companions. The great dragon lay in his wolf form next to the stove and listened. Had already told his story, when she had picked him up and told his master the mission was completed successfully.

A knock on the door from a young dwarf meant news about Jinasin, she took the letter and thanked the deliverer, waited until he was gone and read it out loud. Jinasin had successfully managed to get invited to study sometime in the famous library of the city. The notables willingly offered help and housing. She apologized for the ceremonials, but reported that Ogrimar and Zagramar were already en route to prepare for her stay.

It took Jinasin a whole day after arrival, with visits to important buildings and monuments to cause enough public publicity, so she could retire to the library to hear tales of the events in recent weeks. The dwarves knew many stories about the Old City. Previously, well before the founding of most cities still existing, there was a dwarf kingdom at the site of the old city. Half the dwarf world was under the influence of this kingdom. The city, built on rich veins of gold and diamonds, had found ways to dig deeper and come ever closer to the lava chambers of the volcanoes found in those mountains. An earthquake, however, made one of the lava rooms come to life. The lava broke through the barriers and a large part of the city was filled with magma, slaying everyone trapped inside the city. Many archaeologists and fortune hunters had tried to penetrate into deeper layers of the city, but had always discovered the passages had through the years become instable and dangerous. Also, the Volcano did not sleep and each year, there were small eruptions.

Jinasin thought to have read an archaeologist liverd nearby, who had been in the old city. Ogrimar and Zagramar nodded and would go to talk to him.

As expected, the old city was, according to the archaeologist, a dreary maze of empty streets blocked on every corner with walls of basalt. He had punctured many hoping to find still undiscovered streets. And the only conclusion he could draw was that most of the city was impenetrable due to the magic of the ancient city still holding the doors closed. The rest was looted long ago. The lava flows also had parts of the city drawn out of context, making sometimes the basalt the only reason corridors and halls still existed. Blindly drilling through it was dangerous. He had never been deeper than the upper two levels of the city. Dared not to go further because every day he heard something beneath him collapse.

If something or someone had provided access to the large halls, there would certainly be a complex system of corridors and strut columns needed. He advised them to look for those, and begin to look at the south wall of the mountain.

That night she took Ogrimar aside and asked him how well Jinasin could handle an ax. They were going into the lion's den. Of course princesses could defend themselves, it was part of their education, but she did not expect any street urchins or thieves. There were high mages together strong enough to withstand a dragon lord. He promised he would give Jinasin a few more lessons during the trip.

She took Lisa and Jinasin shopping the next morning. They stopped at a blacksmith who was recommended to her and let Jinasin choose the form of a new ax. She tried a few and eventually chose a short stem with double heads. The blacksmith had to do some tests. Strength, reaction, speed and speed of action. Calculated from these data which head he needed and finally came up with a richly decorated, but relatively small head. He hit a piece

of wood in it and asked the princess to try it. It felt good, but the blacksmith was still not satisfied, measured the hands of Jinasin and then asked for time. The ax would be ready the next morning.

Jinasin was slightly disappointed. The ax of her big brother had a head that was twice as big, and he looked majestic with it in his hands. But in the test it did not felt like she had an ax in her hand, but like the ax was a part of her arm. So she trusted on the reputation of the blacksmith.

Now it was time for Jinasin to take the other two out for some shopping. They would venture deep into a dwarf town. It was useless to dismiss the ancient wisdom of the dwarfs. They had to be measured for dwarf clothing. Lisa and she bought leather pants and jackets wrapped with iron rings. Maybe not elegant, but the only clothes for work and life underground.

The blacksmith had put a richly decorated handle on the head, but two bits remarkably were ground slightly. Made for the larger hands of male dwarfs there was none he could find in the size of Jinasin. The solution was as ingenious and elegant. She grabbed it and tried it out. The smith asked how it felt and was not satisfied with her answer. He asked the ax back screwed the weight off and put a heavier knob on the handle. Again she tried it out and slowly they came to the perfect combination. When the blacksmith finally was satisfied she paid and got a matching belt, ointment for the stem, and a whetstone.

On the road during breaks Jinasin and Ogrimar practiced with the ax and Jinasins skills comforted her a little.

They searched the mountain of the old city from bottom to top and back. Four doors, they had found. None of the four they could open. Tired of searching they pitched camp to wait for a new day.

She was awakened by a noise. Lisa, who stood guard, sat with drawn arrow in the mouth of the cave, which they used as campsite. She woke up the others, tip toed to Lisa and looked over her shoulder. Two vehicles were driven to the mountain. In her mind she looked over the mountainside. It hit her and Lisa at the same time, they sneaked back into the cave and grabbed their bags from the hands of the dwarves. A carefully spun web slowly made her disappear, after which she pushed Lisa and the dwarfs in niches in the wall, and wove a web over them. Just before Jinasin completely disappeared she grabbed her hand and placed it on her ax.

A brief warning from the great dragon said they were right. The first vehicle was driven into the cave. A long low tone rolled over them, and slowly they saw a portion of the wall slide away. By the light of the vehicles she saw a tunnel spiraling downwards, supported by rows of columns looking too new for this setting.

After the door had closed, she crept forward, feeling the magic that caused the door to move. Again dragon magic. Ogrimar lay with his ear against the floor. The rest remained perfectly still, waiting for him. Finally Ogrimar told he heard the cars ride about ten times around the spiral, after which they drove off to the northeast. When he finished Lisa warned, knowing most human languages, the people had spotted something suspicious outside.

The great dragon came inside the cave and they decided to immediately follow the cars. This kind of tunnels were kilometers long and it gave them time to look at what was done with the tunnels and this part of the old city.

Zagramar returned with the vehicle, and the great dragon began to fiddle with the door. He shook the wall in a different rhythm until the door slid from its place and opened. With everyone in the vehicle they followed the dragon into the funnel. The great dragon was used to crawl through narrow passages and moved forward as fast as the vehicle. The funnel released them on a large square. Like the tunnels there was a concrete reinforcement placed against the ceiling. All held up by concrete pillars of a meter thick. She ignited a fireball and watched the corridors coming out on the square. Only one was reinforced with concrete. She looked at the dwarfs. They believed that these were royal roads. meaning any corridor was leading to another part of the old town.

Zagramar parked the vehicle in one of the corridors and along with Ogrimar he went further into that tunnel. The dragon chose another to explore, and together with Lisa and Jinasin she explored a third one. The corridor ran steeply down, back south. Approximately one kilometer further they were stopped by a large block of basalt. Jinasin knocked on the stone, but shook her head. The final tunnel from the square was just like the first one. Slightly less steep, but eventually ran dead on basalt. She sat down on the square and waited for the return of the rest.

Both the dragon and the dwarfs had selected corridors leading to higher parts of the city, where the aisles were free of basalt, but every time a door presented itself and passage was blocked by dwarven magic, which kept the doors tightly closed.

The reinforced corridor ended onto a small square with doors. The vehicles were turned and both stood against a wall. They walked through the only open door onto a staircase carved in the basalt. In the eerie light they looked in the Royal Hall. Approximately four meters of stone had gathered on the floor of the hall. The roof of the hall was not visible without better lighting. She thought to see a few bridges, but it really could be anything.

Lisa took a lamp from one of the pillars and walked into the darkness. The dwarves and the dragon used to the darkness could see enough with the little light there was. After some rummaging, she heard the great dragon beat his wings, jump and fly out. A few times she heard him pass over, until he landed beside her and asked to come with him. She climbed on his back and felt him take off. Ever more quickly she saw, more felt, the pillars pass them by. High in the middle of the room he stopped at the guard platform. It was still intact. The dragon said the walkways were all passable, and ran into holes in the walls. She scanned the room and saw a soft glow at the other end of the hall. On an increase several meters higher than the current floor was a door through which light was burning. The great dragon told the dais of the king was used by the humans. Many things were piled up there. The humans themselves were in rooms behind the dais.

One by one the great dragon picked up her companions. Jinasin first, not yet accustomed to the adventure, she had quickly returned to the entrance. Ogrimar had explored the hall until its walls. There were small bits of the majestic doors to be seen pushed open by the magma, they had endured the heat. About the balcony he could say she looked passable, but any opening donned a mushroom of basalt. Zagramar searched the vehicles of the humans and had found maps of the area. The designated route ran from the old city to small villages, a few hundred kilometers away, artfully dodging the two small towns lying in between.

Lisa had scaled the walls and climbed onto the balcony, walked halfway around the hall and had found some free openings. Unfortunately they were too high for her to climb to.

The humans lit a big spotlight. They had broken several seals by the entrance, so the humans knew something was inside. Flat on the platform they heard the group search the hall. Occasionally, Lisa caught a patch of a conversation and whispered the translation. Mostly bats were blamed for the disturbance. Nobody was quite sure, but they could think of nothing else. After searching the whole room they could just conclude something was inside with wings and decided to set a watch to be sure. After a while they came to the conclusion, the guard would be difficult to surprise. They themselves set a guard too, waiting for opportunities.

Slowly they began to recognize a pattern in the movements of the humans. Every two hours, the guard changed. Occasionally somebody else came out to talk with the guard. The

talks were followed by the dragon, and some pieces he repeated verbatim, so Lisa could translate. They wrote down the names and faces, in total about fifteen men, who were bored. A few weeks ago, at least they got visits from drakelings with information to pass through. However, there was something going on. They had successfully defended the portal against the dragon lord, but feared the worst for the other portals. All the time waiting for new orders.

Making the wait opportune, they explored the walkways connecting the platform to the walls. Whispered the possibilities and thought out a number of attack plans. After a while they had chosen their target. This one was usually alone and had the occasional tendency to fall asleep.

Shortly after the changing of the guard she floated to the ground and crept to the stage. Carefully making sure her body did not make shadows on the pillars. She climbed the podium and waited. When the guard fell asleep she heard a noise of wings above her, the dragon made a bit more effort to make a sound. She gathered some wind around her and waited for the reaction of the guard. Who gave a scream and took a few steps forward, where the flurry of her wind magic threw him a few meters into the air skillfully caught by the dragon, who flew away with him in his claws. The group came storming out cursing at the guard.

She felt the dragon came back and looked for a next victim. One of the mages walked alone to the edge of the dais. Ice brought him out of balance, a fireball toppled him over the edge. Again, nicely captured by the great dragon. She counted the seconds, took a run and jumped, with a bit of magic, flew a few meters into the air, causing a vague shadow on the nearest pillar. The dragon corrected the difference and she landed nicely on his back and hitched a ride back to the platform, leaving the group stunned.

On the platform she coughed the mage, bound him hand and foot and laid him down in the middle. Lisa was busy questioning the guard, And when the dragon landed on the platform he started talking and told everything they wanted to know and more. The group was in contact with cells around the world of dwarfs. The plans were slowly making more portals. He had heard the dwarves were only one component to achieve a larger goal, but really had not heard what it was. She had been watching the mage and by his movements the guard spoke the truth. She expected a large plot was building to tilt the balance of power in the dragon world, but kept it to her selves.

A big bang and lots of flashes silenced them all. Seven of the guards ran shooting all the way to the other side of the main hall. Amused, she looked at them. The survival instinct of the guards had prevailed. Outside they could defend themselves.

Leaving the two men on the platform they walked over the walkways closer to the stage. The dragon flew them one at the time to the ground. As she floated down herself. They walked onto the stage, towards the entrance of the rooms. A shield of fire kept in front of them, when they walked through the opening. The impact made her fly back through the hole, turned around and landed on her feet just to see how the great dragon breathed fire balls in reply. She followed him into the room and caught the remnants of the volley. The great dragon growled a bit. An arrow flew past them and hit a mage. For a moment the unity was broken. Fire from the dragon and ice from her hit the Magi and dispersed them. They were able to isolate one, the dragon took a leap forward and killed him. The rest withdrew and formed another unity. The dragon was now in front and got the next salvo onto him. With one man down and a man wounded the sting was out of the attack. Immediately he answered the lesser strength and cracked the unity now forever. One by one they isolated the mages and killed them.

She stepped through the portal, picked up the threads, loosened them from the markers and wove others through them capable of holding the portal, destroyed the markings stepped back through and countered with the great dragon the slowly dissipating thread on the other side until the portal was closed. A great wave of magic rolled into the room. All looked towards the door. The great dragon had already recognized what it was and ran from the room into the great hall. She ran after him. One of the dragon lords stepped through the portal, greeted them politely and turned to her. I've always wanted to duel the great elven mage, added act in word and blew a large fireball towards her. She was prepared, expecting anything. Even before the fireball was gone from the mouth of the dragon lord she had disappeared, using all her strength, she bounced around, using the walkways. Ice, fire and wind shooting at him, testing the dragon lord where she could strike. Countering each other, they shot through the room. her small size in comparison with the dragon lord was only an advantage if she remained in motion. The dragon did not wait for her and so she shot ice on fire, fueled fire by wind and sent it back, avoided the traps laid for her and tore with her sword nets to pieces thrown over her. Countering the dragon lord earlier and earlier.

Fire Balls splashed out on a display of ice she had raised in front of him, so he was forced to jump back slightly. Wind made him fly through the hall. Now it was the turn of the dragon lord to use the footbridges as a shield. He flew around a pillar and tore a trap to pieces before it could slam shut. It gave her just enough time for a firestorm. Small balls of fire shot toward him, in their thousands. Although the dragon lord avoided many he had to take a lot of impacts.

The last part of the firestorm he blew away and formed a shield in front of him, when he stormed towards her. She evaded the shield, using his tail, which he wanted to use to put her off balance, to tie it with ice and air. The dragon turned around, banged his tail against the floor. The air insulation held. He pulled a shield and lost precious seconds to get rid of the millstone of ice. She used the time and blew fire and ice in small streams on all sides along the dragon lord. He looked around and could only use force breaking through the net. She dodged the remnants of the net, but the fireball that came after them grazed her body. She spun through the air, recovered against a pillar and launched herself towards the dragon lord. Fire and ice swirling about her. Just before she reached the dragon she pushed off from it, taking a slightly higher route away from him. He could not dodge this attack either, fired some fire balls in her direction to regenerate. She caught them, used them, and made them explode on the dragons body.

With his wings wide the dragon lord stood tall and bowed deeply. "As already said. It was always a big wish of mine to duel with the great elven mage Alexandra. My gratitude is great. I heard you found my activities here and in the archipelago. Around two thousand years ago, when I was still a young dragon, I became intrigued by the legends of the ancient city in the world of the dwarfs. If I were to crack the codes of the old magic, I would lie in piles of gold and silver. I fathomed the ancient magic of the dwarves, it was after all a descent from the old magic and still contained parts it. For years I studied the dwarves, trying to understand them, stole and read their books and when my magic was great enough I even lived a complete dwarf life. At that time I used the volcano in the archipelago to recharge my magic.

Around five hundred years ago, I found the last pieces in the puzzle and could open the door. In the meanwhile I had become dragon lord and had little time for archaeology and sent two of my subordinates under the old city to excavate. The lock on the door I had adapted to keep the old magic of the dwarves to myself.

Eventually this royal hall was found, where they dropped a beacon, and I could come straight into the old city. I sent the two dragons back to the dragons world and for years admired the ancient city's great treasures. But as with all good things in your life. Eventually you lose interest in what you already have. But I had too much respect and was too much a dragon lord to share with someone else. With the magic of the Old City, I hid the treasures and I continued my life. The dragon lord beckoned her and the rest. Walked to the podium, put his paws on the back wall and said an incantation. Slowly the walls came to life and cracked open, revealing a wide corridor behind it. The dragon lord showed them his treasures. Artfully carved stone panels, inlaid with precious stones of all colors, turned into mosaic, depicting the kings of old. An adjacent room, stone statues depicting dwarfs dressed in ceremonial dress made from gold and silver. A room full of the most beautiful jewels you can imagine. Eventually he remained for a closed door and beckoned Jinasin. "This room is for the princess and her alone to decide what to do." He showed her an incantation and let her repeat it. Gave her some clues, turned her fingers as they should move, and left her to try again. The door slid open. A room stacked to the roof with books, miraculously still intact after all these centuries. Jinasin understood only too well what the dragon lord referred to and closed the room quickly. It was not the time for history. She was young and had enough time to go through the books.

"Now you know why I've been in the dwarven world. Of the two who know the ancient city is passable, one is a dragon lord and the other is a hopeful, fast becoming a dragon lord. He, pointing towards the great dragon, knows who I am talking of. If I go after them all these treasures will be lost. I am sure they have left behind clues, ultimately leading to the unraveling of a plot, without these treasures trampled on by brutes."

The dragon lord walked back into the Great Hall. "You should start by finding out who lured the drakelings to the volcano. Usually they go back to their world as they have been discarded by their lord. Someone picked them up and used them for private purposes. "He handed her a piece of paper and bowed, opened a portal and went home.

Jinasin was the first to pul herself loose from the bewilderment. Concerned about the treasures of her ancestors, she walked into the wide hallway, placed her hands on all of the doors and said the incantation. Slowly the doors slid shut. Getting the hallway back in hiding. She was still staring at her hands when she hit her arm around her. "You are now the keeper

of the old city and one of the most powerful dwarfs of the modern world. The library is full of books on ancient magic. Magic you can use to destroy worlds, or heal worlds. Jinasin looked at her and made an oath on her father and mother, she was ever to find a way to make the knowledge usable again for her world.

The great dragon joined them and asked for her attention. He had been in the outer world of drakelings. Life usually took place in the air. The ground on that world was a place where even dragons prefer not to be found. If they wanted to know something they had to prepare and find suitable dragons so Jinasin and Lisa could also come to the outside world. He apologized to Ogrimar and Zagramar, but this issue could only use one representative from each race. They understood, and wanted to use the time to search the volcano in the archipelago.

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The great dragon called his peers and together they flew her, Lisa and Jinasin to the great dragons master. She asked audience and a few hours later, the dragon lord flew down to listen what had happened. Jinasin now being the guardian of the ancient city was her secret, not to be revealed by her. The dragon lord nodded when the names of the two dragons for their next journey where described, asked for two messengers and sent them away to inform the dragon lords of the coming of the great dragon. With a slight bow he took his leave.

They were taken to the peak of the great dragon, where he left them, to return a few days later with the two dragons, slightly smaller than he. Jinasin and Lisa were presented. They nodded slightly as she had taught them. Then she was introduced, both dragons bowed low for her. The Dragons had agreed as long as their rider was better than them in at least one thing.

Lisa chose a goal, far away from the peak and shot an arrow straight into it. Took a second and third arrow and placed them just above and below the first. Then looked at the dragon with the most brawn she could muster and waited. He looked once at the goal, then

blew a fireball, and enflamed arrows and target simultaneously. Then turned to Lisa, bowed and called her an asset to the trip.

Jinasin had not been idle, wove some strands and then threw them over the other dragon who then ripped them to pieces. She was full of admiration for the princess. Each time he broke a strand from the princess, he drew in fact a web ever tighter around him. The dragon began to be impatient and asked if Jinasin had anything better than these simple games. Jinasin tightened the web so the dragon felt it around him and tried to free himself. She went on and slowly the dragon lost control of his body, just so far until he could only bow for her. She tore the fabric into pieces and the dragon bowed again deeply. "Would never underestimate her." he added. The great dragon just whispered: 'The dragon lord was right by choosing her."

The next day they flew to the gateway to the outside world of the drakelings. She said the incantation the dragon lord had given her and together with the three dragons she opened a large enough portal, for the dragons to fly through. The portal was located in the air, next to a tall spire. Lisa gave a signal to her dragon she was ready and he jumped up and took a dive through the portal in front of them. Jinasin had sat staring at Lisa flying through the portal. Her dragon looked back at her, which startled her, she braced herself and gave the signal she was ready. Just behind them the great dragon plunged into the portal, made a sharp turn and continued to circle around it, for her to close the portal.

Flying next to each other the three dragons headed to their first designation. The world among them was a big forest with an occasional forest giant who towered far above the forest. These often included a few drakelings, diving from the tree into the jungle and then surfacing with wood, leaves, a struggling animal and other things they could not identify, flying back into the forest giant.

The horizon began to fill with a mountain range. The great dragon gave a signal they had to

be careful. The mountains were the domain of large birds of prey. For the dragons no problem, but they would certainly try to extort them, their riders.

In the distance about twenty birds dived into the deep towards them. All three had their feet down between two scales of their dragon, so to have two hands free. She gave a call she was ready and the great dragon changed course and flew directly to the group of birds. Spitting a small fireball on them when they were close enough. Accustomed to dragons the birds flew around the fireball, obscuring her briefly from sight. Twenty fire bullets were fired through the fireball. Eighteen found their target. The first two were able to dodge the bullets, skimming over the mouth of the great dragon only to be torn to pieces by her sword. The great dragon muttered approvingly, then turned and joined the other two dragons. More were coming.

They came from all sides now. Some went from afar into their dive and spread their wings somewhere underneath them. The dragons darted through the air. Scorching birds if they could, dodging them when they could not. One of the birds dived over a fireball of Jinasins dragon and dove with outstretched claws at Jinasin. She sat on her knees, her feet still between two reversed scales. The dragon ducked, but the bird had reached Jinasin. Beautifully timed she swung her ax around and sliced the bird in two pieces. Jinasins dragon now aware that his rider was far more capable than he had given her credit for, began to take more risks. Burning more birds with the downside sometimes a couple would survive. She did not flinch.

The birds soon got to the conclusion two mages were too much and avoided her and the great dragon. Occasionally, they shot a few birds from the air, but usually they did not dare, afraid to hit the other two dragons. Lisa had now adopted the same position as Jinasin, her bow useless in close combat fighting, she sat there happily cutting birds to pieces with her little sword. The great dragon made a huge turn to the other two, gave both ampel time to caution their rider and Lisa and Jinasin put their weapons away and quickly grabbed hold.

Immediately the dragons fell out of the sky, the great dragon took their place. Both she and the great dragon made short work of all the birds too late to react. With dozens they fell from the sky. The few alive fled. Waiting for easier prey.

It took a while before Lisa gave her dragon the next signal. The three dragons and their riders now knew each other tactics and went into attack mode, rather than being hunted. Even before the birds came close Lisa's arrows darted through the air here and there extracting a few from the air. She was next, when the birds came into range, she wove a fire screen and sent it over the birds. When the dragons could join in, the ball of birds splashed out and each bird went back to its own rock.

Leaving the mountain range behind them, they flew along over the jungle, heading for one of the giant trees. The great dragon began circling downwards towards it, followed by the other two, and they landed under the canopy of the tree onto one of the main branches, more than twice as wide as the great dragon. He walked on making room for the next. Turned when all three had landed and warned the three riders under no circumstances to get off their dragon.

From branch to branch, he climbed to the top of the tree, always taking her into account on their way to the actual ruler of the region. The great dragon explained the arrival of them six and started rattling off questions about hiring drakelings especially sidelined. The manager said he had thousands of drakelings under contract. Every day a number were hired by dragons, and others came back after been sent away. It was impossible to keep track of who was stationed where. He had employees for that job. Eventually after a long lament, he started talking about a new dragon hiring help. He had met him once when he was still working for a dragon lord and he had never expected him becoming a intermediate for drakelings. Out of contempt he had redirected him to a corner in his empire, not willing to waste good employees on him. The great dragon understood he needed to get the rest of the

story from the source itself, and climbed through the tree, came on a thick branch and walked it down. Warned her to tie herself down and jumped, where the branch was broken off, into the depths. In dive as long as they were within the crown of the tree, but beat his wing just beneath it. Behind she heard the cries of Lisa and Jinasin. Their dragons had never done this before and were clearly a little less smooth. Only when the great dragon was circling to climb, she turned. Both lay flat on the back of their dragon and only relaxed when they were safely winning height. The dragon took them back to the mountains and on the very brink of them found a great platform. He remained circling above it and signaled the rest to do the same. After a while a drakeling came circling next to the great dragon. In his own language, they talked with each other and quickly exchanged some information, then the drakeling ducked back out to work, and they climbed a little to land on a grassy slope. He had asked the foreman about the intermediate who had been here. He was quite negative about him. The dragon had asked for some drakelings with magic. She had picked up the contemptuous tone of the foreman, all drakelings had magic. Eventually, the dragon picked, it seemed at random, some drakelings. An intermediate should know the bad from the good workers. Not him. He had tried to save the dragons face by asking whether he still wanted to see some other, indignantly the dragon had cried, an intermediate like him could very well determine what he needed and what not. He had chosen the best he had seen. The dragon went away saying he already had been somewhere else, and he did not like the treatment he received and the next time he would definitely not return here. The great dragon could figure out who the dragon was out of the description the drakeling foreman gave. The word of a drakeling, however, against a dragon was not enough.

The grapevine in the drakeling world, however, was as efficient as in any other world. They were given a number of places the dragon had been before and after and took flight for visiting other regions in hope to find out more. Again the great dragon landed in one of the giants of the forest to question the local administrator about strange buyers or complaints from rejected drakelings coming back from service. The administrator let the great dragon talk even though it was clear he wanted to interrupt him as soon as possible. Then told a dragon had just left him. The dragon had quarreled about trivial things, felt he had received little respect from his supervisors. He was sympathetic with them, because the dragon really was unreasonable and incompetent, but now he feared for his reputation in the dragon world.

He had sent the dragon with his second in command and instructed him to find the best reject drakelings there currently were on offer, as the dragon thought he did not need to pay more. Then pointed out where to find them. The great dragon thanked the administrator and promised that if he could discover any irregularities when he met the dragon, he certainly would report it to the guild.

They flew the indicated route and circled down to the forest giant. Saw the dragon and soon heard his curses. The dragon, thought it strange he was offered bottom seekers. The supervisor did not really give his best employees the dirtiest jobs? The overseer tactfully avoided the question and praised the offered drakelings as the best there were available at this moment. The dragon growled loudly, but kept his cool as three other dragons landed in the tree. Asked with sarcastic voice if the supervisor was selling his wares to multiple buyers and warned the three new dragons on the methods being used in this part of the realm.

The great dragon confirmed that he had heard them from the air, nodded to the overseer and apologized for disturbing negotiations with a customer. They were investigating irregularities in the hiring of drakelings and in particular rejected individuals. The dragon was dead quiet cause he had discovered Alexandra, took a run and dived out off the tree, leaving just hired drakelings behind. The great dragon greeted the overseer and advised him to secure the money and give the hired drakelings back their old work, then they followed the fugitive.

She gave some extra lift and soon they flew higher than the fleeing dragon. With a dragon somewhat above and two below him, he knew nothing else than to take a dive into the jungle. The three dragons grunted at each other and she strapped on somewhat more. The great dragon adjusted his course and cautiously dived after the fugitive dragon, occasionally with a deep hum keeping the other two dragons above the canopy on track. She had once read what they were heading in. Large lizard-like creatures, some much larger than the dragon lords, had their home here. She lay flat on the back of the great dragon and scanned the surroundings on living organisms. Indicated them to the dragon, who needed all his attention to avoid all trees and branches.

The flight of the fugitive dragon was erratic, he had no time to find out what lay before him and had to swerve regularly as one of the giant reptiles crossed its path. Every time they could come a little closer, until their goal was stuck between them and the fauna of this world. The reptiles made a lunge at the fugitive dragon he could only narrowly avoid. The great dragon slowly dived under him and pushed him through the canopy, where Jinasin was ready throwing an array of nets over the dragon. Pulled one of the threads tighter and threatened to tie his wings as he tried to flee. Tugged again when the threat was repeated by her dragon in dragon language and reeled out again when the fugitive dragon gave up and slavishly flew along to the nearest rock outcropping that jutted above the canopy.

The great dragon fired question after question, and slowly the accused got back some of its swagger. Too late, however, because he had revealed the majority of the operation in the drakeling world. The great dragon stopped the questioning and asked Jinasin to resolve her nets.

All four dragons rose and they accompanied the prisoner to a portal, and forbid him to show himself in this land until the Dragon King had ruled on the issue. The portal closed and they headed back up into the mountains, climbing ever higher, circling until they came to a big hole, flanked by four peaks. The great fragon kept circling above the hole and consulted her. He was still thinking of the volcano and did not like to fly in directly through the entrance. She wove a lot protecting incantations around her and the great dragon. Meanwhile asking the other four to find a quiet place and wait for them.

She tied up her feet well and indicated she was ready. The great dragon pulled its wings and dived down still circling. Slowly the steep walls of rock changed to the whimsical surface of a cave wall, passed a few holes in the wall, but the great dragon kept on falling. Saw a screen coming, but needed her hands to hold on. Praying that the protection would keep they burst through the net. Many incantaties now were pulling on her, she tried to remember those that stuck. Internally fighting the incantations, she waited for the end of the flight.

The ground was getting closer, the walls widened, and more feeling than seeing she looked for a way out. The great dragon hit his wings, floated into the large cave, and blew a fireball into the room. The walls sparkled in the light and while it burned she could easily look around, all the while frantically trying to get rid of all the incantations. On the ledges along the walls were dozens of drakelings in a trance.

In the middle of the cave, she felt the crystals tug on a incantation still illuding her skill. Recognized it at last, and countered it. Could eventually tear it away.

Four dragons flew from four of the smaller tunnels in their direction. She wiggled her feet free, set off and let herself float to the ground. A fireball thrown on the floor, gave her a safe place to land. One of the dragons attacked her, she countered his fire with ice, cut her parachute loose and fell. Ducked on the ground and followed the dragon. He was a lot smaller than the great dragon who kept circling in the middle of the cave.

The great dragon made an occasional sortie to one of their attackers. The difference in size meant that soon he drove them, instead of them attacking him. They shot in narrow

corridors where the great dragon could not follow them, to surface again at the other end of the cave.

She had seen some drakelings shifting and feared they were slowly awakened. She remembered the stories of Jinasin, over how hypnosis was layered. Ran to a wall and jumped onto the lower ledge. Sat on it, overcame her aversion and felt at one of the drakelings. Ever moving behind the drakeling because he was increasingly active. Strand for strand she searched until she found the right one. Tore the net of the drakeling, and then blew the rest of the strands to pieces.

One of the dragons came out of a tunnel next to her and hit her with the left wing. She tumbled through the cave, stretched and let magic blow her high into the air. Fire and ice tied the dragon and made him crash. She let herself fall and landed on top of the dragon, her sword white with fire above her. He rolled over and blew a cloud of fire to her, which burst on her screen, used the draft and jumped a few meters into the air. Landed a short distance from the dragon, pushed off, drilled straight through the next fireball and hit the dragon full on his armor. A deep hum proved she had struck home.

She jumped back on one of the ridges, now knowing what thread to pull off, and one after the other, the drakelings were freed from their hypnosis. The dragon on the ground had cured itself and tested his wings. With one half of the drakelings awakening and the other half freed from their hypnoses there was now a full battle going on. She, however, had taught the drakelings how the hypnosis was put together and more and more of them were freed from their chains.

With time to worry about the four dragons. She saw three were still playing a cat and mouse game with the great dragon, who was wise enough not to enter the smaller corridors, chasing them. A few ridges higher, she set off hard at the right time, and landed gracefully on the great dragons back. He had seen many nets in the narrower passages of the cave and asked

if there was anything she could do about them. She shook her head. She had enough trouble with the incantations of the large net at the entrance.

The drakelings now had a big enough number for them to dare an attack on the four dragons. Satisfied she and the great dragon steered onto a difficult course up to the four peaks, evading nets and traps. He told the other dragons what was going on, who briefed Lisa and Jinasin.

Both laced themselves, sitting on their knees. She pulled a piece of rope from her bag and followed their example. Following each other closely the three dragons dived into the hole ever circling downwards. Jinasin saw the first net well in advance, Tore it at first, then destroyed it completely. Trap after trap was so destroyed, until they finally made it to the cave. Just in time to see one of the dragons being chased into one of the smaller corridors by a group of drakelings. The great dragon grunted and their three dragons adjusted their course and plunged among the drakelings. She blew some out of the way. Jinasin and her dragon dived into the hole between them, and agile slalomed through the drakeling, every time passing a net, Jinasin struck out. With such speed she could only tear it. But it was enough for her and the drakelings to be able to see them. The group spread out and all traps were burned from the walls.

Following Jinasin her dragon they crossed the labyrinth in a more leisurely pace. Lisa lay backwards on her dragon and kept an eye on the rear. Only after an endless flight through the corridors and caverns of the complex was Jinasin satisfied. This was also the moment the four dragons realized the caves were lost to them, they appeared near the rising tunnel, to climb up and flee. The great dragon shot after them, with some rising wind she made sure that they could rise faster and gradually they were reeling in the four dragons. Knowing what was to happen she launched herself from the back of the great dragon onto a narrow ledge, sat down to have both hands free and followed the upcoming battle. One by one the great dragon

could grab the four dragons and throw them into the deep. Every time she made sure he could quickly gain altitude and kept the wind away from the falling dragon. The Dragons fell to the bottom where the dragons of Lisa and Jinasin kept them in check long enough for Jinasin to throw some hypnosis nets over them. The fight against the nets broke the dragons will slowly, but gradually Jinasin gained total control over them.

As the drakelings dispersed a few lingered. Following them so the great dragon circled back, and got a request to help them free other clan members, had seen the power of the mages, terrifying powers, thought them more than a match.

Both the great dragon and she looked at Jinasin, who clearly had no problem leading the four dragons. She send pictures of them crashing into another cave filled with drakelings, then fleeing dragons. The great dragon mumbled approvingly. Thought it the most likely scenario, and gave the four dragons a possibility to redeem themselves.

The cave turned out to be a whole mountain, as they crashed in. She just calculated the proximity of the site, thinking it no coincidence it being in close to the silk trade mountain, and drake mountain in the dragon world. The central hall was teeming with drakelings. Immediately turning into chaos when they stepped through the portal. The great dragon looked around, barked some orders and soon a small dragon came to him questioning if he could help. She felt something move in the shadows. Checked the area thoroughly and felt more, warned the great dragon and nodded at the sign from Lisa. The small dragon continued to stretch the conversation, was unable to explain.

She jumped off the great dragon and asked for attention, tore a mage from the shadows and asked for an explanation. The hall exploded. Dozens of wizards pounced on the dragons, steering the drakelings. The dragons swept away some of them, weathered the storm and jumped to higher plateaus. On command of the great dragon they assembled and systematically stripped all platforms on the upper four layers of drakelings and mages. Jinasin had captured a little dragon and used him as shield and weapon. She looked for order in chaos, bounced from plateau to plateau. Found the mages and circled around them, drove them through the room, got help from some dragons, each time attacking one of the mages, until they finally tore the group in half. With wind gusts sent through the smallest group, she broke their resistance and they were trampled by the dragons.

The drakelings formed a ball in the air to defend themselves, which grew as more drakelings could escape the dragons. The great dragon and the dragon lord dived into the ball, spun like a whirlwind around, and let the ball explode, waited and watched as the drakelings rallied again, repeating their action, but now faced the leaders of the group and killed them. The group fell apart. With the dragons in the room above, successively cleaning lower levels the floor got ever more crowded. The drakelings were looking for a way out, but the Magi kept the exits closed and tried again to gain control over the group. Their effort was hampered by Lisa, who had found an empty platform and fired at anything moving, or failing that shooting with air arrows drakelings from their flight, so they crashed on the already overcrowded floor.

More and more drakelings folded their wings around themselves, as sign of surrender. The little dragon was sent by Jinasin through the hall and tore the fabric wound around the drakelings to shreds. Lifted off and attacked the group of mages who accidentally strayed too close to Jinasin. Rose to the platform where Jinasin resided, who checked the bonds and then dived back to the ground in between the drakelings.

The doors opened and the mages fled, saw the dragons had come to the lowest level. Now lacking the protection of the drakelings, they were downright panicking. Jinasin inspected the drakelings, let the dragons sort them by place of birth and then left them alone, cut the strands from the small dragon when he was near the great dragon and sat quietly on one of the lower plateaus.

Lisa joined her, had found a strange headband, looted from one of the magi. With the great dragon she negotiated how best to evacuate the cave under the mountain. He asked for patient, consulted with the ather dragons, and everyone got ready, in battle formation they emptied out of the mountain, localized the entrance of the cave, approaching it from all sides. Cowered back for the already present predators and kept circling at a safe altitude. In one of the dives she had seen some drakelings and asked the great dragon to fly towards them. Freed from the yoke of the mages in the world of men they had pulled a few tricks to lure predators here so they would smell the food in the cave and carried out an attack. Had not much sympathy with the drakelings who were still in the cave. Hoped the mages didn't had enough time to get to safety through the portals, but from the tone she understood that hope would be vain. The cave at least was for quite some time no longer usable.

On and around the peak of the master of the great dragon it was pandemonium when they arrived with the four dragons. They landed on the large platform, where the dragon lord was already waiting for them, and before she was fully dismounted she had already started the story. Knowing more ears were listening she talked loud and clear, told about the drakelings and the contempt in the drakeling world for a trading dragon, their experiences in the cave, where four dragons attacked her and the great dragon, and of the hypnosis of the drakelings which rendered them helpless.

The dragon lord growled about respect and good workers and invited her to come up to transfer power over the four dragons. She asked politely whether Jinasin could be bestowed

with the same honor. Surprised the dragon lord looked over to Jinasin and the dragon she rode on, but finally invited her too.

After an appropriate wait, she followed the dragon lord, carried by the great dragon, who subsequently picked up Jinasin. Dead Silence held when Jinasin, one by one, called the four dragons and let go of the hypnosis. Then bowed to the dragon lord who would take over and retreated behind Alexandra. A low growl of the dragon lord made his counterpart act. He thanked her and Jinasin for bringing the four dragons and asked about the allegations which were raised against them.

She took a few steps forward, nodded to the dragon lord, then to his counterpart again briefly and told the adventures in the world of drakelings. She closed with the allegations: discrediting the dragon race, sedition of numerous drakelings and a non ceremonial attack on a higher dragon, the last count twice. Both dragon lords nodded and the host indicated that she and Jinasin could go.

After Jinasin was taken away she climbed on the great dragon and asked if they could fly around. Practice. The great dragon growled, had the same idea and floated away from the peak, dropped down towards one of the mines to circle in the hot wind, rising to greater heights, felt she had tightly strapped herself onto him and began a dive, followed by numerous stunts and sharp bends, each ended abruptly when she said she could hold on no longer.

She finally found a place where she could hold on with her feet and lower legs. Bound with some air, she had her hands free. Lying in sharp bends on her knees if necessary. The great dragon entered the climb for the last time and she urged him to go full out. Without warning, the dragon folded his wings and with his tail, steered into the depths. Flat on his back she waited. His wings folded in half the fall was now an attack flight. He avoided some small peaks, rolled through a hole in the rocks and let himself fall again. Hit his wings, soared

into the air at full speed and made a perfect half loop, turned right and made speed, dived sideways, rolled three times around its axis, as a defense. Hit his wings and went straight up a few meters. Dived back down. Startled, dropped quickly out of the sky, after her and caught her again. Quickly she tied herself again, a few sharp curves confirmed she was in the right position. Satisfied they circled back to the platform where Jinasin and Lisa had been watching breathlessly. She jumped from the great dragon and embraced Jinasin, wished her welcome to the select group of non dragons. To be approached at your own risk. Where possible avoid. She told Lisa the part where Jinasin stripped the four dragons of their hypnosis and did not forget to tell anyone including a dragon lord had been watching with amazement.

IV

More and more cases were linked to each other, whether or not justifiable. A power was trying to break down existing structures, in favor of a still obscure goal. They sat in the dwarf capital to report to Jinasins parents.

The earth elf kingdom was standing out, as all other intrigues were still in the process of gaining influence. The sects questioned were generally small. A single sect had managed to gain influence by breaking into closed guilds, but still they were rejected because of their methods or foolish ideas.

She actually wanted to spend a few weeks in the old city. The adventure seemed to be heading for a confrontation with a dragon lord, who had lost all grip on reality. Possibly the collected works could contain something offering help in the inevitable fight. She had talked about it with Jinasin and found her match in mind. Jinasin was slowly working on her parents so she could go look for her friend, who stil hadn't surfaced. She had send requests to all existing dwarf empire's, with her description, in the hope she had appeared somewhere, without regaining her memories. So far in vain. Eventually she got her permission, but of course there was a catch. Because of her role in apprehending the sects. However small her share, according to her parents, had been. She now was one of few capable of leading studies to other sects in the world of the dwarfs. Especially accompanied by Alexandra. And as leaders of an official research team they were allowed to explore the old city again in the hope to find anything they would have missed, then they were needed high into the mountains to visit the kingdoms of heaven, where reports kept coming in from shepherds and lonely travelers, about wandering dragons along the high snow-capped peaks of their mountains.

One of the principal archaeologists stood waiting for them when they arrived near the old city. He had spent years digging in the corridors of the city revealing the architecture, to compare them with teachings in schools being in fashion. Although the question to come alone, without large excavators was quite unusual for an excavation, he would not let an opportunity slide by, seeing lower pieces of the ancient city.

The reports revealing informationabout their travels in the old city only said a few passages in the old city were opened and he hoped maybe to find passage to the throne room. Believed they had found some of the secret passages of the old king.

He went on about the possibilities and how it was such a shame he could not bring more but his simple digging tools. Because of the narrow corridors, he suspected. Jinasin let him rammer on about his fantasies. But eventually asked him total secrecy about what he was going to see. He looked at her vaguely. But a princess traveling in the company of the greatest mage of the elves, had to know what she was talking about. Eventually his curiosity got the better of him and he agreed, if only she would give him some of the discoveries, however small, for him to publish. Jinasin smiled and nodded. Ogrimar and Zagramar had collected a vehicle and she checked it on magic and technology. After performing some detours they arrived at the cave where they had previously sheltered. The archaeologist nodded, had been here before, expecting an exit. Had been searching for days, however was never able to locate the door exactly.

Zagramar stopped in the entrance of the cave, and gave way to the great dragon, transformed back into his dragon form. He sang the song opening the doors, then led them to the hall and found on one of the platforms a place to sleep.

Jinasin opened the door to the treasury, took a large golden bowl and handed it to the archaeologist. "This is everything that you can write about. Of the rest," thus she opened the various safes, "we like to know what it is, what it was, and whether it still has value other than to show in museums."

It took minutes before the archaeologist did move. He bowed low before the princess, and declared to be her humble servant. Picked up the bowl and carried it carefully to the vehicle. Then took place in the room with jewelry and started his work.

Jinasin was searching for suitable study subjects. Did think for now she had to stay close to her expertise, hypnosis or in more general terms, control of another person. Days went by, and Jinasin found ever better incantations, nets which allowed you to, for a short time, control a person's limbs. Hundreds of incantations to carry out full or partial hypnosis. Many variants of incantations they already knew, but variants that could reach their goal faster or just being much stronger.

She had picked up a volume about fire spirits, and tried for fire dragons and hell hounds. Despite their name they necessitated a combination of various magic. The fire dragon was interwoven with fire, air and miraculously ice. In her world only incantations were used made from single elements. This type of tissues were only pictures in museums. Starting of with a lump of fire, she soon got air and fire weaved together, to get the shapeless form to

float. The ice, however, was necessary to give the dragon structure. Got wind and ice in the correct proportions interwoven and then had the solution to tackle the whole. Fabricated a creature resembling a bird and started a test flight in the great hall.

Each progressed slowly but steadily with their research until Ogrimar and Zagramar had found a passage to one of the other big halls in the city. Jinasin closed the doors to the main hall with the aincient magic, while a few others were destroyed in order to keep open the corridor. It was enough for the archaeologist to report as a result.

They watched the vehicle fade, when the archeologist rode back to civilization. He had set them off on a predetermined pickup point for their transfer to the high mountains of the empire of heaven, and waited in the capital until Lisa and the other two dragons had found their way to this incredible city of air too.

Lisa told of her trip through the high mountains of her world, although the peaks and mountain ranges were eroded differently, the high mountains in both worlds had stand the test of time. She had talked with the locals in search of legends and strange phenomena, normally being classified as fiction. Of course they came back on the stories of hairy creatures living in the mountains. So timid only some people could claim to have seen them. Altogether, you could split it into stories of encounters with beings who were not or no longer found on earth. She had travelled with professional mountain climbers, viewing the most inhospitable parts of the mountain range, but did not found any activity. She had therefore a negative answer to the question she had given Lisa. If there was something about spreading its tentacles through multiple world's, in the human world it was very careful.

They were flying in low and installed themselves in the snow, on a point with excellent views on the only mountaintop not covered with snow. They could even look into the crater of the volcano. Divided the watch, and dug themselves in. The reports indicated there were many activities and she hoped to catch one of the dragons just before he went into the volcano or just after he had come out. The hours ticked away slowly. After dusk she tied her dress around her legs and began to weave a large screen, pulled the wires and jumped a few meters to test them, gave warning, and leaped into the abyss. The screen pulled tight and she felt a tug on her shoulders, corrected the screen angle to the wind and floated towards the volcano. Saw she fell too fast, and made an occasional breeze to keep her goal in sight, carefully making sure no pattern could be identified.

a few hundred feet above a small plateau she adjusted the screen and began circling while the threads were slowly dissolving. She managed without too much magic to get rid of the screen and bounced hard on the plateau, rolled over and laid dead still, while she scanned the area. There certainly were dragons in the mountain, but nothing happened.

Satisfied no one had heard anything she climbed toward the rim of the crater and discovered it only partially open. The lava had made sharp downward pointing spikes. Nothing was broken, nor were there any scratches or cracks in the rocks to see.

After many looks in the crater, she began a long and difficult descent. Circling around the mountain ever descending she hoped to find the hidden entrance. One of the cliffs about halfway up the mountain she looked down, presented a problem. Back and around it did not work. She hesitated before the jump. The smallest bit of magic helped her landing. Again she was dead still. Within the mountain the dragons were startled. Four, she was confident about that.

One of the dragons broke away from the group, to her, across the volcano. She stood up and climbed further away from the cliff, found a good spot, lay down and began to regulate her breathing.

She recorded the place where the dragon began to fly, followed him, but remained dead still. Kept her eyes closed, with her breathing now very shallow. The dragon remained

circling above the cliff for a long time, then twice around the volcano, before crawling back in. She waited until he reached the other three, before daring to stand up and climb down. The entrance was hiding behind a large group of rocks and had a small overhang, thus also from above the entrance was hidden. Standing at the entrance, she could not find any incantations, pondered about her options and decided she had seen enough for now and descended to a cliff the great dragon had indicated her the day before, pulled out a large cloth from her bag and tied it firmly to her elbows and knees. Stretched her arms and pulled the fabric tight. Tied a rope around her waist, making sure the cloth was firmly secured, looked into the depths and then plunged off the cliff, stretched her arms and legs and adjusted to the slope below her. Many seconds passed, her thoughts concentrated fully on the canvas and her position in the sky, until from the corner of her eye she saw a black flash dive after her. She heard a soft deep hum, counted two beats off, lifted her head and pulled her knees. At the same time the dragon spread his wings, rose a bit. Slowly they got together, she grabbed hold of the great dragon who dived further into the deep, followed the slope, and only deep in the valley circled up to join the others.

She showed them where the entrance of the volcano was, and told them about what to expect. She wondered what an eruption of magic would stir inside the mountain. She looked at the great dragon. The dragons do not feel threatened. None of the locals could come here and in the Dragon's world no one ought to know this existed. She suggested to capture the exploratory dragon. She was stronger than the dragon, even the great dragon was probably stronger, but there were no tournament rules on top of the mountains. Lisa, the three dragons and Jinasin agreed to the plan and long scenarios were created, then possible solutions were sought. Eventually they pulled warm blankets around them and fell asleep. The next morning they circled several times around the volcano to take in the land. Where they could descent, how fast they could rise and where, and especially where not they could use evasive actions. Jinasin and Lisa remained high in the air while the great dragon used a normal landing route to the entrance of the volcano, announcing themselves high into the air and again near the lair, giving clear notice a dragon was visiting. One of the dragons came rushing through the corridor, he did not even look who had arrived and attacked straight from emptying out of the mountain. Blew a fireball at their direction, easily beaten into sparks by the great dragon, jumped up and won height with a big arch. The great dragon kept circling above the entrance and waited for things to come. The attacker was much smaller than him and would normally not forget to bow before him.

The attacker took advantage of the volcano, proceeding into a diving attack, stretched his wings and blew a fireball from underneath them, with something more if she heard it right. The ball hit into pieces on the protective net of the great dragon which was immediately torn by the hail mixed in the fire. The great dragon fell into the hole, sinking lower than the attacker and made some sharp turns to dodge the next fireballs, came close enough to the attacker to use his tail smashing his attacker from its course and dived after him, blowing firestorm after firestorm over him.

She warned the great dragon for the next attacker who came from the corridor and the one following behind. The great dragon dived in evasive action, then let her help, to quickly rise above the four dragons, tugged in his wings to go back into the attack, blew over two a firestorm, while she used air to make the fireballs of the attacking dragons explode. Gaining altitude and repeating the attack until they had come within range of the two dragons above them.

Lisa's dragon plunged through the group, shooting flames everywhere, made a loop and enabled Lisa to shoot some arrows. The four dragons dived down, but could therefore not

react at the ice storms she scattered around. All four fell from the sky and it took a few seconds to rid themselves from the ice. The great dragon waited until they were back at his altitude, made an occasional bend so she could shoot small fireballs at the eyes and mouth of their attackers, just to keep them occupied.

The four dragons all blew a fire storm in the air, which was easily evaded. The fire sank, warming the air for one of the attackers to shoot high above them, where he turned and immediately went into an attacking dive. Between two fires Lisa's dragon had no other option than take an evading dive. Lost a lot of height and circled away from the volcano to gain altitude again.

She kept their attackers on their toes while the great dragon was winning height to get back into range of the dragon above him. Again the catapulting trick was performed. This time the great dragon reacted. She jumped up and grabbed with two air leads, one of the dragons, drew him into a spin and let go again, saw the great dragon push off from another attacker smashing a firestorm with his tail, so close the dragons had to take a beating too.

She used the falling dragon as a step up and was neatly picked up by the great dragon, who, now being sure they were much higher than the dragons below them, again remained circling, gaining altitude. After a while followed by Lisa with her dragon. Above them Jinasin was testing her new found tricks. She had broken screens for her with many small fireballs, making the four attackers extra sensitive to the incantations and the large net thrown over the attacker who had tried to reach them, was easily drawn tight. Some strands slipped when she could not get his wings under control fast enough, but could with a rapid turn of her dragon pick up the threads.

The small dragon fought violently against the control, but was still turned left and right, went into a dive following orders until he could finally throw off the strains, then got another push from Lisa's dragon and rejoined the other three.

The cat and mouse game began again, with all four attackers staying far away from Jinasin and the great dragon. While still creating small screens Jinasin her dragon saw an opening and dived through the group, She made a fireball explode among them, splitting the group. The great dragon got one of them within reach, grabbed him and threw him into the abyss. She jumped over a second, leaving a few explosions and just missed a third. Sucked the air out under his wings then got a boost from Lisa's dragon, lashed out with an ice storm, wove a screen and let herself float away from the volcano. Turned on the thermals and saw Jinasin steer one of the dragons to her. Her dragon followed the turns and dives closely, thus keeping Jinasin within reach of the threads.

With a bit of warm air she floated over the dragon, let go and landed on top of him. Looked at the threads and passed this on to Jinasin her dragon. Got an image back and pulled on the wires here and there. Leaped back into the air stepping over its tail, when she saw Jinasins dragon avoid an attack by one of the other dragons, just before the great dragon was whizzing by. Attached a wire on his tail and hung on, to be swept on his back at the next bend. Had just enough time to weave a protection over herself, before the great dragon hit a fireball into sparks. Caught a ball from the dragon just behind them, filled it with ice and air and sent it back.

Both avoided the net, to be blown away when Lisa's dragon drew in his wings shot past the ball and made it explode lashing it with his tail. Surfed on the pressure wave and when it faded made a sharp turn, using his speed, ending up well above the two dizzy attackers.

Jinasin now had two dragons into reins, let them do the same moves, practiced with flying the two dragons in formation and succeeded in gaining altitude, until they hung far above the battle. Tugged the rest of the threads more tightly, reducing the last bit of their own will until it was just a little flame. She catched Lisa in open sky and pulled her on her back, so they both hung suspended on a giant screen slowly circling to the opening of the volcano. In the meanwhile following the cat and mouse game now arising. The great dragon, larger and strangely more agile than the rest had chosen the greatest attacker and chased him, giving him no other option but falling out of the sky, to get some space between him and the great dragon. Who now with no one on top of him, turned such sharp bents, every gained room instantly vanished.

Still lower brought the fight them, until the smaller dragon had as choices, landing or giving up. So he stretched his wings and let the thermals rise him just before the great dragon and meekly followed the commands given him.

On the other side of the volcano was a totally different battle going on. The two dragons more evenly matched, used each other to get upwind. Lisa's dragon turned at speed on his back and forced his opponent into a dive, not wanting to expose his belly. Folded his wings halfway and with the resulting speed rose rapidly, went into a loop and came thus behind Lisa's dragon, making him beat his wings, slowing down, turned, giving a blow with his tail, shaking the attacker. This gave Lisa's dragon slightly more lift than the attacker for a frontal attack. Flew just over the attacker and hit him with his tail so hard against the body, the attacker went into a dive trying to get away and recover. Saw two dragons shooting past him. Felt a web close around him and then could do nothing but follow his companions.

One by one they landed next to her as Jinasin and her dragon stayed circling. She junped from dragon to dragon, checked the wires, flexing them on the advice of Jinasin where necessary. With a gust of wind she swiped the legs from under the fourth dragon, when he thought it necessary to resist the web of Jinasin. Growled at him, cursing him with the only curse she knew in his language and helped Jinasin with a gust of wind, enabling her to make all four dragons lift off at the same time, launched Lisa to her dragon and then was picked up

by the great dragon. He went in front of the procession to a distant deep valley, he had calculated, being the closest to the ground in the world of dragons.

She accepted help from the great dragon to make a beacon to the dragon world, and waited several hours until a dragon lord opened the portal, kicked the four dragons through the portal and then before leaving again, turned telling the great elven mage Alexandra he would raise this issue with the dragon council too. She bowed, answered by a deep bow from the dragon lord who, after some explanation of Jinasin closed the portal.

With the dragons coming along she hoped to finally discover something of substance, get any clue on the threat hanging over them. She waited and Ogrimar and Zagramar showed them the paths leading to the opening in the volcano. Hit up camp in front of the entrance corridor and crept along with the great dragon into the mountain. The corridor ended abruptly onto a large hall. Along the walls many things that you normally would encounter in a dragon roost. She took on two books: "Art with smoke" and "Art with fire" and showed them to the great dragon, who grumbled it was the reading of lower dragons. In the ceiling and floor where two large holes. The sharp rocks she had seen on top of the mountain hang in clear view. The inside of them artfully carved in shapes of the animals roaming around the mountain. From the hole in the floor the heat of the lava chambers entered the room. The great dragon looked over the edge and stopped her doing the same, because of the heat, even as high as they were in the mountain right now.

Many items in the room indicated the dragons were only the guardians of this volcano. Furthermore, there was nothing interest to find. They walked back to the rest, told what they had found and decided to jointly explore the volcano. The corridors leading from the big hall into the volcano were high enough for dragon lords. So all three girls climbed on their dragon to take the steep slopes. Ogrimar and Zagramar followed at a distance, knowing the dragons would pick them up in case of emergency. The hall was made many centuries ago and the

dragons searched it meticulously, but found nothing worth reporting. Only items that could belong to the guards or their predecessors.

From the hall no magic could be noted deeper into the volcano, however, she wove a camouflaging net around herself and threw one over Lisa. Jinasin and the three dragons followed her example, and they cautiously descended the corridor circling into the mountain. Occasionally they could sit up as they crawled through a small room, big enough to contain two dragons and so devoid of any decorations or items they could only be used for dragons passing each other.

It got warmer and for security she wove guards against the heat of the volcano. A gleam announced the next hall. The magic was now clearly notable, but not large enough to abort exploring the room. Here was the craft of the dwarfs on display. Wide columns many feet thick kept the roof of the hall in place. In the light of the volcano could be seen the room was split in many parts, wherein a portion of the room was covered with what appeared to be grass.

The great dragon beat his wings and together they explored the higher parts of the room, saw a cabinet with many books, however, surrounded by a lot of magic. Further on, the room just had the look of a comfortable house, within three corners the thing they had sought for, the characters to maintain a portal.

Not sure what to do she had a long discussion with the other members of the group. she actually wanted to go back, wanted to avoid a confrontation but in the end succumbed to Jinasin who wanted to know if Ogrimar and Zagramar could tell from what time this Dwarven artwork could be. They heard them already coming and so this time she let her curiosity prevail. She let the great dragon bring her to the library to study the magic carefully. Took the patterns in, formed a disguise and shuffled slowly toward the bookcase, felt the patterns changing and adjusted her disguise accordingly. Closer she came. Could discern the pictures

and sent them to the great dragon to translate them. They betrayed she was looking at the studies about the intrigues in the many worlds. The great dragon translated an intrigue about the earth elves. It was a book of about half a meter wide. Carefully she tried the book. felt the magic adapt, let the book go directly and only picked it back up after changing her magic in the same manner. She could pack it into air and slowly walk out of the library. With her hands full, it was increasingly difficult to adjust her disguise. It worked eventually.

A wave of magic, however, made sure she could not take a look in the book. She had expected it here in the hall, took one look around and smiled. She would not like a war in her own home either.

The other two dragons were already in the climb. She jumped past the great dragon and launched herself past them. The two dwarfs like rag dolls in their clutches. Saw they were fine and bounced into the now empty corridor, rapidly going up. Wove ice, air and fire as a shield above her. made everything whirl when the light above her was brighter and pulled out the safety just before the entrance. The little dragon glancing into the depths was ejected by the explosion. She stepped into the hall and saw a few dozen small dragons recovering from the explosion. She gave the images to the three dragons in the hallway and got a warning back of the great dragon. She reassured him. None was seriously hurt, but now shared his concern. They had to figure out who these kids were. Did not feel like angering some dragon lords because she hurt their child.

The group mobilized themselves and attacked when all three dragons had crawled out of the corridor. Out of the translations of the great dragon she made up, this group of young dragons thought they were still in the dragon's world and they had to protect this roost against intruders. As a group they attacked, not so much to injure, but rather to get them out of the mountain. To show them who was in charge. Lisa and her dragon slowly drifted back to the entrance. With Jinasin and her dragon high against the ceiling they turned when they began to

feel Jinasins magic. The group blew apart, three fell back when it appeared their wings did not want to work. She shot towards them and tied them with air. Called and got a lift from the great dragon and together they swept clean the ceiling. Jinasin and her dragon were not impressed and continued to throw out nets over the young ones. Every time one of the dragons floated back to the ground to rid of the nets, she jumped on them and tied them down.

Lisa was sitting backwards on her dragon, together keeping the small dragons from the entrance corridor and insuring no large groups could form. She got a warning from the great dragon and renewed the bonds on the captured dragons. They now had a big problem. Opening a portal to the dragon world and delivering all these young dragons equaled on suicide, how well thought out their story would be. She waited until Jinasin had resolved the bonds of the last free dragon, assuming three older dragons looking down on him would make him docile. The great dragon rattled off questions to the young pup and got his answers. They had heard that some dragons tried to break into the residence of one of the dragon lords, they were studying at and had conceived the plan to prevent this. Did not believe they were in another world, till finally one of them took a longer look at her and recognized her, bowed deeply and apologized aloud. The room was suddenly silent and everyone looked at her, bowed and waited.

She said a few reassuring words and the great dragon explained in what world they were and added, in general, dragons and especially dragons as young as them, were not allowed outside their world. The bonds were all resolved, but the young dragons remained where they were. One of them came forward with a big marble. It enabled them, according to the stories, to travel through the shadows in the residence. He understood now they were just walking through another world. She picked up the marble and recognized some strains. Asked and got some space and tore it slowly to pieces, making sure the magic could flow back to its owner. Held the marble in front of Jinasin to let her deal with the hypnosis strains unraveling

them and eventually burn them in the crater. Then called the owner of the marble and let him see some of the strains. He nodded that he saw them, but did not understand. The great dragon came up beside him and she started at the portal. Let the great dragon hold the strains she normally could attach to the characters. Halfway she did the same with the young dragon who first let slip a thread out of uncertainty. She pulled the thread tight and stabilized the portal, hung the wire a second time onto the young dragon, who now wielded it properly, then the portal opened and the great dragon stepped through it. She encouraged the young dragon to do the same. The rest followed. She took leave of the great dragon and began to close the portal by slowly letting go of the threads, felt the same thing happening on the other side of the portal and thread by thread it faded. V

Back in the dragon world, sitting in with the great dragons master she discussed the possibilities of drake mountain. All who travel through the dragon world hear of it, always implicated with some kind of treachery, treason or dispute. The dragon lord however couldn't tell her more than reports would have told her earlier. The resident dragon lord however would be due in court to defend against allegations, so it might be time to attend this meeting.

She thanked him, and all got back in the air. Catching up with the dragon lord of Drake Mountain after the meeting. He bowed low to her and gave a nod to the others, and to her surprise invited them to visit the drake mountain.

When the mountain came into view they landed and the dragon lord asked everyone's attention. He had the residence and the land almost forced upon him. Although he was much weaker, the last lord was at the end of his strength and had all but begged him to take over the possession. In the residence he had found many books by the previous owners, describing how the magic of the drake mountain was put together, up to the entering of the mountain itself. He had seen it as an investment in time and education, hoping to unravel small bits of magic and make it his own.

He knew there were dragons tracking up to the mountain, but this always happened when he was gone to defend himself on some claim over drake mountain and its magic. It had unfortunately only became an investment in time. He walked to a statue of a wood nymph standing alongside the road. A disclosure incantation made a tunnel visible over the road disappearing again when he stepped back away from the wood nymph. Then asked Lisa to shoot an arrow high into the air. A flash of lightning disintegrated the arrow shaft. So far as the dragon lord could find from the writings the only option to reach the mountain was the journey over the protected roads. The lightning was worse closer to the mountain, and as they had seen, protected against everything. No interference possible, since the origin of the magic lay deep in the mountain.

The roads had a wall at regular intervals, you had to break through. No problem at first sight, however, it contained incantations causing to scoop more and more weight on you. The incantation dissipated with time, but then you'd need several days to get to the mountain. What constituted another problem. The roads were renewed every two days. The tunnel collapsed and out of the mountain a new tunnel was blown along the road. so for a short time you were unprotected from lightning.

Jinasin had walked to the wall and stepped through it, swept the incantation off effortlessly, shrug off and came walking back, was not very impressed by the incantation. They had to wait until the next morning, however, since that night, the roads would be renewed.

The dragon lord took leave, offered to them a bed just to be courteous, which she kindly rejected. He promised to be back the next morning, bringing reinforcements. Jinasin climbed on her dragon and walked with him through some walls, then asked him to speed up on the way back and came smiling into camp, gave some references to ancient magic and asked the great dragon how long the trip to the mountain would take. He thought about it, asked if Jinasin could show him how to remove the strains because, according to him, that would remove the biggest obstacle. Both she and Jinasin nodded as if this was a serious question, raised with the intrigues of the palace. Jinasin walked to the first wall, stood with her back to the camp, weaving several threads and learned the great dragon the simplest form of the incantation, who then stepped through the wall, removing the threads with difficulty. Jinasin did not forget to mention the limits of the incantation.

The great dragon growled amused and made an apology to her and let both take a seat. She wove a protection around Jinasin and her, held her tightly and let Jinasin signal they were ready. The great dragon stepped through the first wall on the road, felt the incantation disintegrate and picked up speed. Using the claws on its wings, he flew with great speed down the road, still felt no pressure on his shoulders, and only slowed down when the magic changed, actually made an emergency stop, expecting this was the end of the road.

Jinasin and she had to jump off his back and carefully tested the magic of this wall. She felt something pull, but could not find the ends of the thread, looked at Jinasin, playing with some, partially unraveling the weave then laying it back as she found it. Only after some time Jinasin looked up, saw that she still could not get rid of the weave and tore it from her. Only then she remembered what this fabric reminded her of, told Jinasin, who nodded absently, took another step through the wall and unraveled the threads once more, looked up and said Lisa just had to tell them what was going on. The great dragon understood they were going back, let them take a seat and shot down the road back towards camp.

Lisa was surprised to find fabrics, she used to steer her arrows, be used in such a way, but did understand the function. No wonder everyone had trouble reaching the mountain. With enough of these fabrics accumulated you would be sent automatically to a particular gate of the mountain. Lisa let her see the arrows, all had a similar tissue around them. Although not all the same. She informed the dragons about the incantations, which they had found and then crawled into her blanket.

Early the next morning the dragon lord appeared with his entourage. They were ready, Jinasin opened the fabric of the first wall, along with the great dragon, she walked through it and then beckoned the dragon lord. He walked past Jinasin and then nodded to his entourage, who carefully followed. All were about the same size as Lisa's and Jinasins dragons. She looked around and shook her head, just wanted to say something when Jinasins dragon roared some curses over the group. Suddenly everyone walked neatly in line. Did not understand what was said, but the pictures the great dragon gave as translation spoke volumes. Everyone had heard the stories about the four dragons and the opening and closing of the walls had made the dragons decide Jinasin would not be contradicted.

The great dragon used a reasonable pace, so Jinasin and her dragon could easily go from wall to wall without the procession having to slow down. She stopped at the wall with the control incantation interwoven and waited for Lisa and her dragon to come forward. Jinasin opened the fabrics of the wall, after which Lisa looked at the tissues of control and shook her head. No possibility to do the same with these tissues.

She went to the dragon lord and told him the incantations of the following walls would have to be burned off. She was willing to do this, but. He nodded and put it to his subordinates. A lot of mumbling about a trap was the result. Three-quarters did not want this. Only the dragon lord and five others were willing to submit to the procedure.

She shrugged and burned the tissues from the first dragons, after which the great dragon again quickly worked his way to the head of the procession.

Farther down, the road intersected. On the advice of Lisa they kept to the left, but stopped when most dragons continued walking straight ahead and only with great strength and effort could stop. She gave them a choice. Going on without questions or remaining here.

Much noise resulted in nobody wanting to stay behind. It took all four to eventually succeeded to break the far accumulated tissue. Fire of the great dragon and her air weakened it, then Lisa and Jinasin joint tearing the tissue. It was obviously a humiliation to be helped by a human child, but all dragons underwent their fate in silence.

The parade now ran smoothly through the tunnels, though Jinasin and Lisa needed some time after each intersection just trying to figure out what the tissues were used for and where the ends were to be found. The sentinel and look incantations were easily explained. Screens changing you into animals, especially in the weak form being used, would not

The gate of the mountain loomed before them. The dragon lord had the tone to open it, but she stopped him. Asked him to repeat the incantation used the day before. They saw a hole opening in the tunnel roof. The dragon lord jumped into the hole, beat a few times with his wings and said the incantation again. High in the mountain appeared a door. The dragon lord let himself fall back and jumped a second time, hit a few times more with his wings, opened the door and climbed through it. The great dragon followed. As were Jinasin and Lisa, both on their dragon, but then all tried to push their way through the doorway.

She turned to the chaos and could just see why there were animal incantations. Large animals like wolfs jumped out of the gate down below and remained undecided, watching the last dragons jump through the overhead doorway. The great dragon tired of the turmoil, restored order by sorting the dragons, like small children, by size.

They were in a high hall with openings at regular intervals. The direction suggested they led to the other gates. She put her attention therefore on the platforms above her in the hall. No stairs, in a dragon's lair. The great dragon agreeing with her. Jumped and with a few wing beats landed on the lowest platform, to walk into the passage behind it. The corridor ran straight up to the next room. The great dragon used the claws on its wings to tackel the steep corridor, and reached without difficulty the central hall Around the crater of the volcano were many platforms carved into the walls. She counted at least two hundred beds. The great dragon jumped from platform to platform, all empty, using the beds as stairs. Still higher a large opening at the top came into view.

On the highest platform he stopped and together they watched the strange arc that was built around the opening. He felt a strong magic and grunted. She also felt it. A powerful incantation against anyone protected the passage. She knew the spell and had to grope for the two loose ends, which would make her able to slip through the fabric, she found them eventually, tested the tissue and returned, showed the great dragon through images, what it was in front of him and subsequently apologized.

The upper beds were all filled now. Jinasin and Lisa were deposited next to the great dragon and listened to her explanation of the gate. It was based on people magic, but was so powerful she would have trouble getting Lisa and Jinasin through it. The great dragon wished them luck and said he and the dragons would search the lair. She greeted the dragons and wrung Jinasin with difficulty through the gate. Lisa followed without problems. The corridor here was steep. She was resting a bit, as Lisa and Jinasin were busy using the stones in the outer wall of the corridor to climb up. Fully fit again she used magic to jump to them and helped both alternately until they had arrived in the top hall.

The central sleeping place drew all attention. The skeleton of a large dragon filled it. It was consumed by fire from the inside, so it looked like he had died a natural death.

The hall was full of books and writings and the big more than man high table was full of magical items. The box with rings was the easiest. Lisa gave them all one. They had the same tissue as the gate, she warned especially not to put them on and then conjured a ball from the chest in the middle of the table, but soon returned it back in the box, when she saw a similarity with the bulb of the young dragons. Opened a book and started reading it. Jinasin and she finally looked over her shoulders. In a shaky handwriting drawings where explained,

at least that reported Lisa. It was written in an ancient human language Lisa had cursed when her parents had made her learn it as a child.

Lisa flipped through the book and stopped at a drawing of a sword. It was as described able to increase human magic. They localized it at some distance, high on the wall. Lisa tested it and put it quickly down again, let Jinasin investigate her on magic tissues. All tissues faded some time after she had laid down the sword. Were only for its intended incantation.

The rest of the time they filled with an inventory of what was in the room. From the descriptions they understood now how intrigues could get a foothold in the other worlds, since the weird sash found in the drake world was described in the book too.

Lisa has just flipped through the book and then took one of the marbles from the box and put it into her backpack. Sought and found a sheath for the sword and a skirt made of thousands of small gold rings, pulled it tight only after Jinasin had tested the tissues, then started searching for the matching belt.

As such, protected from dragon fire, Lisa thought she had sufficiently lifted her status. She nodded, time to bring the dragon lord the news. Sent an image to the great dragon and waited until he reported back being in the main hall, before she took Lisa down. Lisa stepped through the gate and let the ambient light dance on her clothes. Pulled the sword from its sheath and let it burn bright red. Then turned to the dragon lord and told what they had seen and asked him if he wanted to see with his own eyes. He nodded and asked Lisa whether she could confirm her claim. Lisa settled herself and nodded, let the fireball glide past her, slit the firestorm with her sword and sent with deadly precision some arrows at dragons who thought to dispute her claim. Touching all on the exact same spot on their foreheads, weathered the second attack of the dragon lord with ease, but stepped back when he landed in front of her on the platform. The dragon lord bowed slightly and received a ring from Lisa. She nodded to the great dragon when the dragon lord had crept through the gate, who also took a ring and helped Lisa back up to the top hall.

The dragons bowed before the remnants of their former Dragon King and let Lisa describe the objects, located in the room and those which were not. All endowed with a portion of the magic of the ancient dragon. They listened to some more reports, before the dragon lord nodded. Lisa stopped abruptly and waited. The dragon lord said he had not much power in his kingdom. The presence of the drake mountain had always given the land a very low status. If it became known what treasures there were in the mountain and the state the central hall of the lair was in, knowing his subjects a certainty, the status of the land would have more than outgrown his power. He was willing to remain as emissary to the dragon council if Lisa could teach him some of this strange magic.

She looked at Lisa, who thought, had heard enough to calculate her upgraded status. Flipped through the book and showed some drawings. Magic which seemed necessary to resist a dragon lord of any statue. Then accepted the offer of the dragon lord and gave him some simple fabrics to learn. Gave some indications after the first attempt and noticed that the first steps, however primitive, were there. Nodded approvingly and showed the tissues ones more.

The dragons had all gathered in the central hall. Together with the great dragon and the dragon lord she opened a portal to the human world and stepped through it, followed by Lisa. The room was exactly like the one they came from. Waited until all dragons had passed through the portal and let go of the threads one by one as they dissolved in the dragon world. The dragons had already begun to explore the complex. She followed Lisa who again had climbed into the upper chamber. The slope to the hall were laid with iron rails so they could climb up easily. Lisa had found the war hammer being able to help her with her air magic. The little bit she used for steering her arrows and for tracking, were now magnified a

thousand times. She took her bow and showed it to her. Instead of arrows she put air in her bow and shot twisters. Small and sharp enough to pierce through walls. Asked Jinasin to remove the tissues the hammer had woven over her. And hung it on the belt they had previously found.

Lisa's dragon had collected all the objects and pushed them through a small portal into the dragon world. She closed the portal and got a call from the great dragon. All corridors were explored. Only machines found and destroyed, but the mountain was empty, as in the dragon world. From the rooms situated on the outskirts of the lair, however, they heard activity outside the mountain. She jumped on the great dragon and led one of the groups. According to the satellite, the mountain was covered with a kind of bamboo grass, which reportedly gave room for caterpillars to grow the finest silk cocoons, for sale in this world.

Along with Lisa and Jinasin she flew directly to the adjacend mine, and plunged into the main entrance. In the factory were large coal-fired stoves, around which some drakelings warmed themselves. In the middle of the hall was a sealed area with high glass walls. Through the glass, hundreds of small animals were to be seen, gorging on mountains of bamboo grass. Food for the drakelings according to the great dragon. Some trucks came into the hall and a platoon of soldiers jumped from them, lined up and shot their guns empty on the dragons. Safely hidden behind the armor of the great dragon, she sent a firestorm over the militia. Who duck behind their vehicles. The dragons jumped up, spit some fire balls to keep the soldiers in their shelters and were then above them, devouring everything in a fire storm. She got the air in the hall slowly turning, feeding it until the walls were sucked inside collapsing the hall. Jinasin with her dragon, had driven out the drakelings, so together with the great dragon she could devour all in flames, including the small animals that were not of this world.

Lisa backed out of the mine, her bow at the ready, her dragon behind her regularly shooting fireballs past Lisa. A platoon of soldiers with large shields and guns in their hands came out from the hallway, adjusted their shields to the direction of the great dragon, and continued to walk slowly forward. Occasionally a large jet shot water over the defenders. Lisa got to deflect it so, the dragon was not bothered by it. A little air brought her halfway. Walked towards the attackers, swept the bullets to the ground and blew the peloton apart, jumped over it, striking the shields from their hands, then launched herself towards the water jets. Hit with ice and fire the metal cars to pieces, walked on and eventually stumbled on large metal doors. The dragons with their weight, forced it easily. The space behind it was empty except for some vehicles. In the walls some doors. Along with Lisa, she broke through every door and explored the corridors and rooms. Got rid of some of the guards and burned the stocks of elven silk, walked back to the dragons in the hall who had already weakened the girders. They picked her and Lisa up and ran through the corridors back outside. Staying in front of the collapsing stone and the cloud of dust.

The mountain was charred black, in the distance she saw dragons blocking roads and destroying bridges. One by one they reported back in the great hall of the mountain. Finally the dragon lord arrived. He had checked everything and erased any dragon traces, and nodded to her, the next portal could be built.

Coughing and spluttering they came back into the hall. Everything in the room was covered with thick layers of dust and soot. The upper room was clean however and the valuables that were stored there were hardly affected. They had opened a few boxes and huge piles of gold and silver coins were found. Swords and axes neatly packaged in moisture resistant fabrics, enough to supply an army. The items endowed with magic also hung on the wall here, with Lisa focusing on a richly worked staff, with its accompanying carrying strap. All felt the staff take root when Lisa tried it out. Quickly a tissue became interwoven around Lisa dissipating again, as she lifted the rod. Lisa would never match her mobility, her weapon against the dragons and therefore used the other strategy gaining advantage over other dragons. With their impressive bodies and balls of fire it was very difficult to stand still and aim to shoot. With the weapons she had, she could weather every storm of the strongest dragons while shooting deadly projectiles.

Lisa eventually came to her, had long thought about the position she found herself in, found that as a de facto custodian of the drake mountain she needed to spent the first few weeks in the mountain. Had received from the dragon lord some scenarios and now understood enough of dragons society and their hunger for fame and power.

She saw Lisa's dragon was gathering the items in this World. Had apparently agreed to go too, took her distance enabling Lisa to make a portal for herself and the dragon with the round stone and was then reassured by Jinasin. She had learned the dragon to burn off the tissues. Both he and Lisa could thus stay out of the influence of the hypnosis of the stone.

VI

She discussed the events very superficial with the great dragon when he had came to fetch her. Got back from him a detailed report on the fate of Lisa, which echoed through the dragon world. A few lower ranked dragons, once briefly dragon lord, visited the drake mountain and had been defeated by the roads and walls. Worse, were brought to safety by Lisa and her dragon. The shame had encouraged one of the lower dragon lords to raise the issue with the dragon council. The great dragon spoke it with contempt, clearly finding action was the power of the dragon race.

The council now had two cases pending, regarding outsiders who upset the balance in the dragon realm. She was not surprised, then, the great dragon brought her immediately to the peak of his master, where she was admitted straight away to his visitors platform. Cautious by this unusual state of affairs she first tested the mood. Repeated the experiences the dragon lord had already heard of her and told her version of things he certainly would have heard through the grapevine. Repeated some cases, asked for the version as they went round in the dragon world and got the dragon lord finally to speak his mind. He also only told about affairs already known to her, as coming to him through the channels available to him. It provided some interesting insight into the dragons society. Eventually the question of the drake mountain had to be addressed and she was told the dragon council was called to a full assembly, to bring the two pending issues to the only possible solution. Knowing the speed of the dragon community, this meant at least a month would pass before Lisa and Jinasin would have to venture in a succession battle. Until that time, the dragons would have the ability to sign up for the fights.

She told of the progress of Jinasin and Lisa outside the dragon world and suggested that both had the opportunity to fight themselves within the hundred and fifty. Suddenly understood the issue of the dragon king and so of the dragon lord. His power lay partly in the fact that her land was managed by him and his entourage. At the time of her fight in the dragon council he had always been her contact for matters taking her into the dragon world. It was therefore a logical step to ask him. A step actually everyone had already anticipated. She asked how far his status should rise to manage the additional lands and understood from his meaningless answers she could not desire this from him, which meant the fights would go over, what the power of the additional land could deliver for everyone. With Lisa and Jinasin at her level that could reasonably destabilize the society. Nodded and asked who had already asked for an interview with her, Lisa or Jinasin. The dragon lord grunted and finally came up with the astonishing answer, everyone in some form had made an application.

It long remained silent and fast she counted down the dragon lords, compared their suitability with their status and came up with too large a list. Looked at some of the consequences and then shook her head. Looked at the dragon lord, thought about the answers he had given the last time and came to the conclusion he still stood behind her and was prepared to defend the lands with her. Adjusted her posture and signaled what was a good place to discuss. Gestured politics, instability and affecting the dragon king. Again there was long pause, he finally nodded and called for his aide. Waited until he had landed and reported he was invited to pay his last respects to the former Dragon King. That he was asked to

arrange this for all interested dragon lords, so he would be some time away from home. She bowed slightly in reply, grateful for the opportunity. Saw the arriving great dragon and immediately understood they would go now. Suspected the Dragon King was already on his way for his chance to talk with Lisa.

She was deposited on the roads, with the great dragon following his master to the ceremony at the residence of the ruling local dragon lord. She ran through the roads, still had the ring from their trip to the elven kingdom. At the gate of the drake mountain, made the air vibrate, like the dragon lord had previously done. Jumped through the gate and found Lisa and her dragon deep into the writings of the deceased dragon king. Greeted Lisa and waited until she closed the book.

Lisa apologized, but she waved it away. Lisa had chosen to take this route. She therefore did not need to know everything, of course, offered her services and started with what had happened and especially the events and implications of the silk trade in the elven world. Lisa made some notes and collected the big stack of books, waited for her dragon to put his on the stack,, picked a round stone from the table and put the books in the bookcase in the dwarf world. Gave a glimpse to her of the exhibited magical objects and closed the portal again. Let the tissues burn of her and began to talk about what she had learned. Had long anticipated the possibility the dragon lords wanted to talk with her. Had even come to a much shorter list than she, deleted the master of the great dragon from it and went on with her story until her dragon looked up at the coming of the dragon lords.

Three rings were taken from the box and Lisa asked the dragon lord, the great dragon and his master to enter. Shook her head when she wanted to give back her ring and used the time they had, to quickly fire questions at her about the origin of the magic controlling the roads. Let her see a large box with a few balls in it, smaller than the one she used to open the

portals, about as big as tennis balls. Each had its own place in the chest and Lisa carefully made sure to touch none of the balls or otherwise move them. She read the tissues and gave Lisa some clues. One was very obvious, had the tissues needed for shooting currents through the sky, in other words lightning and pointed this out to Lisa. Lisa nodded suddenly understood something more about the controls and deposited the box back into his niche in the wall and welcomed the three dragons. Explained in a few sentences how she wanted the arrival of the dragon lords to be organized and then proposed the plan that she and her dragon had conceived. When Lisa indeed won a place in the dragon council, there were, depending on her future status, two options.

Low status, which meant the drake mountain remained in possession of the current dragon lord, who also would manage her insignificant area. Her dragon was already freed by his master to enhance his status as second in command.

A high status meant she could claim the drake mountain, then basically the same would happen, except her dragon than would rule the lands as equal with the dragon lord. Both the dragon lord and Lisa's dragon nodded, indicating they were in agreement.

The master of the great dragon grumbled about bold plans and gave his view on the issue. Had been busy since the arrival of Jinasin and the introduction to her dragon to find a dragon lord with potential in her specific field of magic and although many of them had mastered the beginnings since childhood, there was only one who actually would benefit from her knowledge being the dragon king himself, but he saw only one possible opening to get this done lying with Jinasin on the dragon council itself.

Lisa held a firm control over drake mountain. All dragon lords could only enter under the supervision of the dragon lord and Lisa's dragon. And even the dragon king, had to leave his entourage behind. Lisa already tested the reactions of the hundred and fifty on plans forming only in her head. She sat in the large hall on one of the beds busy with some collected works the dead dragon king had gathered in his lifetime, was now reading his vision of the elven kingdom, did not come very far because of the speed of the visits, which only became shorter with the visits of the lower dragon lords. Lisa had ordained she had only one day for all visits, wanted to go for a trip in the human world.

VII

The great dragon had brought some goods used in the human world and she sat in one of the caves of his spire reading in the collected works, Lisa had lended to her. With Lisa as well as Jinasin in their own world, she had consented to stay. Many envoys had stopped by to catch up, but mainly to get across the views of their master. Could therefore now reasonably guess how the tournament would go. The dragons saw the participation of the outworlders as a signal their world could have changed dramatically at the ending of the tournament and all waited for more information, before committing themselves. Many of the lower dragon lords had indicated wanting to withdraw, had looked around and used their position to get an important appointment with one of the mighty dragon lords. Some dragons, including the great dragon were therefore urged to join the tournament. He had already pledged his attendance. With his activities in recent times outgrowing his status, putting the relationship with his master in serious danger. Could've made arrangements with him, but thought it time to satisfy his ambition with a beautiful spot in the inner regions of the dragon world. She was not worried about her transport in this world. Always knew no matter how honorable flying her through this world was, a dragon, always experienced someone riding on his back as an insult.

The dragon's world was thus on the eve of dramatic changes. The dragon king had circulated many emissaries, was quite sure of his position and was trying to divide the lands. Every land was of approximately equal size. Position and proximity of powerful dragon lords determined the status of a land. Of course there were volcanoes, but even the dragon king could not say whom was blessed with the most. New dragon lords simply took over the land of one of the losers of the tournament. Laying out the problem of the dragon king. The lands with the lowest status circled around his domain, as powerful dragon lords often did not want to take a detour to their ruler and so the borders of these lands were continuous violated. The high officials such as the great dragon, who had registered would never allow this to go on and had the power and connections to enforce that.

History had made for some solutions and everyone expected the dragon king to simply claim another land for himself and were busy keeping him as far away as possible through alliances with dragon lords of equal abilities. Alliances initially directed against the Dragon King, who had long anticipated on this. All was only based on information that was supposed to be generally known. Each dragon lord also had a big list of secret motives, which were linked with specific magic, opportunities in worlds exploited by them or simply personal vendettas.

The great dragon and his master had started a conservative lobby to get the new land of the dragon king near the site of the ancient city in the world of dwarves. The land was known to be rich in volcano's, contained some clusters, was far away from their current residence and most importantly had no mighty dragon lord in its vicinity.

After finishing a subsequent volume, she closed the book and thought about the route of Jinasin and Lisa during the tournament. She herself would need to win the fight with her closest challenger. She then had a choice to challenge one of the top dragon lords, otherwise her tournament had ended. Jinasin and Lisa, however, started at the bottom, as she had begun.

First had to determine the hierarchy between all new challengers, followed by a complex system to again restore the order in the council.

Because you had the choice whether you wanted to challenge someone, the number of fights was reasonable when she was a candidate. The amount of newcomers meant, however, you had to win your first fight in such a way the rest did not wish to challenge you. The dragon king had linked Lisa and Jinasin in the first fight to high officials, from, of course, him not favorable minded dragon lords. She doubted whether the level of her friends was high enough, they both had the major disadvantage of their low mobility.

After many days the report came Lisa had returned to the drakemountain. Not long after, followed by an invitation. She had borrowed one of the higher local dragons and instructed him only to take her. The new dragon meant the entire flight she was busy analyzing his movements and adjust herself accordingly. She was therefore happy when the drakemountain came into view.

Lisa had quit her job in the world of men, found that both were not compatible, had her assets put under management of the office and was thus freed for the tournament and the responsibilities coming afterwards. Had picked up Jinasin in her World, to travel via drake mountain into the dragon world.

She told both about the course of her tournament and what she now had learned about the first two opponents assigned to Lisa and Jinasin. Both shared her ideas about the tournament and thought to have sufficient arsenal to compensate for their shortcomings.

They practiced for the tournament until a bell announced it was time to leave. The indicator of low tones Lisa had brought from the human world warned them an escort of the dragon king was waiting for them. He had sent three big dragons and a supporting group, normally used for such an escort.

With a few stops they collected a number of newcomers to the tournament and some of the lower dragon lords took the opportunity to swap an otherwise quiet entrance for one with at least some noise. The group descended to a large lava lake in a volcano. The walls studded with large and small platforms, many of which were occupied by smaller dragons. Out of the steep slopes of the lake, plateaus were carved, almost all of equal size. Only two on opposite sides of the lake were many times larger. Together with the dragon lords her dragon removed himself from the group and circled down to one of the plateaus. Hers was a little further and thus closer to the lake than the others, entirely according to her status, turned, after being set off, to the dragon king and bowed. Turned round, bowed slightly to dragons high in rank and received with a nod the salute of the other already present dragon lords. Directed the dragon to a place near the lava lake, so everyone could see who would serve as a translator during this tournament.

In the middle of the arena was a rock about the size of the square of the setting sun, mostly flat, with on one side a huge pile of boulders. Two carved increases marked the starting points for the fights. She could easily reach the rock by using some air magic, but the tournament had never specifically banned outworlders. It was therefore allowed to use aid for transport to the rock. Her status almost condoned it.

On the other large platform opposite of the dragon king the new dragons were finally heralded. One by one they landed. Some great and mighty as the great dragon, their position as second to one of the higher dragon lords more than outgrown. A few, smaller, were using the situation to become dragon lord and hoped for luck in the allocation of the lands. Lisa and Jinasin were put on the side of the platform, had looked at her actions from out of the sky, and sent, after their bow to the Dragon King, their dragon to the edge of the plateau in front of them, where they, lay down something to the side. So enabling their master a clear view at the newcomers. The mightiest dragon lords with their entourage were the last to arrive. She also gave them a bow and now had time to check and memorize the status of the entourage. A long deep hum of the dragon king drew everyone's attention. He opened the tournament with a terribly long argument about the values of the dragon community. Asked everyone to appreciate the choices of the dragon lords accepting valuable tasks and then welcomed the challengers facing him. Subsequently indulging in a plead for the servants of each and everyone and the community as a whole. Paused a for little time and then invited the first pair to take their place in the arena.

The first battles of the group of the challengers, where ceremonialized agreements of what everyone already knew. After a minimum of actions the smaller dragon bowed and the fight was over. Even in fights, where two at first sight matching dragons faced each other this was no different. Had already, determined in a fight who was the stronger, so saving their strength for the battles which really mattered.

Lisa made short work of her opponent. Weathered any attack send to her. Shot whenever the dragon was preparing for a next attack some air, every time making him a bit weaker. Used the hammer to easily vent off physical attacks. Self giving no sign of weakening, so the dragon quickly stopped his attacks and bowed.

Everyone had expected Jinasin to envelop her opponents with a multitude of incantations, tied indeed a net around her selves for protection, but then used it as a catapult. Shot magic absorbing incantations to her opponent, parried firestorms with screens, used the obtained energy to make the incantations of the net wider and more effective and ultimately lost this battle narrowly due to exhaustion. Needed soon after to fight her second opponent. Started the same way, but this smaller dragon was slower, had less responsiveness and firestorms were quickly becoming fire cages, which slowly were shrinking and in the violence

the dragon needed to use he had missed a few incantations, felt them gripping and immediately understood this battle was fought.

The dragon king who had given a value to every battle, began, after all challengers had fought two fights, to read out the pairs for the second round. He had put Lisa on top of the list and Jinasin somewhere just above the middle. Both fought a battle similar to their first fight, with the difference that Jinasin narrowly won.

When Lisa's fight with the former chamberlain of the Dragon King, was won as easy as the other two fights, a murmur went through the arena, gave food for thought, likely prompted some dragon lords to adjust their tactics. She rolled into a ball, woke up frequently to obtain information about current and past battles and was woken up early enough to prepare for her fight. Was challenged by the dragon directly below her in rank. Thought she had to show at least once she still had the powers of before and started the fight by avoiding everything, adapted her selves to the rhythm of her opponent and then hit him fast. Fell back to again avoid as soon as he adapted his pace, took the time to get used to it and hit again. Won with every hit some ground. Weathered some fireballs and eventually got her opponent on the edge of the arena ensuring victory. Accepted with a bow the resignation of her opponent and then was secretly helped a little by her dragon, so she could leave the arena with grace.

The third round was used to fit in the challengers in the dragons council. The dragon lord with the lowest rank chose one of the challengers, defeated him, so all challengers who qualified lower, were just credited below him in rank. Every time one of the dragon lords came forward, then, depending on the outcome of the fight, his opponent was registered just above or below him. The great dragon made it just into the top one hundred. The chamberlain, dragon lord in earlier times, fitted in just outside the top fifty.

Only Lisa was left. One of the rising stars, scaled as fifteenth had seen an opportunity, asked for, and was awarded, a pilot fight. The battle lasted long. The dragon lord had many tricks at his disposal. Tested all Lisa's attacks. Used a way of attacking like the dragon king also used, but eventually underwent the same fate as his predecessors, had to bow to Lisa.

Lisa's victory had created uncertainty in the forging of alliances. According to dragons around her, she certainly had a chance against the dragon king. She roamed through the talking dragon lords in search of information. Talked long with the neighbor of her lands, had once stood opposite each other in the arena, and inquired about their common neighbors. Just a friendly start. Got a cryptic answer meaning it was often advantageous to work with your neighbors. She beckoned the former master of the great dragon, talking only with acquaintances and soon the conversation turned onto a big mine ever expanding towards her land. The border had been violated, she understood. Asked a ridiculously high price for the mine to expand and understood, when the talk continued, something was deeply wrong. Gave a nod and left the two dragons to talk in their own language.

The short translation revealed the dragon lords around him had put him under pressure to stop his mines, all on the edge of his land. Effectively he was now dependent on her. Reasonably informed of what's happening in her domain, she knew little was lacking and therefore suggested to share a few simple minerals, such as coal, fifty-fifty. She saw the two dragons nodding and got a bid back of ten percent as fee for mining precious metals. She agreed and closed the deal, giving the former dragon lord of the great dragon, managing her domain, a whole new network of contacts to take advantage of. Remained talking about the smaller things in their empire. Had for a very long time noted in her reports the huge cattle herds in her land, crossing once per cycle, the boundaries of their lands. Of course some of them where caught. She'd always booked it down as fair payment for the use of the green pastures beyond the border. Now saw a chance to formally settle the case and got the dragon

lord to prepare a report on it, after which she received a signal from her translator, Jinasin had made several attempts to contact her. She had time and nodded that he could fetch her.

Jinasin fell down beside her on the rocks. Was fat up with all the friendly congratulations. Still had the plan of the former master of the great dragon into consideration but had come to her last original excuse to get out of a conversation. Had used the entire arsenal a dwarf princess was taught, and wanted to have some time before she would start from scratch. They talked about high fashion in their homes and helped each other with tips on makeup, but they remained the focus of the dragon council. Nodded to one of the dragons to get Jinasins attention on him. Jinasin agreed it was time to try. She send him an invitation, and with a graceful bow, did the new chamberlain of the Dragon King land on the plateau to give the same introduction as Jinasin had already gracefully rejected so many times. Now however, she asked for his former masters interest in strange magic. Saw interest and got after a long meaningless conversation an invitation to exchange ideas with the dragon king. Jinasin accepted very shrewd to a meeting over the topic with like minded. The chamberlain and Jinasin left and everyone prepared for the fight of the day.

Lisa had been dropped off in the arena, and the dragon king rose from his terrace to take his place on the other increase. The dragon king went cautious into the battle, had understood Lisa primarily would manifest herself in a defensive way, but still wove nets hanging them on to screens, being held in the air by a previously generated whirlwind. Lisa responded by slowly moving to one of the nets destroying it with the hammer. No response from the dragon king who proceeded to hang nets. Lisa, however, began to shoot air from where she was. At first little bits, but soon she filled her bow with large twisters. It had little effect on the actions of the dragon king. The more, however, on the air around him. Lisa had apparently guessed the dragon king would react this way and now had reversed the airflow in the arena, so the nets slowly drifted towards the dragon king.

A direct attack on Lisa was easily repelled by her, but made sure she was now between the nets and the dragon lord. She used a fire storm of the dragon lord to easily burn off the nets, put her staff into the ground, pulled the string of her bow very far back and shot giant twisters to the dragon king who jumped through some them into an attack on Lisa, dodged the hammer without problems and left some fireballs. Lisa stepped a few paces back and shot the fireballs into sparks, used the hot air, but had to let go of the incantation because of a diving attack from the dragon king who took it in, weaved some threads through it and poured it back over Lisa. She was still not ready tearing the nets when a huge fireball hit her, well the fireball split in half when it hit Lisa, crashing harmless on the rocks behind her.

Faster and faster were interwoven fire screens and fire balls shot at Lisa and always she adjusted the tissues so they would help her to protect herself. But the air bullets she shot away were not without effect, shown when the Dragon King dived through one of his own fire screens to burn off some incantations. Then went down to the middle of the arena and shot small fireballs at Lisa, who kept destroying them with air until one of the fireballs exploded. The explosion was transformed into the largest firestorm the dragon king had made in the fight. Lisa weathered the storm, but there were obvious signs she had trouble with it, could not misuse any incantation. The following fireball passed Lisa intact, but kept hanging in the air and eventually, in very rapid succession she shot them back. The dragon king could not escape them all, warded them off, destroying them with his tail and was just too late to react when a huge vortex behind the fireballs threw him a few meters off course. Stabilized in the air and landed next to Lisa. poured fire and air over her, took her counters, continued, the fireballs coming back, smashing on his armor, immediately using for a firestorm. Saw Lisa changing the airflow again, so he had to weather much of the firestorm himself. Stepped even closer to Lisa, creating a swirling mass of air and fire around both of them, both taking significant hits. The dragon king stepped even closer, dodged the hammer, but now felt the

pressure of the storm swirling with the hammer, and was forced to use the storm to move to the other side of the arena.

Drawn into a defensive position he protected himself against a volley of quickly shot small air arrows, created a fire screen for better protection, who, however, hindered his sight on the twisters put between the arrows now pouring over him. Could eventually move slowly forward until he could throw the fire screen over Lisa, who quickly switched to the hammer, hitting it, with difficulty, in pieces, but had to weather the resulting storm.

Looking difficult she built a twister around herself, preparing for the ever approaching dragon king who pushed firestorm after firestorm towards her, in between frantically pulling on some tissues, and again fire and air thundered around Lisa and the dragon king, both still had to take a lot of hits. Incredibly the dragon king managed to come closer. Dodged the hammer several times, but was now unaffected by the wake. Again he stepped closer, but, to everyone's surprise, then bowed to Lisa telling her this was the most dangerous, but effective direction incantation he had ever have to experience.

Together they blew apart the storm and waited for the arrival of the chamberlain, after which the dragon king offered Lisa the staff, symbol of the dragon kingdom. Lisa bowed, was handed a small book, by her dragon, but refused to accept the staff. Asked the dragon king first to read a piece and handed him the old book. The dragon king took the book, opened on the first page and read some pieces in silence, every time flipping over a few pages, flipped back and greeted all the dragon lords in the name of the deceased dragon king. Told of his ordeal, many years ago. About his vanity to find a way for its magic to live forever. About a trap that eventually cost him the throne, and forced him into seclusion, enabling a mysterious group of well-organized little dragons to work under his protection, further developing their plan for democracy in the world of dragons and equality for all sizes. Only by continuing his experiments he hoped eventually to get his revenge.

The fact a human now stood before them as winner of the tournament, was the only proof that he could deliver of his truth, then a long list of dragon names were called. Dragons who would have participated in the conspiracy.

The dragon king looked up and said there were two very old documents in the book. Opened the first and read a ban for the entire dragon world for a spell that could link the power of dragons. Turned some pages and read a statement from the days when dragons still lived together with dwarves, elves and humans in the same unbroken world. Although dwarves, elves and humans, it declared, could participate in the dragon council tournaments for personal gain or for the protection of their kind, they could never get the opportunity to become dragon king. This way making sure the wars that almost destroyed the world would never rise again.

The dragon king closed the book and gave it back to Lisa, bowed and asked if the dragon council wished to reinstate the deceased dragon king in honor. Then slowly all, the mightiest dragon lords first, got behind the proposal putting the tournament to an end.

The End