

Kathrin's Journal 23rd Day of the Seventh Month

The pickpockets were pushovers. They thought themselves someone's heavy muscle, but they were in fact lightweights. I have run into their kind before. I will run into their kind again. And every time I have encountered them, I left the vermin to lie in the filth of the streets. I despise towns.

"A toll, Chickady," the thief in front said as he grimaced at his nails. He pulled a stiletto and began to clean them while pointedly looking in my eyes. "Me and the boys, see, we keep this street safe, and all whos want ta use it gots to pay a toll." The nails were cracked and brittle; grime was embedded in the knuckles and in between his fingers. His cuticles had been filthy so long they were stained. "Thinka all the hard work me and the boys gotsta do to keep yous safe." His arms were covered in that film that is equal parts dirt and old sweat. "These streets is dangerous, little things like you might get hurt here, even with these friends o' yours tryin' to protect ya."

His eyes left mine to study my companions. Nylan, to my right, was in a green travel stained cape of wool. It looked threadbare. It covered most of him. But, his bow and quiver were over his shoulders resting comfortably. Nylan's good bow had broken in that last run-in with orcs up north. He was using a serviceable one now -- rough carved from a staff of yew. The only part of him that did not look old and worn-out was his boots. Athalia off behind me, I was sure, was glancing nervously about and fidgeting. She should be; if I had my druthers, I would leave her here with these men. The two new guys were not much to look at either. The cleric was dressed rather plainly in his vestments. The fighter Thresh, well, the fighter looked like a man obsessed with armaments. I was

the most impressive of our group, and I don't usually pretty up for walking back allies. I guess we didn't look like much.

"Who do you work for?" I asked as I watched the stiletto roll through his hands. It scraped against the underside of his nails, flicking grime down towards his feet. I brought my eyes up to meet his. He stood a few inches taller, and when he grinned down his eyes sparkled with malice. I stole a quick glance at his companions. There were five of them all told. All of them had leering faces and crude makeshift arms and armor. One thought he was hiding in the shadows. The others were moving to flank the party.

"I work for myself," he said stepping closer, "I'm the boss." His smell wafted over me. A gnoll would have taken offence at his stink. "Best Pay, Chickady. We wouldn't want nothing to happen to a girl as pretty as you. Would we boys?!" The thieves all laughed, and he started to fondle himself through his leggings. Enough of this, I thought. I swished the fingers of my right hand and used a minor cantrip spell to snatch his dagger. It took flight and spun through the air to my waiting hand. Coolly ignoring the flustered thief and his friends in the alley, I turned to Nylan.

"Should we kill them all now or let them live?" As I asked, Nylan stepped away from the stained red brick of the alley. His left hand brushed back a shock of red hair, revealing the delicate points of his ears as he pulled his bow from where it rode on his back. "They will only cause trouble later," I pointed out. I was only asking because he had been complaining recently that I killed too easily.

Nylan's eyes glistened with mirth at my question, and he smiled, pulling an arrow from his quiver. It was all the answer I needed.

“You’re going to be the one to die witch!” The thief in front of me screamed as he pulled a long sword and sprang at me. His friends fanned out around him, and I can only assume the party did the same around me.

The “tough” in front of me was one of the first to fall. His sword came down like he was trying to split me from the top. Up came my left arm and my animated shield blossomed to life unfolding and snapping taut. The stab was foiled, but the thief was quick. The sword pulled back and stabbed straight out again with an all or nothing attempt to spit me. But my animated shield was there again. It’s my newest, and so far finest, magical invention. But, it surprised even me when the sword shattered like glass.

I relished the look on that pig’s face. First a shield that seemed to appear from nowhere foiled his initial thrust at his apparently defenseless “chick-a-dy,” and then on his second stroke it sundered his precious steel. He was off-balanced and fell towards me because of that unexpected break. I used the shield to hold him off long enough to draw my rapier underhanded from my left. A quick flip in the air to regrip, and I ran him through. The thrust came under the shield so he never saw it; but, when I pulled up on the blade and jerked it to the right, his face clouded and filled with recognition and pain. I watched his eyes the entire time. I saw them shift from malice, to surprise, to agony. When men fall from your sword it makes a certain -- near indescribable -- sound. It is a wet sound, with a hint of steel in it. This sound was followed by a thud when he hit the stones of the alley. His eyes began to cloud, and he started looking at something far away, something that wasn’t there, while he clutched his ruined middle.

I stepped over him and onto his neck crushing his windpipe. His hands began to claw at my boots, but they had no strength left in them. I heard the release of Nylan’s

bow and knew that another thug was down. The sound was quickly repeated, and I knew yet another had fallen. I kept my eyes on the thief under my heel. I didn't recognize a scream behind and to the left; another of our robbers got his just desserts. Eventually the one under my boot stopped clawing. Four dead of five - and that was it.

Unfortunately, I was only able to run through one thief that day. Nylan, being his usual showy self had killed the two in as many moments with his longbow, and the new cleric and metal-head fighter we picked up at the Answer's keep accounted themselves with that one kill off to my left. That bitch Athalia I'm sure did nothing. But, our party made quick work of the thieves anyway. I surveyed the alley and our handiwork. The one I dispatched lay curled with those dirty hands grasping at his throat. The two on the right side of the alley had both fallen to Nylan's arrows; one was crumpled with a shaft in his eye. The other had been shot through the heart and had fallen back on a midden heap. The thief off to my left looked bludgeoned; one of his eye sockets had collapsed and his temple was encrusted with blood. The fifth one I didn't see.

Nylan wondered aloud if we were going to run into trouble for killing the hoodlums later, and some of the others expressed similar concerns. I looked around the alleyway at the garbage and filth. I looked at the brick, covered in slime and what I guessed was human excrement. I told them all I sincerely doubted anything would come of it. They were not worth the trouble to their owner, whoever that was. Not after claiming they were independent. Had the one at my feet not claimed to be in charge, perhaps then, but as it was... I shrugged the thought away. Athalia and the two new members of our group rifled through the pockets of the dead men. Nylan retrieved his arrows. I left them all to lie as they had fallen. I had managed to go through the fight

without having to touch any of them. I considered myself fortunate, and I didn't want to soil my gloves with them now.

As for the "tough" that had slipped away during the fight, we decided not to bother with tracking him down. Cowards only come back when they feel you have slighted them. As it was, the fool was likely rubbing his hands together and thinking of his recent promotion. Nylan once again brought out the map, and we returned our attention to it. We had almost decided our course when those pests had scurried from behind the refuse piles. Nylan thought we were close now and was checking our position. It was complicated by the age of the map and the lack of decent landmarks. Only the piles of filth remain fixed in these parts of town. Even graffiti will change over time.

As we both studied over the map, the two new guys joked and laughed over the dead men's possessions. The cleric was telling ribald jokes, and the fighter chuckled while sorting out the stilettos, dirks, swords, and cudgels, as well as lock picks and other accouterments common to human vermin.

The map led to some great treasure, or at least that's what Athalia claimed. Ever since she lost everything playing with fate and cards from the magical Deck of Many Things, she had been most adamant about seeking the treasure the map promised. What treasure? Who knows? It's a marked area on a map. If I was her I'm not sure I would have trusted fate, which had treated her rather harshly. She lost all her god-given clerical power and all her possessions on that hand from the Deck. Yet, here she was blindly following the map seeking the treasure that the Deck promised. And here we were following along. I guess I had nothing better to do. At least Nylan was there.

I looked around again to the decrepit alleyway. It still amazed me that human beings could live in such squalor. The houses to either side of the alleyway were old red brick. They averaged around a storey and a half tall. None had windows on this side. The few that had doors to this street had them all locked and boarded up, and several were even chained. I grew up and spent the majority of my life in a small town bordering Kistin forest. I thought then that the town was crowded and dirty. I would seek refuge among the trees and high branches of Kistin to escape. But it was nothing like this filth. I don't think I could have survived a place like this.

When Nylan had satisfied himself that we were still on track he looked up and cleared his throat. "We're a little less than a mile off now. We are still headed in the right direction. Well, roughly. As straight as we are going to get through these streets."

He fixed his bow on his shoulder and shrugged his quiver back into place. I cleaned my rapier on my thief's pant leg and sheathed it. The cleric and metal-head had by now sorted out the cheap items from the completely worthless ones, and we continued on our way. We moved on from alleyway to identical alleyway. The whole area smelled of garbage, and mostly it was a monotonous trek through filth. Rats and beggars made up like lepers or amputees were constantly underfoot, and assessing eyes peered at us from dark corners. Perhaps that escaping thug had spread the word about us, for we were not accosted again.

When we made it to the clearing indicated on the map, the transition was abrupt. The alleyway just spilled out into a field littered not with trash, but with stone. Weathered corners stuck up everywhere. Some pieces showed signs of script with old illegible symbols apparent on the smoother sides, while some were just plain roughed block. The

remains of an arch lay on its side near the alley we had exited. The keystone was in near perfect condition, and the stylized carving of a lion's eye watched silently as we entered the clearing. At the new cleric's suggestion we fanned out and searched the ground. We found nothing but stone and ruin. I decided then to cast a detection spell for magical emanations. Sure as snot the entire clearing glowed to my eyes with a subtle cool blue: old, ambient magic. I decided then that this must be the place marked on the map, and I said as much.

I didn't do anything for the next hour or so. After I informed the others that we had indeed arrived, they spread out to search the ground and bicker about shovels. I was content then to sit under a tree and nap. I set about doing just that under the shade of a small elm. My fellows combed the ground searching through the litter of stone, while I dozed beneath the tree.

They searched for hours and examined every pillar, rock, and stone. Eventually my eyes closed on the metal-head fighter kicking blocks of stone about.

Unfortunately my reverie was interrupted by one of those "Who goes there," kind of things. I missed what was said at first, for I was almost asleep, but I heard the second part. "Clear out, this is private property." A Guard. No one else says "clear out." It's one of those sayings that are strictly reserved for guards. That and "halt," no one ever says halt unless they are a guard. I yawned and stretched, got up, and made my way to the group of men who had entered the clearing. The five guards stood together in a tight erect group. Members of our party started to drift over. It looked as if we might have some more fun very shortly.

"Do you have a shovel?" I asked of the one who looked in charge.

“You all must leave. This is private property.”

“Do you have a shovel?” I asked again as he didn’t seem inclined to answer me.

“This is private property!” his face was quite red and it was a startling contrast to his black uniform, neatly pressed and spotless. It seemed my impertinence in the face of his obvious superiority was riling him. Oh goodie. He was tall but not sinewy, and by the lack of silver adornments I assumed he must be a man with a long and uninteresting career. His wavy black hair, close cropped above the ears, made his scarlet face seem comical. The poor man looked like he was about to burst. Guards are a pompous lot and become accustomed to a respect that is disproportionate to their actual ability.

“I take that as a no, then. So who are you, You Who Are Without a Shovel?”

He told me his name then. I don’t remember it. I hardly ever remember a person’s name unless they impress me. This one didn’t impress me. It sounded like a proper guard’s name though. Something along the lines of StormCastle, or HighCastle, or something similar; I’m sure it had a ‘castle’ in it.

Here was a man who could not control the streets he was assigned, and so instead busied himself with impeding those content to mind their own business. The metal-head went up and said something soothing to the guard then, and the guard stopped scowling. I figured I could fix that.

“So You Who Are Without a Shovel, by what right do you tell us to leave?” I knew he was a guard. But, nothing gives me more satisfaction than questioning someone’s authority, especially if they have insignia or are in uniform. This bruiser didn’t seem to have the former. But, he certainly had the latter. I’ve never been the kind of girl who goes for a man in uniform. They tend to be stupid.

Well, my comment certainly helped. He started to frown again and started back with his guard talk. When I continued to ignore him and remain in the clearing, he started moving his hands toward his belt. Not toward his sword though. I was betting he had a sharp little toy he liked to throw at people, and I was preparing to fan out my own toy and see what my animated shield thought of thrown daggers. I wondered idly if the knife would shatter as the sword did. Oh I was betting the guard wouldn't like that at all. I smiled to myself then but my mirth was cut short as Nylan turned and started away down the street.

Now this was right disappointing as I was quite ready for another row after the unsatisfying tangle with the young toughs in the street. Then the metal-head left, followed by Athalia. I had expected Athalia to run off. She usually does, and after that bad hand with the magical Deck of Many Things I didn't expect her valor to take a turn for the better. Nylan, though, I thought I could always count on the rough and tumble elf to be ready for a fight. He is cocky, but he is quite skilled, as long as it's outside of bed. He is not too bad inside the bed, either, but I've had better, much better.

Then the new cleric left. I might have been able to take them all alone, but it wasn't worth the trouble. There were five visible, and who knows how many had been close by. I reluctantly left as well. I blew the lieutenant, if that is his rank, a kiss as I left. Except for the hair, he was not too bad looking. But as I said about men in uniform, they tend to be stupid.

We left the clearing, and we once again entered the depressing alleyway. We waited for the guards to scamper off, and then we made further plans. Propped against a crumbling brick wall not too far from the lot, I told Nylan that if we were hoping to

investigate without disposing of the guards we really ought to enquire about buying the land. As with most places in the seedy parts of town they tend to be bought easily. “You sure have been spending a great amount of my gold here lately, Kathrin.” I just smiled. With his windfall from his much more fortunate hand from the Deck of Many Things, he could likely buy the land outright. Regardless, we needed to find a place to stay for the night. As it was past four bells, all the government workers would be departed and nothing else could be accomplished that day.

We traveled some ways through the twisting narrow streets before finding an inn. Dilapidated, and cheap, it smelled of old wine and ale. It was my kind of place. All it needed was a fellow being pitched out the door into the street and the sound of breaking furniture. We haggled, but were overcharged for the rooms. We might have done better had Athalia no been wining the entire time.

“I’m tired and my feet are sore. It’s not a lot of money, and besides, you can afford it. Just pay the man,” She droned on in the background. The finer points of bargaining seem to escape Athalia.

Nylan eventually paid for a room, and I tagged along with him. I needed some exercise after the disappointing row with the toughs and the retreat from the guards. Nylan would be an excellent way to relieve some of my tension. He is not unskilled and he is quite pleasant looking: shocking red hair and sharp chiseled features, with a lithe body and corded muscles. He saw me watching him and threw a smile my way. Yes, tonight Nylan would do quite nicely.

I had a bath brought up in the early evening. The kitchen boy brought up the hot water two pails at a time while Nylan and I stored our gear. After Nylan and I washed all

the dirt off ourselves and our clothing we had some pleasant *light exercise*. It was late, and the sun had set before we were finished. We joined the others of our group and the inn's night life down in the common room for supper.

That night it was lamb stew. They dished out gallons of the stuff into large earthenware tureens. Irregular torn chunks of buttered black bread and tankards of short beer were passed around. It was not long before a minstrel took up position in front of the now quiet fireplace. He played lively tunes for the rest of the night. The minstrel had a fair hand with the lute and a surprisingly powerful bassetto singing voice. His music filled the room over the clanking of rough fired mugs and bowls and the mostly amiable roar of conversation.

I sat in a corner with my back to the wall. Nylan joined the rest of the party closer to the minstrel. It looked like there would be no trouble tonight as the minstrel was proving ample entertainment. It wasn't long before the minstrel moved on to more daring performances. The first sing-along started with a ribald song about a cuckold husband, his wife, her lover, and a fireplace poker. There were a few lines sung solo by the minstrel, and then everyone would join in for the chorus. Not having the kind of voice for a sing-along, I left my place in the corner, and headed back to the room. I hummed the tune on my way up the stairs. It was catchy.

The morning came as slowly as I expected. But after a wonderful breakfast of runny eggs, yesterday's biscuits, and limp bacon down in the common room we were at last ready to start the day. Nylan and I sent the clerics and the metal-head fighter Thresh off to find shovels while we took on the important task of enquiring after the property.

Without too much trouble, I found the way through the winding streets to city hall. There I let Nylan do the talking. Or rather, I let Nylan's gold do the talking. As with most bureaucracies the entire structure was corrupt. We had to bribe the political scum simply to do their jobs. Entrance to the city hall was unguarded and unguided. For hours we explored an expanse of identical wooden doors without so much as a nameplate to differentiate between them.

After we started paying the city workers for information on who to contact and which offices to visit, however, we soon came to the truth of the matter. From the pie faced secretary to the Minister of Watercraft and River Tithes we learned the land was owned by a long estranged sorcerer. Mixed in with furtive glances around the room and gestures meant to ward against evil were some choice bits of information. I forget the owner's name. What was it? I ought to remember this one. Sorcerers, especially the evil variety, get all uppity if you don't remember their names. Yayer, Yahoo, Yaral, that was it, it was Yaral. Anyhow, the land was owned and it seemed even this corrupt system was unwilling to foreclose or condemn the land so that we might buy it out from under the long absent spell crafter. Seems he was, at one time, a very political animal, and no one at city hall was willing to cross him for fear of some unknown retribution later.

After throwing even more of Nylan's gold around we were directed to a sniveling weasel of a man in a corner office whose eyes lit when Nylan let a few gold coins roll through his fingers. The man snatched up the gold and it quickly disappeared somewhere on his person. With a long look over the two of us that ended on the closed door, he ushered us close and told us what he knew, which was little. He told us the sorcerer was a cursed man. He was a shape changer of some kind, able to take any form at will and only

be known through his strange red eyes which remain fixed regardless of his form. It took much too long for the man to impart this wealth of knowledge to us, as he stopped every few moments to look around and scratch the back of his neck. But, he went on to tell us of rumors concerning the sorcerer and his alleged traffic with demons. We asked for specifics, and what he bid his demons to do. But the answer, if he knew it, we could win from him with no amount of gold.

With only this information gathered, we headed back to the lot where we were to meet up with the others. If they hadn't messed things up too badly they would be waiting with shovels and picks and whatever else might be useful.

I hadn't noticed the gradual change in the quality of the streets as we had moved towards the business district. It was only when we began back towards the marked clearing that I noticed the transition. It was the smell that bothered me the most. We had no trouble finding our way back.

It happened that we beat the rest of them there by a few hours. I spent the time under the same elm. I was shaded from the sun, but was able to enjoy the light filtering through the branches. I brought out my spell books. Distracted only by the interesting shapes of light dancing on their pages, I passed the time memorizing some spells I thought might aid us in our digging.

When the others at last returned from the dangerous quest to find shovels down the street at the general store, we determined the exact center of the ruins. This was much more difficult than at first we had thought it would be. Nylan and I spent thirty minutes arguing with the others that the center of the ruin was not the center of the clearing.

Eventually we managed to persuade them to our point of view when I threatened to make them go purchase marked twine to measure it out.

The sun was at its zenith by this time, and it was burning hot. The sun seemed to lean on us. Light sparkled and gleamed off the fallen white stone. The sky was completely clear, and the sun was bright and blinding. Those in the sun could only squint and furrow their brows to protect their eyes. In the shade I summoned forth three unseen servants – little more than manifestations of will -- and I sat under the elm while directing them to dig. I could have with only slight difficulty directed them while digging myself. But, I found it much more enjoyable to sit in the shade and watch Nylan dig. He is quite tone.

For hours the party dug. I eventually had to come out from under the tree when our hole got too deep to see into. Sweat ran from my brow, and all the men had stripped to the waist. Even the metal-head was bare-chested, though he was loath to go without his armor. It was around four hours into the afternoon when the soil began to change. The earth we were moving had been mostly rock and rubble up till then. Around eight feet deep it turned into softer soil with little to no rock. I was exhausted. The mental effort of concentrating on those servants for so long had become more taxing than any physical digging could ever be. My headache, which started an hour before, was becoming very painful. I thought then that this “treasure” had better be worth all the effort.

While digging, Nylan came up with a passable plan. He thought that if the guards came back it might be well to have one of our party pretend to be the owner, the sorcerer Yahoo, or whatever his name. Gesturing first at the metal-head and then at the new cleric he gave us his idea. “Kathrin, if you will cast an illusion over Fletch’s eyes, and then one

over our good cleric Graven's eyes, we might be able to play a little game of switch-aroo."

He bade me cast a glamour over them both which would turn their eyes blood red. Somehow I managed to do so without losing control over the three servants, but I was ready to collapse. Nylan then told the metal-head that on the signal he should hide behind a pillar. The thought being, that if the guards came back, the cleric would pretend to be the sorcerer. He could then prove himself to the guards by "shape changing" behind the pillar -- which the metal-head would be hiding behind.

"Athalia, since you are not doing much digging, if you will stand at the entrance to the ally and watch for the guards, you can give the signal if they come." She got up off her ass then and grumbling made her way into the alley.

I thought the plan quite ingenious, and for that reason was certain it would never work. Experience had taught me that the best plans go awry where chance and fortune favor the unprepared. Still, I went along for my part, and managed to cast my illusion over their eyes. It was quite well done, I might add. Even I found the effect shocking.

Soon enough the guards did come back, and just when we were beginning to have a sizable hole. Athalia gave the signal in time and the two managed to don most of their armor and get into position. The party abandoned their digging and moved closer to the entrance to the alleyway. I was a bit distracted. For just when Athalia gave the signal one of my unseen servants hit an iron handle. I'd have given equal money it was part of a stone door. I quickly bade my servants uncover the door, directing them as quickly as I could from the now greater distance. I whispered of the doors existence to the party, and I

hoped I could get the servants to uncover it in time. I thought we might need it despite Nylan's well laid plans.

It was a good plan, and I was right. It did not work. As soon as we identified our cleric as the sorcerer, the guards tried to arrest him. Seems Nylan and I did not uncover all there was to know about the state of this sorcerer. Regardless, the melee I desired before soon started up. The guard captain went for his knives and threw two of them - at me. Why at me? I'm not sure. I must have made an impression on him earlier. I was able to deflect one with my animated shield. It did not shatter the blade as I had hoped. But, I was exhausted and couldn't stop the second. It cut me quite well on the inside of my thigh. I hate being cut on the inside of my thigh. It's perhaps the most un-enjoyable place to have a wound.

As we were cut off from the only alley out of the clearing, we had to fight a retreat back to the hole. I managed to keep the servants digging, despite the dagger in my leg, and they had by this time uncovered most all of it. Nylan and I were right about the center of the ruins. Nylan had his bow out and was keeping most of the guards pinned down. The fighter was engaged, but fighting defensively. They were both still trying to keep from killing them all. The guards advanced and we retreated. I was hunkered down under my animated shield trying to keep from turning into a human pincushion, while still directing the servants.

The guards kept pushing forward and the party kept pulling back. I wished Nylan and Thresh would have just killed the cursed guards. They had backed us about halfway to the hole when the unseen servants finally got enough dirt off the door and enough

space around it cleared so that it could be opened. I dismissed the servants and immediately felt the pain in my head ease. I yelled for the party to get the door opened.

I drew my rapier, and I relieved the metal-head now desperately fighting to keep from being flanked. I rushed past him and barreled into the guard captain with my shield. I knocked the man back a space, and it cleared enough room for the metal-head to disengage. "I'll keep them off you. You and that cleric get that dammed door open!" I whipped my rapier before the guard's eyes to clear some room and looked around for the new cleric. "Cleric! Stop hovering about and go and help Thresh."

I was in a slightly better position than the fighter and Nylan had been. Where they kept trying to keep from killing the men, I simply didn't care. The guards knew it too. The first one to let his sword drop on an attack got his mouth torn open. I tore enough of his face away that I could see his molars from the side. That one dropped back and the guard captain moved in front to protect his comrade. Nylan had taken to shooting for the legs, and two other guards were down with arrows in their knees. It was now two effective guards on the two of us, and the odds were decidedly in our favor.

We started pushing the guards back towards the alleyway. Their attention was divided. I was directly in front, and I was sufficiently skilled to keep myself from being flanked. Nylan was a good twenty feet off to my right shooting for their legs. We backed them past their wounded comrades and into the street. But, the sounds of battle had drawn more guards, and two more squads were running down the alley towards us as fast as they could. I unarmed one guard; twisting and locking his blade with my own I sent it flashing through the air to my left. The captain then tried to shield his comrade, pushing his man aside and out of the way. I feinted low then. He dropped to parry it and moved

forward to get inside my guard. My foot crushed his nose flat against his face and he crumpled. I knew he would fall for it. As I said before about men in uniform: they tend to be stupid.

The two squads down the alley continued towards us as fast as they could run. I drew my bow then and took aim. It was then that the cleric and metal-head fighter managed to pull that heavy ass stone door open. They bellowed for us then. I knew that once again the guards were going to escape with their lives, and once again we were going to leave without killing them. I put my bow over my shoulder, pulled that guards bloody dagger from my leg, and I dashed towards the frantically waving Thresh. But, it was with some reluctance. By the Virgin's gods-screwed slit, I was going to kill something soon or burst!

Nylan and I managed to make it through the doorway just as the bolts from the Guards' crossbows started whistling in. We all managed to make it though alive, but the metal-head was injured while keeping the door open. The new cleric was just coming back with a last load of our bags and equipment. Thresh took an arrow to the shoulder and an arrow to the leg while holding it up for the last of the party. Athalia broke from cover, just as Nylan and I started loosing arrows back at the guards. Once Athalia was through the doorway the metal-head just folded. The huge stone door slammed above our head. How he managed to hold it up so long, I have no idea. It had to weigh five hundred pounds.

Nylan scurried up to the door then and took hold of the lock and lever with his hand. He muttered under his breath, and we were all dazzled by a flash of green light. We had to cover our faces then from the strong smell of acid. He had melted the apparatus

into an unnatural, and hopefully locked, position. We patched up the metal-head then. His cleric friend called upon his god for aid and the blue green glow of healing energies enveloped his hands. The cleric carefully removed the arrows from Thresh, and I took the moments respite to congratulate the injured fighter.

I gave him a smile and said, "That's a heavy ass door, Thresh." He nodded at me with his eyes closed. His teeth clenched as the last arrow was pulled from his shoulder and tossed aside. When the healing was finished and Thresh regained most of the use of his shoulder, we finally took note of our surrounding. By the light filtering in from around the cracks of the stone door, we determined we were on the top landing of a staircase. The stone door was directly overhead. It was only from the slivers of light around its edges that we could see anything. We waited there quietly in the darkness.

"Will the guards follow us in?" Athalia asked no one in particular. She was hunkered down as if waiting for some giant to rip the door away and snatch at her.

I thought about it for a moment and then answered, "I doubt it. No if I were them I would just bury us alive down here." I really did not say it to scare her. It was just my own logical conclusion. Her terror was a definite bonus though.

"We have to get out! They're going to bury us alive down here!" She started to run about and finally started to push up against the stone. She of course could not lift it. Nylan then patiently explained that we could not hope to get out alive that way and that we must continue on. She calmed slightly but still looked like a frightened rabbit. Then, true to my prediction, we began to hear the muted sounds of earth and stone hitting the door above our heads. With each subtle thump, more and more of the light filtering

around the door would go out. We had only a few moments till we were left in total darkness.

I looked around in the quickly waning light for our packs. “Did we manage to get everything down here?”

The fighter Thresh looked around and rubbed at his left shoulder. “We got everything but the shovels and what not. All your stuff is over there in the corner I think.” He pointed to one of the dark recesses of the landing. “I have a lantern around here somewhere...”

Before he could find it the last of the light was gone. The sound of laughter came from above the door then. I thought I heard the guard captain speak. Though it was a faint, it reached my ears and made me chuckle. “Bewch Browk M’Bose. She wons done dere so bah det herh rot done dere.”

A few sparks lit the darkness as Thresh ran his dagger along a piece of flint. The scraping echoed strangely in the closed space. A few more flicks and the lantern caught. The darkness pulled back slowly when the wick lit. Thresh’s shadowed face was scored with deep crevices. Areas of darkness shifted about his features as he replaced the thick glass globe and adjusted the wick. Then the light spilled out and we could all see once more.

The landing was around seven feet square. It was just large enough that we could all fit on it without tumbling down the staircase. It was low enough under the stone door that only Athalia and I could stand without stooping. The others moved about hunched gathering their equipment. Left with no alternative we made our way down the stairs.

The stone steps were larger than usual and irregularly spaced though cut perfectly straight and level. I brought up the tail end of the progression, and I noticed Athalia acting funny for a bit. She ran her hands along the stone wall in a swirling motion with her head cocked to one side. On around the fifteenth step she stopped so suddenly to look around that I almost bumped her headfirst down the stone steps. I don't know why I mention it. I should pay her no mind except that she always manages to encumber me in some way. She is a downright menace in battle. She once shot me in the back from five paces with a crossbow. Had it not been for the protection of her God or Goddess, I don't remember what she worships, anyhow, if not for some deity's protection I would have cursed her with a countenance none could stand a long time ago.

We made it down the stairs with no mishap, and there we came across a statue. Or rather, statues. The stair opened up into a large natural cavern, completely dry with fresh smelling air. When we reached the bottom step and entered, our flickering lantern light revealed the most detailed and well preserved statues I had ever seen. They were statues of humans mostly, but littered in amongst them were the statues of elves, orcs, gnolls, kobolts, I even saw the statue of a Halfling. Every statue danced in the light with shawls weaved of shadows, and it made for one of the most eerie sights I have ever seen. I took in the sight, marveling at the grotesqueness of the menagerie. But, my attention was soon drawn to one statue in particular. The largest statue was that of a centaur. It was broken down the middle and lay in two pieces. Crushed beneath it were the remains of an elf holding one of the finest looking bows I have ever seen.

I padded my way silently to it and found it was stuck fast under the statue. Nylan and the cleric followed me in, and I motioned for help moving the massive thing off the

bow. We stood apart and leaned into the statue; with as little noise as we could manage, we rolled the statue and balanced it on its side. I whispered for Nylan to hold it steady while I moved the body and the bow, but when I tried to move my hands away I found that they were held fast. Nylan's attention was soon taken trying to pry his hands away, and the statue rolled back onto the body. The momentum bent our wrists so that I thought the bones would snap. The racket of the statue rolling back and forth in place was enough to wake the dead in the stillness of that place, and with baited breath we waited for a response from the darkness.

The reaction was much closer than I expected. A thing, for that's the only way I can describe it, came out of the statue and struck Nylan in the chest. It was a mottled gray and snapped forward like a frog's tongue. Spherical balls of pigment were deep in the tip. One ball of red and one of green were connected on stalks of like color back to the statue. The two balls of color meshed and came back apart when it batted against Nylan's breastplate. His armor held. But, I could tell by the way he screwed his face that he had a few bruised ribs, despite the hide armor and quilt beneath.

I started to squirm my way out of my leather gloves; for luckily that was the only part of my person I had touched to the statue. I found that I could wiggle my hands in the gloves, and I was soon working my right hand free. Nylan caught on immediately and started to unlace his greaves with his teeth. The cleric took a little longer, but he eventually followed suit. Thresh behind me pulled a whip and moved up to attack. But, as we were all still stuck to the statue he was unable to get a good strike anyway. The surface of the stone rippled, and the thing from the statue made another appearance. It struck the cleric a solid blow to the shoulder. It nearly felled him, but he managed to keep

his feet. It was a good thing too, for a fall would have likely left him draped over the sticky statue and at the mercy of whatever manner of beast was inside it. I heard Athalia scream something about bats, and then I heard her pulling on her crossbow. I wrenched my head around to look, but my arms were too far apart to turn my body about. I was stuck staring off into the darkness.

I don't pray to gods often. I didn't pray this time really. I simply told Athalia's deity, in no uncertain terms, that if she shot me in the back again, by Gred's cloven feet, I was going to run her through. *If you're fond of her, you better do something about her aim before she looses that bolt.* It might have helped because Athalia managed to not shoot any of us, and a bat let out an ear piercing shriek.

My left glove was proving more difficult than the right, and it took some time to free it. My right hand I had placed twisted on the statue, and it had come easily out of the glove in a few moments. The left glove I tugged back and forth as I wiggled my wrist and fingers out. The angle was all wrong for me. I had trouble squirming my hand free while making sure not to touch the statue again with my right hand or allow my left wrist to make contact on the way out of the glove.

While I was still squirming, both Nylan and the cleric had gotten loose. Nylan ran to the right drawing his bow, and before you could say toasted toads he had spit the other bat on an arrow, and he was running around behind the statue and out of view. But, while I was admiring Nylan's shot that thing gave me a good drubbing and caught me flat on the chest. I'm sure it broke a few ribs, and I was having a time of it simply drawing breath. It was yet another lesson on keeping your eyes on the closest foe in battle.

The cleric, recently freed, came behind me, and he grabbed me around the waist trying to heave me backwards. It was the wrong idea. But, when he lifted me up it did change the angle of the statue enough for my hand to slip out yet some more. The metal-head behind me must have gotten a good hit on one of Athalia's bats. I heard a swish from a long sword, the tearing of fur, and then all sound of bat wings ceased.

About that time my hand came free, and the cleric, still tugging, fell backwards. When I fell on top of him I was in a bad way. I was seeing double and felt dizzy and nauseous. After the whack from that statue haunt, I was lucky the fall didn't drop me unconscious. The cleric, who is none too strong, tried to rise with me still draped over the top of him like a rag doll. He only managed to push uncomfortably on my back.

I heard a few arrows whistle in, and I heard Nylan curse. I smothered a smile; Nylan getting hit with an arrow is just ironic. I managed to extricate myself from the cleric and make my way to Athalia. She tried to heal me but rushed it, and her god given divine power only fizzled a little like a bad gnomish fire-work. The metal-head ran at the statue then and cracked it with his whip. It was a solid blow, but the only reaction from the rock was a counterattack by that thing. It launched out again, and it walloped the fighter almost as hard as it had me. It laid the fighter out cold, and his head hit the stone floor with a crack that made both his cleric friend and I wince. His fall tipped the lantern on the ground and the room spun with the shifting light. With my doubled vision it almost made me ill right there. I told Athalia to see to the fighter and pulled a potion bottle from my pack. I saved those I could from the campaign up north in Kagian's library. But, this was one of the last of two healing potions. I pulled the stopper with my teeth and guzzled half the contents. I looked to the fighter, but by this time Athalia was

there, and I could see the green glow of healing energies, so I downed the rest of the drought.

I tossed the bottle aside and drew my new longbow. This was one I had purchased with the funds from a salvaged set of ancient plate mail. It is a magnificent bow, and this was going to be its first use in combat. I had the stone statue marked well and was drawing back. I took a five foot step to the side, sighted along the shaft, and..."damn cleric get out of the way!" The cleric and the metal-head fighter Thresh were both backing towards me, and I didn't have a clear shot. I ran to the right and sighted again. I silently willed the haunt to strike out again, for I was sure I could pin it before it completely emerged and have another arrow nocked before it let out a death knell.

The stone was silent. The entity inhabiting it seemed to realize I was waiting for it, for it did not come out again. But, it was only a matter of time. The new cleric then offered up a prayer to his god for divine favor and healing energies for his injured companions: but called his god by the wrong name. Well, not quite, but he pronounced it all wrong, and it was startling enough that I whipped my head around. My shot was ruined. I pulled down and to the right, and I loosed the arrow and drew another. The cleric was flustered and sputtering. It isn't every day a cleric gets tongue tied with his god's name. I've never had a man call me by the wrong name. If it happened you can bet I'd make the man get the name right in the future, and I'm not a god. Gods are a jealous lot; I was worried I might should move away less the cleric burst into flames. Even Athalia started to cackle at her fellow cleric's less than glib prayer.

I shook my head to clear the thought and again took aim at the stone. My hand and fingers were numb. I usually draw with my gloves. I have an extra thin bowstring for a smooth release, and it's my gloves that keep it from biting too hard into my fingers. I adjusted to a three fingered draw. But, it cost me a moment of concentration, and the metal-head Thresh chose that moment to attack again. The creature emerged, and I hurried the shot. It was a second slower than the creatures retreat into the stone, and a chip of granite ricocheting off the wall was my only reward. Damn, damn and damn!

The metal-head wasn't too badly hurt from the last attack, but he was unwilling to attract its attention again. I drew and held a three fingered draw. Waiting. This was better. I could hold this all day. I adjusted my aim to where the creature emerged the last time. My vision narrowed until I was sure of myself; I held a half breath and waited for the tell-tell pooling of color that preceded the last attack. I held my shot steady. I was certain this time I could pin it when it emerged; then Athalia walked in front of me. The creature chose that moment to attack and went for the female cleric, as she was the closest target. My shot was fouled all to the Abyss; I could hardly hit the thing through Athalia. I had a half second to think about trying it. I figured I owed her god one though. He kept the klutz from shooting me in the back again, after all.

Athalia took the full attack, and in her weakened condition after the mishap with the Deck, fell stone cold to the floor. She was out like a light, and I couldn't find it in my heart to care. I gave up on the haunt. If it wanted to hide in that rock I wasn't going to stand around all day and wait on it. I ran out around the centaur statue and left Athalia to the tongue-tied cleric and the Thresh.

I called out for Nylan. He was out past the statue loosing arrows. I could tell it was him, even in the darkness, by the simple fact that the sounds of the bow release and the whistles through the air were so closely following one another.

“Hold on Kathrin, I’m killing something.”

“No shit?” I mocked.

I waited in silence till the sound of the arrows ceased. Most of the light from the fallen lantern was blocked by the statue, and without the night vision of a full elf all beyond was as black as pitch. I could only make out the vague outlines of statues and a thin figure weaving through them. Nylan

He was running back towards the main party while I covered him with my bow. I didn’t know if there were more surprises left for us in the dark. He was just running past me when the statue suddenly rippled again with color. Nylan put an arrow into its center. The creature emerged just in time to have Nylan’s arrow split it down the center. It fell to the floor, quite obviously dead. I cursed. I cursed again. I could have done that.

Nylan continued past me, and I kicked him in the ass. It hurt him, but he is used to me and made no comment. Cocky, as I said. He turned towards me then and untied a cloth sack from his hip. He held it up but kept it close to his side.

“Look what I have in the bag, no don’t, just kidding. It was a medusa.” His smile was lopsided.

“Well that would certainly explain all the statues,” I remarked dryly arching an eyebrow.

We just looked at one another. We were sharing a moment. Nylan and I tend to share very odd moments. We went back around the centaur statue. Athalia was out but it

looked like she would live. The new cleric said he was exhausted and couldn't heal her until he rested. Thresh then picked her up and laid her down on a blanket he kicked open with his feet. We discussed then the possibility of changing the statues back into flesh. I thought perhaps the clerics could accomplish it if they spent long enough in the asking of the favor from their gods.

I wasn't so much worried about the poor people as I was concerned about their stone pouches with their stone gold. I went and examined one of the closest statues, a kobold by the look. I walked around it and started to move it, when its head rolled off. I looked to Nylan, and we both had the same idea. That damn medusa didn't want them turned back, ever. I broke open one of the pouches then, and inside as I expected were stone coins. Not a gold piece to be found. Damn. Where was this treasure?

I considered briefly going to the body of the medusa. The head was in the bag, and by all the tales it should be safe to look upon. But, I knew that Nylan had already looted the body, and I knew that the most prized items were in his pack. I went to the bow then and examined it. Beautifully made, it was a fine bow. It was not as good as mine perhaps, but it was a fine bow none-the-less. The cleric asked about it, and I tossed it to him. I see no reason to carry an extra bow. I always carry an extra bow string, two in fact. I always carry extra arrows, dozens. But, I have never carried an extra bow. I'd just mend mine if it broke. Magic comes in handy sometimes.

I told the group that we should press on. Athalia was still out cold. But, battle always seemed safer to me without Athalia in it, especially since the day she pegged me in the back with that ugly crossbow of hers. An inch to the right and I would never have

felt anything from the waist down again. Believe me, I am quite fond of feeling from the waist down.

The others felt we should rest in the room for a few hours to regain strength. I went along with it, if for no other reason than it wasn't worth arguing about. Nylan and I explored the room to insure that no more dreadful things were about. The number and variation of statues was amazing. We made several rounds of the room, and I saw each statue a number of times. Each and every statue was a flawless work, and it was eerie to move among the petrified remains. I felt chills run down my spine every time I came across a statue facing me. They all had looks of such horror that it was painful to me to look upon them. After our third tour of the medusa's menagerie we decided the room was safe enough.

Nylan took the first watch. It passed uneventfully, and he woke me some hours later so that I could take a turn at it. I spent most of the time preparing my spells and committing them again to memory. Needless to say, nothing happened.

I woke the group after six hours. We rearmed and chewed a little dried meat while refitting. I was getting low on rations, and I was going to have to purchase more jerky before long. After once more insuring that the surrounding room was free of monsters, or at least believing they wanted nothing to do with us, the party took a few hours to marvel at the labyrinth cave. It was rough hewn stone, and it looked as if the stone under foot had simply been worn smooth with time. Nylan and I had seen it all before, but the party stopped at every statue to gape. There were all manner of stone creatures. Humans mostly, but stranger creatures as well. I'm no expert, but, by the look of dress on the humans it appeared as though the statues had been accumulating for several hundred years.

At the end of the long rectangular cavern, towards the southern wall in the corner farthest from the stair, was a hallway leading to a small chamber. It was the medusa's most likely. It was a fairly large sleeping room, square, with an entryway to a staircase directly across from us. The décor of the room was surprising.

There were velvet drapes covering the stone walls, a four post oak bed, and finished oak furniture with a large dresser. Parchment and ink lay prepared on the top of the dresser, and the room was immaculately clean. No mirror. The room looked as if it might belong to a court noble. Nylan and I searched the bed and desk. The others went about searching the dressers and the wardrobe. Thresh set the unconscious Athalia on the bed. Nylan found a backpack with odd bits in it. A pouch full of platinum he distributed evenly among everyone. I was sure then that he found something of import on that corpse. I gathered up the quills, parchment, ink wells, and backpack. Just outside of the room was another stair leading down into darkness. I nudged Nylan and rubbed my hands together motioning back the way we had come. He got my point and backtracked.

Down the stairwell we came to one of those interesting places where you know events have taken a turn towards the strange. The rough stairs led to a natural platform in a large cavern. A good size underground stream was running quietly some yards away. A rowboat in good condition and newly caulked was docked. It was tied with a new line to a crude but newly built wooden platform which projected a few feet out into the water. The whole of the area was lit by lichen clinging to the walls of the cavern. The glow was so bright that we were able to see even without the lantern.

The whole of the clearing above had shone blue with magic. We had yet to come across anything that would radiate such strength. What we found was a medusa living a

life of luxury under land belonging to a lycanthropic sorcerer. What seemed most troubling to me was the presence of the quills, ink, and parchment. Who does a medusa write to? Looking upon the dock the question became, who does a medusa write to, and who does she visit by boat?

After a rough search of the natural projection and dock, the new cleric found a cache in the boat. A bag of gold coins, a bag that radiated magic, and a wand were all neatly placed under one of the seats of the boat along the keel. The cleric handed me the wand and asked me to identify it. I did, and I handed it back.

I'm not one to pass on the more interesting magical items but this rightfully belonged to him. It was clerical magic. I was fairly certain it was curative in nature. And if he was going to pray that badly to his god he might need it. The wand was a find that made the venture worth the effort even if we found nothing else, but there should be something else here...

Nylan came back then with my gloves, and his greaves. I quickly put mine back on, and I was relieved to find them whole and un-mangled after all the pulling and twisting that they must have taken under that adhesion spell.

We congregated on the projection over the water where we remained for some time. The boat looked like it would take our weight. But, we decided to rest up again before departing. Perhaps we were simply gathering the nerve to take a leisurely boat ride through the dark under hundreds of tons of earth and stone. Not that we had any choice about it now. We set up a makeshift camp under the green glow of the lichen. Bed rolls were placed around in a circle about forty feet from the dock. A fire was built and

allowed to die down for cooking. We would have something besides jerky before our trip down the river.

I sit now on my bedroll writing in this journal. The cave is quiet with only the muted sound of water beside us and the occasional rustling of bedding. No one is saying much. Thresh, I think, will fit well. He pulls his weight and has managed these last few days to get by without doing anything incredibly stupid. The last metal-head we had thought more of valor than he did of strategy. He got his head caved in by a flesh golum. Maybe Thresh will last longer. The new cleric I'm still not sure about but I'm willing to give him his chance to screw it all up.

I'm on watch now. Nylan is in reverie beside me. His eyes are closed and a smile plays upon his features. It appears and disappears as he moves on from one memory to another. I shall never get used to the fact that he does not sleep as I sleep. I wonder how many times he has set as I am doing now, just watching me slumber.

Ah, Athalia is tossing about on her blankets. She looks fine now. She looks like she is having a bad dream. I expect she shall be back to her old self in a few more hours. Perhaps I should kill her in her sleep. I can say a sorcerer did it.