

Westward Calling – Volume 1.

by

Richard V Finney.

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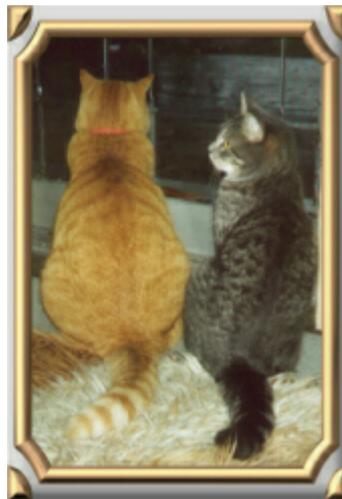
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Dedicated to by beloved cat "Beau" - the inspiration for 'Chryllexius the grand', who passed away in the early hours of December 16th, 1996; one month after the first draft of "Westward Calling" was completed.



Perhaps only Xix could fully appreciate the depth of my loss. Also in memory of Michael, Alexander, Boris and Maximillian – devoted guardians now passed to the Western Havens.

I trust this meets the high standards of my two current stewards – Maurice and Sylver – faithful companions during the long nights of writing and editing.



Note.

The "volume" structure is not a trick to rip-off readers, nor attempt to mimic Tolkien's style. Simply it is hard to build and write of complex worlds and intertwined lives, thus harder still to find periodic ending points in a following tale ... for publishing ease/convenience. It is always very evident, when writers place the latter, ahead of the reader and story line, in order of priority.

Westward Calling is an extremely complex undertaking. This offering (Westward Calling 1.4) is only the first third, of the first volume, but it does have an 'ending' of sorts, plus makes a fun read for fans of the Middle Earth.

## Westward Calling - Volume 1. (revision 4)

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This story line is intended as an extension to the world conceived and created by JRR Tolkien in his Hobbit series and Lord of the Rings trilogy. It is not the same, but draws on that background for its setting - several hundred years after the great war of the rings.

Why? I read all the aforementioned volumes in my youth and craved for more; however it was not until recent years that I began to suspect what JRR Tolkien used as his parallels/inspiration. Thus I could not previously produce a story line, to weave into that (Tolkien's) world, which would do it the justice it deserves.

### 1. The Lonely Road

Xix looked around the room one last time, before walking to the door. All that could be ordered and packed away had been, as much as is possible for a wizard's den and its years of accumulated oddments. He had ordered everything not so much in the intention of a later return, as he could not foresee a return; nor for an expected successor to one day unlock the door and become engulfed in a treasure trove of collected wisdom, because there were no more apprentices. It was ordered in vain hope, because although Xix did not believe - even in the depths of his heart - another might some day come, he could not be sure. If by some off chance another did rise worthy, a treasure would await.

Xix picked-up his staff and small travel bag, donned his grey cloak and walked out, casting a sorrowful look back at his most treasured possessions and memories, then locked the door to the den. With heavy legs he walked down the tower staircase, turning once outside the tower and raising his staff. Using an incantation of the ancients, he then shifted the entire tower to a place "between" - neither in this world nor the next, where only one of the true blood might find it and call it back.

He moved to what was now just a gateway in a circle of stones, then with a weary sigh, strode out onto the dusty road. "The road goes ever on..." he recalled, thinking also of the Western havens and the cheerful company he might find there. But therein lay the problem. Xix unique, named Eylofren the Fine - lore master and keeper of the gates in the high elven's tongue. Whether or not the old world and ways had passed from middle earth, and whether or not man had abandoned the old ways and laws in favour of greed and corruption, it still went against everything Xix had fought for - to simply walk away; but he was the only one of his kind. The havens truly beckoned his weary soul.

He walked, thinking. Speculating on follies, past triumphs and failures. Wondering on the fate of middle earth, as once again dark furnaces glowed dull red in the bowels of the earth and men prepared for war. Sadly - these were not those of Mordor, rather the descendants of heroes past who through greed and self-interest, embraced the corrupt arts of the dark and hatched schemes of war and conquest - against ancient allies.

"Its the nature of mankind and their curse" had said Glywnnl, one of the last noble wood elves in the forest of Ghosts.

"They care too much for themselves and too little for what surrounds them, thus they do not see how each small action damages and weakens the world in which they live. Perhaps the stewardship was ended too soon after the Great Battle, but so many were smitten by loss or tainted by the touch of the fell, that they could no longer stay? Since so many left, the planes have shifted and the sacred places grow rarer by the year. Tarry here a while Elyofren and rest, as we are not yet really to abandon our forest nor its misty cloak."

The "Ghost Forest", though Xix. I might go there and stay a while, then turn to the West. The hunched figure wandered on, pausing now and then to watch a bird or small animal hurrying on its way. Few hailed to him as he walked, not so much because he was a frightening or intimidating figure, but that a trick of light made it difficult to see the wizard unless he wanted it, or if a watcher knew what they were watching for. The latter would see a silver-grey shadow, with slightly more density or body than a normal shadow - then know it to be one walking in glamour.

Though most he saw were bent or corrupted by their toil, he did on occasion hear children laughing or someone singing a happy song, as a brief ray of sunlight amidst a gathering storm. Some good remains he thought, but evil feeds on good and continues to flourish until all the good is consumed - only then turning on and devouring itself. Then according to the ancients, good grew again from the barren wastes of humanity, because it was eternally seeded in nature. Conversely - if he continued to fight the overwhelming spread of corruption and greed, would that not just give evil more to feed and grow stronger upon, simply delaying the inevitable. He thought again of children, songs and laughter.

Xix sighed. Locked in these thoughts he continued on his way, arguing with himself to try to find answers to paradoxes that had plagued him for many years. His heart and soul called to the West, but his honour and dedication argued to stay and fight for a wholly worthless race. What to do? What to do? How many times had he asked that question and deferred judgement? Well the tower was locked now and he had set forth to secure the gates, as was his duty - in name and as the last of the line.

Wizards don't usually kick stones along the road - little boys and troubled youths do. Xix kicked the odd stone on the dusty path, because he lapsed sometimes, and was very deep in his lonely thoughts. By and by, one of these stones cannoned off a larger rock and bounced into a quietly trickling brook. "Oi" said a deep voice. "Watch out whose peace you wander around disturbing - young man". The brook flowed into a millpond, which shimmered and transformed to reveal the body of a large dragon rising from its cool resting-place.

Xix broke from his distractions. "Chryllexius the grand, if its a worm!" laughed Xix, for the first time in many days. "My most humble apologizes for disturbing your slumber" he said sweeping off his battered grey hat in a formal bow. "Hefty deeds my lord, I heard you close the tower and your steps are heavy... So you are off to finally close the gates then?" enquired the dragon.

Xix sighed - not for the first nor last time that day. "Yes, I see no other way. I've tried, but the task is too great and I fear delaying further, might find everything too weakened to do what I must do!" he replied. "I was on my way to the Ghost Forest first, to discuss it with the wood elves and then call a council of the shape changers. I hoped you might join me, somewhere along the road"

"Sadly, if you were a young dragon, I could more easily have explained you were swimming against an impossible tide. The folly of mankind is not something that can be countered in one or twenty wizard's lifetimes, but you are stubborn and had to find out the way you usually do - the hard way. Come to think of it, you are just like most of us. All sentient beings seem to be stubborn to a fault!", replied the dragon. "You need to understand that there is no disgrace in failing to overcome the insurmountable. Yes you are great in power, perhaps the greatest and equal to the greatest of the council at its peak; but all of you combined, could not circumvent the natural trend towards mutual destruction, that plagues mankind. They couldn't stop Sauron could they? ... So there you are! Destiny is the greatest force of nature - not you, nor me. That is all there is to it!"

"I think it's being beaten that gets to me - Cy. I keep thinking perhaps if I keep trying, the next win might be the

one that makes the critical difference", mused Xix. "I seem to recall you said something like that about ten years back, twenty years before that, and then fifty years further back ... before you went off and got your rear fried, in the Eastern wastes." replied the dragon. "Wisdom is about learning from experience. Sooner or later you just have to accept the way things are and then do what you must. You are equally responsible to those on the other side of the gates. They have done everything to deserve that loyalty, which is far more than can be said for most on this side!"

"True. Yes you're right as always Cy, but it's not a decision I ever wanted to make. I thought there would be others, or another generation. I did not know or expect to be the last. It is very hard, but at least you're here!", he said smiling up to the dragon. "Do you really feel the vibrations of all that happens in Middle Earth?" ... as a professional question. "Hmmm... trade secrets don't come cheap. You'll have to bribe me with a fish or two!", replied the Dragon smiling. "I suppose if I'm going to be with you for a few days, a more appropriate form might upset the locals a little less."

The body of the dragon shimmered again and folded, contracting until it winked out in a flash of light, leaving a fairly large cat sitting on the grass. "Fairly heavily bone structure, I see!", mused the Wizard. "Mind your manners and hurry-up with the fish!", responded the cat.

"It is obvious we could enchant them, and that's always been the case", said Cy between purrs as he watched Xix rig line on his staff, then drop it into the millpond. "Then you have the same problem that has confronted everyone since time began. If humanity do not have control of their own nature and destiny, they are robbed of essential being. It is something that all your sires have agonized over at one time or another, in my company, but it is hard for you because it was not anticipated that the true line of wizards would come to an end so abruptly."

Xix caught a fish, pulled the line in and gave it to the cat. Cy scoffed the fish in one gobble, then set about a typical feline-cleaning episode.

"Actually cats eat fish slowly and in several bites - not one!", observed Xix.

"Yes - and real fishing poles have hooks and bait on them!", Cy responded.

"Generally I do feel most things, if I'm in dragon form, but I've plenty of information supplied by my kin around the place and it seems rude to say I already know. Anyway - we can both read open thoughts and nature's signs, but freely given perspectives have more colour and vigor. So I don't always listen to the vibrations ... unless I'm particularly interested in a place."

"Your tower is such a place, as are your footsteps. I have been guardian of the Keeper of the Gates since the first age and it is written in the old law that I will accompany the Keeper at the final closing. Although you've locked the tower and sent it between, I do not think you've fully decided yet, which is why you are off to see Glywinn and the wood elves ... as a digression. I thought I'd tag along until you decide what you're going to do ... or don't decide, which is more likely."

"What if I don't do it, or can't make up my mind?" asked Xix, sharing his feeling with the this enchanted dragon, who was older than the first ages of the wizards.

"Ahhh ... you should know better than that Eylofren! I already know what you will do and when you will do it, but I don't interfere with destiny!", purred the cat.

Xix laughed and threw him another fish. "Well we'd better be moving along then Cy. Any more than two fish and I'll be battling to carry you!"

"Now a return question if you will", said Cy, lying across the wizard's shoulders, with his feet hanging down either side of Xix's neck. "Why do you lot - wizards that is - always assume the shuffle of old bent men?"

Xix laughed - "Maybe it's carrying the weight of the world, or fat cats, on our shoulders that does it! Actually it's easier to be nondescript amongst men, if you assume the guise of the old and frail, probably because people try not to see you, in case they might be inclined to acknowledge you or offer help. Whatever - it is easier to pass with little notice", he responded.

Some days later, night was falling as they came to a rickety bridge before a village. There was a night guard posted, who seeing the old man shuffling-up carrying his cat said:

"We've no place for beggars here. We'll not turn you away at night, but you'll have to sleep on the roadway"

"Thank you captain", replied Xix in his best aged and quavery voice, then shuffled across the bridge.

"Hmmm... should dunk him in his river", quietly muttered Cy, in Xix's ear. "We'll not be any trouble", said Xix - both for the guard's and Cy's benefit.

The village was distinctly unfriendly and not outwardly offering of any hospitality as Xix went through. Even the public house had a burly looking roughian standing at its doorway, glaring a warning - to move along - towards the disheveled looking old man. On the other side of the village Xix found a small bower in a hedge, shelter enough against the cold biting wind, for a brief resting-place.

In fact it was basically all about appearances. Cold and heat are relative. Dragons and Wizards - especially those who follow pathways between continuums - experience extremes a thousand times those of middle earth, thus the climate was quite 'mild'. Xix appeared to all and sundry to be an old vagrant, when choosing to be seen, thus those who saw who expect him to rest as did most others. In fact - for both Xix and Cy - night travel was preferable, because they could see perfectly in any light and night gave them a chance to travel with far less concern about the movement of men. As for wolves, the odd orc, goblin, or robber and other creatures of the dark who preyed on travelers, confronting a wizard and dragon is not really an ideal way to spend your last evening on earth.

Xix was lying in the bower, semi-slumbering with Cy curled within the folds of his cloak, waiting for the last of the humans to bed-down for the night, so they could resume their journey. They were not in a particular hurry, as if that was the case, Xix - as the Keeper of Gates - could move through time and space as he needed. Although not written in the wizard's lore, and one of those things Chryllexius was smug about - but would neither confirm nor deny - all those whom had been Keepers of the Gate were fairly certain Cy could also move through space and time at will. The most ancient and wise amongst old dragons or not, Cy was still a dragon - characteristically loving to hoard secrets even more than pearls, gold or jewels. To a dragon, secrets and superior knowledge were the greatest treasure of all, because they could be used to trick adversaries into giving more treasures, secrets or knowledge. Not denying Cy his due, he did know most things already - so the fun of discovering secrets was mainly limited to swapping spells with wizards or exploring new remedies and mixtures with the elves - but he did have fun extracting some price for any information volunteered ... simply as a question of dragon dignity.

The walk was to think and talk about options, as well as sharing knowledge on assorted points of discussion. Travel - especially at night - gave both a very good opportunity to gauge the levels of corruption and plotting, as well as how many fell creatures were crawling from their hiding places in response to the gathering tide of new evil.

There was a hurried shuffle as a bent village woman hurried by, with the patter of an old dog following loyally at heel. She was poor and cold, as her clothes were threadbare and for her, the chill night winds biting; but she paused on seeing the crumpled form trying to sleep in the bower. She was clutching a couple of potatoes to her chest, just bartered, so she could make some broth.

"Excuse me" she called. "Excuse me ... if you would like some shelter just for the night, I've a warm hearth." She was watching her dog, whose tail was wagging - a good sign, because she trusted the dog to sense danger.

Xix slowly sat up. "Thank you good woman. Your offer is indeed kind and accepted if I might not impose upon your hospitality", he said.

'Ahhh ... a high spoken old man. Probably a former castle steward or servant, turned-out in his old age. Still well spoken and mannered, so there's company for the night and added safety in numbers ... she thought to herself.' The old dog rubbed against the stranger and wagged her tail - a very unusual show of trust. The woman looked closer in brief hope that it might be ... but it was not ... the lost husband, disappeared now for two Winter's gone. "I've a little broth on the fire for the children and I. I can spare a little, to help you keep warm", she said.

She hurried off towards a small ramshackle hut on the outskirts of the village. It was badly in need of repair and showed the structural neglect caused by two hard seasons, without detailed attendance to the heavier external maintenance needs. Obviously no one was offering to help her, from the village. Inside the hut was as neat and well kept as possible, for a poor woman of limited means. What little she had was carefully maintained, neat and tidy.

The old dog ran over to greet her mate, curled on a bed of straw, at the back of the room. He was flanked by two younger dogs, pups, perhaps from three or four seasons past. The old male could not get up, seemingly crippled by age and some degeneration of his hips. He greeted his mate with his tongue and eyes, showing his joy at their reunion. By the hearth were two small children, thin but clean and well cared for. The boy seemed around eight years and the girl about six, thin and willowy through less than full stomachs in recent years. On a pallet in the shadows was the body of a man, grey in pallor, eyes lost in some long forgotten dream, with drool leaking from listless lips.

The boy was stirring a pot, bubbling on the fire. He jumped up as his mother and her dog entered, eyes betraying his patient hunger. Initially he stepped back, when he saw a stranger with her, but recovered confidence as his mother and the dogs showed no reason to fear. "Who are you?" demanded the little girl ... "And hurry up and close the door. Its chill tonight and firewood's not for the wasting" she scolded.

Xix smiled and quickly closed the door. "What's that you've got in your coat?" she asked, spying Cy's tail. "Don't be rude, Rhiannon. He is a guest and we must be polite", said the boy automatically assuming self-defined his duties, as guardian of the household.

"My name is Eylofren, but my little friends call me Lyo and this is my cat Cy", said Xix removing his hat and bowing. "How do you do. I am Daffyd and I'm the man of the house" said the little boy, trying to imitate Xix's bow and signal his sister to curtsy at the same time. "You must excuse my sister, She is only young and does not know her manners properly yet", he continued.

"I do too" retorted his sister. "I just didn't know he was a guest"

"That's uncle Avvon", the boy said pointing to the inert figure on the pallet. "He got cut by an evil Orc's knife, during a fight in the Mirkwood, and Dad's taking him to the Singing Lake ... when he comes home".

During this exchange Xix had watched the race of emotions across the mother's face, proud of her children, laughing at the banter about manners, and then sadly clouded at the mention of her brother and a husband - long overdue - unlikely to return. "Ohhh... he's the biggest pussy I've ever seen!" cried Rhiannon, as Xix put the cat on the hut's floor. "Can I stroke him? He won't fight with our dogs will he?"

"I am sure Cy would love to be patted by such a charming young lady and no - I don't think he will fight with your dogs. They look too big and tough for Cy. He's a smart cat, so I expect he'll be on his best behavior." said Xix.

"Roy used to fight wolves if they came at night, before he got sick. He's the biggest and bravest dog around", Daffyd added proudly.

"Quick - put these in the pot Daffyd. Sooner done, sooner cooked and eaten", his mother said wiping her hands on her apron. "I am Sarah. There's not much left to tell that these two haven't already mentioned", she said smiling.

She was a handsome woman, proud once, but bent by recent trials. Xix had thought her in her mid thirties when first she called to him, but realized she was actually in her mid-late twenties. She was thinking the same of Xix, realizing that rather than an old broken vagrant, he was a timeless middle age - perhaps forty - with remarkably fine and uncaloused hands. What ever he was, he had never been a serf or servant. What calamity overtook him, that left him wandering the roads and sleeping in ditches? Still the old law says that even the Great King, once walked abroad as a humble ranger; but that was three hundred years ago and much had changed since the great battles, before the gates of Mordor and on the plains of the Rohan.

Xix knew all she was thinking, as he had on the road, even the yet to be born thought that perhaps here was a suitable replacement for a husband long given-up as dead. In fact Cy had already ascertained he lay cold on a slab, enchanted by a Bolrog for seeking to steal from its hoard; in an ancient dwarf mine, deep beneath a dark forest dell not twenty leagues distant.

"I am an apothecary, formerly in the service of the Rohan March Warden. As sometimes befalls those of my calling, I had an urge to range to the west and east, seeking forgotten and rare herbs to use in my medicines. I am interested in what Daffyd said of the Singing Lake. Has it medicinal properties in its waters?" asked Xix, then feeling a cats claw cuff his ankle.

Sarah had picked up in keen interest, faded hopes again beginning to rekindle and glow. "Your village folk did not seem that hospitable. I was told to move along and no shelter would be given, which is why you found me making-do with a hedgerow bower. I've sleep worse in my travels, but not within a village and am happy to pay for your hospitality", Xix continued. "I also have four fish, fresh caught today, and some herbs, you may wish to add to your broth".

Xix knew there was not enough broth to feed them all, nor food for the dogs; because Sarah's thoughts betrayed her as she offered far more than she could afford to give. She was desperately poor, trying to find possessions of her own she could sell to unfeeling villagers, simply to stop her small family from starving. Her own small holding never seemed to produce crops to match the work and care she devoted, along with her children, because the soil was poor. Yet she still dismissed thought of payment for hospitality and simply prayed her visitors might be able to help with medicines for her brother, or perhaps directions to the fabled Singing Lake.

Xix took four fish from his travel bag - courtesy of Cy, who had been busy while he'd been talking - and some herbs, which he gave to Sarah. "Fish!" cried Rhiannon, "Goody! goody!"

"Too much might spoil the herbs, so perhaps the dogs might share two?", suggested Xix.

Sarah was in a dither. So much was happening so quickly, all good after so much pain and ill luck. She really had doubts about stopping by the sleeping figure, but she couldn't go past, and now all her luck had suddenly changed. Where to start, what to say. She couldn't decide.

"The villagers and the Singing Lake" said a voice in her mind. She focused, then said:

"You really are so kind, Mr. Lyo. Are you sure it would be alright to give two fish to the dogs?"

"Quite all right, Mrs. Sarah", responded Xix, which made her smile. "You did invite Cy and I in, to share your meal. It is only fair that we should share in our own small way. I think you might also agree it wouldn't hurt Cy to miss every second fish for the next week or two!"

She looked over at the large cat, lying on its back playing with Rhiannon and the two younger dogs.

"Yes, he looks like he's fairly well stocked", she agreed. "But I won't hear of lodging, as you are our guest, although I would appreciate any medicines you might have to help my brother or poor Roy."

"I think Roy is not a problem, because I've some herbs of arthritic joints. It is very common in both human and animals. Orc poison is another thing altogether, but Mithras can arrest it and I collected some a few weeks back in the Gweflen Steeps. I'll mix that tonight and see if it has any effect".

"Is an Apothecary like a wizard , a healer, or a doctor?" asked Daffyd.

"It's someone who has studied herb lore and curing medicines", said his mother.

"I'm going to be an Apothecary when I grow up, if you can cure sick people and animals too!", said Daffyd, serious with the gravity of such a monumental decision; as previously, he was going to be a great champion, and kill all the Orcs in the Mirkwood.

Sarah had feed the four dogs and placed the remaining fish into the broth, now ready and ladled out in earthen bowls. She took one aside to feed Avvon, but Xix stopped her saying: "the Mithras will work best undiluted by other foods or liquids. I'll feed Avvon after I've made his medicine. Where was the Orc knife wound?"

"Just above his hip, on the left side", Sarah responded. "Ummm ... fish is yummy" said Rhiannon. "Can I have some more?" Sarah looked at the serves already made, mentally calculating what would be left in the pot, preparing to give from her own bowl to top-up her daughter's second helping. She lifted the pot and ladled out the remaining contents, discovering that somehow she had miscalculated and there was more than enough for a second helping. Her mind tried to grappled with this before being overtaken by her own hunger, normally held in check until she was sure her children had eaten, and she was carried away by the pleasure of eating her fill of the fish broth. For the first time in years everything was going alright for once. Her mind simply relaxed, for a brief respite and discounted anything unusual as part of the general good luck. Thus it did not question that Daffyd also had a full second helping, just as there had been enough for Rhiannon.

"The villagers in these parts are very unfriendly to strangers and anyone from outside the village itself. They seem to grow worse each month, even to people just outside the villages and those - like me - at its edge. It's almost like they were trying to reduce themselves to the smallest possible thing, occupying a space at the centre of the village. They fear, anything and everything, but seldom with any reason. Fear is growing and with it distrust. We are different, but that's because we came from the Mirkwood."

"While we are accepted here, we are still permanently 'outside' the village and they will not help us as normal neighbor's do. As a matter of fact, it is even getting rare for them to help each other. I really don't understand it all, but that is the way it is." said Sarah.

"It is probably the wolves!", said Daffyd in his 'man of the house' voice. "Roy and I are the only ones not scared of wolves". Daffyd's mother beamed at him. "Yes, they don't have brave boys or dogs to protect them, do they? They're not lucky like me."

"Many wolves about in these parts?" asked Xix. "They seem to be increasing, either in number or bravery, but I may be noticing them more since Gwnlyn has been gone. Anyway children - time for bed. Off you go now and cuddle-up close, to keep warm."

"Can pussy come too... Mum?" asked Rhiannon. "I think you should ask our guest", her mother responded. "I am quite sure Cy would rather be with some warm cuddly young children, than with his bony old owner", smiled Xix. "Good night My Lyo. Thank you for the fish and the medicine", said Daffyd.

"Thank you for the shelter of you roof and protection, kind sir", replied Xix, seeing Daffyd's chest puff with pride.

"Good night Mr. Lyo, are you bringing more fish tomorrow?" asked Rhiannon.

"I expect I might have to, for Cy, so we'll see tomorrow. Good night young lady", Xix smiled.

Sarah shook her head. "I'm sorry, I has been a while since we had fish. It's something we have on special days, as a treat."

"What were you saying about the Mirkwood?", asked Xix, removing an assortment of small paper twists of herbs from his travel bag, along with a well-worn marble grinding bowl. Sarah watched in fascination as he prepared three separate mixtures of powdered herbs, each in its own small bowl.

"Well most people say I'm crazy, but a person like you would know about things like the tree farming Ents of the old world and the other strangish things that inhabit deep ancient forests like the Mirkwood. Most are fell or evil in dark forests, but some are good and kind according to their own measure. What actually happened was that some weeks after my young brother was struck-down, a tree told me to come here with my husband and sick brother, to seek-out the Singing Lake, then bath Avvon with its enchanted waters. First my husband thought I was mad - talking to trees and all - but there were records of Ents in the legends of the Great war. All our neighbours thought we were crazy; but an old crone who is a friend to all sorts of injured animals, and who lived alone twelve leagues to the north of our old holding, confirmed the what I thought the tree had said"

"I didn't see a face or anything. I had been collecting faggots for the fire, because the forest doesn't mind that, when grief swept over me. I sat on a log sobbing, then this deep and very old whispering voice asked what ailed me. I thought it might be a kind Elf lord or wizard or the like. It is different if you live by an old forest, you see things others don't and believe more in the ancient legends and the old folklore. Well I told my troubles and the voice said: "... to come north through Rhovanion, beyond the lonely mountain. Nestled between the Ered Michen und Erinmore steeps we would find an enchanted singing lake - home of the water nymphs the wisest of the ancient dragons."

"We are going to see elves and dragons and wizards, when dad comes home ... " said Daffyd's tired voice from the corner where they lay. "I might be a dragon or an elf, when I'm big, if I don't like being an apothecary". The voice trailed off into dreams as Cy purred louder, snug between sleeping children and young dogs. Sarah smile a proud sad smile.

"It went on to say: '... place a pearl on his tongue - as tribute to the dragon lord - when you bath him with the enchanted waters. Then he will be cured.' We came around the eastern reaches and up the Anduin by boat, but we had little money left by then and none by the time we reached the edges of the Withered Heath. Gwnlyn got it in his head to find a troll's cache and find a fortune. He took to searching dark hollows and dells. When we reached here we had no money left, except that we could raise collecting faggots and helping holders in their fields. We had to sell our cart and horse, as well as those possessions we did could spare, to buy this small hovel and see us through the winter under shelter. I don't think Avvon would have survived a winter without proper shelter, so here we stopped and tried to seek directions to the Singing Lake. All I have been able to discover is that it is somewhere across the Withered Heath, on the northeastern reaches of the Grey mountains. Some of the very old folk say the place is called the Emerald Downs, or 'Erinmore Steep' in the old tongue. That confirms the message of the voice in the Mirkwood, but I've barely enough to feed my family, let alone to buy another cart and range further north east into the unknown."

"So here we sit, waiting for Gwnlyn to return; but we have shelter and are not starving, which is more than can be said for many. I do hope your medicines might help, because I fear Gwnlyn will not return." she said in a low tired voice, so he son might not hear.

Xix was mixing water into his medicines, then carefully warming and further mixing two of the three, in the cooler glowing embers of the fire. The third mixture remained dry. He mixed one batch into a paste and added some of the broth from Avvon's bowl, then moved over to where the two elderly dogs watch him from the straw bedding.

"This is a standard draught for arthritis and arthritic or swollen joints. It should work. I will give it to both dogs,

because although the female does not yet show pain, I expect she suffers like her mate", said Xix, extending his hand for the elder dog to sniff and lick. Sarah could see the trust in both dogs' eyes and felt easier that they recognized this stranger meant them not harm.

"It sounds like it was an Ent to me", continued Xix, "... from what legends and stories I've heard of them, but it is apparently hard to tell the difference between them and a tree. Apparently there are a few woodsmen who claim to have raised their axes to a tree in unknown parts of forests, then been struck down by some enchantment and awaking to find themselves in a clearing - when they fell amongst standing groves. How much is fact, or fantasy I don't know, but I believe the Ents are still in the deep forests - in some of the older places."

He put some of the paste mixture on his hands and allowed each dog to lick the potion off. He then placed the remainder in a small clay pot and sealed it with bee's wax.

"This will keep while sealed. Use it if you, your family, or dogs, have joint pains and problems."

"Should I give the dogs more, in the next days or weeks?" Sarah asked.

"I don't think it will be needed. I expect Roy will be up and about in the morning. It is fairly potent, so only use a little - either ingested or as a poultice on the area affected - when the problem is noticed or at its worst. If the medicine is going to do its work, it will do by the morning. More medicine will make no difference if it has not worked by morning and may well just harm the patient", he said.

Sarah listened carefully and took note of the instructions. Apothecaries were rare and expensive, usually only found in castles, richer holdings and some large townships. She had never met one in her life and had previously placed them in the same semi-myth category as the high lords, kings and fair folk, common people were unlikely to meet in their simple life times.

She watched as he took the second potion, and the bowl of broth, over to the pallet on which Avvon's wasted body lay. He pulled the unconscious man's nightshirt up above his left hip and examined the ugly scar, that still weeped foul puss and remained cold to the touch.

"The wound won't heal, though I've always bathed it daily", she offered.

"It seems a slither of the blade is imbedded in his hip bone - which is both good and bad - but also why the wound won't heal. It is good because if the slither had been free, it would work its way to his heart and kill him within a few days, which is the way of fell weapons, made in the days of the Dark tower; but the slither itself poisons all uncorrupted flesh and seeks to overwhelm his life-force. My potion depends on the size of that slither, in the balance, as to whether the healing power of the Mithras can overwhelm the poisoning power of the Orc metal"; Xix explained, brow lined with concentration.

"Some of the old folk here about say there is a wizard's tower in the Grey mountains. Perhaps the wizard might succeed, should your potion fail, or we not be able to find the Singing Lake", said Sarah openly speaking her inner fears. "Oh I'm sorry Lyo. I didn't mean to question your efforts. I was just thinking out aloud, in case it doesn't work", she hastily apologized.

"Now, now, Sarah... I understood what you meant, so you need not worry yourself apologizing", he said kindly. "The pearl was important, I suspect, because the Ent would not have mentioned it unless it was. I don't suppose you have a pearl?"

Sarah sighed. She undid her top button, revealing a thin silver chain around her neck. Undoing the clasp she removed the chain revealing a small pearl set in similar moon silver, as a pendant.

"This is my hope and last thing of value. It was a wedding present to my great grandmother, given by friendly folk of the woods, who she knew as a girl. My grandmother said it was elves and this was elven's design of minthral silver. I have kept it against the hope we might someday come to the Singing Lake". Sarah passed the fine chain and pendant to Xix, who looked at it closely.

"Yes this is of high elven's design and crafting", he said, admiring it. "You may not actually have to sacrifice it, because the old lore says: 'A pearl on the tongue, tribute to the dragon kings, for passing through their watery kingdoms'. It doesn't say it should be swallowed, nor necessarily lost".

Cy had picked his way carefully from between the sleeping children, now jumping into Sarah's lap - purring softly - and curious about whatever they were doing.

"My .. he is a big cat, isn't he!", said Sarah, as Cy spread his bulk across her lap. she stroked him absentmindedly, as she watched Xix spread some of the potion on the wound, then sprinkle the rest into a bowl of clean well water. Opening Avvon's mouth, Xix said: "Just put the pearl on his tongue and hold the chain to prevent him swallowing it or choking on it; while I administer this mixture."

"Is there a wizard's tower in the mountains? I mean have you seen one in your travels. I ask because I believe in wizards, but most of the wise folk I've met say they've all gone away?", she asked as she watched him put the bowl to Avvon's lips.

"Wizards are true" declared a sleepy voice from the pallet. Daffyd was showing remarkable resilience for a tired little boy, with a full warm stomach, so late at night; but he was keenly interested in the goings on and grimly resisting the weariness of his little body. Careful not to disturb his deeply sleeping sister and the two young dogs, he got down and came over to stand by his mother, grasping her apron in habit from years past.

"Are you curing Uncle Avvon? Will he be better?"

Sarah had noticed a slight improvement in Avvon's pallor, when the potion was applied to his wound and the wound itself did not seem as bad as she remembered it, but then it had been a long day and perhaps she was seeing what her heart wanted to see, rather than what was.

"Why is your fairy necklace in his mouth?" asked Daffyd, using the family name for her heirloom.

"It's just there as something to stop his tongue getting in the way, while I give him this medicine", said Xix, freeing Sarah from thinking of a suitably convincing answer.

"I believe in wizards too, Daffyd, but there was no wizard's tower when Cy and I came down through the Grey mountains. That doesn't mean there isn't one, just that we didn't see one. I expect if the right person went looking, they might find one".

Avvon's breathing had become easier and less laboured. His jaw was no longer slack and drool had ceased to run from the corner of his mouth. "Remove the necklace now Sarah, and give him his broth. We will see what the morning brings and if the medicines are enough. We have done our best, but now we must wait. I will watch him tonight and I think its time you both had a good sleep. You especially Master Daffyd. A good apothecary must be sharp first thing in the morning, because that's when you find the best fresh herbs for medicines. Off you go now!" Xix smiled.

Daffyd returned to the bed with his sleeping sister and curled around Cy, who had followed him, as Sarah carefully spooned the broth into her brother's mouth.

"What is the third potion you prepared - Lyo", she asked. "I feel rather embarrassed at offering you shelter to sleep for the night, and then having you keep a vidual instead!"

In the distance a wolf howled, answered by others of a pack. Sarah shivered.

"Well I'm not modest and I welcome the chance to show off my trade to such an attentive audience. Besides - an evil wound caused by dark magic is far more interesting and rewarding than treating a lord or his lady for gout and warts", Xix smiled. Sarah giggled at the thought.

Yes - what a waste devoting those fine hands and skills to self inflicted ills caused by excess. She thought to herself.

She felt young again for the first time she could clearly recall in many years, and even the distant wolves seemed no threat with a man watching the house. She had forgotten the feeling of security and the warm embrace it gave.

"The last potion is for the fire", said Xix. "It makes the air cleaner through the night and will help heal, as well as give sounder sleep. Now put your necklace back on, and sleep easy tonight. I will watch Avvon and Roy, to see how the medicine fares". He threw the potion into the fire, where it flared briefly, filling the room with a fresh tingle - like the crisp clean air, after a summer storm on the meadows.

Sarah was suddenly very weary. She noticed the older dogs were both watching Lyo with trust, through half closed eyes. Well if this stranger did try anything, the dogs would rouse her and she was too exhausted to stay awake much longer. "You are safe. You can trust. Sleep secure tonight" said the voice in her mind.

She lay down with her sleeping children, her last waking glimpse being of Lyo filling a long clay pipe and smoking thoughtfully - blowing fine smoke-rings into the air - as he stared at the glowing embers. 'Smoke-rings' ... something secreted deep in the old legends, pulled at her mind, but she was too tired to pull it into focus. She drifted into the deep sleep of the long exhausted, free to rest secure, for the first time after long and lonely toil.

Xix finished his pipe, then took out a small crystal knife and pricked his finger. He squeezed a drop of blood and extended his hand to the old dog to lick, then repeated the process with the old dogs loyal mate. Shortly thereafter both dogs slept soundly.

Xix got up and did the same to the soundly sleeping boy, then walked over to Avvon. Here he was joined by Cy, who sniffed the wound and felt the skin around it with his paw. Xix squeezed a fourth drop of blood onto Avvon's tongue, almost instantly changing the rhythm of his breathing to that of a strong deep sleep.

"It will have to come out", said the cat.

"The price has already been paid!", mused Xix - smiling at the cat.

"He's your patient and you know I hate touching fell things", replied Cy, licking his paws.

"Well she's paid your price my friend, so you have to do it. Just transmute it in the embers, and that way there is one less fell thing in middle earth", said Xix.

"How about a swap. I'll do the Bolrog and you remove the Orc metal", Cy bargained.

"No bargain there, Cy. You're just itching to fry a Bolrog. Maybe try out a few of those special spells you've worked out for just such an occasion?", asked Xix knowingly and similarly guilty.

"Well I've just cleaned my fur", stated Cy. "Might be different if I was in normal shape, but as a cat - I don't want to touch anything dirty".

"All right" said Xix smiling, "... but you owe me a pearl", he added - just to stir the old dragon.

"Ahhh yes ... her great grandmother's mother was a wood elf", said Cy.

"Thought so ... even before I saw the pendant. Avvon would not have lasted without Elven blood - even diffuse", Xix replied.

"May account for young Daffyd too", said Cy, looking over to the sleeping forms, one now stirring - licking a salty taste on his lips, and starting to awaken again.

From between slit eyes, Daffyd spied the man and cat talking by his Uncle's sleeping form. The cat was looking straight at him. "Sleep Daffyd!", commanded a voice in his head. Daffyd fell asleep instantly, wondering if a cat could talk, or whether he was just dreaming.

Xix moved his hand over to the wound on Avvon's side. His hand moved through the flesh, as though it was air, and pride-out the slither of Orc blade from the bone. "Yuck!" said Xix, as he threw the slither into the fire, then pointed outstretched fingers, sending a bolt of blue-white fire after it. There was no sign of his operation breaking the skin of his patient, which in fact was rapidly healing - no longer discoloured or cold.

The cat looked towards the fireplace, then a globe of glowing blue-white fire rose, divided in a liquid motion and fell back into the embers. "Nice effect", smiled Xix; then sent a fiery flash into the embers, adding a few slight variations of his own.

"Well we've a long night ahead of us. Do you want to see to the wolves, while I leave a small message?" Xix asked the cat.

"Yes I'll do that", replied Cy. "I might pop down the well and see what ails the soil here about's too, while I'm at it. It should produce better than what Sarah has described. If I clean the springs, it will make the soils sweeter". The cat walked through the closed door and shortly after there was a great beating of wings. Cy lifted into the moonlit night, in his full majesty.

Xix walked to each sleeping form and touched them briefly on the forehead, scribing a form with his fingers, as though writing an incantation on parchment. He whispered to the old dog Roy, who opened his eyes and nodded in acknowledgement, then closed his eyes and returned to his contented slumber. Xix paused over Avvon, pulling the blanket over the rapidly healing young man.

"You will sleep until I return at sunrise. When you brother returns, you will tarry here until high Summer, then go with your family to the Ghost Forest. The old folk will await you and see that your family prospers", Xix commanded in a low even voice.

The wizard then took a cold piece of charcoal from the fire's edge and draw a design on the reverse side of Sarah's worn cutting board. Beneath the design he scribed some runes, not sure if Sarah might be able to read them and not wished to insult, by not leaving them, in case she could. A heavy flapping, followed by a loud splash, indicated Cy's return. Xix picked-up his staff and bag, then walked through the closed door - just as the cat had a few minutes earlier.

"Humans are such dirty creatures" commented Cy, shaking his monstrous form and showering Xix with water in the process. "The fouling was coming from the refuse the villagers' - present and past - recklessly allowed to pollute the lands which sustain them. Soil's a bit lacking in pot ash, but they could fix that by plowing-in their cinders; instead of discarding them - as they do - in heaps with other refuse", commented the dragon.

"Might suggest that to young Daffyd, as something to help him see interest in herb law", responded Xix. He lifted his staff and waved it before the house, then moved to the small gate with Cy. They walked forward, passing through two gates - one unseen.

## 2. Long Night.

The dragon and wizard materialized outside a dark pocket of forest, growing up and hiding a deep cut that once led back to the Southern gate of a grand dwarven mine.

"Iron Mountains dwarves, by the look of the paving" said Cy, transforming himself back into his cat form. "First age if I recall correctly. Had a few small relatives over this way back then", he added. "Perhaps one or two are asleep deep in the bowels of the workings, might be an adventure searching them out", he said with optimism. "Still - work first and fun later!"

"Don't try to fool me", said Xix smiling. "This little escapade should be all fun! How did you go with the wolves?"

"Arrrrhhh - well let's say they agreed to leave the entire district. Our friend on the bridge saw me though, and was struck by the dragon fright human's get".

"Hmmm, I suppose you expect me to believe it was unintentional! No doubt we'll be asked to fix that when we get back", murmured Xix as they passed through the thick glade of dark trees.

The old law says: "The man who walks with virtue, need not fear the night, nor evil". It is slightly different when those walking are like Xix and Cy. Things of power can be felt, or sensed by most creatures - even by humans to a limited degree. The dark things dwelling in that dell knew the feel of great power. Each of these strangers emanated far greater power than the evil Bolrog that dwelt within the old dwarven workings, and on rare occasion came out to cull their numbers for sport. There would be a battle and the Bolrog would lose. Some of the more optimistic wondered - speculatively - what tasty pickings might be found within the old mines, once the Bolrog and strangers were gone.

All knew these two creatures could see them, at least as clearly as they saw the two creatures. Most slunk away quickly. The rest tried to be as small as possible, and not move or attract attention. They waited, knowing the earth would shortly be shaken.

Xix paused before the great doors of the mine, reading the ancient runes. "Both high Dwarven and Elven glyphs", he said to the cat nestled on his shoulder. "There's Sauron's mark too, from the second age. Might one enquire if one might expect to find the great forges that formed the nine within these depths?" asked Xix, getting an inkling of an idea.

"One might", replied the cat, "... but one might be better served focusing on other problems first"

"You mentioned exploring and searching-out some sleeping relatives here. I take it we are coming back, to satisfy our curiosity, after this night's activities are concluded", Xix pressed, accustomed to the word and meaning games, dragons loved to play.

"Arrrrhhh! .." said Cy. "You are worthy of your title some days. The Bolrog has sensed us. No point in prolonging his curiosity". With that Cy jumped down and passed through the small guard's gate - slightly ajar, at the side of the great doors to the mine.

Xix held his staff high, whispered a word and flooded the great entrance gallery with light. Night vision lacked colour and perspective. He and Cy admired the architecture, craftsmanship and use of coloured stone, as well as ceramic inlays, as they casually explored the entrance level.

"That stairway up to the third level looks interesting", volunteered the cat as they went deeper, Xix understood Cy was taking the most direct route to wherever the Bolrog had the enchanted body of Gwynlyn stashed or exhibited. "Smells like it has some pet orcs or goblins to pander to its needs", replied Xix. "Yes, I've heard a few scuttlings deeper down", said Cy.

The Bolrog watched with cool fury, in a dark gallery on the fifth level above them. It saw what seemed to be the form of a wizard, which it felt equal to, having bettered a wizard and broken its staff some aeons earlier; but the

other shape was not familiar as the Bolrog had never seen a fat domestic cat. It knew it was a shape changer of some form, but it could not pick what it was exactly from its aura. Normally you could pick a bear or werewolf and the like, but the auras of these two strangers were somehow fuzzy and obscure. Sort of wavering misty and silvery grey, so you couldn't quite determine the true shape or nature.

Maybe I'm just out of practice, it thought. Rules were rules and Bolrogs hated strangers - especially creatures from the light - so he would attack and enthrall them, then put them in his gallery of conquests. This Bolrog was powerful. He got that way by being cautious and learning by being careful. He watched and tried to remember what he knew of the old magic lore.

White aura was high elves, kings of the true blood and wizards of the first rank grand council. Grey was wizards of the grand council, lords of the wind and sea. Red through black were creatures of the dark, with Sauron's ringwraiths being a misty black shape, with red-gold tinge; but there was no mistaking what they were and the red-black evil of their purpose. The shimmering silver mistiness here was not the black mist aura of ringwraiths. Blues through greens to yellow were the auras of mankind and the warm-blooded creatures of the day. Silver? ... It thought. Of course!!! A wrag pack leader had once told of seeing the forest ancient 'Old Tom' tending his bees, but the bees had attacked the wrags and driven them off, howling. Silver is for the old magic of the Ancients.

What business did Tom Bombadil have in his mine?, the Bolrog wondered. It automatically assumed the shape changer to be the water nymph, that the wrag leaders had said lived in the waters of Old Tom's lands. This added-up when the Bolrog recalled that water nature caused some auras to shimmer. The latter was one of the lessons from its youth, the use of which had defied explanation until this minute.

Thus by fairly dodgy logic, the Bolrog deduced the two strangers were Old Tom and his water nymph partner. It drooled at the thought of capturing a nymph, and twisting her with its evil. The rings were broken and Old Tom was never known to have any particular magic abilities greater than say a second or third ranked wizard. He had defeated and entranced a second rank wizard, so Old Tom would present no great risk. It would be hard, but the Bolrog knew it would win.

"Twisted mind - twisted logic. It will attack shortly!" Xix whispered to Cy. "Twisted maybe, but I can see where he went wrong. In for a pretty sad shock really", Cy replied. "A gallery of conquests, including a wizard?", sounds interesting said Xix. "Yes" responded the cat, simply and smugly. "You knew, of course. More schemes within schemes?", Xix thought. "First things first", thought Cy.

The Bolrog swept down, setting a wall of flaming columns towering around the two intruders and locking them within its confines. Landing across a stone bridge, that spanned a chasm, it roared with pure malice: "I know you and your companion - Old Tom Bombadil. What folly brought you into my realm - answer before I blast you to the nether worlds!"

"Wrong on both counts" said the grey robed figure.

Neither of the intruders were cringing as they ought. The Bolrog hesitated. He had named them in his incantation, which had no visible effect. Either he was wrong or the old magic could resist his strongest incantations, meaning this was going to be more difficult than first thought. He tried a test and used his fire whip to draw the columns more tightly together, to further constrict the space the burning circle delineated, and increase the heat being felt by his captives.

It didn't work. Not only didn't the columns obey his command, but they grew chilled, burning with cold blue-violet fire, rather than the yellow-red heat of dark magic. The chill touched the Bolrog and caused him to shiver. It weakened him. He retreated to collect his thoughts and flew down to a great gallery in the lower eighth level, where he was warmed by fires rising from the molten forges of old.

He did not have time to gather his thoughts, because two shimmering forms materialized in the chamber with

him, and became the two strange intruders.

Perhaps if I can maim one and then turn on the other, thought the Bolrog. It gathered its dark powers and fired them in a full blast at the smaller of the two figures, causing the mountains to shake and forges roar with heat behind him.

"Mistake!" said the smaller form, turning away the fiery assault. As the smoke and flame cleared, the Bolrog understood its error, because the dragon form of Chryllexius the grand was revealed in all its glory. "Shimmering - waters and ice fire, the scales of the dragon lords... ", the Bolrog suddenly recalled with dismay. He had no chance against a large dragon, let alone against the magic of a dragon lord! A terrible error the Bolrog thought. I must escape and start a new elsewhere.

"What makes you think I would let a play thing like you, escape before I'm finished?" enquired the dragon licking its lips.

"I've a hoard of treasures and jewels, even pearls from the Western seas and Elven wrought metals", I beg you to let me go free, pleaded the Bolrog - offering a hefty bribe.

"No!", said the dragon. "I am going to send you back from whence you were called in the second age. Your time here is finished, you will not escape, and besides - I thought you counted yourself a great champion and kept a gallery of conquests? Am I not a worthy challenge for you?"

Stupid! stupid! stupid!, thought the desperate Bolrog. Why did I act so hastily. Of all creatures to challenge - a dragon lord. I must escape somehow! Across the molten forges and around the side of the dragon's servant, it thought. Then the dragon could not blast him without also blasting his servant. The Bolrog moved with blinding speed, driven by a desperate urge for survival. As he moved he fired a blast across the servant at the dragon, hoping to destroy the former and distract the latter.

The Bolrog flew straight into a freezing wall of blue-white flame, this time delivered from the finger of the dragon's companion, who had shed his cloak and blazed with the silver-white light. He was caught, held fast, being drawn into a space between the wizard and the dragon. "Silver on white ... for the Guardians, first ranked of the wizards-fine!", wailed the Bolrog in final recognition, then utter dismay and defeat

"That's right, and I am afraid you made another tactical mistake!", the wizard advised the Bolrog. It howled with fear, while its sniveling servants in their deep hollows, quickly abandoned their leader to his fate and made for the great doors of the mine. Cy noticed the movements and sent jets of dragon fire burning through all those galleries leading to, and including, the great entrance hall. His fire was enchanted and would continue to burn all evil it touched, until he quenched it by order. Hundreds of orcs and goblins died in that brief flash of fire.

The wall of blue-white fire that held the Bolrog, now closed around it and squeezed it smaller and smaller, until it was reduced to the size of a man's head. The wizard picked up the fiery ball, looking deep into the fearful eyes of the Bolrog trapped within, then kicked it over to the dragon. It arced high and the dragon caught it in its mouth, then spat it towards the ceiling of the gallery and held it up with a stream of dragon ice fire. The Bolrog was screaming in mortal agony, trapped and burnt, with its magic totally quenched. Cy maneuvered the screaming ball over Xix and then withdrew his flame, letting it drop. Xix pointed his finger and pushed it up again with a further jet of magical ice flame.

"So what was your idea for punishing this one, Eylofren?" the dragon enquired. The Bolrog's screams changed pitch to a howl as he heard the dragon name his companion and confirm its error.

"Well, Chryllexius ..." the Bolrog wailed louder with anguish, on hearing the name of the High Dragon Lord, just as Xix had intended, "...I thought maybe crush him like a beetle, like this ..." Where upon the wizard clapped his hands together and the ball field became a flat saucer shape, emitting the screams of the Bolrog trapped within. "Or maybe send him to a cooler climate, where he'd cause less of a nuisance!" The wizard retrieved the saucer and sent it spinning through a spatial gateway, across the cosmos, and landing on the frozen surface of distant nitrogen planet.

In torment on that frozen waste, the Bolrog saw a hand reach through time and space, drawing it back, then dropping it on the gallery floor, deep beneath the mountains of middle earth. "How about you?" Xix asked the dragon.

"I was thinking about something a little closer and warmer. Poor diddums might catch a cold out there...", replied the dragon, using his magic to send the trapped Bolrog spinning into the Sun, but enamouring it against total annihilation in the searing furnaces of the star. The Bolrog was again drawn back to the gallery between his tormentors, but this time the wizard expanded the constricting field restoring the Bolrog to its normal size and shape, albeit firmly held and stripped of its powers.

The Bolrog groveled, vanquished, unable to believe its stupidity in not recognizing and engaging two such creatures. "Do you choose to go back, from whence you came?", the dragon asked.

The Bolrog nodded in ascent, then felt the spatial shift as he was thrown back through the gates of lore and time, to that place from whence he'd first been called, by the forces of darkness.

"Think twice before you come again, and impress that upon your friends", said the dragon's voice across space and time. The Bolrog heard, counseling all against answering summonses to other worlds, and never forgot this encounter.

Cy recalled his dragon fire that had been burning in the galleries changed back to the cat form and went with Xix to the Bolrog's gallery. They found Gwnlyn, as a lesser exhibit marked "Burglar", in a hall of more notable conquests.

"Who is this wizard?" asked Xix, trying to remember all members of the council lists and those missing or unaccounted. "That is Rhyss the brown, also known as the rat, because his brown is more a cobalt brown like the coat of a rat. He was Radagst's understudy, freshly risen to the second rank - a journeyman - when he went missing. The council thought he had gone across the Western sea two centuries back, but we dragon's knew what fate had befallen him." Cy answered. "...but we don't play around with destiny", he added, stating the obvious reason the dragon lords had for prizing some of their secrets and secret knowledge.

"It occurs to me that all is never lost, so long as someone watches and knows what passes", said Xix speculatively. "Well I've always held there is something wondrous and new to be discovered everyday. It does you credit to still be learning", replied the ancient dragon, with a superior air.

"His staff is broken. I expect we'd best restore it before we release him, to cushion his anguish", said Xix. "Yes, there is much to do here, when we come back", replied Cy - reminding him that time moved on. "Shall we get Gwnlyn a small cache for all his trouble? I expect that might make your plans along that line - for Sarah and her family - a little easier to implement!" he continued.

"Am I that transparent?" as Xix smiling. "No ... more predictable. I have watched you now, for almost a hundred lifetimes, so you're not exactly a subject I'm unfamiliar with. Besides a little gold will expedite things, but we should time his return for after our departure. A day perhaps?" enquired the dragon.

"At least half a day ...", agreed the wizard.

They collected some gold and jewels, specifically finding some fine jewelry for Sarah to keep and wear - that matched her existing Elven necklace - then added some pearls and embossed leather collars, made for some long forgotten king's dogs. They placed these in a sack Gwnlyn had by his side, where he was exhibited, then left. Outside Xix sealed the guards gate at the side of the great doors with an enchantment.

Watching eyes saw the two emerge with a third - seemingly enchanted - and leave. They had heard and felt the battle, along with seeing the flames that engulfed the fleeing Orcs briefly flare through the guard's gate. The Bolrog was vanquished and the strangers were leaving. Many eyes watched their progress, back through the dark forest glade.

In the middle most part of the deep dell, Xix stopped, opened his cloak and grew to his full measure of power. He called out in a loud clear voice:

"Hear me creatures of the forest. Listen and bide what I say. I am Eylofren the Fine – cosmic wizard of the first rank, lore master and keeper of the gates. The Bolrog is vanquished and banished back whence he came, never to return. Most of his train have been flamed. The rest will be enslaved as my workers. Before the moon is turned I will return and the workings of the great forges be restored, for a while, but only for those of the old blood. You who mean no ill to other creatures may stay without fear, knowing we go about our affairs as you do yours, avoiding the folly of men. This forest and dell will remain protected, more so perhaps; however those of you who love the dark and evil, should leave now for the northern wastes - if you wish to see the new moon. I wish you no evil, but will not abide evil at my front or back door. Think well and decide, before I return."

"Fairly well put!" said Cy as they turned and continued their journey out of the dark glade. Outside Xix opened a gate, moving them to a small treed hillock about three leagues from Sarah's village.

"A tree will get his blood flow working again", argued Xix. "But it might get chopped down too", replied Cy. "How about sinking him in a stream?" he countered. "Then he'd be all wet, when we got him out" , complained Xix. "How about a nice rock facing sunward", offered Cy as a compromise.

"Well I suppose it's that, or be chopped, drowned or buried. Alright - a rock it is then", agreed Xix. They found a suitable rock and using enchantments hid Gwnlyn within it, along with is treasure sack. "Better do a small protection spell, just to be on the safe side", suggested the cat. "Cutting branches is one thing, but rock as well!" Xix shrugged his shoulders and said an incantation that would protect the rock. A lark that chose that rock as a possible resting place got a rude shock later that day, and probably would have cursed the dragon, had it known what shocked it.

Sarah awoke to the smell of fragrant herbs. She sat up and rubbed her eyes, looking first at the hearth, where the fire was crackling brightly beneath a bubbling pot of gruel and Lyo sat - legs outstretched quietly smoking his clay pipe - as she recalled him being when she slipped into deep sleep. The three small windows were open and the air was freshly tingling in the room, adding a kind of fresh goodness to the spice smells coming from the cooking pot. She got up and stretched, smiling a sleepy good morning to her visitor.

"You need not have gone to the trouble of cooking breakfast for us too, especially after sitting through the night with Avvon. How is he? Has the medicine worked?", desperation giving an edge to the pleading concern in he voice.

"See for yourself", said Xix, indicating towards the slumbering form with the stem of his pipe.

Sarah then saw the string of fish on the table and that the dogs were licking there paws, obviously happy at already having their fill. She was overjoyed to see Roy get up, tail wagging, and walk over to rub against her legs. There was no sign of the crippling pain that that kept him to his bed in recent months. Free of the obvious pain, he actually looked younger.

"I see you've been busier than I thought", she said, indicating the fish.

"Actually - Cy was a bit insistent on that score" he smiled. Sarah looked at Cy lying on his back, feet upwards, sound asleep in front of the cooking fire. She laughed and then carefully pulled the cover down from her brother. Though pale, his colour was returning to normal. His breathing was free of effort, while he had turned on his side during the night - the first time she had known him to move of his own accord since being afflicted. She saw the wound itself had closed and the discoloration was gone, along with the chill.

"He's cured", she cried with joy.

"On the mend I think is closer, but yes the medicine has worked and broken the power of the evil within him", Xix responded. "I actually made the gruel as part of his recovery. I expect his body needs the nourishment, so it seemed a good idea and I thought I'd save you the work".

"How can I ever repay you for your kindness", she asked sincerely, wringing her hands and mentally regretting she had no coin to speak of. Her hands reached to her throat as she recalled her prized possession.

"Would you take this as payment, with my most sincere thanks?", she asked reaching to unclasp the chain.

"That is probably the most I've ever been offered" said Xix, "but no, it is too valuable and must one day pass to your daughter Rhiannon, as it was passed to you. Cy and I would welcome one more night of your hospitality though, if it is not an imposition?"

"Imposition!", laughed Sarah. "You've fed us, healed us and stood watch through the night; when I invited you here so you might sleep in safety. I wonder who has imposed on whom?", she enquired with a smile.

Xix drew on his pipe thoughtfully. "Favour begets favour. It was you who first turned aside and offered kindness to strangers in need. Perhaps you deserve some kindness in return, and should simply accept your due", he said "The gruel is about ready now. If you'll bid me the liberty, I might have a small portion myself and then snooze for a little while".

"Oh! but of course." said Sarah, blushing. "You must be exhausted, poor thing. Ummm... I don't want to be too expectant, but how long do you think it might be before Avvon recovers. I mean the children will be asking and it's been so long. I'm excited, relieved and fearful of hoping for too much - all at the same time". Xix noticed she was again wringing her hands in anguish and thought on it.

"You bend down your finger nail on your index finger when you're worried, you know. Ever noticed that?" asked a voice in his head.

Xix glanced across at the outstretched body of the cat and noticed a twinkle in the slit of an eye.

"Well don't get your hopes up too much, but the gruel should give his body enough strength for him to awaken, perhaps latter today or tonight, judging from his speed of recovery thus far; but he must not be over excited. Much has happened since he was struck down, so he'll awake very disorientated and weary from the long battle against the evil poison within him."

Sarah joyously nodded, hardly able to believe her ears, but knowing the stranger would not lie to her. She would speak again to her brother before the day was out, after she had all but given-up hope of keeping him alive.

"Mind you, if you don't feed him and feed yourself, I expect your ravenous children might eat all the gruel when they awaken", he added drawing a final time on his pipe, before tapping its bowl against the side of the hearth, then secreting it back into its pouch and his cloak.

Sarah got three bowls and ladled a measure into each. "Just a little for me", repeated Xix. "That's enough". "There really is plenty more" said Sarah looking into the pot. "Are you sure that's enough?" "Well I finished-off what was left of last night's broth - 'waste not want not' - so just a little is fine", he explained.

Sarah the mother looked at him with a raised eyebrow. She was skeptical about just how much of last night's broth was left, given that she and the children had their fill - along with Avvon - from a pot that normally barely sufficed for four people. Perhaps the thickness of the added fish made it seem like more, she thought. That might explain it. Xix was spooning his gruel into his mouth and she had the inkling he was smiling at her, but his face did not betray it. The dusty gold eyes held a twinkle of good-natured mischief. She smiled and turned her attention to feeding her brother.

She heard Rhiannon and Daffyd stirring. They were up and rubbing sleep from their eyes by the time she had finished with Avvon, whom perhaps not surprisingly, had chewed and swallowed of his own volition, though still too unconscious to know what his body was doing. She hushed the children, pointing to the outstretched figure by the hearth slumbering. Rhiannon still squealed briefly and cuddled Roy, when she saw him standing at her mother's side. Sarah placed two serves of gruel in bowls on the table, looking again into the pot puzzling, as it was still a quarter from empty, and shook her head in bewilderment.

The children hungrily launched into the fragrant gruel, Daffyd pointing at the cutting board and tracing figures she'd been too busy to notice.

"Is that rune-talk to mean - 'catching fish'?", asked Daffyd, pointing to the runes sketched below the figures. Sarah looked at the symbols and saw the figure of a man drawn, feet in a stream, with a fishing line tied to the end of a pole. A cat and two fish were drawn at his side. Under the picture was long stroked lettering of the old language, she had sat painstakingly learning with her grandmother, when she was a small child. Rhiannon looked over with interest as Sarah concentrated on explaining the letters to Daffyd.

"That is a plural symbol - meaning two - and says 'we' or 'us'. This is an active symbol that says how the writer is acting, or what his action is, which is called a context. In this case it means 'doing' or 'being'. This little group says 'by moving water' or 'by the stream'. The stroke and letters here show the water is moving and that symbol is for water itself", she said tracing the letters.

"The next one is an active sign again!", offered Daffyd transfixed.

"Yes", said Sarah. "that's very good Daffyd."

The next word puzzled her a little and she smiled, because her understanding of its usage was for 'with nature' or 'at one with surroundings', usually meaning 'speculating on nature'.

"The next word means 'thinking about' - which must apply to the pussy cat Cy (who is watching). That is a little joke, and the last symbol is for 'fish'."

"The lines actually say:

'We - being - by the stream, - doing fishing - thinking about fish'. This one at the end is Lyo's own symbol, to say who has left the message", she explained as she examined the fine intertwined monogram at the bottom of the message.

"The picture is better", said Rhiannon. "Yes, but see how the letters only use a little space compared to the picture. A long or detailed message is easier to write in these letters, than to draw in lots of pictures. It is much faster too, if you're in a hurry", said Sarah.

"Would you teach me these letters?" asked Daffyd, better seeing the advantages than Rhiannon, who was shaking her head in doubt. She remained convinced the picture was a better message.

"Yes. I should have started last year Daffyd, but it's been busy for me, with Uncle Avvon sick and your daddy away so long. Perhaps we will start in a week or two."

Daffyd's face registered the realization of the implication she had made, jumping up and going to feel his uncle's brow. "He's better. The medicine has worked hasn't it!", yelled Daffyd excitedly, causing Rhiannon to shriek with delight and setting the two younger dogs barking and jumping about.

"Shush, shush ... all of you!" hissed Sarah, but without a scold and belayed by the excitement in her own beaming face. "Yes Mr. Lyo has cured him, like Roy, but the poor man was awake all night - then went out this morning and caught us some fish to eat. We owe him at least some quiet to get a little rest in", explained Sarah. "Run outside and play. It's a wonderful day, but don't stray to far away now", she said.

"He made the porridge to, didn't he!", said Rhiannon. "His things have a special smell", she offered.

"That's because of the medicine. He's an apocky remember", explained Daffyd to his sister.

"I'm going to be an apocky too", he said walking out the door with his sister. "You said that last night and before that, you were going to be a champion and kill Orc-monsters", Rhiannon retorted. "You blow with the wind", she added - throwing in one of her mother's phrases for describing changes of mind or indecision.

"Well I'm going to be a champion and apockey", Daffyd returned. "Then I can kill the monsters and cure the people they've hurt!", he said, impressed with the solution he'd framed. Three of the dogs were jumping about barking, the two youngsters chasing their tails and happily acting silly; now not weighed with having to be serious - constantly on guard - in the company of Roy their sire. His mate, remained inside with Sarah, wagging her tail with pleasure.

"A happy day indeed, Belle!" Sarah said to her dog, smiling and understanding the relief the dog must feel to see her mate - not just up, but outside playing with the children. Belle answered with a short bark of pleasure, walking to the door then sitting in a patch of sun light, where she could watch the frolicking and guard her mistress at the same time. In the partial silence Sarah heard the firm purring of Lyo's cat - Cy. Glancing towards the sound, she saw the cat was now slumbering contentedly in his master's lap, chin resting in the crook or the sleeping man's elbow.

She went about her morning housework as quietly as possible, finishing the last of the gruel herself, before washing the pot - a rare thing indeed to have a full stomach, for one who had got into a habit of thinking of herself last and going without, more often than not.

She was still puzzled by the pot, that seemed to give out more than it could hold, but then even the well water tasted fresher, smelt almost fragrant and was purer than she could previously recall. Perhaps distress and loss of hope, darkens your perception of life and nature, she thought. She was accustomed to always trying to be optimistic in the face of ill fortune, that almost crushed her spirit. After cleaning Avvon and his bedding, she went outside in the morning sun, admiring the fresh day and marveling that as with most other things - it seemed fresher and brighter. Yes - it's restored hope she concluded. Everything looks better when you have real hope.

A brief cloud crossed her joy, as she thought of her missing husband. She was no fool and had long given him up for dead, realizing the cold realities of a person missing so long on the fringes of the wilds; but it was hard not to hope that perhaps he might still return, especially on a lucky day like this. Still - perhaps if Lyo might stay a while, and once Avvon was recovered, they might try to find trace of what had befallen Gwnlyn. Maybe if he stayed, Lyo might also take Daffyd as his apprentice and teach him his trade. The family of an apothecary would never go hungry or without, but more importantly: he and his, would never be shunned by selfish townfolk. Sarah was desperate that her children never experience the indifference and neighbourly exclusion, she had suffered since setting out from their Mirkwood holding, to find a cure for Avvon.

Taking her small hoe to the vegetable patch, she dug over the soil to find what tubers might lie hidden. Much to her surprise she immediately found three; unusual in itself, but more so because they were large - at least twice the size of the few that normally grew there. "Truly a lucky day!", she said smiling to Belle, who had her nose in the earth and was digging holes to help. Sarah placed the tubers in her apron, dusted most of the dirt from her hands and then walked back to wash her finds. Belle was bouncing around like some silly young thing, obviously basking in the change of their fortunes. Sarah smiled. It was hard not to, and she felt so light hearted too, even to the extent of considering skipping - then laughing at the thought. Instead she hummed a long forgotten tune and tried to remember words, seemingly lost in another time.

After washing, her haul was revealed as a big potato and two fair sized nublato - a kind of sweet potato with yellow-cream flesh and a pink-red skin. She kept humming her happy tune, adding words where one seemed to fit from memory or just adding something that happened to rhyme. Entering her home she crossed to the window and put down her treasures on a rickety bench, thinking about what grain she might add, with the fish, to the evening's broth. Perhaps some corn seed and barley; just a little, because her supplies were very limited and she still needed to preserve seed for her plantings. Up the road, more a lane-way really, she could see Daffyd and Rhiannon jumping about with the dogs - Roy faithfully retrieving sticks thrown by the little boy or girl; while the sillier young dogs ran back and forth, not quite sure of what was supposed to be going on. The cries of joy and laughter, mixed with excited barks, drifted back across hedge and field.

She briefly stopped her meal preparations, trying to recall ghosts of words at the edge of her mind, as she could almost remember the next verse of the song she'd been half singing.

*"... Fie hi - dilly dom dally,  
the birds and brooks all sing ...  
Happy are we... tra lah - tra loe - tra lee,  
in spring's finest flowerings ...  
'neath the dappled arms of leafy kings,  
we dance - we elves ...  
fairest and happiest of all living things ..."*

- Sang a quiet voice behind her.

"Don't give-up your day job Sar-bear, you'd never make it as a minstrel!"

"I would too - if I didn't have to watch over such a pesty brother", she said turning with tears of joy in her eyes. "Avvon !!" she cried, releasing the anguish of years, and rushed to her brother's arms.

She hugged him crying and sobbing, while trying to laugh and be happy at the same time. The young man held her tight as she poured out her release of love and emotions, then as she regained composure, he said: "It was just a passing observation. You needn't to take it too much to heart!"

Sarah let out a little laugh and sniff, then made a half hearted attempt to beat Avvon's chest.

"It's been so hard. Gwnlyn has been missing two Summer's gone, and I was so lonely. I thought it would never end", she sobbed, pressing into his comforting embrace.

"There, there, brave little Sar-bear. It's over now and I'm sure we'll soon find Gwnlyn is more temporarily misplaced, than lost. It over and your safe. You've done well!", Avvon said gently rocking her.

"I don't suppose I might just sit in the sunlight for a while", he asked. "I've been in the dark so long it seems, and the draw of the light is strong on my spirit".

"Oh!", exclaimed Sarah, suddenly remembering Avvon was only just restored and must still be ailing, as well as weak. She looked over towards Lyo, who she saw was awake - quietly watching - filling the bowl of his pipe.

"I must ask Lyo - over there. It was he who cured you", she explained

"We've introduced ourselves" said Avvon smiling. "I awoke while you were singing outside, but you didn't notice me watching - not surprising really - when you came back in. Then I didn't want to frighten you."

"Wasn't me, it was the medicine - mirthras in particular. I think the sunlight is a good idea and the children will handle the good news better seeing him outside, than jumping on him in here!", offered Xix. He got up and put the bench seat from the table out in the sun, by the door. Coming back inside he helped Sarah, help Avvon to test his unused legs and shuffle into the warm sunlight. With Sarah and Avvon seated in the sun, Belle lying at Sarah's feet, Xix dusted off a section of log that bordered the faggot heap. He returned his attention to his pipe, as the young couple simply sat in a silent embrace, warmed by the golden sun.

"What was that verse, you sang earlier from ?" Xix asked Avvon, knowing the answer but with the purpose of opening a non-painful area of dialogue between the two siblings.

"Grandma used to sing it. She called it the 'Wood Elves' Dance of Spring'. We used to hear echoes of it, when we sung it in the woods, whether we were happy, scared or lonely. It made use feel happy and safe, expectant

maybe ... like spring itself probably", said Avvon, eyes looking inward in recollection.

"I tried to sing it to make me happy these last few years", said Sarah with pain in her voice, "...but the words wouldn't come and the happy memories were gone, until today. I think perhaps it doesn't work if there is no real hope, and there were no echoes here, to give me courage", she sighed.

Avvon held her in the sun, restoring her with his warm comfort.

"I've heard echoes like that in the Ghost forest. Perhaps your elves still dwell there", said Xix, nurturing a seed he was tending.

"Do you really think there are still Elven folk in the Ghost forest?" asked Sarah, with girlish interest.

"Almost certain, Sarah", Xix replied.

Belle pricked up her ears and looked towards the village, shortly thereafter they all heard distant barking and laughter as the children came running down the lane. Belle got up and ran out to greet them. A flurry of small bodies - dog and child fell through the gate, with Daffyd calling "Mum. mum, guess what... ?" He then saw Avvon sitting with his mother and let out a whoop of joy, rushing to outstretched arms, Rhiannon close behind.

The happy babble and chatter of the excited children subsiding, Sarah said "Guess what - what?.. Daffyd?" Daffyd looked puzzled for a moment, then remembered.

"Jake the watchman was struck dumb, last night. They say he saw a dragon and has dragon fright! I said 'that's stupid 'cause dragon's aren't bad'. I told then My Lyo was here fixing Roy and Uncle Avvon 'cause he was an appocky. Mr. Botho asked if he was a doctor, but I said he was an appocky. They're coming to see if Mr. Lyo can help cure Jake", he said with an excited rush.

Sure enough a group could be seen coming down the lane. Sarah looked at Xix concerned, in case Daffyd's gossiping had over stepped the mark, but saw he was just smiling at the boy in good humour. "Your right, Daffyd. Dragons are mostly good, like children. Only a few get up to mischief sometimes, which means they might be naughty, but not necessarily bad. Tell me though...", he asked seriously, "... does Jake like a jug or two, of mead?"

Avvon coughed and smiled. Sarah giggled at the suggestion and Rhiannon laughed to show she was as sophisticated as everyone else. Daffyd couldn't see the joke or implication, so he asked:

"What has mead got to do with dragons and being struck dumb? I need to know so I can cure it when I get older", he added in his best authoritative voice.

"Drinking mead makes you happy and light headed", offered his Uncle. "Lots of mead makes you sing, stagger and a little clumsy. Too much mead makes you imagine you're seeing things. I think Mr. Lyo was trying to establish if Jake actually saw a dragon, or more likely drunk and imagined he'd seen a dragon!" Avvon explained.

"Arrrhhh !" said Daffyd adopting his new sage-like air. "If he was drunk, he might be seeing things! ...But it might have been a real dragon, because they're true - aren't they mum?", he countered

"Yes - true but very special and very rare. Only special people meet dragons", said Sarah smiling.

"Jake is the watchman", offered Rhiannon, "... and his brother is Mr. Botho, who owns the Inne. Isn't that important?" she asked. "Yes I suppose it is, but important is not the same as special", said Sarah. "That doesn't make sense", protested the little girl, still curious. "You'll understand better when you're grown-up", said Daffyd trying to look taller than he was and hiding his own doubt. He did understand vaguely, in that Mr. Lyo was obviously special, but not important like Mr. Botho, so there was a difference that he could just see.

Roy was standing at the gate, giving one bark of warning and a low growl as the group of villagers approached. Sarah called him to heel and he ran back wagging his tail, realizing there was no immediate danger; but pleased

to be able to assert his authority again, as an example to his mate and pups. Sarah and Xix stood as the villagers reached the gate, leaving Avvon sitting - a child snuggling in either arm.

"Mr. Botho, Gregor, Owen, Gwennith", she said acknowledging the Inne Keeper, Black Smith, Merchant and Mrs. Botho, in turn. "You may not have met my guest Mr. Lyo, nor my brother Avvon, who Mr. Lyo came to treat for a swoon. Mr. Lyo is an apothecary, from the court of Rohan...", she added, in introduction, with a certain enjoyment seeing the looks of surprise on their faces. In fact she'd never met, nor been visited by, any more than two of the villagers at her home, in the entire time she had been there. Daffyd watching had noticed something in the way the villagers had responded to hearing Mr. Lyo's background. He didn't know what a 'court of Rohan' was, but it was clearly something that made Mr. Lyo very important, as well as special.

"I've not had the pleasure!" said Xix, extending his hand to Botho, smiling; while his eyes bore into those of the man who'd stood outside the Inne glaring, the previous evening. "My brother in law's been struck-down by a dragon", said Gwennith in a rush. "Might you help him Mr. Lyo? We'll pay what price you ask!" Her husband shuddered, but the woman had heard people like Mr. Lyo did not count pennies, and was certain Sarah could never afford such an important one as this, if he did.

Ahhh ... the brains behind the Inne's prosperity, thought Lyo, following her thoughts. I'll extract a price you'd not expect, but hardly be able to refuse; he decided, golden eyes shining. "Struck as in physically or struck-down as in dragon fright?", Xix asked.

"Dragon fright", replied Owen, already having noticed the possible variation in interpretation when first Gwennith spoke. "It happened towards the bewitching hour, last night", he added "...on the bridge to be precise". Owen liked to be precise, because it was like stock tallies. He liked things that added-up and that meant exact measures. 'Being precise is a good rule for life', was his view. More often than not the other villagers called it 'splitting hairs', and thought Owen's love of precision was more an affliction, than a virtue.

"Had he drunk any mead before going on watch? If so, how much?", Xix asked blandly.

Rhiannon hearing the joke line a second time, got in early, and shrieked with laughter. Sarah paled.

"... and then the big goblin flew over the moon, with sparks coming from his burning pants. When he finally got home, he couldn't sit down for a week!", said Avvon pretending to be telling a child's story and covering his niece's laughter. Daffyd understood immediately. It was great to be part of Adult games. He laughed and said: "Tell me another story Uncle Avvon". Rhiannon though Avvon and Daffyd were going bonkers, but the thought of a goblin with its pants on fire and bottom burnt made her giggle. She wanted to hear more. "Tell us some more", she squealed with delight. Sarah's eyes send her message of deep gratitude to her brother, answered with an impish wink that reminded her of their many happy childhood games.

"He's not a drunkard, if that's what your suggesting!" frowned Botho. "Aie, but 'e liked a pot o' two a' fore 'e went on guard each night - din't 'e", said the Smith - tapping his forehead with four splayed fingers in a silent message to the Apothecary. "But he was a sober man ...", added Owen, wishing to stay on the good side of his principle customer - Gwennith.

"I simply need to know, because it affects the balance and concentrations of my medicines. The wrong mixture will more likely harm than heal, so the nature of the patient's habits need to be established. Did he eat hot spices?" asked Xix continuing.

"Hated spices" said his brother - Botho. "Wouldn't touch them if he was starving. Why?"

"Herbs are spices too. The amount of spice you consume can also affect the way medicines will work on you. As your brother did not partake of spices, he will be far more responsive to my medicines than someone who took many spices with their food!" Xix explained.

Daffyd was listening intently, taking this all in, while carrying-on with the charade of listening to Avvon's fairy tales.

"So where is the patient?" asked Xix. "I sure it's something I can fix, within an eight-mark or two".

"He is at the Inne. Can you come now?" asked Botho.

"Yes, I'll come straight away. I'll need young Daffyd, to help me and would you like to come too - Rhiannon?" he asked smiling invitingly.

Rhiannon looked at her mother who gave a slight nod of her head. "Yes, please", said the little girl with her best manners. "Run inside and get my bag, please Daffyd", Xix said to the beaming boy.

"I'll look after them well, I assure you." he said to Sarah. Both she and Avvon understanding he was removing little distractions, so they might have time to speak and be alone.

Daffyd came running to the door, carefully holding Xix's bag with an air of importance, then joined the party at the gate. Roy let out a small whine, before Sarah shooed him off saying: "Quickly then or you'll get left behind". She called to the younger pups, reinforced by a growl from their father, indicating they should stay behind on guard. Belle had hardly shifted, still lying contentedly at her mistress's feet, one eye on the gate and the two pups.

### 3. A Fair Price.

Only Daffyd could remember the inside of the Inne, which was not a big Inne by town standards, but the biggest building in this village. They had stayed there briefly when his father had sold the horse and cart, along with other things he couldn't quite remember, to get the money to buy their small holding. Rhiannon stared with wide eyes at the vast spaces, many tables, as well as all the assorted smells of foods and brews. This must be bigger than a castle she decided. Holding the reassuring fur of Roy at her left, she reached up, by habit, seeking her mother's hand, then recalled her mother was not there as her hand was grasped by Lyo's long fingers. She looked up and saw him smiling down at her. She moved slightly into the folds of his cloak, brushing her cheek against the smooth greyish fabric. It was very soft, holding the smell of his herbs and pipe. Daffyd was similarly close by Lyo's right, standing as proud as he dared amidst so many strange people in such a big place.

There were probably no more than twenty in the Innes main hall at that time, but the size of the room, noise and numbers in one place, were quite beyond the children's experiences - especially as most eyes were fixed directly on them, as the centre of local interest.

"Where is he then?", Xix asked of Botho.

"Across here in the loafer salon", said Gwennith leading the way. She opened the curtain and showed them through, the rigid body of Mr. Jake lying wide eyed on a thick padded sofa. "Is there anything I can get you?" she asked.

"Some sweet meats and two long cups of cordial for the children, would be fine", said Xix. "Two empty cups and a jug of spring water will be sufficient for Jake and my needs".

Finding treats for the children was not exactly what Gwennith had intended, but she did not wish to upset or insult the apothecary in anyway, and hastily directed a serving wench to supply what had been requested.

"Could you pull that table over here by the sofa", Xix directed Botho and Gregor. "Pass my bag Daffyd", he asked taking a seat and pulling it up to the sofa. "You two just sit on that side of the bench and pay close attention Daffyd". Roy curled under the table as Xix used a piece of polished silver metal, to reflect a small beam of sunlight into Jake's eyes.

"See how the coloured part around the black centre, stays thin and only reacts slowly to this light. It's shape - see its slightly oval - as well as how slow the reaction to light is, tells us what kind of trance or swoon he is in. Look in the mirror at your own eye," he said handing the polished object to Daffyd. "See its round and in this light the coloured part is about as thick as the black centre on each side? That is normal. Now close your eyes for a little. Open them and tell me what you see?"

"The black bit grew, but now the coloured bit is growing and the black part is shrinking", answered Daffyd. "Can I see too?", asked Rhiannon, opening and closing her eyes for practice. Xix gestured for Daffyd to show his sister. She saw the effect and was impressed, but also looked at the reverse side of the mirror to see what was there. The serving wench came in with the tray containing the drinks, water and sweet meats.

"Thank you", Xix said to the fair serving girl, looking deep into her green eyes and then turning to the children. "You can both eat those and have your drinks, while you are watching", he told them.

"Now - because Jake's eye is this shape and responds to the light in that particular manner, this tells us he is in a cataleptic trance - which is caused by a great fright or shock. A hit on the head would cause a different type of trance, and your uncle Avvon was in a somnolistic - or poison induced deep sleeping state. Once we know what kind of trace it is, we then know what medicine to mix for it!", Xix explained to Daffyd - overtly, but covertly well aware all those in the room and doorway were listening and learning, at the same time.

"If he was in the cataleptic one, then the fright might have been a real dragon", surmised Daffyd, demonstrating logic ability beyond his years to support his belief the dragon was real. "Can I have another", he asked indicating the plate of sweet meats, on his sister's behalf as well as his own.

Xix smiled, realizing both children had only taken one each and would not touch the rest without permission. "They are all for you", explained Xix. "And you can have another cordial, when you finish that one, if you wish". He smiled at the wide eyed children and was pleased when - after giving one to Rhiannon, passing one under the table to Roy (who Xix noticed had received half of Daffyd's first sweet meat) - Daffyd offered a sweet meat to Mr. Botho, Gwennith, Owen and Gregor, as well as several others watching the treatment.

It came as such a shock, that the Inne Keeper, his wife, Owen and the Smithy just took them, dumbfounded. No one had ever offered Botho one of his own sweet meats and Gregor the Smith had never eaten one. Daffyd offered the plate to Xix, relieved that there were still plenty left, as it was hard to be good mannered and give away something so nice, that you had never had before.

"Throw one to me and I'll catch it", said Xix, wishing for a quick distraction in case any adult turned down Daffyd's kindness, before thinking about it. The boy realized this would be some kind of a trick and watched closely as he threw a small sweet meat towards Mr. Lyo.

Xix's hand flashed up, with a loud snap of his fingers his hand closed, then slowly opened to reveal nothing. It had disappeared!

Daffyd watched with wide eyes. Mr. Lyo put his other hand towards his ear, then opened revealing the magicked-away sweet meat. "Wow!!" said Daffyd, looking over his shoulder to see looks of wonder from several of the adults watching, but seeing the knowing look behind the smiles of Mr. Botho and Owen, while Mr. Gregor winked at him. Rhiannon just sat mouth gapping. "it was a trick - not magic!", said Daffyd confidently. "Show me again?"

"Yes, you're right Daffyd. Just quickly, because I'm sure Jake would be far happier watching awake than asleep. Now remember to watch the sweet meat, not my hands. Don't be distracted from watching the sweet meat. Throw it slightly higher to give you time to see what happens!" said Xix

Daffyd threw the sweet meat slightly higher this time, and like several others in the room, saw this time that the first hand did not in fact catch it at all; rather just seeming to as it dropped behind the blurring movement of the snapping fingers, to be caught for the first and only time in the second hand. Daffyd nodded and smiled. Several people clapped. Rhiannon looked perplexed, and Xix popped the offending sweet meat in his mouth.

From his bag, Xix took out several twists of paper, with delicate figurine runes neatly written on each. He put these on the table so his audience could see them.

"Jake is in a cataleptic state, Daffyd. Apothecary is not so much about how that happened, but how it might be fixed, once we know what's wrong. Something gave Jake a terrible fright, but the only one who say what it was, is Jake. A dragon? ... well I expect if one met a dragon one might fall into such a state. In the very olden days, before your grandfather's grandfather was born, legend says dragons were seen periodically in the wastes and raiding farms along the wilds. In those days dragon fright was thought to be dragon magic, which they used to freeze their victims before devouring them. Today - in modern times - we realize that it is a form of shock, not unlike that suffered by a rabbit, mouse or chicken, if you suddenly spring out and they had not known you were hiding in wait. I expect a big Daffyd, produces the same effect on a little mouse, as a big dragon on a little Jake - but, we don't know what scared him, just that it did", explained Xix.

Even Rhiannon followed this explanation and Daffyd nodded his head - agreeing but still sure it was a real dragon. The others understood that whatever Jake had confronted, it was fearful and he had been standing his watch to protect the villagers.

"B'n some strange tid'ns of late. 'Old'rs reckon t' seen wolf spoor lead'n aways t' tha wastes, und som sa' tha seen packs runnin to tha nor-wes re'ches. Might strange, Ai sae. Som'int scared 'em", said Gregor. "Perhaps what ever scared the wolves was what Jake saw, or perhaps he actually confronted a wrag on the bridge", offered Botho - both in explanation and to enhance his brother's reputation. Botho was smart enough to realize such speculation in his Inne, over jugs of mead, would significantly increase this takings in coming months.

Xix ignored that, having achieved his purpose is sowing doubt and providing several lines of alternative

explanation. "This is the mixture for cataleptic shock", he pointed out to Daffyd. "The runes say 'dragon fright' in the old language, because that's what it used to be called - as I've explained.."

He emptied the contents into his small mixing bowl, added some of the spring water - which he had smelt and tasted first - then extracted several herb leaves from brown wrappers inside the bag, and mixed these into the paste. "I'm adding a little Mithras - for any fell curses or evil poisons - in case he met a wrag or something similar, and maygorn root to keep him calm for a few days, until he's fully recovered", Xix explained as he worked.

He knew full well - he might say bat wings and lizard entrails, for all these folk knew or expected of herb lore, but was more interested in keeping Daffyd's and to a lesser extent Rhiannon's interest. Cy had mentioned both would become great healers of bird, animal and folk, as they walked the last leagues back to the village just before sunrise that morning. It had surprised him that Cy had said: "Rhiannon, would be the more widely known of the two"; but he knew better than to argue such observations with the ancient dragon. Cy knew what would happen in most things, but only offered what was necessary to see those things develop. "Swimming with the current, rather than against it", was Cy's only explanation on such matters.

Xix increased the dilution of the mixture by adding spring water, then mixed that into the larger cup of spring water. Satisfied with the colour and dilution, he then carefully administered the draft to Jake - pinching his nose, holding down his tongue with one finger and pouring it down his throat. It worked quickly, causing Jake to groan, close his eyes, then sigh, before dropping into a slumber - just as Rhiannon finished her cordial and sixth sweet meat.

Gwennith also let out a sigh, releasing a breath she hadn't been conscious of holding. Botho himself relaxed a little also. Whether or not this stranger knew what he was doing, it was one thing to talk about 'dragon fright', but something different again to actually curing it. One of his lodgers had said that their wise folk routinely treated dragon fright by immersing the sufferer in a well, four times in quick succession - then placing him naked in the sun. Botho had actually considered trying that, though it sounded more like a quick way to drown someone, before Gwennith had heard Daffyd boasting that a medicine-maker had cured his dog and was curing his uncle. Botho made a mental note to charge the lodger a premium, for telling wild yarns and almost causing him to drown his brother.

"What next?" asked Botho. "How long before he's up and about, or well enough to walk?"

"We settle first", said Xix. "... by which time, we should see Jake up, shortly after the account is concluded." Botho was unsure if this was straight timing, or if the apothecary had added something to stop his brother recovering, if the account was not settled.

"All right, we'll settle if you'll tell us the accounting", said Botho - conscious of his audience and no longer welcoming their interest.

"Another cordial for each of my assistants, if you please", said Xix, drawing a small stylus and smooth slate from his bag. The two cordials were brought for the children as Xix made a short listing of his medicines used and the agreed routine village administering charge rate of his profession, discounted according to the means of the village or townsfolk in question.

Owen watched from Botho's shoulder, impressed by the neat figures and clear listings. "Very precise!", he said in admiration. Not another Owen!, though Botho with a sinking feeling.

Both Owen and Botho saw the listing was in fact very exact and fair. It even had the cordials and sweet meats listed as "refreshments provided" - valued at double the village rate - subtracted from the apothecary's charges. The discount rate was also more than generous, being eight to one - instead of the more common five to one, usually haggled over when buying produce or services from further afield.

Lyo had not totaled the account, rather moving down the slate and writing a list. That list was: two hens and a rooster, twenty wooden shingles and nails, two half bolts of fabric, with thread and needles for sewing, a ham, a

cask of mead, a parcel of sweet meats, bag of sugar and two bags of seed - corn and oats.

These too were accurately costed, to a value of sixteen half-marks; fairly priced. Lyo then went back up the slate and wrote in the tallied figure both Owen and Botho already knew to be half a crown and five marks, or twenty five marks.

"Your choice", said Lyo to Botho. "The lower account is what I want - the higher what I'm due."

"That's very fair, more than reasonable!", observed Owen - particularly interested in Lyo's use of the fine stylus and slate for ready calculations, instead of ink and parchment. Many advantages he thought. Perhaps he should go and see more of the big towns, maybe even to a court like that of Rohan - once he was rich of course - to pick-up more of these good ideas.

"It is more than fair", Botho said somewhat humbled that he'd now twice thought ill of Lyo, only to be shown to be totally wrong. "I am quite happy to give you what you want and pay coin to balance what you are due". Gwennith's ears pricked up at this and came over to stop any avoidable extravagance. She saw the accounting, but was silenced - with a look from her husband - before she spoke. She thought perhaps she might haggle over the discount rate, as the stranger obviously did not know the going rate and might be fooled into reducing it.

"A crown for your thoughts", said Xix to Gwennith looking straight into her eyes. Owen and Botho understood the double meaning - a clear warning - and exactly what Gwennith's thoughts were. Fifty marks was what Owen, Gregor and Botho had speculatively concluded was a charge they were likely to pay, before first going to Sarah's to seek the apothecaries help. A crown and ten marks, for which he'd accounted only half and asked for only half of that again, in payment.

"I think you've customers to attend to!", Botho said icily to his wife. She realized she'd almost embarrassed him in front of Owen and the Smith, by habit - not design - and quickly found other matters to attend to.

"You're a fair man Lyo. I agree and I'm sorry I've not paid you your due in other ways" said Botho.

"The account is settled and I've no thought of things to complain of", said Xix rising. "While the materials might wait, I'm keen to get food into Avvon to restore him. I'd appreciate if you could spare someone to help carry them for me." - You can spare the serving maid Noala, was the silent thought the wizard sent with his verbal request.

"I can spare Noala", said Botho - "... as it is just past the midday meal and more time for resting, than serious drinking", he smiled. "Besides, I think Gwennith needs a little time to remember who she is and what's important in this village. Serving people - specially her neighbours - will help her remember that!", he added, grin widening.

Gregor let out a roar of laughter - "Aie, cen ye jest see som ot tha laddies cuddl'n Gwen, like tha try wid lil' Noala!" He coughed and laughed again, joined by both Botho and Owen.

"Whose to be cuddlin my sister in law! I'll stop 'em" said a sleepy voice behind them - revealing Jake trying to get up to meet what ever challenge had been presented.

"You've had a bit of a scrap and lost a bit of memory", said Xix to Jake. "You'll not be scrapping with anyone for a few days yet, and your memory will return shortly".

"It was a jok'n matter", said Botho, sitting by his brother. "Naught to worry about, just lie back now and rest."

"If ye say so Botho", said Jake, sinking back onto the sofa.

"Well I've another patient to watch this day, so we'd best be getting back, but first I'd like to appraise your choice weed and a few way-supplies, if I may, Owen?", said Xix looking to the merchant. "We'll come back shortly and pick-up what of the accounting is ready", he said to Botho. "Your brother will be a bit vague for a day or two, because the medicine is dampening aspects of his memory until he's fully better, but he'll be fully restored within a seven-day. Come along children"

Daffyd and Rhiannon drank the last of their cordials, then followed with Roy, out onto the Inne's veranda. Botho clasped Xix's hand. "I thank you Lyo. You are a good man".

"It's easy to be good when you deal with people full of gratitude, but harder to trust, if you deal with those running from life or deceiving themselves... Fare well Botho!" said Xix smiling.

Daffyd stored away that thought, although he did not understand it. Owen and Botho just nodded in agreement, understanding Lyo was explaining he understood the life that made Botho - and Owen for that matter - perhaps less trusting and friendly than they might otherwise like.

They crossed the road with Owen and waited as he unlatched the door to his store. Being a small village, Owen resided in the Inne during the day, where his customers came to fetch him, should a purchase be wanted. As the Inne was his best customer by far, the arrangement worked well - as it did in many similar small towns and villages.

"Have you any 'Riverbank'?" asked Xix. "No. I've not the custom for an expensive exotic like that", apologized Owen. "I do have some Southland's light, which came by accident one day, invoiced as Harrow Tan. I did try to tell them, but they insisted they'd send Harrow Tan, so it has sat here since - a little too rich in blend and price, for folk around here. I thought one day someone, such as yourself or a local lordling, might pass through and ask for something like it!" he told Xix honestly.

"How much have you got?" asked Xix. "Two folds", replied Owen - referring to the wrappers that contained four packets, each packet containing five wads. "I'll take two then!", said Xix. Owen moved a ladder to a high shelf, climbed up and got down a fold. "Both folds", clarified Xix, before Owen made the mistake of opening the fold to remove two wads from a packet. "Ah yes, of course", he said recovering. His mind was racing calculating the size of this windfall purchase. A lucky day indeed and Lyo was not the type to quibble about price or be slow in payment. Owen started whistling a happy tune.

He came down the ladder with the second fold and was about to reach for his quill, when he saw Lyo already had out his little slate and stylus. "Would you like to try this, I saw your interest when I was accounting with Botho. If you make an error, rub it with your finger and then rescribe the figure. A cloth, or a damp rag will clear the slate if you wish to start a fresh.", Xix explained. Owen picked up the stylus and tried it. It was smooth in flow, not scratchy like a quill. He experimented with rubbing-out a figure and then re-entering it. This made him marvel and smile.

"I would like a pair of soft shoes and boots for each of these children too", Xix added. Daffyd and Rhiannon had been sitting on a bench seat, sucking on sweet meats, that Noala had put in their pockets as they'd left the Inne. Her wink of co-conspiracy, had made them smile and immediately like her. The mention of shoes had shocked them both, because they only had the moccasins their mother had made and never thought of their own shoes, let alone new ones.

Owen started whistling again, as he got down some shoes and boots for the children to try on. "Can I wear mine home? Now I mean?", asked Daffyd.

"I imagine so, but one pair at a time", replied Xix smiling.

Daffyd understood that joke - he laughed: "I'm not silly you know!"

Rhiannon was trying out the shoes and boots, cooing with delight, as her brother helped her. Xix moved over to the whistling merchant and whispered: "tally the same for Sarah and her brother, delivering them tomorrow afternoon, if you would. A dress or two - Sarah and Rhiannon, plus the clothes for Daffyd and his uncle would be an idea too." Owen smiled - at the kindness more than the rocketing account. "She's proud and will argue you know", he said. "Bit hard to argue with the wind, isn't it? We've all got appointments to keep, whether we might like to tarry in one place or no", said Xix smiling sadly. Owen understood Lyo would be well on his way by the next afternoon.

"A nice cloak each as well, I think as a final touch", suggested Xix. Owen nodded, marking down four with the stylus and getting a selection for the children to chose from.

This sabotaged Daffyd's best efforts, as he'd almost succeeded in getting Rhiannon to decide on her shoes, when she was distracted by being given a choice to make of cloaks. He shook his head in frustration, then carefully picked the best wearing and sturdiest looking items for himself. Owen was still calculating the tally when he heard the jingle of coins as Xix reached into his pouch. "I won't be a minute", he said, whistling again - then promptly stopped with a sharp intake of breath as a coin was put in front of him. It was a golden sovereign, featuring the distinctive horse of Rohan. He doubted even Botho had twenty crowns to hand at that time of month, which was the value of a golden sovereign and what he would need to give change.

"Take your time Owen and don't worry about the change", said Xix. Owen would have liked to start whistling again, but was flabbergast. He couldn't believe his ears and his heart was skipping. Little wonder Lyo could afford to be so generous with his charges. He could buy the whole Inne today, if he wanted to.

Two more coins clicked down on the counter. Owen stared at the three golden sovereigns. More money than he'd ever though he'd see in one place at one time, in his lifetime.

"One of these is for you Owen, a professional fee - not a gift. The second you will keep as collateral against any unseen circumstances that might befall Sarah and her family, or to underwrite any purchase beyond their means; giving it to them - from me - if it remains in your care, on the day they decide to leave these parts, should such a day come. The third is for these purchases and those ordered, plus what Sarah wishes to buy in way of food, clothing or goods. I fully trust you to keep a precise account and advise Sarah how much she has in credit, should she ask. That is your commission, for the professional fee of one gold sovereign. Watch over her, her kin and her finances. Is it agreed Owen?" asked Xix.

Owen nodded and held out his hand. They shook, sealing the commission. Owen looked at the slate and then handed it to Xix, as it was no longer needed to hurry the calculating of the tally. Xix did not take it. "That's a personal gift from me to you", he said. "I've a spare and I know you really wanted one like it, the moment you saw it".

Just then there was a squeal of laughter from Rhiannon, followed by Daffyd as both children pointed laughing at an animated cloak - with four hairy legs - walking across the floor. Xix leant down and freed poor Roy from the cloak Rhiannon had inadvertently thrown on him. "Right children, quickly make up your minds, if you want to wear these home now; otherwise it's wait until tomorrow. We've Noala waiting for us at the Inne, while I think your mother will start to threat shortly."

Xix's strategy had an immediate effect on Rhiannon's indecision. Faced with the prospect of having to wait, she quickly made her decisions. Conversely - Daffyd and quickly decided his choices at the first opportunity, based on quality and sturdiness. He had his cloak over is arm, was wearing his boots and put his shoes to one side. The other items he had refolded neatly, much to Owen's pleasure - because the boy was "precise" as well as good mannered. Owen found two sackcloth bags and packed the temporarily discarded moccasins, with the shoes. Daffyd wanted to wear his cloak, which among other things - matched the olive grey colour of his boots and shoes. Rhiannon wanted to wear her shoes, putting her cloak, boots and moccasins in the bag Owen kindly provided.

"Thank you for the service", said Daffyd, careful to mind the manners his mother had taught him.

"Thank you too!", followed Rhiannon, reminded by Daffyd.

"A pleasure I'm sure will be repeated again", said Owen smiling and offering the promise they'd be back soon and welcome.

At the door Owen again shock hands with Xix, affirming a trust well placed. As they crossed the road to where Noala waited for them at the entrance to the Inne, packages in hand and some by her side, Owen noticed - as had Noala, and would several others - Daffyd had chosen colouring and form as close as he could get to Lyo's.

He'd even acquired a similar stance, causing both Noala and Owen to smile at the same thought - big and little Lyo crossing the way.

"You can put some of those in your bags, to help Noala", suggest Xix pointing to some of the smaller parcels. He picked up the ham and cask of mead, then the group set off down the lane, with Roy leaping around them.

"Your nice!", Rhiannon informed Noala, which she felt she should say in case Noala didn't know and didn't realize she though so.

"Thank you, Rhiannon. Those are very pretty new shoes!" replied Noala smiling. "I've not had shoes before. Didn't need them until now, when I grew up." She sighed "It's one of those things you do when you're grown-up; wear shoes", she advised all and sundry officiously.

Noala bit her tongue. Xix smiled and Daffyd just shook his head again, wondering how she got away with things he'd always been scolded for.

"How came you to this village?" asked Xix, of Noala. "Ohhh, my adopted guardian died some months back. He had taken me in after my grandparents perished in a forest fire. Once he was gone, there was nothing left there to hold me, or that I cared for, so I came north searching...."

"Fangorn is a long way off. You've traveled a long way - 'searching' - as you put it" smiled Xix

Noala looked at him again. She already knew he was of the old blood, because she could see in his manner and strong aura, as were the traces in these children. She recognized that they had Elven blood and their foreheads displayed vaguely familiar runes, seemingly visible only to those who could recognize them; but she could not understand what these meant, as she'd lost her parents and never been taught. Instead she relied on her blood and intuition, plus small things she learnt during her travels.

She could not pick the race or tribe of Lyo. One of the old blood definitely - the line of the true kings of men (a ranger of Aragorn's race?), or perhaps a shape changer? He knew her and could place her, so he was very much more than what he seemed. Mr. Lyo was just the sort of person Noala had been seeking, because he obviously knew of, or came in contact with those Noala sought.

"What have you lost?" asked Daffyd. "Our dad got lost, but we'll find him again".

"I suppose you could say - sort of like your dad - I've lost my family and I'm trying to find them again", explained Noala.

"That's why we stay here for dad", said Rhiannon. "He might not be able to find us again, if we moved", the little girl explained

"Are you going to say and wait for you family, or move on to see if they're elsewhere?" enquired Daffyd, setting a tack that Xix saw, but Noala did not.

"I'm really not sure. That's why I've stopped here for a while to decide", she said.

'Sprung' thought Xix and waited for Daffyd.

"Perhaps you could find a new family here?" Daffyd suggested in a vague manner.

Xix called to Roy and patted the dog, as a distraction in case he should start laughing. Belle came running up the lane, followed by the two younger dogs falling over each other in celebration of mutual silliness, as they tumbled through the gate. Belle immediately sniffed the children, their footwear and Daffyd's cloak, before satisfying herself all was well, then running to Roy.

Sarah was standing in the doorway, keeping an eye on her cooking, Avvon still sitting in the afternoon sun soaking-up as much of it as he could, singing little verses that he recalled Sarah liked. Sarah had noticed the

packages, not sure what to say to Lyo about his generosity, then she had noticed the cloak Daffyd was wearing - because he looked like a little Lyo from a distance - then saw their new footwear. She bit her lip and wrung her hands, trying to formulate some kind of speech, she knew she'd probably never make. Sarah recognized Noala as the fair girl from the village, but she'd only seen her twice and knew little of her. Avvon could not see her from his position sitting stretched in the sun, until she walked through the gate.

Avvon's eyes locked with those of Noala, his little verse catching in his throat. "Mum - we've had sweet meats and strawberry cordials. Look at my new shoes ... I'm grown-up now." Rhiannon gushed with excitement, running to Avvon. "Look at my new shoes", she demanded, then reached into the little packet. "These are sweet meats, that Noala gave us. I saved some for you and mummy", she said offering the packet to Avvon. "Well don't you look like a fine lady, in your new shoes!", said Avvon quickly recovering.

"This is Noala from the Inne. She kindly helped me with the goods Botho made in exchange for the treatment. Jake's fine now. Just a bit of shock, that was easily fixed", explained Xix

"I know some magic ... not real magic, but it looks like magic!" announced Daffyd proudly. "I might show you after supper", he offered magnanimously - then acquired his most serious air, just as Sarah was getting ready to say something about Lyo's generosity.

"Noala has lost her family and can't find them", he said looking at Avvon and his mother gravely. "I think that now you're better - uncle Avvon - you'll need a good wife, so you should marry Noala", said the little boy, pleased with his solution.

Avvon choked on the sweet meat he'd been eating and began to flush. Sarah quickly put her hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh and rushed inside to check on her bubbling pot. Noala stood there blushing and looking at her feet. Xix strode past her and relieved her of her packages, taking them inside to Sarah. "Excellent idea, very well thought-out", he said to Daffyd, patting his head as he walked past. "Now as man of the house you should offer your guest a seat and drink, as thanks for her help in carrying our parcels home!".

Daffyd nodded, pleased at the praise from Mr. Lyo and quick to make good his duty as man of the house.

Daffyd scurried out with a stool and mug, then when to the well to pull fresh water. "Please have a refreshment and chair", he offered Noala, then nudged Rhiannon and pointed to her packet. "Would you like a sweet meat? Noala" asked Rhiannon, offering her prized packet.

"Thank you Rhiannon, and thank you Daffyd ... for your manners and kindness", she replied - casting a side-glance at Avvon and noting he was biting his thumb knuckle to keep from laughing - though his eyes danced and there were tears at the edges.

Inside Sarah was giggling and trying to scold Xix, but she couldn't regain her composure, nor stop giggling. The look on Avvon's face, when Daffyd had detailed his solution for Noala's lost family, was something she was never likely to see again. Avvon was thunder-struck and she'd never seen him so lost for words in any situation - notwithstanding his recent years of illness.

"Poor Noala", she said giggling "Now you really shouldn't have bought these things. I honestly can't repay you!" Sarah continued, trying to be serious.

"I was paid in kind, but I travel light and could not carry trade goods on the road; so I just converted the goods to fare that might be useful for you. Besides that Avvon will need things now, which as you say: 'you could not afford'; and you must never part with your necklace", explained Xix.

Sarah saw the sense of this and was saddened by the reminder Lyo would leave shortly to continue on his way. "I expect it might get a bit crowded in here anyway..." continued Xix "... if Daffyd is successful in his new profession as a matchmaker".

This set Sarah off giggling again.

"I suppose I'd better distract the children, as I've a suspicion the eventual outcome of this little meeting was determined, before Daffyd so bluntly suggested it. You saw them lock eyes, I expect - sisterly concern and all that?" asked Xix with a smile.

"Yes - I saw the looks, but Daffyd certainly did something - I'm not sure if he's thrown oil or water on that fire!" she said with a wide smile, then a wistful look as she recalled the first time she had come face to face with Gwnlyn and fallen madly in love with him. That reminded her of something she wished to ask Lyo.

"Lyo ... is it possible that the Orc poison might have a permanent affect on Avvon?" she asked as an opening gambit. Xix thought he could see where Daffyd inherited his particular style of sideways-forward-sideways-forward debating skills. "Yes, but it depends on what you mean by permanent effects and affects..." said Xix, drawing out what he already knew she was on her mind. "Is it possible that he might be sort-of 'touched', I mean like his imagination and imagining things or perhaps not being too stable in planning ahead?", she asked with difficulty.

"Well if the blade or poison did do serious remedial - that's negative - damage, the first thing it would show in is his sense of humour - that would be gone - and the second in selfishness - he would not care to think of you or the children. That is a kind of damage, in that the evil has won in those two areas and destroyed the first essences of good over bad."

"You will agree Avvon has lost neither and I firmly believe the poison may have killed him in time, but never succeeded in corrupting him. The good inside both of you is too strong." Xix explained.

"How about just telling me what he said, that has caused this concern; then let me see if I can decide what it means and if its good or bad!", he said putting a kindly arm around her shoulders.

Sarah bit her lip, and then let out what she had bottled-up inside her:

"Avvon is not only convinced Gwnlyn is alive, but insisting he is already on his way home. That's not all either. Avvon says we have to leave here and go to the Ghost forest, by Summer's end! How could he know anything of what has happened, while he was in a trance and why does he suddenly want to take us all to the Ghost forest?" she pleaded.

"So you want to know if he's bonkers, or has the sight?" said Xix candidly, with a smile on his face.

Sarah giggled. "Not 'bonkers', I just meant if he might 'take a while recovering his senses'.. "

"Bonkers in other words", said Xix laughing. "Don't worry, he's not 'bonkers' at all. As for now having second sight, that is highly likely. You see the fight with the poisons of the dark, is actually fought on the fringes of the nether world. The longer the fight goes on, the longer the person's spirit has, to become used to seeing things in, and acclimatizing to, that shadow realm. Your brother has been there a long time, longer than any Orc-blade poisoned I've known - under my hand - and lived. The only way I can explain it, is that you have old blood in your veins. Quite frankly I think you've both got Elven blood in you; which is why I insist you must not part with that necklace, incidentally. Anyway - I would be more surprised if Avvon didn't have second sight now, than if he did. He'll also be able to see better at night and in half light, but that is something to welcome - not fear." said Xix seriously.

"As for what goes on around people in trances - some say they do know what happens about them, in part or important chunks, stored deep within themselves. I don't know, as I've not experienced such a loss of awareness. If Avvon insists Gwnlyn is alive and returning, I would bet on it. Going to the Ghost forest? ... Well you asked about elves earlier today and I said I thought some dwelt up that way. I do know of another apothecary up that way - which would help me with something. "

Xix looked out the door to where the children were showing their new possessions to Avvon and Noala, excitedly relating the events at the Inne and in Owen's store.

"I must leave tomorrow to keep other appointments, which may make you sad, but you knew must be anyway.

You are too polite to ask of what is in your heart, but I know you would like Daffyd to have chances you could not, so would like to see him apprenticed - and yes he has all the makings of an apothecary - he is a natural."

Sarah smiled at this, with pride, and was glad Lyo had noticed what she had been too timid to broach, because she was already too deep in the kind man's debt to her way of thinking - freely given or not.

"I cannot take him as an apprentice, but my colleague near the Ghost forest would be happy to ... and if you're heading that way, I can arrange it as I pass through in coming days. He must first have a basic understanding of the old writing and runes, which you should be able to teach him now, and have done by the time Avvon has suggested you leave for those lands. All in all, it would workout fairly well - whether Avvon is right about your husband's return or no. While I think you should fully trust your brother's farther sight on things, it must be faced that Gwnlyn has been gone two full Summers. If he has not returned by this high Summer, you must face the reality that he is unlikely too, and start rebuilding your life. I am sorry to say this, but it is true.", he said.

"Thank you for your honesty, Lyo. You have been good to us and true - perhaps too much so, but a debt to you is something I'd rather, than a debt to any other. Yes - I believe we have a little of the old blood and I love the songs and stories of the elves, so perhaps the family rumors are true. What you say of my necklace seems to prove that all the more, and I would dearly love to see Daffyd well placed in his adult life. I will follow you advice, as it seems to be what I really wanted anyway. Perhaps Gwnlyn may not return, and you're right - we cannot stay waiting forever, at the cost of the children's future - hard though that may be to decide." she sighed.

"Well I'm going to distract those two, however briefly, to give Avvon and Noala a brief chance to be alone. Excuse me won't you!", said Xix

Sarah gave Xix a grateful hug and a peck on the cheek, as he turned for the door. "We'll miss you!", she said with a tear in her eye, then went back to unwrapping the packages.

"Oi - you two. I've a mind to show you something in the vegetable patch", Xix said calling the children; "... and then I must walk young Noala back to her Inne, because your uncle's a bit weak for that just yet."

"Is it hiding somewhere?" called Rhiannon running across to search the tilled ground and trying to see what new excitement could have escaped her notice.

Xix gave Avvon a wink and strode off after the girl, Daffyd by his side looking serious. "They'll make a good couple", said Daffyd gravely.

"Yes I agree", said Xix, suppressing a smile and keeping his face solemn - "...but they might need a bit of time to order their lives, a year or so, perhaps. Your uncle needs to recover his strength if he's to support a wife, and you've got to find your Dad first too!"

"I agree that Uncle Avvon could not build a home just yet - even with me helping !", Daffyd acknowledged, - "... but I was thinking with her experience, Noala might be a help to find Dad faster", he explained.

"Good thinking, that", said Xix, once again seeing the little boy's chest swell with pride, "- but I've an idea Avvon might not need too much help on that score, now he's better and with you to help him".

The little boy's bottom lip trembled, but he maintained his serious composure. "Yes, it would be useful to have you here to assist, but I expect there are many sick people waiting along the road and I'm sure we can manage without you". There were a tears in his eyes, but he held firm having faced his immediate focus of anguish.

"It's very hard to have to leave people you grow to love, to help others further along the way..." said Xix. "It is something you will have to do - you know; but you must remember that there are other uncle Avvons and people like your mum, just waiting for you to arrive and help them."

"If you never arrive, their prayers and dreams will never be answered. Remember that!" he explained gently. "Now - I've something important to show you." said Xix.

"There is nothing here", complained Rhiannon.

"Isn't there?", asked Xix. "I want you both to pick up some soil and hold it to your nose, like this", he said demonstrating. "What does it smell like?"

The two children followed his example. "Kind of stale", answered Daffyd.

"Yes" agreed Rhiannon. "Sort of musky like dead straw, but mainly it smells like soil! So what!", she said, not particularly impressed and looking to see the dirt was not clinging to her new shoes.

"Is this like smelling the water at the Inne?" asked Daffyd, quick to understand and reawakening Rhiannon's interest.

"Yes - exactly like that", said Xix, pleased. "Now add a little of this to the soil in your hands, and tell me if the smell changes". He extracted a little pouch with grey powder that looked like ash, then sprinkled some on the soil in each child's hands.

"That makes it smell fresh!", said Rhiannon, impressed at the magical change she had just witnessed. Daffyd nodded his head in agreement, concentrating on a little of the grey powder on his wrist. "What is the magic powder?", asked Rhiannon.

"I think it's not magic. I think it's ash from the hearth!", he offered with measured assurance.

"And you're right!", said Xix smiling. "Just old fire ash?", questioned Rhiannon. "yes - 'just old fire ash'...", Xix replied.

"Arrrhhh - I've seen Gregor put ash in his smelting pot to make the metal cleaner, and ground-up charcoal too. This is sort-of the same isn't it?" said Daffyd, totally absorbed.

"But why? What does it do?", protested Rhiannon.

"Well ash is actually what we call a mineral, like some of my special powders are other kinds of minerals. When they are mixed with other things, they change each other. Ash and yellow cake, mixed with ground charcoal is what we make fireworks with".

"I've never had a yellow cake", said Rhiannon thinking about cakes and sweet meats.

Daffyd had seen yellow cake in Gregor's smithy. Not for the first time that day just shook his head, but noticed when he looked at Mr. Lyo he winked - indicating the explanation had been solely for Daffyd's benefit. This made him proud indeed and feel very important.

"Sometimes soil or water gets dirty or tired over time, but if you add a piece of charcoal to the water it will become cleaner and if we add ash to the soil it gets cleaner - does that make sense to you?", asked Xix. Daffyd understood and nodded. Rhiannon wasn't sure, but she thought she got it and nodded because Daffyd had.

"If the soil was cleaner, the grain and vegetables would grow better - wouldn't they?", said Daffyd having worked-out the point of this lesson. "Yes", answered Xix. "We would get more and they should be bigger or healthier too!", he said elaborating on his theory, then casting a watchful eye - one eyebrow raised - on Xix, to see him smiling and nodding in agreement. "Right again!", said Xix.

Daffyd nodded his head in understanding, looking speculatively up and down the furrows, then across towards fields and meadows of other holdings around the village.

"It wouldn't take much ... just a sprinkling along the furrows", he said in careful calculation - " ... and I expect others might think it's magic or special medicine, if they didn't know about minerals", he added.

"There's a dragon!", called Rhiannon pointing at white-grey clouds in the western sky. Sure enough there was a

cloud shaped like a dragon in full flight. "Perhaps that's the dragon Jake saw!", she said

Daffyd and Xix both watched the cloud with Rhiannon. "Could be something like that", said Xix. Daffyd looked and nodded in agreement, but then it could have been something else too, he thought. He was sure Jake had seen a dragon. He felt it in his bones, but what was important was not what was seen, so much as what people thought had been seen. That could work two ways - like the trick with the sweet meat. He filed that away, and looked-up to see Lyo smiling encouragingly at him, seeming to give a barely perceptible nod of agreement.

"Come along then, time I walked Noala back, or Mr. Botho might get angry at her for taking too long", said Xix. Daffyd walked back across the furrowed ground deep in thought, more about Lyo and the future, than the lesson he'd just received. He had already worked-out that if he worked furrow by furrow, there would be enough ash from four days fires to do the complete vegetable patch and he'd start tomorrow. After that he could perhaps earn some coin for his mother by helping neighbouring farms, using "magic" taught by their guest.

Rhiannon had run ahead to Avvon and Noala, stroking Cy who'd taken-up residence in Noala's lap and was playfully swatting at Belle's wagging tail.

"We'll meet again, by and by, won't we?", said Daffyd instinctively knowing this. "Yes", said Xix smiling. "What else do you see, if you think hard?" - Daffyd? Daffyd's brow wrinkled in concentration, then changed to a look of surprise and pure joy. He started to say something, but Mr. Lyo cut over him: "... some surprises are best kept a surprise, and how do you explain 'just knowing' something?" Mr. Lyo said. Daffyd nodded in understanding, but could not wipe the big smile from his face.

"Past time to walk you back, I think", said Xix to Noala, as they came to them. Sarah came to the door and smiled at Noala. "Thank you for helping, and looking after the children when they were at the Inne", she said. Noala smiled "until another day then", she replied. Avvon stood fidgeting - Sarah was suppressing a giggle as she watched her brother, then laughed openly seeing Rhiannon struggling with the bulk of Cy, trying to carry the big cat inside.

"... another day, then", mumbled Avvon looking up at Noala and then back to his feet. They waved from the gate and then started back up the lane. Xix humming a little tune as they walked.

"Lovely family!" offered Noala

"Yes!" agreed Xix non-committedly and resuming his tune.

"The children are gifted", she said. "... you can see the elven blood in all of them."

"Like I can see it in you", replied Xix, still not helping. He began to sing a song that pulled at her heart, but she couldn't decipher the words - though she instinctively knew she should be able to.

"I can't remember", she said in a small voice, torn by anguish.

"I know, but you will", he answered

"When?", she asked pleading.

"Starting tomorrow, when you leave here with us, and resume your journey", said Xix

"Then I'll not stay, and marry Avvon?" she said, feeling a sudden deep loss.

"The former is true, but the latter you already know in your heart of hearts", Xix replied.

She thought a while and then smiled contentedly. "Is Cy your familiar?" she asked wryly.

"Perhaps, but you'll learn more of Cy along the way", he replied smiling.

Xix saw Noala to the door of the Inne, said good evening and then turned to go. He paused at the end of the veranda, planting a thoughts on minds inside the Inne, then made his way back down the lane humming his tune. He heard the clank of hammer on anvil and saw the sparks jumping from the entrance of the smith's workshop. Xix wandered in and talked with Gregor for a while. The two men shook hands when he eventually came out. Bidding Gregor farewell, Xix continued down the lane, in gathering dusk.

That evening Gwennith and Botho had a terrible tiff. Gwennith was convinced poor Botho had designs on the serving wench Noala, and insisted she must leave. Botho spoke of this with Owen and Gregor, who both laughed at the thought; and tried to make alternative arrangements for the young girl, rather than put her out on the road. What had happened was explained to Noala, who surprised all by saying she had already decided to continue her search for her lost family, and felt safe travelling to the next town with the apothecary - Mr. Lyo.

They agreed this was a good idea, though all were very sad she was leaving - not the least because she was always a sight to make the blood tingle and caused more than a few to tarry in the Inne, in the hope they might win her favour. In the longer term it was Gwennith who suffered most, because she had to do much of the serving work herself for three summers, because Botho refused to get another serving girl after she had accused him of being unfaithful. Gwennith could never really understand what possessed her to suggest such a thing.

As this happened around the same time Jake had been struck with dragon fright, it became a popular joke that he'd actually seen his sister-in-law in the moonlight. For years after the nickname "Jake's dragon" stuck to Gwennith like a leech. Despite this, most believed Jake had seen a dragon - because of the wolves, or their disappearance - to be precise.

After that night, not a wolf was seen in those parts for many ten-years. Most locals concluded the only thing that could scare wolves that badly was a dragon, so Jake remained a popular local hero - even if he couldn't quite remember what he saw and had fainted when he saw it. The village itself - free of some fears - became a little more neighbourly and friendly to strangers; especially Botho with his two new partners, Owen and Gregor. They went out of their ways to help the poor and destitute who passed through the village, but seemed to prosper marvelously anyway - or perhaps because of it.

In time the village prospered, not the least because of its friendly way towards strangers and above average good crops. They had a strange practice of ploughing in ash in their fields and taking care where refuse was dumped, but the best a new comer could get in the way of explanations was:

"Ahhh ... was an idea of young Daffyd's";

... which was also the only explanation given for one or two other odd practices, that always seemed to work.

Eventually the village grew to a township, which the key town council members - Botho, Owen and Gregor - insisted be called Wormintown, then Wormington, on account of a night - long ago - they claimed a dragon was seen in their village. A statute of a man standing on a bridge, confronting a dragon, was erected in Jake's honour - well before he was even sick, let alone dead and buried. Jake became a popular local hero, even though no one could get him to accept a free jug of mead.

Time also allows the gathering of small threads of information, which come together to be what people call the wisdom of age. The Wormington Inne was a big place, with an extended veranda that looked over a small park containing the statue of Jake and the dragon. Most days Botho, Owen and Gregor sat at their table on the end of the veranda, smoking their pipes, discussing various weighty matters, locally and further afield. Periodically they could be overheard talking about purity and precision, or dragons, medicines and magics. The latter being the kind of weighty matters, most would expect respected town elders to be well acquainted with.

On occasion questions might be asked by important strangers or merchants, passing through the town, which would draw responses like:

"Well you see there's science, medicines and magic. You can't tell between them, unless you know som'int about 'em!";

or,

"What the eyes choose to see, is not always what's actually there - like wizards for example. Can you see them by how they appear and what they do, or by some peculiar signs or habits?"

The latter was always followed by a knowing nod, and the three would blow small smoke rings in the air, or tap their pipes and refill them.

Most put this down to some eccentricity the three shared, but could few could ever quite work out what it meant.

Owen's mercantile was a big three building place that had its own landing, for offloading cargo from boats and supplied villages all over the district. There was a locked cupboard in the main office, which contained two wraps of rare "riverbank" pipe tobacco. The product in question appeared on all the stock holding tallies, but none of Owen's staff had a key to open the cupboard.

"If someone comes asking for 'riverbank' - call Mr. Owen to serve them", was the instruction to all new staff. Most put it down to some eccentricity of their employer's, but as he could not be faulted in any other way - except his insistence on 'being precise' - none complained.

Putting aside certain small peculiarities in their behaviour, usually attributed to some shared joke of years long gone, none could deny that Botho, Gregor and Owen were well known throughout the district and beyond - specifically for the purity and precision of their respective crafts.

Botho had a secret for making mead and brandy-wine, that made it particularly clear and mellow. Gregor produced some of the finest, strongest and purest alloys, when alone in the smelter - using his own special additives. Owen's produce had a reputation for freshness and quality; while his inventories, a reputation for their accuracy and fairness. It was considered prudent to glean what information one could from them - obscure though it may be - simply because they were the most successful business men in the history of the district.

Wormington prospered and was known as a friendly town to visit.

#### 4. A Farewell, a Find and a Reunion.

Xix came through the gate and was greeted by Roy, the stars starting to come out in the darkening eastern sky as the western sky moved through hues of orange and pink. Rhiannon ran to the door and called "Quick - watch Daffyd doing your magic."

Xix watched as Daffyd encouraged his mother to throw another sweet meat in the air, which he made disappear - then reappear from Belle's ear (Daffyd's personal variation).

Sarah and Avvon said it was amazing magic, for about the twentieth time that evening - relieved Lyo had returned so they might distract Daffyd by having supper.

It was more a banquet for that household than supper, because they had broth and ham and oatmeal cakes (that Sarah had cooked that afternoon), as well as the sweet meats in the package from the Inne. There was warm mead too and smoked fish - far more than had graced that poor table at any time during their stay. Best of all was having Avvon sitting there eating with them, by Sarah's side, as the two children stared at the fare with excited expectation.

"Now don't try to eat too much!", Sarah warned the children, specifically directing her gaze at Rhiannon. "You're choc-a-block full of sweet meats and if you try to eat too much more, you'll just be sick". Fortunately both Daffyd and Rhiannon were quite aware of how full they felt, allowing them to temper their eating. They were also well worn-out from all the day's events - mentally as well as physically - both feeling rather drowsy.

"I had a word with Gregor the smith, on my way back", said Xix after finishing a small serve of broth and contemplating one of Sarah's oatmeal cakes. "He says he'd be happy to show Daffyd a few of his trade secrets, if Daffyd would be interested and maybe give him a small wage for any help he might be on the odd day".

Daffyd looked up with interest and then at his mother. "Would you like that? Daffyd", she asked, both surprised at the offer and happy at the opportunity to perhaps get a few extra coins from a totally unexpected source. "Daffyd and Rhiannon impressed a lot of people with their good manners and quick minds, today", Xix added, as much for Sarah's pride as that of her children.

"It would be great!", said Daffyd, who already liked hanging about the smithy as much of the time as he could, without getting scolded by Mr. Gregor or his Mother, "... but I'm still going to be an apothecary!", he emphasized, almost getting his tongue around the tricky professional term.

"I expect a knowledge of mixing and working metals, is helpful in Apothecary - wouldn't it be Lyo?", Avvon asked Xix. "Well I'd say crucial - a very good opportunity, I think", Xix answered.

Daffyd beamed. "Remember what we've talked about with purity and purifying minerals, Daffyd. It works with metals, as much as for water and soil", Xix added. Daffyd nodded, still smiling at the thought of actually being inside the smithy - without getting into trouble for being there - and picking up knowledge to help him towards his adult dream.

"I'll be able to earn a little too, to put food on the table, until uncle Avvon is fully recovered", Daffyd said in his most responsible 'man of the house' voice.

Sarah smiled lovingly at her devoted son. "Yes, you're a fine provider Daffyd. You and Rhiannon are more than any lucky mother could wish for".

Rhiannon had been falling asleep at the table, but smiled and yawned when she heard the loving praise of her mother. "Perhaps it's time for bed now you two?", Sarah said to the children, which they accepted without a squeak, as both were battling to keep awake.

Rhiannon hugged and kissed her mother, then uncle Avvon and then Xix ... without a blink, followed by Daffyd, who paused at Xix; because he wasn't sure if it was correct professional behaviour to hug Mr. Lyo. The little boy

inside won. He hugged Xix and went to the pallet with his sister, carefully removing his boots and placing them under the pallet, then doing the same with the shoes Rhiannon had kicked off and left lying.

"How is the strength going, Avvon?", Xix asked. "Better than I thought possible. I think I might have even walked Noala back to the Inne, but I wasn't sure and thought perhaps you might have something to discuss with her", Avvon answered. "I've had a fair amount of sleep recently too", he added smiling at his sister, as she cuffed his ear.

"Well it's good you're conserving your strength, because I think you might need it in the next few days", said Xix.

"Oh ... In what way?" asked Avvon with bemused concern. "Ummm.. I organized a few new shingles for the roof, because I think it might rain a little tomorrow afternoon or night. Nothing like a bit of exercise to get those muscles back in trim again!" Xix joked.

Avvon laughed. "I think I might even have managed that today. I actually feel young and vigorous - sort of ...", he tried to explain.

"You sure that wasn't your response to Noala", Sarah teased, really enjoying the opportunity to talk and joke with adults, in her own home and so much at ease.

Avvon flushed as Sarah score another bulls-eye, but was briefly saved by Lyo's bedside manner.

"Your body and health are all there in full, but it's out of practice and weakened in terms of not having practiced co-ordination, so it will take a day or two to get the feel back of many things you take for granted or do automatically. I suspect the 'vigor' is the mirthras. It rejuvenates - especially if used in Spring - so that will be having an impact ... though perhaps Sarah is right about a reawakening of your libido!", he added with a laugh. Sarah giggled and Avvon flushed again.

"Unfortunately Noala is leaving with me tomorrow!", Xix continued, but seeing the cloud pass over Avvon's face said: "Don't worry, its not that kind of arrangement. Noala needs to find herself, as much as anything else. She was orphaned at a young age and needs to answer some questions about herself and heritage, but I suspect you'll be seeing a lot of each other in the future!"

"I intend to take her to some friends for a while, so she can find her answers before you meet again!"

"How long will that be?" asked Avvon bleakly.

Xix looked at both, paused and then said, "On the road to the Ghost forest, before you reach the Grey Mountain passes".

"Then we will leave by mid-Summer eve!" said Sarah, looking up she added "Will ...?" but left the question unasked. Xix looked directly into her eyes and said, "Yes to both, Sarah".

Sarah looked back with joy in her eyes, then asked quietly:

"Who are you Lyo? Are you the dragon lord?", toying with a thought she had since he insisted she place the pearl on Avvon's tongue.

"I am who I said I was - Eylofren - and no I'm not the dragon lord, nor a dragon", said Xix, his eyes warmly burning golden, in the reflected light of the cooking fire.

"Did Jake really see a dragon?", asked Sarah persisting and exploring things she'd talked over with Avvon earlier in the day.

"Yes", said Xix frankly. "You needed his help and paid his due, so he came here."

"I felt his power", said Avvon

"Did you?" questioned Xix.

"Yes - I could not overcome the evil I was fighting, but it couldn't crush me - then I remember a great light confronting the darkness, even feeling the darkness quail before it, then it was torn away leaving only light and freshness", said Avvon with distant eyes.

"Interesting perspective", said Xix with genuine interest.

Xix took out his pipe and moved to the seat by the fire, lighting his pipe and blowing smoke rings into the air, waiting for the next question.

"Why?", said Sarah.

"Why do you stop to help strangers?" countered Xix. "Accident, fate, destiny? All that really matters is what is. You benefit from helping others. Can you say that the dragon or I might not benefit from helping you? What is received isn't what's important, is it? What is important is the giving and the reasons for giving."

"But what could we give you?", she asked.

"At least four very dear and new friends", answered Xix smiling gently.

Avvon nodded.

Sarah looked at Avvon, then asked the last thing she really needed to know.

"Will he and Noala marry?"

"Yes", smiled Xix, "And it will be quite a party indeed. I wouldn't miss it", he added.

Sarah's eyes twinkled at the double promise. "You still haven't answered my question properly - about who you are!", she scolded in good humour.

"Yes I have", Xix countered.

"Might one surmise there is more in a name that meets the eye, or that it will become clearer as we go along?", asked Avvon guessing the key was the name itself.

"One might indeed!", smiled Xix, golden eyes beaming with pleasure. "I'm of a mood to answer Sarah, good food and wonderful company - you might as well ask", he added knowing she'd thought of other concerns.

"What happened to him and is he disabled or disfigured?", she asked referring to her lost husband.

Cy had jumped up and was sitting in her lap, licking her fingers as she stroked him absent-mindedly and focused her attention on Lyo. He was purring loudly, louder still as Avvon slipped him a piece of ham, while his sister was looking at Lyo. Sisters become mothers and mothers miss nothing. She gave him a look, then smiled and gave the purring cat another slither of ham.

"Well it seems he found the treasure horde he was always searching for, but it was guarded by something a little worse than a troll. He was entranced and placed on a cold slab, actually exhibited as a 'burglar' of all things! As for injuries - being away from his loving wife and children are injuries enough I expect. He has no others." said Xix

"You found him then?" asked Sarah.

"No, the dragon lord did. He knows most things that move over and under the earth. I believe he's taken quite a shine to you Sarah, and Avvon, but especially your children." Xix answered.

"That's why the water tastes cleaner and the crops have suddenly grown better, and our luck has changed!", she said, patting Cy as he lay purring in her lap.

"On the whole, yes", said Xix.

"We owe you both so much. I wish we could find some way to show our gratitude and appreciation", said Sarah humbly.

Avvon nodded in agreement - "But how do you thank a dragon?", he added

"Perhaps you already have!", said Xix distantly, contemplating the fire.

"But I haven't seen or met the dragon lord", said Sarah, trying to understand why a creature she'd never met had decided it liked her and her family.

"Maybe ..." said Xix, lost in contemplation of the glowing embers of the fire. He blew a few more smoke rings the said: "Maybe the dragon lord feels kindness to all creatures, or through all creatures. Might keep that question for the dragon lord yourself one day - if you should meet him?"

Sarah pulled up the purring cat and hugged him. "I hope he's fluffy and cuddly like Cy", she said girlishly. Avvon snorted at the thought as the big cat purred even more loudly.

Lyo just said "Maybe..." again and left it at that. He seemed to fall asleep, not really surprising to Sarah - as mystical or not - Lyo must be exhausted from the day and night before.

She quietly motioned Avvon to his bed, but he indicated she should have the bed and he would sleep with the children.

Sarah carried the big cat to the bed with her, and slept soundly - free of fear or worry - for the first time in her life. She dreamt, as did Avvon, they met the dragon lord - a silvery shimmering light - and were told: 'he would always watch over them and their families. Not to fear evil, sickness nor ill luck'. 'The children especially, Daffyd and Rhiannon, as well as their children's children, would always share his good will' ... the dream assured them.

Sarah awoke to loud tapping at her door and hearing her name called by the merchant - Owen. It was warm, the sun high, indicating they'd obviously slept late into mid morning. Avvon and the children stirred now too, similarly roused by the visitor. Sarah quickly dressed and went to the door, hearing Rhiannon calling Cy, then asking Avvon where the cat might be hiding.

Owen was standing there with one of his store helpers, holding a number of packages. Behind him was Mr. Botho trying to shepherd a rooster and two chickens - without a great deal of success - while in the background Gregor supervised the stacking of some shingles and delivery of some other assorted packages.

"Good morning! Sarah", said Owen with a broad smile. "Where do you want these put, and I think Botho might do with a hand from the youngsters, to control those dratted chickens."

Rhiannon ran out, distracted by the prospect of much going on that required her urgent involvement and immediately set off after one of the chickens, with a squeal of delight. The rooster and Botho were having a test of wills at the hedge, while the third chicken had taken-up a comfortable viewing position on the faggot heap.

Sarah was at a loss for words. Avvon wandered out, still a little unsteady on his legs, stretching and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Rather than ask questions - he was only half-awake anyway - he simply walked over to where Gregor and some village boys were sorting out their deliveries. "Nice morning, can I help with that?", he asked.

"Ye m's be yon Sarah's br'thr - Mahstr Avvon! I be Gregor tha smithy", said Gregor extending his big hand to Avvon.

Daffyd walked out wearing his boots and looked sadly, walking to the gate ignoring those around him and gazed out along the road to where it merged into the distant landscape.

"They've gone!", he said quietly, in a sad small voice, but his words carried through the bustle and noise impacting on those gathered in the yard.

Sarah turned and saw that the staff, as well as Lyo's travel bag were indeed gone. Rhiannon ran inside to confirm Daffyd's words, then said:

"Well that was rude - not saying good-bye!", and then ran out to resume her pursuit of the chicken. Botho had by now grabbed the rooster and managed to get it to stay - on a slightly higher perch than the chicken - atop the faggot heap. He contemplated joining Rhiannon in her pursuit, but decided she seemed to have the upper hand and had far fresher legs than he.

Sarah looked sadly at Avvon, then Daffyd, a small hint of tears in her eyes.

"My Lyo asked us to give you his best wishes", said Owen gently. "We saw him off early this morning, with young Noala, who is going with him to try to find her family. He said, especially, that he didn't like to have difficult good byes and that Daffyd would be able to explain. He is a good man and we thought he'd take her safely on her way - perhaps more safely than with most others" He glanced at Botho and gave an obvious wink, which caused Botho's face to darken briefly. Gregor let out a snort and laughed with a big bellow - the whispered something to Avvon, which caused him to laugh too.

"Seems to be a few dragons around these parts!", said Avvon to Botho with a smile. Gregor let out another roar of laughter, Owen chuckled and Botho grinned at Avvon's suggestion.

Daffyd nodded, trying to assume his most serious air - though tears ran down his cheeks. "it is hard to be an apoth'ry", he stated solemnly. "You grow to love people you help, but there's always another little boy or girl, and mum or dad, or uncle or aunt, just waiting over the hill, wishing you were there. It is very hard, but you must get to those who need your help, leaving behind those who don't!" With a sniff he marched back up the small front path and went to clean out the fireplace.

"Well said young man!" said Owen, as Daffyd passed. "Very much to the point and precise indeed" Tears were freely running down Sarah's cheeks, but her face and smile showed the tremendous pride she felt for her son, as well as appreciation of the thoughts he had expressed.

"There are some new things here for you and Mr. Avvon, along with cloth and tread from Mr. Botho - Sarah. Where would you like them put?" asked Owen - wisely knowing she needed some distraction, just at that moment.

As Sarah and Owen sorted the parcels inside, Daffyd let out a sudden cry - initially causing Sarah to think he had burnt himself on some still burning embers. "Mum - quick, look what I've found", he called out, scrapping through the ash with a slightly blackened stick.

His urgency caused Sarah and Owen to rush over to the hearth, just in time to see him tentatively touch then pick up two bright objects "Look - it's alright, they're not hot at all" he said, stretching his hand to his mother.

There was a little ash dust on his face with trails from recent tears and more ash on his hands, but in his outstretched palm were two small moon-silver coloured rings, with intricate designs on the boss.

Sarah took one, admiring and dusted it, then showed it to Owen, standing at her side.

Rhiannon had been running past the doorway when Daffyd called out, helped by the two younger dogs, in hot pursuit of the single-minded hen. Botho, Avvon, Gregor and the village boys helping were mostly watching the entertaining spectacle with large grins on their faces. She stopped - distracted - running inside the cottage to see what Daffyd had found. The three men came in behind her, squeezing into the now crowded cottage.

"Amazing!", said Owen simply.

Sarah looked at the finely wrought rings - feeling cool, but warm in her hand - and then handed one back to Daffyd.

"I think this was intended for you!", she said.

Rhiannon struggled to see. "Show me too!", she demanded.

Sarah turned and smiled. "I think this one was meant for you, Rhiannon", she added; giving the second ring to the little girl.

"A going away present!" squealed Rhiannon - forgetting her new shoes and clothes, putting the tinny ring on her finger. "Well that's proper. I thought Mr. Lyo might have forgotten!"

Sarah put her hand over her mouth to cover a smile and looked at her grinning guests in apology, seeing similarly suppressed smiles returning hers.

"It is a dragon, with a rune in it!", said Daffyd, showing-off his new ring to the adults, so they could admire it. "It fits perfectly, and that's Mr. Lyo's mark in the middle", he added, going to the cutting board to demonstrate the charcoal mark still visible on the underside.

"Mine has a little bird and cat in the middle", said Rhiannon, showing the tiny figures within the dragon boss. "I'm going to look at it in the sun", she squealed, running outside with excitement.

"A most impressive gift", said Botho reflectively, looking to Sarah, Owen, Gregor and Avvon, with an understanding dawning in his eyes - reflected in those of his companions.

"Aie - thae be of tha fin'st mak'n too", observed Gregor in admiration. "Be ard f' a mun ta sae tha age, twixt that elv'n cr'ft o' old - ta mayhap mor' rec'nt mak'n", he added with a twinkle in his eye.

"Forgive me, I've forgotten to offer you refreshments in all this excitement. Might I offer you all a cup of mead?", said Sarah, motioning the men to the table.

"I've work to do", said Daffyd importantly, finishing filling his wooden bucket of ash and cinders. He thought the adults wanted to talk privately, to discuss things he already knew; so it was best he get out of earshot and let them get on with it.

"D'yu nae mind 'tif ae tag along ta see wha ye mae be do'n?" asked Gregor.

"Yes, I'd be pleased to show you and explain", Daffyd beamed, greatly impressed at the smith's interest in what he was doing.

The ring made him feel different and he already believed that it was magical, but unsure what that magic might be and sure he should not experiment, before he got to know it better. He did immediately know of one magic property of his prized new possession.

Daffyd could hear - everything - as soon as he put on the ring, and felt it warm him. Hear or see was a little difficult to distinguish between, but he could hear/see the thoughts of all those around him, in addition to the birds and animals outside. He knew Rhiannon could do the same with wild creatures, just discovering the wayward chicken had come straight to her as soon as she had willed it in her mind. She was currently sitting on a log experimenting with the young pups and the chickens, coming to terms with the gift she knew was her own magic ring.

Daffyd watched as she experimented further afield and summonsed an old crow flying far off in the distance.

Daffyd knew Gregor was beside himself with curiosity about him, and would readily have the boy as an apprentice

whether Mr. Lyo had paid for this in advance or not. Gregor knew he could learn things from Daffyd, just as the intelligent boy would learn much from him. Gregor speculated in his mind that this might be exactly what Mr. Lyo had intended.

Daffyd was about to agree with him, when a clear voice in his mind said: "Remember - don't ruin people's discoveries with your own foresight or foreknowledge and then you won't have to think of ways to explain it!"

"Xix", said Daffyd aloud and in surprise, now recognizing Mr. Lyo's more common name.

"Eh? ... 'ot twas dat y'ng Daf'd?" asked Gregor, thinking the boy had counted "six" for some reason.

"Oh ... six. I was counting steps to workout how much ash I would need...", he offered.

"You see the soil is deficient in pot ash, so if I add a little it will purify and fortify the soil - as it does when you mix it into metals", he explained, finding words to explain things he'd not known before.

Gregor saw the wisdom in this and said so to Daffyd. He also noticed the more sophisticated linguistics and wondered about what Mr. Lyo had taught the boy in the last few days, then about the ring.

Gregor was from the northern lands, towards the top most lands of the middle earth and bordering the wilds of the northern wastes. It was a strange and old country up there, perhaps much clearer in memories, as well as traditions of the lore of the first and second ages. He was also a smith who worked with earth and metals to forge ploughs, tools or weapons. His art was strange to most common folk and in the old days, considered a branch of magic craft. While less magic and more science today, it never the less had its ancient knowledge, memories and secrets - between its craft masters.

Ageless though it looked, Gregor was sure the ring on Daffyd's finger was wrought within the last two nights - by Mr. Lyo.

He wondered about the stranger's cat and dwelt upon the staff Lyo had carried earlier that morning. Had Lyo had the staff when he'd cured Jake, Gregor might have thought more about magics and wizards, than medicines and herb lore. He realized that was what had been intended and smiled.

He was sure the symbol inside the dragon boss on Daffyd's ring was Lyo's mark, just as he was now fairly certain Lyo was in fact a wizard. Hidden back in his smithy were the secret hallmarks and runes of his craft. Gregor would paw over those tonight and see if he might not discover Lyo's mark amongst them; though he'd only ever met two craft masters who'd had actual dealings with wizards.

Most interesting...

This one had specifically asked him to explain as much of the lore of his craft to young Daffyd, by mid summer's eve. Gregor watched the young boy carefully spreading the thin trails of ash along the furrows, then turning the soil to mix it with the little hoe. I wonder how much of this the young boy actually knows or guesses? he mused to himself.

Daffyd had actually been doing three things. First he was following Gregor's thoughts and relating them to those he was talking to in his mind. Second he was physically doing what he appeared to be doing. Third he was talking to Xix and also to his joy, the deep ancient voice-thoughts of the dragon lord. It was - Cy!

"I mean - imagine being called or distracted at a bad moment, like if you're in the middle of some difficult task or going to the toilet. When you need us just call, but not if it is trivial or for some matter you can work out yourself. What you need to do now is enjoy life being a boy and learn from those around you", Cy explained. Daffyd smiled at the thought of being interrupted going to the toilet and realized it was a funny way of explaining something important; as the dragon lord flashed him an image of the opening gambit of the recent battle with the Bolrog. Yes he thought, it would be bad to be distracted at such a time. "That doesn't mean not to call us should you need to, or feel lonely. It just means be responsible", said Xix's voice with assurance.

"But what of Rhiannon?", silently asked Daffyd, concerned at what havoc his sister might cause with such powers unchained.

"Test her powers. Feel them out and see their limits.", instructed the dragon.

Daffyd followed the instruction and tested his sister's powers, realizing they were a shadow of his own, largely confined to dealing with creatures and healing ill. She could not communicate by thought with others than creatures of the wild, except Daffyd; but she did not know that yet, simply being overwhelmed by the joy of her communications with the birds and animals all around her. She had already learnt one discomfiting lesson about Roy and Belle. Daffyd understood why, because the ring allowed him to see all things that had been clouded, or removed from his memory and understood the special properties of the droplet of Xix's blood given to his uncle and both dogs. The dogs were rejuvenated in body and soul, given the task of watching over the family and the two children in particular. Specifically - parenting Rhiannon when her brother or family were not there. Rhiannon had commanded Belle to come and beg at her feet, in a quite childish and spoilt manner. For her troubles she received a sharp nip on her behind and a severe mental chastisement from the wise dog. Rhiannon - somewhat surprised by the response and stern scolding - understood immediately and did not make the same mistake with Belle or Roy again.

"We've much to do young Daffyd" said the wizard's voice in his mind, "... but we've freed you of one concern in barring Rhiannon talking to other people about her ring, or how she uses it. That should save you considerable worry, but she will discover she can talk about it, through thought, to you. She needs to share it with someone. Be patient when she discovers that."

"Will she be able to in time? When she is older, I mean", asked Daffyd.

"Yes, to certain people and those such as ourselves, but we cannot have her babbling to us every five minutes, until she matures into a grown woman", answered the Dragon lord.

Daffyd smiled at the thought, realizing Rhiannon simply would not stop to think before she called-out - especially to consider that someone might be very busy - because she simply lacked the appreciation of others that delivered consideration. That would come with maturity and in the interim, Cy and Xix's imposed limitations were the only solution.

"Good bye for now, Daffyd", said the two voices in his head. "Your father's return should distract and temper her, for a few days at least...", was the parting thought from Xix.

"Good bye for now", he thought happily in response.

The dog Roy called a greeting in his mind, as he came across the furrows wagging his tail.

"Aie ... Ah ken see da sense 'n dat, y'ng Daf'd", replied Gregor, after Daffyd had explained why he was putting the ash in the furrows.

"Ah ken show y'ng'n ah trick 'r two 'bout smith'n too!", he added, as he walked back to the cottage so Daffyd could refill his ash bucket.

Gregor stayed with the other adults, drinking the mead Sarah had warmed for him, while Daffyd and Roy went back to finish spreading the last of the ash. He was half listening to his sister's antics, with his mind, as she asked the birds and beasts of news and goings-on around the district. Daffyd laughed as he heard the dry thought-comment from Roy: '...that there would never again be peace of mind for the birds and beasts in the district'. He looked at the faithful dog smiling and said: "Don't worry, I expect she will very quickly over-fill her mind with those doings, get a sore head, and then be less inclined to listen to bird's gossip!"

Roy let out a short happy bark, which Daffyd was pleased he could now see was a dog laugh. While it was only a small thing, one of the virtues of the ring Daffyd came to appreciate most was that he could understand animals' expressions. Generally animals were the happiest of folk, always trying to be jolly or optimistic among humans

and other animals; even if they felt ill or sad themselves. People called it "loyalty" or "devotion", but Daffyd realized it was much more than that. It was something Rhiannon eventually discovered too, becoming the driving inspiration for her work in caring and healing of creatures all over the countryside.

One piece of information had no significance for Rhiannon, as she was not looking for detail of that kind, but greatly excited Daffyd. A distant rook had said "there is a lone man on the road, to the north of me, going south along the main track".

Daffyd imparted this to Roy, thinking it might be Xix returning, then directed a question to the rook.

"Excuse me kind father of birds and lord of the winds - might the traveler be carrying a cat and staff?", he asked with his mind, casting the thought to the flying rook who was but a speck on the distant horizon.

"Fairly spoken, unlike your nestling, answered the rook. The traveler has neither staff nor cat, but carries a bag and sees naught but the road. He is travelling with purpose - in a hurry to be somewhere or perhaps may nearly be in sight of his home country".

Daffyd suddenly realized it must be his father returning, as he had known would happen and he excitedly told Roy. Roy let out a yelp of joy.

"Perhaps you might run out to meet him", said Daffyd reading the urgent need to greet his long-lost master. "Tell Belle and if anyone asks, I'll say you went off after a badger in the thicket!"

"Thank you", panted Roy in his mind, running towards the gate - pausing briefly to lick Belle - then taking off down the lane.

Rhiannon noticed and was about to call Roy back or question him, but Daffyd was relieved of the need to interfere by a single short growl from Belle ... directed at Rhiannon. The little girl got the message immediately and timidly went back to mentally chattering with the chickens.

Daffyd, always conscious of his manners, returned his thoughts to the distant rook; now returned to his family and perched high in a distant forest grove.

"Pardon me again for disturbing you Mr. Rook, but the traveler you have seen may be my lost father returning. I thought you may be interested to know the good tidings you gave".

"Thank you for your civility, young master", responded the rook. "My name is Caccius the blue, should you wish to speak again", the rook responded invitingly.

"That is a most prestigious name", replied Daffyd, almost feeling Cassias ruffle his feathers with pride. "My name is simply Daffyd. I will look forward to our next discourse..."

"As will I, as will I, master Daffyd" replied the rook. "My clan and I will watch for you".

"Good morning then Cassias the blue. Fair flying and good eating, to you and your clan", said Daffyd.

"Good morning and fair flying, to you young master", said the rook's voice from affair.

"Magic or not, the rings have had one effect", said Sarah looking out at Rhiannon - quietly sitting looking at the chickens giggling - and at Daffyd - sitting in the shade of an apple tree, eyes focused on some point on the horizon. "They have certainly quieted them down a great deal. I hope that's for the better and not for the worse!".

"Tha lad see mor'n wha's 'ere und 'bout. 'Tis a deep wisd'm 'es got. Ah nae th'nk dat's fell, S'rah", said Gregor.

"Yes ... If anything they're deep in thought. I think they see more than they did before, and with much better understanding. Appreciation of things and those around you is not a bad virtue to acquire", agreed Avvon. "Besides - we know the rings were a gift from Lyo and he'd do nothing to harm any of us - on that point we're all

agreed", he continued.

"Well they might be strange folk and impossible to read or predict, but wizards through history have been our friends. I think he was a wizard and no ill will come of his visit", said Owen.

"Ae, ya s'und ta mite sure 'v ye self, Ow'n. Why's dat?", asked Gregor.

"Well it was something he asked for, then something Avvon and Sarah said he did!", replied Owen.

"When I was very young, my grandda was mighty taken with the old legends and stories, with a particular love of tales about the wizards like Gandalf the Grey ... to be precise. Now I remember my grandda told us about smoke rings and always used to try to make smoke rings as small or round as he might manage, because that was something most wizards did when they were relaxing or thinking. Sarah and Avvon say Mr. Lyo was most relaxed, when he was sitting by the fire blowing smoke rings. Mr. Avvon said specifically, he recalled how perfect and precise the smoke rings looked; while you - Sarah - said: 'he seemed to make them go chasing each other and some jumped through other larger smoke rings'. That would take an enormous amount of practice and skill, to produce such precision", explained Owen, deep in thought.

"The other piece of the puzzle was at my store yesterday, when Lyo asked for pipe tobacco. He didn't ask for any common or local special blend. He asked for 'Riverbank' - the rarest and most expensive of all weed. Now we all know Lyo was obviously very rich indeed, and I've heard tell most apothecaries are very rich - let alone one who has been at the court of Rohan; but 'Riverbank' was the weed most favoured by the wizards in grandda's stories. That is the weed grown and smoked by the lords of the halflings who destroyed Sauron in the Great War. They live as far West of here as Mordor's broken gates are to the South. They say those little folk can blow better smoke rings than wizards, in some of the tales; but that is likely an embellishment, because they destroyed the great ring, than a precise measure or contest. Anyway - Mr. Lyo asked for 'Riverbank' and had noticeable skill in blowing smoke rings, but he stood all of two thales easy - so you could never describe him as 'little folk'. That is why I think he was a wizard, but I cannot be precise until I learn more of the court of Rohan. Smoke rings and Riverbank, might be normal things to them. I don't know!", he concluded.

Gregor grunted, but kept his thoughts to himself.

Botho agreed with Owen, but said: "I think it's better left unsaid, partially through respect for all Lyo has done for us and partially because he obviously did not want it to be common chat. Besides, in the old lore the say wizards be quick to anger and a frightening sight to behold. I see no advantage in tempting such a fate, even if Mr. Lyo were the kindest wizard of all. It would still be folly to anger him, because a wizard is a wizard, friendly and undeclared or no!"

They all agreed to keep the matter as an open secret amongst themselves, agreeing with Botho's views, but to a person doubting Lyo would anger, or had a vengeful bone in him.

"Well we can't sit here chewing the fat all day", said Botho. "There's work to be done and tables to be tended; so I must be off". With that he stood, joined by Owen and Gregor. They said their good mornings and went to the gate, Avvon looking far north up the road and seeing a lone traveler in the distance - dog jumping about at his side.

"That looks almost to be a twin of old Roy", said Avvon straining his eyes.

Turning and looking about, he saw Roy was nowhere to be seen.

He glanced at Daffyd, who returned his level look, then gave a quick wink and a small grin. Avvon looked back at the stranger and strained his eyes.

"Strike me blue if I'm mistaken - that's Roy and the only person he'd behave like that with is Gwnlyn", cried Avvon, letting out a whoop of joy and running up the road - albeit in a slightly unsteady lope. Sarah - despite her skirts - was hot on his heels, crying-out Gwynlyn's name, and quickly overtaking her recently recovered brother.

"Glad tidings indeed! I expect the work and tables can wait a while longer ... Gwennith's able to look after it", Botho said taking out his pipe, with a wry grin.

Owen and Gregor laughed at the jest, then joined him.

"Never really thought of smoke rings as an art. Seems an interesting leisurely pursuit though" suggested Owen speculatively, blowing a large wobbly smoke ring.

"Aie - be need'n consun'trat'n ... or 'pre-siss-on' ah y' be say'n - Ow'n", laughed Gregor.

The three of them sat, happily absorbed in their newfound leisure activity, as the distant traveler was greeted by the family that had run to meet him.

"Reckon the events of the last few days will long be remembered hereabouts", murmured Botho looking up the road. "I expect Sarah's husband will have quite an adventure to tell, too!"

"And over many a jug of mead, too", said Owen with a smile.

The thought made Botho grin.

Owen started whistling, between puffs..

"Aei: m're ta tell o' da lest f'w daes, thn' o' tha lest ten turns ... ta ma wae o' th'nk'n", muttered Gregor, thinking of his hallmarks.

Down the road they came, dogs barking with excitement. Children babbling and men laughing, while Sarah - heart bursting with joy - alternated between laughing and crying. The wiry and dusty figure of Gwnlyn was thinner than the three watchers could remember him, but he seemed more road weary than injured, to their eyes.

They rose as the group approached and called their welcomes to the long lost adventurer. The party again went into the small confines of the cottage and once again the mead came out as much was told of adventures in the wild.

It was not until mid-afternoon Botho, Gregor and Owen, again took their leave, with many hearty farewells ... then staggered merrily back up the lane to the Inne.

Gwennith was glaring at Botho with a black fury, returning so late in the day and having obviously had more than his share of mead.

She shared her withering look with both Gregor and Owen, for a moment threatening to undermine the close bond the three had recently found, but broken at the last instant when Owen giggled and then quietly said:

"Old Jake's dragon don't you know? I wonder if she'll be a flying tonight!".

His two partner's let out a roar of laughter, the conspiracy sealed when Botho ordered his wife to bring them a pot of mead and some mugs.

Gwennith went to argue, but saw the look in her husband's eye and complied. They took a table at the end of the Inne's veranda, talking and laughing well into the night.

## 5. Spring Cleaning.

At the crest of the hill Xix paused. Turning he raised his staff at the distant figures, standing in the lane by the cottage, and waved a last farewell. Noala also raised her free hand and waved, then took one of Cy's paws - where he was nestled in her other arm - and gave a little wave, not that such could be seen by any other than she and Xix. It just felt right. They then continued down, into the valley beyond.

Noala had abandoned her serving wench's attire and returned to her road clothes, looking more like a woodsman of the forest fringe, than a young maiden. Her Jacket and breeches were a dark olive-grey, faded from much wear and many leagues on hard roads, but still very much the colour of deep forest canopies. She had stout hide walking boots, a hood - thrown back - and a belt of matching earthy brown. Rolled atop her shoulder pack, was her sleeping kit and heavy coat, inherited from her dead woodsman guardian. Although seemingly soft and the focus of much admiration at the Inne, Xix had no doubt that Noala was far tougher and more traveled than many hardened journeymen from those parts. At her left was an old battered sheath, holding an equally battered looking forest long-knife. He had no doubt the blade was keenly edged and had seen some use in Noala's hand. All in all she was a capable venturer in any company, well able to account for herself where many others might not, or might turn and flee.

In the way of such things, Noala was very curious about her travelling companion. Sure he knew the trails of the wood elves and would lead her there; but equally curious was his own story - as she was inclined to think he might be a travelling enchanter or seer of sorts. Back where she had come from, old folk versed in herb lore and some forgotten spells of greater days, were largely respected and called seers or seeresses. The greater among these were called enchanters or enchantresses, but in these parts such language was not known. She had not heard of the term 'apothecary', but it equated to what she understood of seers or enchanters, in her own lands. In some of the larger villages she had passed through on her journey, it was dangerous to be thought of in such a light, as the middle earth was becoming superstitious and fearful, only too ready to persecute anything deemed strange or out of the ordinary. Much was rumoured of sorcerers, sorceresses, witches, warlocks, spells and enchantments - particularly in relation to folk from 'the wilds'.

'The wilds' seemed to apply to any place outside the immediate district, or on its borders. She had long ago learnt not to speak of her home forest and real extent of journeying, having narrowly escaped being tarred and feathers - accused of being an enchantress by jealous village women - in one place she had sort shelter. Her quest being as it was, Noala had sort out a number of these old wise folk to seek directions and anything they might know of the old lore. By far most were simply deeply wise and caring people, well versed in herb lore; but she had encountered those who quested for something more and tinkered with darker things of the nether world, seeking such greater powers or mastery. The latter she could recognize immediately, because their auras were tarnished by the darkness they sort to embrace and they 'smelt' slightly of brimstone, to Noala's keen nose .

In her experience, such folk usually had 'familiars' - creatures or spirits holding the shapes of common creatures, who worked with their masters or mistresses in seeking paths through the labyrinths of the nether worlds and helped seek-out healing herbs in hidden places. These 'familiars' were common to both those of kindly and good enchantment, called those of the 'white'; and also to those of greedy and bad enchantment, called those of the 'dark' or 'black'.

Noala's understanding of these things was a composite of old lore, woodsman's lore and a hotchpotch of local superstition and popular rumour. Thus she thought Mr. Lyo was an enchanter or seer in her framework of understanding and had assumed Cy was his familiar. Within her understanding he was clearly of the 'white', but it confused her that he stated without a hint of falsehood, that the cat was not his familiar ... but had left open that the cat was other or more than he seemed. 'You will learn more as we travel on the road ...', he had said the previous day.

Noala grappled with what to say and how to broach the subject, indirectly, without sounding to curious or desperate. They walked at a pace that impressed Noala. It was not pressed, but it was solid and covered distances in a measured balance; indicating Lyo was well accustomed to travelling the roads. The pace was not reduced or strained on her account, which she appreciated, because it demonstrated equal treatment and unsaid recognition

that she was an accomplished traveler herself.

Lyo hummed little tunes as they walked along, the cat in her arms seemingly purring in rhythm with both their footfalls and the tunes. It was an also gay way to travel, still wearying on the feet, but in a light happy manner - rather than the heaviness of anticipated distance to be covered or rest falls to be made. 'Incidental', she thought. It makes the walking seem incidental, rather than toil to a purpose.

"On the road you'd best call me 'Xix', as that is my common name. Tell me about your parents and guardian", He said briefly, before continuing with his tune. Noala was about to say he should tell of himself first, but realized he'd just offered something of himself in asking. She toyed with how much to say, but then reminded herself of just how apparent the old blood was in this stranger and she had never met someone in whom it was so apparent, nor with such a strong aura. Her best chance of finding what she wished, was to be as open as she could with this seer. She toyed with how to start, but thought the best thing to do was explain as best she could and then explain anything Xix might not know about - like the Ents and their stewardship of the Fangdorn.

"I've little memory of my mother or father, just wisps of loving faces looking down at me, joy, singing and living high in trees. I don't know what happened to them, but I remember a great fire with much smoke and mortal peril. Half awake, some great hand lifted me and carried me away to a bed of soft ferns, where my guardian found me. His name was Dirk the Tallowman and he was a simple forester living on the edge of the Fangdorn. We lived by collecting faggots, making tallow and casks from fallen wood. Sometimes Dirk would fete with visiting travelers - herbalists - and help them find the plants they sort."

"He told me the Ents - great tree lords, who were the shepherds of the ancient forest trees - had plucked me to safety, when my home had been burnt in a great fire. What had become of my parents he knew not, simply that the Ents delivered me to him - saying they had perished - asking that he care for me until I was grown and could seek-out my own people. 'Her father was of the Elven blood. Bid her - seek them when she is grown', was all they had said."

"Dirk raised me as best he could, but I fear my father's blood caused that raising, to be a longer task than he had perhaps thought; for he aged rapidly and I came to adulthood slowly in his reckoning. He passed away in his sleep last summer, after giving me this token and bidding me seek-out my own kind. He was sixty four full turns, he told me. Although I look a maid of but eighteen turns, I had been in his care for nigh on forty and was a child he deemed to be six turns when first placed in his care."

"He could not verse me in the language of my sire, nor their songs, or lore. After burying him and beginning my journey, I first went into the Fanghorn to seek instruction and direction, but the forest would only whisper that I must seek to the north, beyond the eastern reaches of the Mirkwood. I knew not then, where the Mirkwood lay, but set out and sort to learn all that I could along the road. Sometimes lucky in travelling on wagons with traders, most of my travel has been alone on foot, which by and large I have preferred, as manys the peril I've face from would-be friends. The lonely road may have perils, but not nearly as frequent as those of fresh met travelling companions ..."

Noala was deep in reflection for a moment, then blushed and said apologetically:

"Oh ... I did not mean you Mr. Lyo - I mean Mr. Xix. I mean from the kinds of people who offer you company and shelter on the road, but with different purposes in their minds and not healthy company for a maiden. That still doesn't sound right, but you know what I mean and I trust you, otherwise I should not have joined you on the road."

"No need to apologize. No offence was meant and none taken. I understand exactly what you were trying to say", Xix smiled. "I've a mind to stop for a rest and a small brew on yonder hillock. We've come a fair way and I might rest my weary legs for a short while", he continued, indicating a grove of trees, by some rocks, at a hillock off the road ahead.

The cat was purring reassuringly and regular respites were needed to refresh serious travelers. They had come a considerable distance she saw, looking back, and nodded in agreement as they left the road for the trees.

To her eye, disciplined in forest craft and many leagues on the road, the rocky hollow within the treed grove was a regular stopping point for some travelers. There were signs of a small fire, perhaps within the last three nights, and a store of firewood was packed in a small rock shelter beside where they now stood. Xix set a small fire and boiled water in a small pot, then added some fine leaves to make a refreshing and pleasant tasting brew. They had some of the oatcakes Sarah had given them, then stretched in the warm sun, Xix's cat purring happily on her lap.

Noala drifted into a contented sleep, lulled by the purring of the cat.

Once Noala fell asleep, Xix put away his pipe and went over to a large rock. He waved his staff and drew out the sleeping form of Gwnlyn, secreted within the night before last. Xix removed Gwnlyn's bag of plunder and took out all but three of the gold coins, leaving the other booty within. He took a small leather purse from his travel bag, put the gold within and then buried it before the rock that had been Gwnlyn's resting-place. He said an incantation over the buried gold, to ensure only Gwnlyn might find it and retrieve it.

To the sleeping man he spoke for a while, implanting detail of how he had been imprisoned in deep dungeons by goblins and only recently found opportunity to free himself; grabbing what he dared from their plunder as he escaped their dark passages. Exhausted he had fallen asleep in a hollow, then been greeted by a traveler and his companion cat. They set him on his path homeward and gave him a meal for the road. The traveler had backtracked his path and assured Gwnlyn no goblins were in pursuit. After saying farewell, Gwnlyn decided to bury part of his horde, so his family might collect it once they were on the road north again. After doing this and carefully marking where the loot was secreted, Gwnlyn turned for the last leg of the journey to his home hearth.

After implanting these thoughts on Gwnlyn's mind, Xix raised him from the ground and set his legs walking in mid air. "When your foot touches the ground, you will know the next rise will reveal your home village in the distance and you will be with your dear family in less than two leagues; but never again will you seek adventure or booty in goblin's dark holes and to your wife will always be your first care", he commanded, and then sent the sleeping man through a gateway with a wave of his staff.

Gwnlyn's foot touched the roadway and he was immediately awake, staggering slightly, he realized the top of the rise should be the last he'd have to climb. Not much further, weary though he was, and soon the welcoming embrace of his loving family. How long had he been gone he wondered. Time stood still in the dark goblin holes. A year - three maybe? Far too long to be parted from Sarah and his children. Well never again.

Gwnlyn reached the top of the rise and in the distance saw his little cottage, basking in the late morning sunlight. He gathered himself and quickened his pace, then to his joy recognized the familiar shape of his faithful dog - Roy - bounding up the road to greet him. He was home at last.

In the hollow Xix again lay back and began blowing smoke rings, unconsciously bending the fingernail of his forefinger, with his thumb.

"You're doing it again", said Cy's voice in his head.

"What?" replied Xix. "You're bending your fingernail!" said the dragon laughing.

Xix looked down and smiled. He did do it, as Cy had mentioned before.

"I'm not sure what we should do with her. Do we take her straight to the wood elves, knowing their kindness will make her feel even more lost, while she tries to recover her past, or instruct her first? And what of telling her of her parents?", Xix mused.

"I'm inclined to agree that going straight to the wood elves would be mean more hurt for her, but it is a decision she should make. I suggest we tell her what we can - which is more than she would otherwise discover, except from the old Ents - then offer a choice of being instructed with by us, or going straight to them", replied Cy.

"Four fishes she'll chose us!", wagered the dragon.

"Not a fair bet, my friend", said Xix smiling, "... but alright - knowing I'll lose as usual! You will have to do most of the instructing, because I'll have much to do in restoring the old workings and halls!".

"Of course. She would want the wiser tutor anyway!", said Cy smugly.

Xix laughed out loud, which disturbed Noala from her slumber.

"What is the jest?" asked Noala, snuggling the purring cat, which affectionately licked her brow - between her eyes - causing a pleasant tingling feeling.

Xix glanced at her and smiled. "Well you should not be so easily awoken, but I expect that is the Elven blood in you. What would you say if I said you've a dragon sitting on your stomach purring and he's just told me he'd make a better tutor for you than I?", Xix asked.

Noala looked at the cat she was absent-mindedly stroking, deep into the watery black pools of its eyes. "It doesn't make sense, but I believe you and know your telling the truth. How can a cat be a dragon, and why does he purr so much?", she asked sleepily.

"I think it's probably easiest if you just drop off to sleep again and listen with your mind", said Xix.

She looked at him, then the cat; nodded and lay back. Cy revealed himself and began to explain.

Having revealed himself and Xix, then explaining the works of those of the first and second ages, he detailed what he had been able to remember and discover of her parents.

Her father had been a wood elf from a family of wood elves in a forest bordering the northern wastes. His father, uncles, cousins and brothers had fought under Elrond's banner at the two great battles before the gates of Mordor. His name was Allfewln and he had survived the last great battle, unlike many of his kin, although perilously wounded by a fell dart of the ring-wraiths. Under Elrond's hand he had recovered, personally tended once by the great king himself, but the recovery was long in being full.

Those of his kindred who had survived, attended to their dead and lesser wounded, then left Allfewln in Rivendell's care, as they had none to match. They could not tarry longer, as there was good and ill tidings to bare back to their loved ones, at home in the far north. Allfewln stayed a year in Rivendell, then left with most of their folk at the beginnings of their return to the western sea; however he was young and not yet so weary of life in middle earth that the sea called him strongly. He parted company with Elrond's folk at the Entwater, following it to the Fanghorn and replanted groves of Iseguard. There he tarried long and worked hard, through his great love of all things growing green; forming a strong friendship with the Ents and oldest of trees, deep within that ancient forest. By the time he began to reach middle age and think of a family, many years had passed in the reckoning of men and Allfewln's love for the Fanghorn was so great, he could not bring himself to depart from it. He knew many of the trees by their full names and was greatly loved by those he tendered; while perhaps in his heart feeling his separation from his race made him dearer to the Ents, separated from their Entwives. The latter was something he always said he would someday rejoin.

Through the years of peace, though bands of renegades from both Mordor's and Iseguard's armies were still to be found, families from the fair houses of the Westnesse, Rohan and Gondor spread far and wide to build new lives. Some settled on the southern fringes of the young Iseguard plantations and forests, living happily from the bounty provided by those great orchards, but still near enough to the wild Fanghorn to provide the ready edge many of the former champion's families desired like wine.

Fair even among these of the Westnesse was a maid named Vivvian; even admired for her beauty, vitality and fairness of skin, by the Ents. Whether by design - which I suspect - or due to their fascination with her unblemished skin - they called her Vivvian "pure-bark". The Ents frequently mentioned her to Allfewln. For his part, being an elf and having personally met several of the great Elven queens, Allfewln did not believe comparable beauty could exist outside the few remaining hidden havens of Elven folk - 'old blood or not'. In fact the issue often became quite heated - for Ents and a wood elf that is - in that Allfewln would frequently point far

to the southeast, where a lonely pine grew. He loved that tree, but it had been struck by lightning in its youth and was twisted by time. To the Ents he would say - "You tell me of the fairness of the Entwives; well in comparing Vivvian's to Elven maiden's beauty, I might just as well compare the beauty of the Entwives to yonder lonely pine".

This was in fact very heated talk and neither parties might speak again to each other for up to a full turn; but the understanding of mutual loneliness always healed the rifts, no others might have got away with.

One Spring they finally persuaded Allfewln to cast his eyes upon her, which ended the argument for good.

Allfewln and Vivvian fell joyously in love with each other - totally captivated - and were wedded before that Summer was high.

The Ents and trees formed a beautiful tree house for them, overlooking the orchards and groves of Iseguard, so Vivvian might never feel too far from her folk.

As for the argument - that became a forest joke. Many trees whispered, when feeling mischievous, 'see yonder pine...?', as Allfewln walked past; which constantly reminded him of the exquisitely beautiful and rare love he had found.

In penance to the Ents, Allfewln pledged to someday find a way to rejoin the Ents and Entwives. 'A well meaning, but rash promise' said they, appreciating the true kindness of the thought, but better understanding the difficulty in keeping. Allfewln insisted somehow they would be rejoined.

After a few years Allfewln and Vivvian had a baby daughter. She was named Noala - meaning fair of face and pure of vein (much to the Ent's liking). The family were happy and many the joyous songs Allfewln would sing, to entertain the ladies within, and the Ents without, their fine tree house.

Sadly that singing was their undoing. The tree house was seen by a host of marauding renegades and rumour quickly spread among their number that it was the watcher's keep over Iseguard - wherein was much of Sauraman's plundered treasure. The renegades lay in wait within the orchards of Iseguard and ambushed your parents as they went to collect fruit. Part of the rabble fired the tree, thinking the gold and loot would drop to earth, as the leafy mansion was consumed; but the only treasure within was little Noala.

Vivvian - beautiful and pure of skin or not - was of the Westernessee; born and bred to fight in desperate hours. Ambushed and outnumbered they fought, back to back, both suffering several mortal wounds, before help could arrive. The Ents in their fury left no trace of the renegade ramble bigger than a grain of sand. They were slaughtered, crushed and ground until there forms could not be distinguished from the dirt. Vivvian died - blood intermixing with that of her beloved - in the double embrace of her mortally wounded husband, while both were being carried by Treebeard. She had cried out for her daughter, then on hearing the great Ent saying she was safe in his care, she sighed. Allfewln cried out in great agony, his heart pierced by her passing in a way no fell blade or dart had ever been able. "Send her to the north, to the wood elves - her own people. The Ghost forest, when she is of age ....", he begged Treebeard, and then he died too.

In the deepest forest glade of the Fangdorn there is a shady grove, precious to the Ents and trees of the forest. It is constantly in mist, from the trees rather than the sky, as they weep for those who stand there, surrounded by the rarest of exotic flowers. There, in the weeping grove, preserved in their full beauty for all time, stand Vivvian and Allfewln - beloved of the forest. They stand and suffer no change nor aging, through the great art and knowledge of the ancient trees; but nothing can call back souls once flown, not even the greatest of the Ents. Always sad at the loss of the Entwives, the grief of the Fangdorn has become much deeper since then and it assails all whom may care to enter. The air of tragedy and loss is more than most creatures can endure. The depth of grief and mourning for your parents is very great indeed. It is second only, to the loss of their Entwives.

"That is the story of your parents, as told by sky, earth, bird and tree; though it grieves me to be the one to tell it. The dragon lord went on to detail her adventures on the road, since leaving Dirk's forest cottage.

Sadly your father burdened you with an oversight, in his anxiety that you should be reunited with his lost kin.

This was that you would grow to adulthood without tuition in the language, ways, and lore of your people - thus forever caught between two worlds.

It is within our powers to send you straight to the Ghost forest, but you would still be an outcast, not knowing their ways and lore; or, you may tarry with Xix and I for a while, learning from us, what you have not been taught. The choice is yours to make", Cy concluded.

Noala lifted her head and opened her eyes, tears running down her cheeks. She held and cuddled the cat close to her for comfort, as she rocked quietly crying.

Xix poured her another cup of the draught he had brewed and then sat silently, after giving it to her.

Noala finally sniffed and wiped her eyes. "I should like to make them happy again. Perhaps if I could find the Entwives, and return with Avvon to the Fanghorn, then they will stop crying", she said.

The big cat purred in deep appreciation. "We will help you with such a noble quest", was the thought Noala heard in her mind.

She brightened and with clearing eyes said: "Well I can't meet my uncles, aunts and cousins as a bumpkin can I, so I expect it is up to you to teach me? Thank you and thank you for telling me about my parents."

"Well I expect you might like to know where we're off to", smiled Xix, "... though you'll not need to worry too much about your shoe leather. We are going to clean out and re-establish the ancient forges at the Dwarven city where we found Gwnlyn, the other night. It won't all be fun for you, as you've much to learn, but I think you'll find Cy is actually as soft at heart as his current fur coat. It always puzzles me how such a soft dragon ever got to a respectable age!"

The big cat stopped purring for a moment, seemed to smile wickedly, and the Xix disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

Within the smoke there was much coughing and spluttering. "I'll get you for that - charcoal breath", muttered the wizard, in a manner Noala suspected was more for her comic relief than was serious.

The smoke cleared and Xix was restored - appearing singed and sooty, but otherwise unscathed.

She laughed and held the cat protectively, then got up to help get things packed so they could resume their journey. Once packed, Xix directed her to walk straight towards the rock face at opposite side of the hollow.

Noala's world seemed to shimmer and then she was standing before the great doors of the long abandoned mines, Xix beside her.

"Ugghhh! What a dark and fell looking place", she said. "It smells so foul and evil!"

"Well I think it's about time you put that fat slacker down and the ground and let him earn his fish!" said Xix.

Noala put the big cat down and Xix moved her to his side, as the air around the cat shimmered.

She was amazed by the sight she now beheld, seeing Cy in his full glory physically manifest before her, far more beautiful and majestic than had been the revelation in her mind.

The dragon seemed to smile tenderly at her, then it gave a wink of its great eye. Drawing himself to his full height and splendor, he gave a long ordered command in some ancient language. The great doors opened wide, according to his command, while a fresh gust of wind blew clean air into the stale confines within. The great dragon uttered further commands before the doors and the entire mountain seemed to shudder with relief and reawakening.

High above them portals, long covered to keep out the light and freshness, became cleared - some blown-out where orcs or goblins had bricked them closed.

Light and freshness flooded the place, while Noala noticed the winds were hardly behaving as normal winds - twisting into little tornadoes that sucked up dust, rubble and debris, then deposited it in some place unseen.

The dragon then took a great breath and blew, but instead of the fire Noala was expecting, he blew a great jet of steam through the halls and passage ways; further cleansing all in its path and quickly dissipating without trace.

The dragon admired its handy work briefly, then let out a ear-piecing roar and shimmered.

The cat sat purring loudly in the gateway licking its paw in a nonchalant manner and waiting to be picked-up.

Noala went to him and picked him up, then followed Xix into the bright airy entrance hall. Everything was sparkling fresh and clean, revealing the beauty of the inlaid marble floors and carved walls of the great halls.

"Wonderful, that was magnificent - it's so fresh and clean too", said Noala in awe.

"Try not to encourage him - Noala. It will make him more incorrigible than he already is!", replied Xix

Noala cuddled and stroked the big cat, who purred even louder - then seemed to poke his tongue at their companion.

"See - I told you so!" laughed Xix.

"How will you restore this place? I have seen your great powers unleashed, but surely you cannot do everything and this place is lonely indeed. Have you organized a host of Dwarves and companions? When will they arrive?" She asked.

"No host is organized as yet, because there is much here still to be set right. Don't let Cy's polishing-up of the main halls cloud your judgement of the greater task within the depths of this place. There are many lying cold on stone, whom we will awaken and ask to help us, amidst whose number are some Elven folk to keep you company. To them you will be our ward and companion, so never think to hang your head in their presence. That will also provide a fair explanation for your turn of phrase and mercenary skills, acquired through your hard life. Few question the ways of dragon lords or wizards, least of all far seeing elves. They will assume we had some purpose in keeping you hidden from their folk; more likely suspecting you're of a high Elven line hidden from enemies long past, for some greater purpose. Regardless none will question or challenge the ward of the dragon lord, so remember you are bestowed with a rare honour", Xix said with kindness.

"How many wards have you taken under your great wings - Cy?", Noala asked the cat with humility.

"Countless among the creatures of the earth, through the many ages, but I perceive you ask of Elven kind, men of Westernesse, dwarves and others of the second age. As a full ward I've had only one other - creature, beast or bird - and he stands by your side. While you may long for company and mourn your times of loneliness, have a care for Eylofren the Fine, last of his kind these four hundred and fifty years gone", said the cat with a rolling purr in its soft voice.

Noala suddenly felt a great pity for Xix and better understood the joyous look in his eyes when watching the antics of Daffyd and Rhiannon. Before she could speak her thoughts the wizard said:

"Ahhh... but I've had the birds and beasts, creatures great and small, for company; but most of all, an overly caring dragon lord to test my mind and keep me on the straight and narrow".

"But you must sometimes miss your kind?" argued Noala.

"Yes - long ago I missed my kind and wished of naught else but to join them in the west. Too long have I been in the care of this dragon lord though, and I suspect I'm more attuned now to dragon thought, than that of wizards.

Not that that's a bad thing, quite the contrary in fact", said Xix smiling.

"And I should think so too!" added the velvet voice between purrs.

"Not unlike my being lost from the elves!", said Noala.

"Not unlike that, young maiden. That was a major consideration in our decision to offer to teach you your lore and language. Xix wished to simply do it, but I insisted it be your choice - which reminds me of a little wager involving four fish!", purred the cat.

"Going! ... I'm going! Take Noala to the sleeping gallery and I'll return there shortly", said Xix with a laugh.

Noala started into the great hallway, listening to the purring voice as Cy gave directions and answered her questions about the building and fall of the great Dwarven city towards the end of the first age. Perhaps a sign of better times to come, butterflies danced in the light of the open portals, for the first time in aeons. Xix walked through a shimmering gateway, disappearing from site.

They made their way to the sleeping galley, which was actually the Bolrog's museum of exhibited creatures it had captured. Many were paired exhibits, some particular curiosities - to the Bolrog - but all shared fixed looks of abject terror or revulsion fixed on their frozen faces.

"There is much to be undone and mended in the minds of these, before I dare awaken them", Cy purred. "Most would be permanently crazed with fear, or at least scarred forever, after being the play things of something as evil as a Bolrog. While memory is precious and part of a creature's essential being, those are memories best removed for all time", he explained.

"But why would the Bolrog do such things? Surely it tired of such cruelty?", Noala asked in great distress, trying to look beyond the frozen looks of horror.

"Bolrogs were called from another realm, time and place, by the dark forces at the end of the first age. Some were captured and imprisoned deep within the earth - like Durin's Bane - only to be released through the folly of deep delving. Others, such as the one we encountered here, dwelt undisturbed and largely unknown in the wider country, protected in part by the lost memories and lost lore of dwarven and elven's kind. Because they come from nether worlds, where all life force is dark and brooding, bolrogs and fell creatures of their kind simply hate any life force with traces of light or merit. That hatred knows not bounds or quenching, as it is born of a most base and evil jealousy. They derive great evil pleasure in seeing such creatures in untempered moral anguish, in the deepest depths of darkness and brooding, where they come close - momentarily - to seeing the realms from which the bolrogs were drawn. As far as bolrogs go, this one was less cruel than most, perhaps tempered by his long years here, or curiously intelligent in some way other than the base evil of his folk. His concession was to freeze his victims as 'exhibits', and then put them in his gallery of conquests, waking some at his leisure to further torment their minds. It may seem a greater cruelty and perhaps it was; but for a creature such as I, it is interesting in that it is out of character for bolrogs and seems to indicate a curiosity of sorts, about those creatures he was tormenting. Strange indeed, for such is the first stage of learning and introduced a possibility in some far distant time, that the world of the bolrogs might have some glimmer of hope. Such would not interest a short lived creature such as yourself, but it was a surprise to both Xix and I. There is very little in the passing years that surprises us, or comes unheralded, so we found it very interesting", explained the dragon lord.

"Don't feel bitter, as we see and feel the hurt of all those imprisoned here, in all aspects of their abject terror and suffering. We will cure and heal them, but remember their memories will forever be with us. We try to understand, so it might be avoided at some time in the future" Cy said finally.

"Does it not haunt you - your knowledge I mean?", Noala asked concerned.

"With time senses become accustomed to such corruption, making the evil no less hurtful but more a question of patterns and designs, which have a tendency to repeat themselves. I ask myself sometimes to adjudge blame - proportionally - between those who in some way, by some small act, start the corruption growing, against those

who are the worst products of the same. Each is inter-related and cannot be separated in the grander picture of things?", mused the dragon lord.

"Succinctly - 'who is the greater evil: the corrupter or the corrupted'. This is a fell lecture to give to such a fair ward and maiden. I thought you were going to teach her wisely; not weigh her with the thoughts of dragons, great kings and the wise? Noala - would you like to reconsider your choice of tutors?", Xix commented from behind them.

Noala smiled, within a deeply troubled face. "No. It is best to confront truth, if one seeks understanding and it is a comfort of sorts, in that I see the sadness and perils I have endured are inconsequential to those suffered by many others. That is not a true comfort in itself, but it does give me strength to endure, but this is a sad and fell place. I would be happier to be elsewhere for a short while."

In a flash she was in a banquet room, bright with afternoon sunlight and butterflies dancing in the dappled beams of sun, filtered between the room's great carved pillars. A long table was fully laid-out and Xix held a chair for her to take her seat, at the left of the head. Xix took the chair at the head of the table and poured her some wine.

"I see being a wizard has its rewards as well", said Noala smiling at Xix.

"It wasn't me that time!" pointing at the cat sitting on a cushion, to her left, inspecting four fresh fish.

"I had forgotten my manners and perhaps forgotten I was talking to my new ward, rather than Xix. Pardon or not, I should not have weighed your pretty shoulders with such heavy thoughts. I apologize, though I know you have grown, rather than taken ill from it." purred the cat. "This is a better way to say I'm sorry - washing away dark thoughts with light"

"Thank you - Cy. Your apology is accepted and rest assured I've suffered no ill", said Noala.

"Hummmpphh! Well it will take far longer for me to forgive you", growled Xix, giving Noala a secret wink.

The cat looked up at him for a second, eyes twinkling and then turned back to its fish. A lobster on Xix's dinner plate suddenly came to life and locked a claw on his nose, making the wizard yelp in pain and surprise - before it disappeared in a puff of smoke. He glared at the cat, while Noala giggled.

"That's number two, you dratted dragon!" he said and resumed his seat, giving another wink to Noala.

"Well I can see I'm not wanted, so I'm going for a walk. Enjoy your banquet", said the cat finishing its last fish. He cleaned his whiskers and paws, then calmly strode from the room, tail waving.

"He's not really offended is he?" asked Noala, giggling at Xix's red and throbbing nose.

"No - he's actually gone down to undo the terror in the minds of those entranced, before he releases them from their entrancement. I do think he forgot he was talking to you and not me. We've not really talked at length, other than to each other, for many years. Perhaps we've forgotten some of our social skills, but I agree that you are better for it", he said with a smile.

"What was the wager about the fish?"

"We had a discussion about what option you would take, if given a choice between being taught first and then going to the wood elves, or going straight to the wood elves and learning from them. Cy - being a dragon - cannot quite rid his nature of loving tricks and wagers. That is just the way dragons are!", Xix explained.

"I thought it was you who worried about my feeling out of place, if I went straight there unprepared?" queried Noala with puzzlement.

"It was", said Xix, "... and because I understood myself, I was sure you would opt to learn from us; but that isn't

the point of the wager. Cy just likes to have small side-bets on things...

It is impossible to get him to bet against reasonable probability and he also cheats on occasion - using his foresight to make sure he picks the winning side. I know he does it, and he knows I know, but it appeals to his dragon spirit to win wagers ... so I just take the other side for the fun of it...

As I pointed out, it is the wager itself - not what the wager is about - that is the central exercise."

"Ahhh - so if he is prepared to wager on something, it means it is a virtual certainty!", mused Noala.

"That is a usually the case, except if he's trying to trick you. If he bets against a fairly obvious outcome, it is either a trick or because he already knows the answer. Dragon's other great love is being cunning or tricky. It's just a habit they have, like cats or dogs circling once, before finally lying down to sleep. Dragon's just love to wager, be cunning and tricky ... but there is no malice in it."

"But it seems to me you would never win!", said Noala exasperated.

"I don't usually win, but it is a good exercise for the mind - trying to workout how you're being tricked - which is worth the standard wager price of four fish", Xix laughed.

Just then there was a movement at the main entry to the banquet room, which gave Noala a small fright, replaced with a look of wonder as she set her eyes in that direction.

There was a group of seven people, looking slightly pale and disorientated, waiting at the entrance.

Xix got up and bid them enter, introducing himself and announcing each before showing them to places at the banquet table.

The first two were elves; followed by three large, very authoritative looking Dwarves, and an elderly Dwarf matron, with deep wisdom clear in here eyes.

The final guest was a gaunt looking man clad in a mousy-brown cloak, perhaps looking older than his years due to his experiences at the hands of the Bolrog, but seemingly in early to mid manhood.

Xix drew this guest to one side and gave him a walking staff, like his own; seemingly producing it from mid-air, or some hidden fold in his own silvery-olive cloak.

It had an immediate rejuvenating effect on the stranger, seemingly lifting a great weight from his soul and renewing his passion for life. They spoke briefly, before Xix turned and began his introductions.

Noala was captivated by the elves. Despite their ordeal, their beauty, grace and composure were simply outstanding and quite beyond Noala's attempts to encapsulate in words.

She stood in her place awe-struck and simply curtsied as each guest was announced.

"Lady Errywn and her steward Myralln of the Steep-downs; Deryn, Lyiam and Cyan - sons of the great Lord Dwain of the Iron Mountains; Princess Thellmyr - peal of the Iron Mountain clans - custodian of the clan lore; and Rhyss, wizard of the second degree, understudy of the great Raddagast the brown... May I present the maiden Noala - ward of the Dragon Lord Chryllexius."

"Please be seated and eat your fill. Your questions will be largely answered when the rest of our company is assembled".

Rhyss took the seat on the other side of Xix, facing Noala. Next to him were Lady Errywn and Myralln.

One seat removed from her own place were Lyiam, Princess Thellmyr, Deryn and Cyan.

Noala felt very ill at ease amongst such personages, but her introduction as the Dragon Lord's ward had obviously elevated her status considerably, in the eyes of the company. She was treated with great civility and diffidence.

The guest began eating with relish.

Rhyss and Xix were talking quietly, while it was the lady and her steward - who said they were from the Steep-down forest (which Noala had never heard of) in a strangely clipped version of common Westernesse dialect - who first addressed Noala directly.

"Ye be of Elven sires - as ourselves. Whence line came ye and by what boon, or bane, 'camest ye ward of Chryllexius l' grande?", Lady Errywn asked with interest.

Noala thought about what she had said for a moment, then having successfully worked-out the speech and question, she answered with timid reserve.

"My sire was Allfewln", she said trying to think of how to describe the forest region bordering the northern wastes, when a familiar friendly voice purred an answer in her mind. "Thank you, Cy", she thought back to the Cat/Dragon still in the distant chamber.

"Allfewfn, son of Hardryln. Standard bearer of the elves of the Cyfryg reaches", she said with clear confidence. "My family were forest stewards of Iseguard, killed by renegades while defending the southern groves of the Mirkwood, which the renegades sort to enter and burn. The great Ents arrived too late to save my sires, but they rescued me and placed me in the care of a woodsman. After his passing I set out to find my kin in the north, then into the care of my lords Chryllexius l' grande and Elylofren the fine."

"Well done!", said Xix's voice in her mind.

"Ahhh - that explains much!", said the dwarf princess in a sharp voice, but with a kind smile to Noala.

"I once saw Chryllexius when I was just a little girl, as he had come to remove one of his wayward kin, who had taken-up residence in one of our great mines. Dragon's frightened me a plenty before then, but they keep to themselves and most don't know they're goodly folk on the whole - but you would know that wouldn't you deary. It is different for a little girl to see a rouge attack her clan with great bursts of fire and smoke, then later see a much greater dragon singe him, and send him packing. But this one here - he's the splitting image of that old buzzard Normyn, but he's younger again. I thought maybe it was his mischief making protege young Gandalf, but then I thought 'No - looks older, but is younger again. Father or brother was he Elylofren?', she asked Xix.

Xix smiled. "Normyn was my grand sire. He went to the western havens a time back, seemingly trying to avoid being taken to task by a certain 'Thellmyr' ... who once pulled his nose!"

"Ahhh!!!", squealed Thellmyr with joy. "He told you did he? Well I was just a little tyke, and he put his nose where I could reach it", she laughed.

There was further movement at the entrance to the banquet hall as another group arrived, having been revived by Cy down below.

Xix got up and excused himself.

"Please enlighten the company Thellmyr. I'm sure they would love to hear the full tale, while I organize introducing our most recent arrivals."

Princess Thellmyr launched into the account from her childhood, in which she had been playing hide and seek with others of her children of her clan, then been surprised by a strange face that looked into the hollow tree, in which she had secreted herself. Not knowing what else to do, and not recognizing the stranger, she grabbed his nose and pulled it; then heard her father's voice outside - next to the stranger - and feared she would be in strife.

They had come looking for her, after the others gave-up trying to find her, and began worrying that something might have befallen her. Her father was beside himself and very apologetic for her action. She was staring at her feet, kicking the dust and pebbles, as he explained this was a very important clan guest; but the stranger proved kindly and pointed-out she probably got quite a fright when she saw a strange face appear right in front of her.

That evening her mother explained, between giggles, she had pulled a wizard's nose and was probably the only dwarf or dwarf maiden, ever to have done so.

The story was told with great joviality and brought much laughter from those seated - including Rhyss.

He was especially amused and asked if she had been told she had pulled the nose of a very senior wizard - actually the convener of the grand council of wizards?

Thellmyr went on to explain that she had not been told of his rank, but she learnt some years later and a number of the family patriarchs never let her forget she had pulled a high wizard's nose.

Rhyss mentioned, with mischief, that he was not aware of any wizards had pulled the nose of a grand council member, then was joined in the jest by Lady Errywn, who said she was sure no Elf had ever pulled a wizard's nose.

This pleased Thellmyr immensely, and made everyone laugh all the more.

Xix introduced and oversaw the seating of the next group of guests.

Thellmyr's story was the icebreaker for an exchange of entertaining and funny anecdotes, of childhood escapades, many reducing those listening to hysterics.

Noala's sides were hurting so much from laughing, she really thought they might split.

The banquet continued with more guests joining the company at regular intervals, with the noise of talk and laughter steadily rising to a confusing roar as the room filled.

Finally when all had sated their appetites for food, wine and laughter, as the roar became a more stable rumble of general discussion and pipes started to come out, Noala noticed Cy had returned to his cushion on the seat beside her.

Xix stood and asked for the guests attention.

He didn't call out or shout for quiet, rather asked in his normal voice which carried to all those (Noala estimated there were well over ten score in all) in the banquet hall.

"Friends - if I may I welcome you to this happy meeting, after your sadness. I must perhaps make many of you sadder still, briefly, but I will offer hope and an option at the conclusion of what I have to say. This cannot be avoided, because most of you sense the world has changed during the brief time you have been held captive here, but you cannot remember why. Thus I must tell you."

"Each of you was captured, entranced, and held here by a fell creature called a Bolrog, or 'Durin's bane' as some Dwarves know them".

This brought a hiss of fear and whispers from many of the dwarves, elves and other folk present.

"You cannot remember the circumstances, exact moment of your capture, nor torment suffered during your imprisonment - because it has been removed during your reawakening in order to heal your minds. Only the wizard Rhyss, on my left, retains most of his recollection - but not all - because it is simply too tormenting to recall and stay sane".

"I am Eylofren the fine - a wizard. Some of you have had dealings with my order and - like the Princess

Thellmyr - will recognize my features as reminding you of some you have known, but only a few of you have seen or known of me prior to this banquet; which bring us to why...." said Xix.

"You have been freed and healed by my companions. Our hostess Noala, ward of Chryllexius l' grande. For those of you who do not know of him in the high tongue, or your experiences, Chryllexius is the Dragon Lord - also known as Chryllex the ancient."

This brought quite a few murmurs and whispers from those gathered.

"Incidentally - for those who have difficulty with the vowels of the high language, my common name in Westernesse is simply 'Xix'. I use this in general travel and it should be easier to pronounce for all."

"... Now - sadly - we are now approaching the end of the fourth age in the Middle Earth. I know that will greatly shock most of you, entranced in the first, second and third ages. Please hear me out. The world as you know it is radically changed. Twice Sauron - the dark lord - rose again after his first defeat, before finally meeting his doom in the great war of the rings; which concluded the third age. He was destroyed and is no more, but so also were the great rings of power. Over three quarters of the fair lands and forests of the first age were destroyed during the three great battles against the dark lord, or subsequently through the passing of the power of the three on Elven hands. For many of you - again sadly - there is no great forest or grand city to return to. Entire clans have ceased to be, through war and the ravages of time; while for the Elven folk - most of your number have long sailed back to the havens across the western sea. The world has changed beyond your recognition."

The chamber was virtually silent, as Xix's words sunk in.

"In fact, your release is both accidental and perhaps fortuitous. As you are suddenly confronted with being left behind, or the last of the few of your kind; I too have held a lonely watch these last five hundred years, as the last of my line and thought to be the last of my craft in the middle earth. I had actually closed my tower and set out for the western havens myself, when an unrelated series of events caused me to reassess my undertaking and led to your discovery. With the help of Chryllexius, your captor was destroyed and this place cleansed, although we have left some Orcs and Goblins hiding in the deeper levels of the mines. We have a specific reason for this and none need fear ill from them, as they cannot escape an enchantment that holds them where they are."

"What I offer is three options, but realistically only two:

The first option is to return through lands and roads you no longer know, seeking for what in most cases will no longer be there. If that is what you wish, you are free to go and will be provisioned accordingly, but I do not believe that to be a realistic option.

The second option is to join your people, or those of the old blood and ages, in the Western Havens. You will not need to travel to the sea, as the dragon lord will establish an enchanted doorway, through which you may pass directly, in four nights time - on Vallyn's eve.

Thirdly and finally - perhaps the hardest, but most rewarding option - stay and help us."

"We intend to re-fire the forges here and reforge rings of power, such as those three great rings of the elves, to heal and restore. Throughout this middle earth there are a few remnants of all your clans, whether single families or small groups of families living, but slowly declining through isolation and loss of hope. Our plan is to reforge the rings and give them to the custodians of tribes and clans, to use to restore the beauty of their greatest years, but in a parallel existence to this world. To each we would provide a gateway or portal, through which you may draw your own, but be safe from unwelcomed intrusion. In such parallel havens, your tribes and clans will grow anew and the most wonderful days of old be resurrected."

"That is our intention, but we cannot do it without your help. The orcs and goblins have been preserved as a work force in the mines. I believe Chryllexius has located some long sleeping of his kin in those depths, who he awoke to guard and oversee the orcs and goblins in a most effective manner. While the likelihood of trouble is very remote indeed, I suspect you will agree these creatures are far better off co-operating, than coming up here

or challenging Chryllexius and his kin - as the former Bolrog discovered"

"To help you in your deliberations, you will find a fountain with a moon pool in the visage gallery to the west through those doors. It was provided by the dragon lord. The moon pool has an enchantment on it, which will show the viewer his or her homelands, under the moonlight. Each individual looking will see the view he or she wishes, even if ten are standing around the moon pool at one time. Please take your time, but do not look unless you genuinely wish to see."

"Finally - no decision is requested, nor required, before Vallyn's eve. I suggest you all take this opportunity to fete, celebrate and recover; leaving aside your cares and worries for the next four days. Quarters are prepared for each of you through the southern doorway, should you require rest, toiletries, or refreshment. If you will excuse me now, I wish to speak with Princess Thellmyr, Rhyss and Noala. Please continue your festivities and make light tonight, as the burdens of tomorrow will still await you in a four-day. Please accept my regrets, as the messenger of such ill tidings", Xix concluded with a bow.

Someone started clapping for some reason, and the guests all joined giving a cheer. Xix smiled, waved indicating they should continue their festivities, then left to speak privately in a separate chamber with Thellmyr and Rhyss.

## 6. Choices and travels.

"They say 'hope springs eternal'... " offered Princess Thellmyr as she walked back through the grand entrance hall of the mines, with Xix.

They had been waving farewell to the last of the host, leaving to find their homelands and search for scattered kin.

"It doesn't make sense", muttered Xix, looking for something to kick along the floor, left hand clenched as he bent his finger nail.

Thellmyr realized that although many centuries older in real terms than herself, Xix was in fact comparably younger in terms of his understanding of people; while she would swear - were Xix a Dwarf - that he was sulking.

"And what has your familiar to say on all of this? ... or should I say Chryllexius l' grande?" she enquired with a wry smile.

Xix looked up, then smiled; knowing one of the old blood and of as ancient lineage as Thellmyr would have known for some days, simply by the cat's unique aura.

"Many may have stayed, if the dragon lord had chosen to reveal himself." she offered.

"Then they would have stayed for the wrong reasons" ... countered the cat, nestled in Xix's right arm. "... and stop fidgeting with that fingernail", he added to Xix.

Xix grinned briefly to Thellmyr, then reverted to his brow-furrowing deliberation.

"I thought they would stay and work with us - here where their world still existed - to rebuild something greater for their surviving kin, spread across the reaches. They saw in the moon pool, but refused to believe ..." He sighed.

"More a case of not accepting, without first hand experience and without trying to regroup their kin, in the lands they once knew. They simply cannot accept your alternatives, without dismissing their own hopes and dreams first. People do that. It is their nature. The problem you wizards have is that you see things in purely empiric terms, devoid of romance; thus you sometimes under estimate or misunderstand, just how romantic notions and dreams cause others to act irrationally - by your measures and expectations."

"She's right!" said the cat.

Xix magicked a small stone, making it appear on the fine mosaic floor ahead of him and kicked it as they walked.

"But less than twenty have stayed and I can't believe Rhyss has left too. Of all, I would have thought he would stay!" argued Xix.

"He wanted to, but I told him to go. While of the few remaining, I believe we have enough - for the time being", said Chryllexius.

"I think we've more than enough, too", added Thellmyr, smiling to the cat.

"You sent him away!" said Xix with a start, and glaring at the cat. "Why - when we needed him?"

"Maybe - he's suffered a great deal with that Bolrog for starters, and I felt it more important he travel a bit - to keep an eye on things and report events through the middle kingdom", Cy replied calmly.

"Very wise" , offered Thellmyr.

"Yes, I suppose so..." conceded Xix, unhappily.

He was about to kick his stone again, when it suddenly shimmered and transformed into a cockroach - which scuttled away across the floor. Checking his foot in mid swing almost caused Xix to fall over.

Cy - leapt to Thellmyr's arms as Xix teetered, then regained his balance. Thellmyr laughed in a clear melody.

Xix glared at the cat.

"You'll keep!", he said, then laughed ... his troubled mood passing.

Outside, Noala waved to the last of her recent guests, as they disappeared down the path into the forest; then turned her attention to the gift pressed on her by Lady Errywn and Myralln. Added by Lyiam - who was one of those remaining behind, seemingly adopting the roll of Noala's shield companion - she sprinkled the fine dust and seeds on the surface of the bubbling brook, that ran from the Mine entrance down into the dark forest. The dust and seeds seemed to tingle on her fingers as she spread them, while the water seemed to jump-up to receive them and they produced a wonderful fresh, woody smell ... sort of like the smell of a forest in spring, after a passing shower of rain.

Noala passed some of the dust and seed to Lyiam, who - after sniffing it and sighing some long forgotten memory - carefully sprinkled it on the waters, smiling as he did so.

Their task completed, they turned and rejoined the other, now walking back up to the Great gate. Lyiam glancing back as they passed through the doors, smiled a private smile, as his eyes perceived a slight change of the tree foliage in the forest, along the path the brook followed. Dark grey-green leaves seemed to lighten, then invigorate, and reach anew towards the sun.

In the depths of the forest, gnarled old roots, trunks and limbs stretched - feeling a vigor and growing strength they had long forgotten; while here and there, small seeds found their own place to take root, then reach up into the clear sky. The oldest trees remembered sighing, recalled the days of the ancients and the elves, setting the highest branches whistling long forgotten tunes.

The breeze carried these newly reawakened tunes to the keen ears of an old rook, who - on hearing them - decided it was time he and his flock settled in a new forest; which held fair promise for the future. Cassias called his clan and their nest-mates, to prepare themselves for a migration.

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