**Interlude- Chapter 25**

These *events occur in Ashabenford just before Swan, Okul and Neon joined the others in Ordulin, Sembia.*

The day promised to be blue and bright if the pre-dawn morning was any indication. Since being persuaded, despite her well-reasoned objections, to go to Sembia, Swan felt a need to improve her usefulness. Too many times now, she had died or come close to death. Each time had been a drain on the Seeker’s time and resources. That had to end. She had pondered on the ways that her physical and magical defenses could be improved. Now having both time on her hands and reward money to spend, there were people to see and business to discuss. Okul was visiting Kurud a day or two at Tyr’s Temple. Since Jhaer was out of town, Neon was only the gods knew where. Kilzadi was off somewhere; hopefully preparing for the teleportation. Risca and Gideon had remained in Sembia. Even though the mage had successfully teleported there and back once already, she had trepidations about being teleported long distances. There was no absolute certainty as to where, when and in what condition one would arrive at the other end. Still, the others were willing, and their arguments for going were good, and so she would prepare.

As usual, whenever she entered the White Hart Inn’s stables, she was greeted by a colophony of animal sounds. The barn cats, Meow-Ow the tawny, and Meesh-Meesh the grey rubbed against her feet, purring louder than snores. ”Good hunting today. Good hunting”, their purring spoke. She purred back as she stroked down their backs “and to you my sisters” Then the horses would begin. To others, it seemed as if the horses had come to an agreement to start neighing at the sight of her. To Swan, their meaning was unmistakeable. It was one of her divine gifts.

The animals were mostly work horses owed by her uncle, but she stabled Nivea there. The other Seekers used the Kaulvaeras’ Stables but she wanted to care for her horse herself. The stable boys were only to care for Nivea if she was out of town

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Calls of “*brush. brush,.” “apple? apple?” “water, chin scratch* “and so on,followed her as she passed the stalls. Since Nivea’s stall was at the far end, she had to pass all the others. She always stopped to pat and stroke each horse that greeted her. To others, it appeared she neighed back to them. The horses adored her; none more so than her own Nivea.

As she led out the speedy and sturdy mare, Swan could not help but laugh as Nivea would tickle her by lipping at her cheek and running a rough tongue along her neck. The others would whinny “*lucky mare, lucky mare”.*

“Stop that”, Swan giggled as Nivea would head butt her along; being eager to get outdoors. The horse desired these morning rides as much as Swan did. Once outside, she quickly saddled the mare and tied up the bag containing her mithral chain shirt.

“Long ride today” she informed her horse.

“*Good. Go. Now.”*

They trotted out to the road leading to the village of Glen, 20 or so miles away. It was the first of Swan’s three stops. Allowing Nivea to set her own pace, the ride became a mixture of walk, trot, canter and exhilarating gallops.

By the time the sun had fully risen, they arrived at Glen. The town was unusual in all of the Dalelands, let alone Mistledale. Its stone and thatched cottages were home to a clan of dwarfs, roughly near several hundreds of them. A few humans and half-elves made up the rest.

Leaving Nivea at a public water trough, Swan, bag of armour slung over her back, made her way to the smithy of Good Master Thorik, the village’s skilled black, weapon and armor leading smith. She could not help but notice the higher than usual number of dwarfs out on the streets, all engaged in little groups, seemingly excited and happy. She managed to overhear snatches of some of the conversations all making reference to the dwarven gods and a book.

Reaching the large building that housed the smithy ovens, she heard happy voices raised in harmonious song to the beat of the heavy hammers pounding on metal; Moradin*, clang,* glorious, cl*ang,* Dwarffather, *clang,* glorious, Marthammor, *clang ,*glorious, Watchful Eye, *clang,* glorious. It continued ever louder in this vein as more and more dwarven deities were added to the list.

 Entering, she scanned for the master smith. Dwarven smiths and their apprentices labored at their separate forges. The dwarfs noted her entrance but continued in their work and song. Spotting him at the largest and hottest forge, she made her way through the warm building, around the piles of pig iron, scrap steel, coal and rusted metals. “Master Thorik. A word, if you please”, she had to shout to be heard above the din.

The master smith, perspiration gleaming orange in the glare of the hot coal bed looked up at her, dark brown eyes almost lost in the thickness of plush thick, grey eyebrows. A long white-grey beard was tied into three separate spiral curled strands, each reaching to his navel. His bare torso was covered only by a smith thick hide apron. His face, arms, hands and shoulders were spotted by old and recent reddish dots; the results of fiery embers and sparks landing on flesh. He nodded to the apprentices to continue as he answered. “I knows ya gurl, you’re with that group, the group that includes that Risca, Risca the clan-banished.” His voice sounded full of disdain for dwarfs whose crimes could lead to banishment.

Swan heard the contempt. Angered, she could not allow her dear friend to be insulted; not her brave and loyal Risca. Regardless that she may be putting her request in jeopardy, she stepped forward to glare down at the smith. “Yes, he is clan banished. But I tell you this Master Thorik; that he has more than paid for his lapse. And I also tell you this; he embellishes all that is fine and expected of a good dwarf. I predict that he will exonerate himself so much that he will be toasted as a great hero!”

The forcefulness and fearlessness of her response gave him pause. *This one has a bite.* Despite himself, he had to admire her stubborn loyalty to a clan-banished. He just returned her stare as if to read her sincerity. “Fine.” he gruffed. “You did not come here to defend that dwarf and I’ve work to do. Since this is a fortunate day for all, then state your business gurl.”

Swan calmed herself but her confusion was evident. “Yes I noticed the gladness in the streets. Why is this a happy day?”

“Ah, I guess the news did not yet reach ya. Just came in by caravan. The Lost Tome of Moradin has been recovered and is now where it belongs; in good dwarf hands. Found and returned by a hired band of adventures, up north, Triboar way. So for dwarfs everywhere, it is a fine day. Now to your business gurl.”

Ignorant of its significance to the dwarfs, but happy for them, she continued. “Oh, yes, well I am pleased; truly, your tome has been recovered. My business is this.” She pulled out her mithral chain shirt from the sack and handed it over.

Thorik, taking it, held it up fully extended and examined it. “It does not seem to be in need of repair. I see no fault.” He stretched and pulled at it. “Workmanship not bad, considering its elfie made. What is it ya want done gurl?”

“If possible, there are several things. I would like it to be re-enforced to make it harder to be penetrated. I would like it to be segmented so that it will be easier to twist, bend and swivel while wearing it and I would like vital area coverage, you know, shoulders, breasts, armpits, kidneys, spine and so on. Is it possible?”

“Hummm.” Rough-hewed experienced fingers felt all through the links.” Yes all that is possible. But it will be slightly heavier. Is that agreeable and are you willing to pay my price. It can all be done with extra mithral metal.

“Yes but with no haggling. I am short of time and will agree on a reasonable cost.”

Thorik boomed out a laugh. Dwarfs did not haggle with each other. A fine price was offered and a fine price was accepted-or not. Her attitude indicated a dwarven influence; Risca the clan-banished most likely? “Fine. No haggling. And because this is a special day, I will do it for base cost of material and the labour.”

Feeling relief that all would be done, she added “Agreed. And a little extra for a job well done, if you please good master smith.”

This elicited another booming laugh. “I am starting to like ya, gurl. Now, what ya is asking for, is like tailoring, so we needs some measurements. It can be ready by evening.”

“Can it be delivered to Ashabedford?”

“Ya in luck. Got a repair shipment of arms and equipment heading out for the Riders tomorrow. I will put your shirt on the delivery. Now to where and for who?”

“The White Hart Inn and leave it there for Swan BATTLESTAR.” She had to shout to make her name overheard above the clanging which at this point had reached a crescendo.

It was as if a switch had been turned. All the noise stopped and all dwarven eyes fixated on her. Only the hiss of steam and the snap, crackle, pop of the coal bed forges could be heard. She felt uneasy by all the neutral stares of the dwarves upon her.

“What? What?” she could only ask mystified by the sudden silence.

“Battlestar? Your name is Battlestar? Tells me gurl, is that a common human name? Are there many Battlestars?”

Still puzzled, scanning all the faces now staring intently at her, she responded “Ah, yes Battlestar is my family name. I do not think it is that common in these parts. It is a Damaran name, so there may be some in Damara. What is this about?”

“A Damaran name? Well, well, well. So you are a Damaran? Well, well, well. What a strange happening. The group that recovered the Lost Tome; one member was a tall Damaran gurl. By all the related accounts, a tall raven-haired tattooed beauty, by name of…Battlestar. Now a Battlestar helps reclaim the Lost Tome for dwarf kind and another Battlestar claiming to be dwarf-friend steps into my shop. Interesting coincidence, no? Any relationship for such an uncommon name?”

Swan shook her head. “I do not know other Battlestars”, she paused, “except for my father and his family side are all deceased.”

“Uhmmm. Well, gurl, in my long life experiences, I have come to believe that there is always a purpose to ‘interesting coincidences’. But the day is aging and there is much to do” .He addressed the others. “Back to it laddies.” As the noise of smiths at work recommenced, he turned back to the scout. Now about those measurements….”

Returning back to Ashabedford, Swan thought long and hard about Battlestars. She knew father still grieved for his lost family. Family, on mother’s side, she was well aquatinted with; distant cousins, great aunts and uncles and so on. If one went back far enough, then all the members of the Fox tribe would be related. But of her Damaran roots, she knew little; just what her father had related. She knew about his brother and his parents and how terrible the Witch-King wars had been; how he had lost his parents and how his brother had to take his family into safety. She knew of the chaos, anarchy and turmoil as the war ended; of the orc war band incursions and gangs of human outlaws. It was time to remedy that. A trip to Damara was called for; a visit to find uncle Whimbrel and aunt Deneb’s resting places; those of her paternal grandparents as well; to pay her respects. It was long overdue. She would also attempt to trace other Battlestars, perhaps even this raven-haired one in Triboar. Maybe when all these dreams of darkness were finally ended, there would be time. Yes, she had promised Okul to accompany him on the search for his father, but the search could begin in Damara and one could seek out gold dragons and Battlestars at the same time, could one not? And so her decision made, she continued on.

It was near midday when the scout arrived at the Abbey of the Golden Sheathe on Ashabedford’s outskirts. It was her second main stop of the day. A troop of Riders taking their noon meal on the church grounds, hailed her. That such a troop was present was no surprise. Nelyssa Shendean, the person she had come to see, was the Rider commander; as well as the in-residence leader of the Paladin Order of the Rose. They were most likely waiting for their patrol orders.

Nearing the temple stairs she was set on by a gaggle of toddler orphan children. Clinging to her, she became the recipient of hugs and a clamour for kisses. Laughing, she set 3 of the young ones on Nivea’s saddle, with two more in her arms, and several still clinging to her legs. She approached the elder dark-haired priestess, Jhanira Barasstan, in charge of the orphans, and the child care acolytes who waited. Swan’s close relationship with the church made her always welcomed.

“The children are ever excited whenever you visit, sister Swan” were Jhanira’s first words.

“That’s because they all get to ride Nivea” was the reply through a pack of giggles and squeals as the toddlers jostled for their turn to be tickled by the scout’s knowing fingers.

“Perhaps so” *or it may be in you they easily sense Chauntea’s love for them.*

“Good Jhanira is Nelyssa available?”

The priestess indicated to her helpers to tend to the children and the horse. Then she linked arms with Swan. “Come, I will take you.” As they walked to Nelyssa’s business office, she added, “Be warned, our dear paladina is catching up on the ‘paperwork’. This always puts her in a foul mood. The sisters and novices dread their turn to aid on the monthly ‘paperwork’ day”

As if to verify her words, the paladin’s voice was clearly heard as they neared the office door. “Pay five hundred gold pieces? WHAT? FIVE HUNDRED GOLD PIECIES? FOR THAT? SHOVE IT UP A DEVIL’S ARSE!” Then was heard the report of a fist striking a desk.

Jhanira sighed. “Yes, and we especially try and keep the children away from this part of the temple on ‘paperwork’ day” continued the priestess to a now giggling Swan, “but they consider their great-auntie Nelyssa to be of immense entertainment on this day and so always try to sneak in to listen.” She shooed away a pair of teenagers who had been loitering, bent over from hilarity and attempting to stifle laughter.” You two; back to the kitchens.” She knocked.

“UNLESS THE ABYSS IS INVADING, GO AWAY!”

Nonplussed at the storming shout that would have sent any sane person scurrying, Jhanira responded “Swan Battlestar is here to speak to you.” There was a silence; then the sound of footsteps approaching. The door swung open and the scout found herself engulfed between two steel-sinew arms.

“Swan! Darling! Come in. come in.” The scout hugged the older woman back just as fiercely. The friendship between them was firm and deep. Jhanira nodded her departure. “I leave you two to your business and will have some lunch brought to Aleena’s garden.” She referred to the ever-in-bloom red rose garden where Aleena lay entombed.

“Come, sit”, the paladina indicated a free wooden chair; free after she pushed off a pile of invoices, requisitions, bills and receipts to scatter onto the floor. “Let me get you a refreshment.”

Sitting, the scout could see the office was cluttered with papers and ledgers. Nelyssa’s desk was haphazardly covered with them along with sealant wax and two signet rings; one for the Riders and one for the Abbey.

As Nelyssa handed her a blueberry cordial, Swan examined her friend and mentor. As Aleena had been a surrogate-sister to her, as Risca was her surrogate-father, so Nelyssa was as a surrogate-mother When she spend those early days at the Abbey, it was Nelyssa who helped guide her in ways of the holy warrior; it was her with whom she had sparred learning the ways of the sword. It was Nelyssa to whom she had turned for support and advice when she felt insecure after deciding to gift her maidenhead to Inialos. It was the paladin of the Rose who explained that these feelings of indecision were natural for a young virgin to have and to trust in her instincts. Nelyssa was one who rejoiced with her in her delight the day after; who welcomed her to womanhood; that dreadful day when Aleena had died. She was the person who reinforced pride in her elf heritage and Daleland culture. *All the things a mother would do.*

More importantly, the paladin had been a comfort to her at the death of Aleena and assuaged the guilt she held.

The paladin’s auburn hair now seemed more grey-streaked and a few more worry lines were etched around her grey eyes. Other than that, she seemed as fit as ever, sitting straight, and strong. Despite her late mid-age, her skin was unblemished, except for the shirt covered old battle scars and her calloused hands; calloused from wielding her weapons in combat and a scythe at harvest time for so many years.

The paladin’s features were best described as athletic, personable and becoming. One would not call her beautiful, yet she carried an emanation of allurement about her; an allure that drew many to her. The scout smiled as she remembered Neon’s first meeting with Nelyssa upon the Seekers’ return from the Zhent fortress, now seemingly so long ago. He remained so close that it seemed he kept tripping over her. **[Lord Tornado’s note- as detailed in chapter 6. To be revealed later in the chronicles is the relationship between Neon and Nelyssa]**

Swan knew her friend’s mind was as active as ever; forgetting nothing, remembering everything and one of the best military commanders not only for Mistledale, but perhaps in all the Dalelands; rivalling both her own mother, Lilia, and Neon’s mother Ellarian. *Unusual that most of the best Dalelands’ field commanders happen to be women. Indeed we rule ourselves!*

“Why do you not get some professional help for all this” she asked, waving her hands at all the cluttered bookkeeping items. ”It would save you time and vexation. It apparently seems to stress you out. From what I heard, anyway,” she tittered.

The paladin gave a deep laugh. “There are several reasons. I consider this my monthly penance for sins past, present and future. It allows me to keep personal track of income and expenditures. Also it gives an excuse to cuss and revile the enemies of my goddess, while at the same time provide great amusement for the older children. And it is a day that keeps the priestesses at bay and so actually lessens my workload. See; another sin to do penance for. Besides a paladin of good faith cannot delegate this agony and torture to anyone else, now could she?” She laughed again. “Now as much as you are always welcomed here, daughter Swan, this is not just a social call, is it?”

The scout who had been laughing along replied in a more serious tone. “No, I need your opinion and advice on obtaining a certain item.” She explained her need to improve her efficiency to the Seekers; how she had agreed to go to Sembia and wanted to prepare and how the item would aid her.”

As she explained, it was the paladin’s turn to examine her friend and now colleague. Her seasoned eyes noticed the overall tiredness; not surprising. Gideon had made his report to the council regarding the extermination of the Eldreth Veluuthra, but only a select few, of which she was one, had been informed of Swan’s confirmation as a punitor of the Sheldarine. It was a role and responsibility that would exhaust one physically and mentally. *No wonder the poor dear is tired.*

She also noticed how much the scout had matured since first arriving in Ashabedford. Where once before her had sat a bashful, timid and blushing teen, there now sat a forward, unabashed and daring young lady. No longer the inexperienced neophyte who came to the Abbey requesting to stay with the novices to learn how to conduct herself as a cleric, she was now at ease in her role as a Chosen of the Great Archer. The hesitant youthful militia soldier had transformed into a formidable deadly warrior, confident of her fighting abilities. The shy pretty girl who was tentative about her virginity had blossomed into a resplendent woman, serene, satisfied and relaxed in her sexuality. That she had a part in all these transfigurations filled her with some pride. *She’s a true daughter of Deepingdale, she rules herself. And an excellent role model to all the young ones here.*

Swan finished her explanation. “What do you think? Is it doable?”

Nelyssa paused to consider. “So, if I understand correctly, you wish this small blessing, available to even the lowest rank cleric, to be imprinted upon an item and…”

“Yes”, interrupted Swan with excitement, “a protection against evil on a ring, but acting permanently. I have the Glen dwarfs bolstering my physical armor, but this would bolster my spiritual defenses. It would save precious, crucial time in a combat. Then, is it possible?”

“I have heard of such itemized permanent blessings, but it would take the cooperation of a high ranking cleric and a high ranking wizard working together in tandem. It would be costly. If possible can you afford it?”

“I now have much money” replied Swan, with hope showing, “we have the riches from the Eldreth Veluuthra episode and the reward from rescuing the little bitc…ah, the littlest Malorn daughter.”

This caused Nelyssa to bark a laugh. “Paladins always speak the truth, Swan. So it is quite all right to label a bitch, a bitch. And little Mandi is a bitch, is she not? Now, more seriously, our abbess, Watchful Sister Alena, can be persuaded to take part, especially considering all you have done for the Abbey, but what about a wizard?”

“I was thinking of Noristuor. He seems to have enough magical acumen. Besides I intend to see him after lunch as I other business with him and the Seekers did help his friend Tunaster, cleric of Mystra with that temple business in Harrowdale. So he should be receptive.”**[Lord Tornado’s note- as detailed in chapters 10 to 13]**

“Noristuor the tiefling, she asked surprised, Noristuor, the self-proclaimed mage-in-residence- protector of Ashabedford? Are you sure he is up to it? He always seems a bit preoccupied and distracted.”

“I feel he is capable. Besides I have only a short time and he is available.”

The paladina shrugged. “It is your choice. Tell him to arrive here for supper and prepared for the ritual. Should all go well, you will have your ring in the morning. I will bring it myself.”

Just then there was a timid knock on the door. She winked at Swan and bellowed out, “WHAT! GO AWAY! BANG ON BANE’S BLACK BALLS INSTEAD!”

“Lunch is ready, auntie Nelyssa” replied a young nervous and skittish voice.

“The poor little one drew the short straw and had to inform me of the prepared lunch. Now I have to live up to my ‘paper day’ reputation”, Nelyssa whispered to a giggling Swan. Then in a much louder exasperated sounding voice, “CRAP ON A DEMON! WE’RE COMING!!” The sound of steps hurrying away from the door could be heard.

“Oh Nelyssa, you are so good”, Swan laughed.

“I have to be. I am a paladin after all”, she laughed back. “Come now. Time for lunch.”

Swan was still feeling positive mid-afternoon as Noristuor’s tower came into view. Stationed in the forested area on Ashabedford’s periphery, it was surrounded by a sizable plot of trimmed, manicured grass, devoid of undergrowth. Signs scattered, hither and thither, on the plot read, in apparently childish printing, ‘Keep off the grass. It will eat you’; despite the fact that many woodland creatures were scurrying about the grass, carrying on with their daily routines. She knew that the mage had a reputation for being a recluse, absent-minded and hated to be disturbed. His time was spent almost exclusively on magical experimentation, but the signs were new additions.

Spotting a busy chipmunk, Swan chittered at it, ‘*friend, grass, danger*?’ The little animal replied in rapid; trill that only a speaker-to-animals would understand; ‘*mage strange good. Grass danger bad’.*

*Well, that’s confusing.* She continued on the beaten path that led to the tower. There more signs posted along its edge. ‘Keep out’, ‘Solicitors teleported randomly’ and ‘Beware of hell hounds, and’ Danger, free-ranging cockatrices’ were some of the most common. The most ambiguous was ‘Owlbear hunting here’.

The tower itself was a three story cylinder capped by a parapet encircled flat roof. A large telescope sat centered on the roof. Build of flat, smooth, greyish stone, on each floor; four rectangular windows faced the four directions. The beaten path led to a thick oaken tall wide door resting on a raised wooden deck. Three steps led to the deck. Centered on the door was a life-sized bronze relief lion head. Reaching the steps she dismounted knowing Nivea would wait. The horse promptly stepped onto the grass to graze a few mouthfuls. Nothing happened. Reassured, she headed up the stairs.

There was a loud’ whoomph’ sound as she reached the deck. Billowing out of the top windows was a heavy dense brownish-red gas cloud. Before she could react, it quickly descended, engulfing the scout, with an intense odor of chocolate and strawberry. As the gas dissipated she heard the mage’s voice gasping and hacking from the top level: “Casper, Casper, another failure. Scratch variant four and prepare for variant five.”

Surprised and coughing, she grabbed the brass knocker below the lion’s head and pounded it on the door. The lion’s head spoke: *make a choice, go away, and do not stay; if remain then face Doomsday especially if Kryptonian.* Its eyes flashed red and its mouth opened to expose long, sharp bronze fangs.

*Well, I’m not Kryptonian, whatever that is.* Undaunted, she knocked again. There was silence until after a longish pause, the door opened, releasing more of the gas, forcing her to cough one more time. The clearing gas exposed the tiefling mage standing in the doorway.

He appeared as she remembered. From the sides of his head, sweeping spiral, bone-white ram-like horns jutted out. His eyes, fronted by large square spectacles, were a calming yellow, his nose straight and aquiline. His dark red lips were straight and narrow. He wore a loose blue chemise and pantaloons which contrasted his red-tinged skin. Shoulder length greying dark hair was topped with a white chef’s hat. A white chef’s jacket with the stenciled words ’kitchen magic’ covered his chemise. Scattered on his hands, face and clothes were smatterings of what appeared to be flour. One hand held a baker’s wooden rolling pin.

“Are you illiterate” he semi-shouted? “Can you not read the signs?” Then, as if realizing she looked familiar, he bent his head and peered over his glasses to examine her more closely. A barbed tail arced over from behind to scratch at his head, reminiscent of someone scratching at their heads when trying to recall a memory.

“Wait! Wait! I recognize you. You’re from that helpful group that has done so much good, the Lookfors, the Questers or the Searchers or…no, no, that can’t be right, the Searchers are a British Merseybeat group, ah”, he looked perplexed.

“The Seekers”

“The Seekers! Of course, the Seekers. Quite right, quite right. And; wait don’t tell me, you have a bird name, sparrow or starling or some such.”

“Swan,” she sighed.

“Swan, yes. Now I remember. Quite right, quite right. You were the quiet shy one when last the Seekers were here. Well, Swan of the Seekers, why are you standing on my doorstep, interrupting my work?”

“I do not wish to intrude or waste your time, Noristuor. I need to beseech a favour and some information, should you be willing.”

His face brightened with a huge grin, exposing pearl-white teeth, somewhat elongated and pointed. He danced with excitement. “You need my help? Finally, someone needs MY HELP! The Council keeps rejecting it. But you, YOU…ah” he seemed momentarily puzzled, then continued

“You, ah, bird named girl of the…ah group that looks for things and does good, you need the help of the mage-in-residence of Ashabenford. Wonderful! Yes, Wonderful! Come in! Come in! Casper, we have a guest. CASPER!! Bring tea and cupcakes.” The last he shouted out. Before she could protest he took her by the arm and pulled her inside. “Follow me.”

*Great Archer, has my aim been true in coming here?* She followed him along a long corridor with rooms opening along each side; an office, a den, a huge library; inside which, on a table, she glimpsed a thin glossy paper document. The cover showed a shapely attractive red-haired female warrior in a skimpy chain mail shirt and matching halter top leap attacking, with a bastard sword, some kind of demon. She did not recognize the glyphs. They shaped RED SONYA. She glimpsed thick carpets and wall tapestries in each room whose particulars she passed by too quickly to discern. It was obvious that the inside was much larger than one would expect from the outside tower. *Extra-dimensional space? Not a surprise inside a mage tower.* He led her to a reception room.

There was no rhyme or reason to it. It held easy chairs, sofas, refreshment tables and side tables; none of which matched in color, material, fabric or size. Knick-knacks of colored glass unicorns, porcelain lawn gnomes, and floating colored crystalline baby beholders were placed or hovering randomly about. The walls held national flags and regional pennants of the states and sub-states of Faerun, as well as others she did not recognize, giving the room an explosion of colour. One’s eyes had to dart around, not knowing where to linger. It was not an ordered, decorated room of an ordered mind. Scattered about between the knickknacks, flags and pennants were paintings and prints: some of a younger Noristuor with other personages, others of pastoral scenes, others of blooded battlefields and cities caught in cataclysms. One showed a spectacular city under attack. Buildings burned, while demonic hordes were being resisted by warriors, spellcasters and priests. The painting center illustrated a female with wild flying red hair, atop a tall mage tower, in wizard robes. Lightning, fire, force and energy orbs and bolts, all streamed from her demolishing company after company of demons. He noticed her interest.

“Ah yes, that one. That is Greyhawk. I fought beside the Ultimate Magus herself, Nuria Darkfire. Oh what a fight for a novice mage to be part of. On top of her tower, hurling eldritch magic of all kinds, she was spectacular! Rumor had it that she and her companions later actually descended into the Abyss where her gnome paladin friend, the one with the funny name, Double XY, I think he was called, actually shook appendages with Demogorgon. Can you believe it? I know someone who knows someone who met up and touched the Prince of Demons and lived!!! He gave a great sigh. “Another place. Another world. Another time.” He indicated others.

“Now this one shows me receiving the First Place Ribbon of the Royal Bakery Cook Off from King Azoul IV of Cormyr. That one over there shows Piergeiron the Paladinson of Waterdeep congratulating me and my team for winning the Challenge of the Champions. Ah, that was several years ago. Those were good years.”

“This is an older one. It shows a very young barely teen, me, on Krynn during the First War of the Lance. I was a kitchen help boy then, marching with the Knights of Solamnia. That’s me holding the cupcake.

That exemplar Minotaur warrior on my left is the renowned Kaz and that handsome fellow on my left, the one holding the big lance; well that’s the great hero, Huma. And that silver dragon towering over all of us, that’s his lady love, Heart. I can’t recall her dragon name but in her half-elf form, everyone called her Gwnyeth. Their love for each other was intense but sad. Fate was not kind to them. They both perished but not before they prevented Takhisis, ah, uum, ah, yes, you know her as Tiamat, from entering into the world. He gave out a sigh of regret. Then as if a switch was clicked, he became jovial. Not giving her any time to digest any of the newly imparted information, he dragged her to a landscape print.

“I find this soothing. I come and look at it often.”

It showed a red sand plain stretching out indefinitely. It was evening as indicated by the darkening grey-blue sky, a sprinkling of bright stars, one easily visible as a pair; a bright blue, and its smaller hugging partner, a lemon chiffon yellow. Traces of wispy ice clouds were back-lit by two small full moons. The horizon glowed with the lights of a spired city. “Barsoom!” he explained happily. “On the horizon is the city of Helium Many were the times I would take a sky ship out, just to take in the peace and quiet of early night on the red sands. I so enjoyed piloting a sky-ship under the moons of Barsoom. It was calm and serene. That bright blue star, that’s Jasoom, with its large moon beside it.”

Again he gave her no time to assimilate any of what he described.” Now this one is just the opposite.”

The painting showed a jungle scene. Giant ferns, along with trees, vines and bushes grew together in a close multi-green canopy. It must have been high noon because there were no shadows. The sky held a flock large flying reptiles, Swan knew as pterodactyls. In the foreground were several seemly dead velociraptors. It could have been a scene from the jungles of Chult except for some oddities. The cloudless sky, instead of blue was whitish, as if the sunlight was a giant lamp. The horizon was not flat but instead the jungle seemed to roll up towards the sky and blend into it. Strangest of all were the three figures in the painting center. One was a tall, an impressive handsome sun-bronzed –skin, grey-eyed muscular human wearing only a leopard-skin loin cloth. A shortbow, quiver, and rope slung on his back. A sheathed long hunting knife was belted around his waist. Amazingly, on his wide shoulder, a monkey sat, staring straight ahead. The last figure was a paragon of a male lion, a golden hide with a luxurious deep blue-black mane on top of a golden head and neck.

“Pellucidar”, he whispered at the painting, as if he was talking to it. He directed his attention back to the scout. “No serenity there. Always noon. The land is constantly awake, and noisy. Never a quiet moment. One has to learn to sleep with all kinds of racket and loud jungle noises; dinosaurs and even nastier things all around. Oh, that’s Lord Greystoke with Nkima and the Golden Lion, Jad-bal-ja. They had just done away with that pack of raptors; saved a lost native child, if I recall. He’s the only outsider that actually likes to spend time in Pellucidar. He told me that it reminds him of a time when the land was not spoiled by so-called ‘civilized’ humans.”

It was a whirlwind of one after another; a blur of paintings and prints, each with their own story. Later, she would have a difficult time remembering all of them, but some seemed unforgettable if totally incomprehensible.

One was a Halfling town called the Shire in a place called Middle-Earth, where Noristuor spend time introducing them to cupcakes, along with an old wizard in white robes and a most ridiculous wizard hat.

Another was a large school in a castle, called of all-things, Hogwarts. Why anyone would name a school after a swine skin problem was beyond her. Apparently the tiefling had spent a few semesters there, teaching the Art of Magical Cooking Specializing in Cupcakes.

There was one that showed a wind-swept desert landscape with two setting suns, one red, one white in the dusty sky. Pictured were what seemed to be two metal golems; one gold humanoid shaped and the other a blue and white barrel shape with wheeled feet and two hook handed arms. Their names were See-three-pee-oh, and Are-two-dee-two.

Another showed a ship’s galley. Apparently Noristuor served there as a sous-chef. The ship was called Enterprise and captained by a certain Johnathan Archer, although instead of bows, he used something called phasers. Finally, to her relief, he came to an end.

“This is the most recent.” It showed the tiefling mage and a much older brown long-haired and bearded wizard, each grinning, one arm around each other while the other hand held a smoking pipe.

“That’s me, shortly after I arrived on Toril, with Elminster of Shadowdale. We had just finished our ‘who has the best pipe smoke off’ contest. I lost but it was worth it as the Simbul stated she never ever laughed so much, embraced, hugged and declared me a dear friend for life. Then we partied. Oh did we ever party! She and I, along with her sisters and their amours and their friends; lots and lots of friends. Lots of dancing, and feasting and cupcakes.” His eyes took on a faraway look; a look of nostalgia, sorrow and regret. “I miss all of them. I miss them all.”

He began to sing: [**sung to the tune of ‘those were the days’]**

Those were the DAYS my friend,

We thought they never end,

We sing and dance……………..forever and a day

We live the life we choose……we fight and never lose

For we were young …..and sure to have our way

La la la la la la
La la la la la la
La la la la La la la la la l…..

He stopped suddenly, embarrassed.

“... Ah, my apologies. I get carried away at times. Now where is that boy? CASPER, tea and CUPCAKES”, he shouted.

Swan could not speak. The best words to describe her present state were baffled, befuddled, flummoxed, perplexed and disconcerted. He seemed to make some kind of sense yet, most of it, she could not understand. Overwhelmed by all the surroundings, by the photo stories; never having experienced anything like this, she was at a loss of how to react. *Have I made the right choice? Nelyssa warned me. He does seem unstable.* Any further recriminations, before her brain could come to grips with what he described, they were interrupted by the arrival of a large silver tray laden with various cupcakes, along with oversized silver teapot and cups. At first, the tray seemed to be effortlessly air gliding down the stairs, but as she stared at it, she could make out the tray being carried by a transparent, milky outline of what seemed to be a small ghost. Despite its lack of body features, she got the distinct impression of a male, a boy. It did not resemble any type of ghost or incorporeal she was familiar with.

An oval bulbous head oversized for the short torso and legs was coloured with small pencil- thin black eyebrows. Beneath were elliptical-shaped eyes, each curving upwards with a bright blue iris. Below them was the faint outline of a nose and below that a pair of colourless thin lips. The whole oversized head sat atop a short thin neck.

She reacted instinctively as would any Swift Hunter when confronted by the undead. She quick drew Lil’Biter and Coldkiss ; shouted a warning and prepared to engage. Then she hesitated as the ghost-boy spoke.

“Please, please don’t hurt me” he squeaked out in a voice full of trepidation. It sounded as would a human boy pleading in fear. It sounded the same as did Perdiac and Ewart when she first found and freed them.

There was no aura of evil. She heard Noristuor’s loud cry of “Swan! Stop! What are you doing?” She could only breathe in the odor of fresh brewed tea and newly baked cupcakes. The laden tray began to shake as the little ghost-boy quaked in fear.

She relaxed her combat stance as she turned to look at the wizard. The tiefling’s eyes had darkened to a ruby color .She sensed strong arcane auras swirling about him. His countenance indicated seriousness with no sign of dim-mindedness. Swan got the impression that she was being tested and her next action would determine a pass or a fail. She turned back to the ghost and slowly sheathed her blades.

She used a soothing voice, as if she was talking to one of her orphaned boys. “I’m sorry if I frightened you. I am unaccustomed to…ah, friendly ghosts. Please accept my apology and calm yourself. You are in no danger now. Here let me carry that for you.”

Carefully she approached the ghost-boy, hands outstretched to grasp the tray. Deliberately, she took it and walked backwards to her seat. The ghost just watched her with big, frightened eyes. Setting the tray on the table, she sat slowly. “Please come and join us.” Casper drew near with caution and seemingly sat by the mage, his eyes never leaving her. The effect of his being a white outlined boy that she could see through fazed her. Noristuor’s next words drew her attention back to him.

“Well, I think we can start over and introductions are in order.” Looking at him, his eyes had reverted back to their normal red and there was no longer any magical aura. She had the reaction that somehow, unwittingly, she had passed a test he had set up. His countenance had relapsed back to his absent-minded state. This gave her the opinion that he used the ‘a bit feeble-minded state’ as a cover for his true power.

“Casper, this is Stork of the Sniffers…”

“Swan of the Seekers” she corrected automatically, without thought.

“Oh, yes, Swan. Quite right. Quite right. Swan, this is Casper, my present assistant.

“Hello Casper. It is a pleasure to meet you. I am truly sorry if I frightened you earlier.”

“Hello Miss Swan. Nice to meet you. Usually people tend to run from me in fear regardless of friendly I try to be. I just want to make friends. You startled me. But I am glad now that we can chat.”

The tiefling patted the small ghost on the head. “That’s my Casper; such a good boy and a fine little helper.”

Faint red patches appeared on Casper’s cheeks. *Did he just blush?* *How can ghosts blush?* “Gosh, thank you Mister Noristuor.”

The mage continued. “Casper has been here for some time now. He got here unintendedly by accident and we have been trying to find him a way home. We have been searching for the proper black hole-white hole-wormhole combination and when we find it, I will summon a spelljammer to take him there and drop him through it.”**[Lord Tornado’s note- Casper’s returning home adventures in Realmspace may be found in his forthcoming book, ‘Friendly Ghost, Unfriendly Skies: A Beginner’s Guide to Incorporeal Sex]**

Swan had been pondering on the honorifics ‘Miss’ and ‘Mister’, ready to correct Casper should they be noble titles, when again, as Noristuor spoke, she understood the words, but not the meaning. ‘Black and white’, she knew and’ hole’ she knew but not together; similarly for ‘spell’ and ‘jammer’. A wormhole was a tiny hole in the ground made by worms, was it not?

Before she could keep speculating on the word meanings, Noristuor pressed on. “So, ah, Swan, quite right, quite right, yes, Swan it is, have a cupcake. Try the Canadian; the maple syrup one with the red and white sprinkles; yes, that one. Good. Now what favour are you seeking? A Seeker, seeking; oh, what a wit I am. Casper, please pour tea. Thank you lad.”

The scout swallowed her bite of the cupcake. It was actually quite delicious with the natural sweet maple taste lingering in her mouth. It had the effect of easing her tension level. *Interesting.* Noristuor’s smile evolved into a grin as she explained about the ring and his required part in the ceremony.

“Truly? I would be operating with Watchful Sister Alena? She for the divine and I for the arcane? Oh wonderful news! Of course I will do this. She is a Council member of the highest standing. By doing this, I can illustrate my potent magic and how useful I would be as the Mage Protector of Ashabedford. She could sponsor me for membership on the Council. This could be my big chance. Thank you, thank you , ah…bird girl.”

Swan ignored his not remembering her name. “My thanks to you for this help, Noristuor. There is also some information I seek. I will be leaving for Ordulan in Sembia soon. I wish to know if you are acquainted with magic shops there that deal in certain items.”

Noristuor’s eyebrows shot up, giving him a more diabolical countenance. “Certain items? Nothing untoward I hope?”

“No. no. Nothing like that.” She identified the items; the cloak, the belt and the bracers.

“Those are rare drow items. Most shops would not carry those.”

Swan looked crestfallen. “Well in that case…”

“Wait, wait. I said most shops, not all shops. Ordulan, uuhm. Will you be there three days from today? Yes. Good. At that time, there will be a shop that will have those goods.” he broke out in a chuckle.” It is called The Magic Shoppe; what a surprise. It is run by a dear friend of mine. Her name is Brenys Silentall. She is a gnome and she will most likely have a pseudodragon by name of Rossal on her shoulders. Tell her I sent you.”

Swan made a frown. *Rossal? Why is that name familiar?*

Like a switch, the wizard’s demeanor chance to serious. “Now listen carefully. On the third day, you will find this shop three blocks east and one block north of Waukeen’s temple. You will not find it before or after. Understood?”

*How strange, but we are talking magic here.* “Yes, I understand. And thank you.”

His demeanor switched once again to absent-minded mode. “Quite right. Quite right. Now that that is all settled, let us enjoy each other’s company, have tea and cupcakes.”

And so, in the course of an hour, Swan enjoyed herself. The conversation with the wizard and Casper were both interesting and humorous. The tea and cupcakes were scrumptious and she found herself more free of worry and stress since becoming punitor. She learned that should her hair have been blonder and her ears less pointed, she could have passed for a certain Kara Zor-El. It was only on the journey back to the White Hart Inn that it occurred to her to remember that she had not asked about any of Noristuor’s pictures and paintings. It was as if the thought had been repressed. She shrugged as she gave Nivea free rein. It was not that important now, as there were more pressing matters to deal with; although it would have been nice to find out what a Kryptonian was.