**Elsie**

PART II

Chapter 7  
The first thing she noticed about him was how sad his eyes looked, not hollow or empty they had a fire and a spark of life hidden deep down but sadness seemed caused them to be buried deep down. He was tall and looked to be powerfully built but it was difficult to tell with his flowing robes.  He looked handsome but it was also hard to tell with his long hair and beard. He also looked ageless his long beats made him look older but he looked like younger features could be hidden beneath.  
L She knew at once he was a wizard  
  
Chapter 8  
Id never been there but my father had. He said it was a land touched by the gods. They built an advanced civilization  
Strange and beautiful trees and creatures, great gardens and tall cities all shining white, vast libraries and scholars.  
Deep magic ran through their whole civilization some say they are descended from the gods there are other rumors that the land existed in different worlds at once  
  
Chapter 9  
Her voice seemed deep and powerful everything stood still and lightning seemed to fill the air but then there was an exhausted pause Her voice became less deep but far wilder the electricity seemed to gather around the ground she caught a glance of her beautiful face and was shocked by the exhaustion written so plainly  
Then it felt like the gathering of a wild storm compressed into endless seconds  
  
She raised her staff and lightning split the air and then time seemed to return to its normal pace fur everyone  
  
I normally like to use my magic for growing and healing things  
  
  
  
  
  
Chapter 6  
Elsie woke up she was cold and felt stiff and sore. Something that felt like ice was  
pressed against her face making her uncomfortable and at the same time almost  numb. She pressed her hands  
down to push her self up and something painful burned into her palms. She opened her eyes  
and realized she was lying in snow and ice. It took her a few minutes to gather her wits and  
remember where she was, though she realized she had no idea where she was.  
  
As she stood up shackily she looked around at the vast expanse of giant mountains surrounding her. They  
looked rugged and forbiding. She realized she was in a mountain valley surrounded by snow and ice clad mountains and jagged precipices, some appeared to have rugged trees, mostly bare but with a few evergreens buried under the white of snow. From where she stood the  
valley was fairly level but sloped up towards the mountain ranges encircling it. She guessed that in the summer the valley was probably briefly covered in grass and she saw a pine forest in the direction of what she believe was the setting sun. Thought it may have been rising she was not sure at all what time it was. Now in the winter the whole place was just ice rock and snow and barren trees and evergreens.  
  
Suddenly she realized neither of her sisters were any where nearby, they had been what felt like minutes earlier.  
"Addie! Susan!" she called out. "Where are you?" She felt a rising panic as she looked around hoping for a site of color or movement.  
She had forgotten how cold she was with the cold fear of not knowing where her sisters might be. She also knew that none of them  
were prepared for the deep snow and cold that would be coming soon as night fell.  
  
She stood motionless for a few minutes listening to the sound of silence, a whole world  muffled by snow. She decided to head towards  
what looked like small forest rising far off on the slopes of the mountains to the west. She guessed it couldn't be more then  
4 or 5 miles and hoped that she would be able to find her sisters. She also hoped that on higher ground she  
could perhaps see movement or spot something to help her find them.  
  
She started moving through the snow drifts and had made some progress, occasionaly yelling out for her sisters. She had not gotten very far when she saw with a rise of joy what appeared to be some blue up ahead. She broke into a run hoping it was Addie's dress.  
  
 As she got closer she saw with both dread and hope a small body huddled on the snow. "Addie, Addie" she screamed as she ran up. She  
stumbled through the snow and reached her sisters body, She picked her up and clutched her to her chest, she was still breathing but her tiny frail body was limp and motionless. "Oh Addie, please wake up, please wake up" she said as tears began to form and freeze on her face. She clung to her in a hug feeling totally lost and afraid.  
  
She knew that they were someplace remote and that she would have to figure out something to keep them both warm. The only thing around  
them was snow. She sat there and it felt like time had stood still as she clung to Addie hoping to warm her little sister with her body heat.  
  
It was when hope seemed to be fading out that she felt or sensed she was being watched. She turned slowly and against the rising ground  
behind her she saw a figure, she instanly knew was a dwarf. His face and eyes were far to wild to be human. He was clad in rugged  
furs, fur boots and a blue cloak. He held a enourmous double bladed battle axe and sat staring at the sisters, his large beard jutting out ferousciosly. He was a forbidding presence, it seemed a great viking warrior had suddenly walked out  
from the pages of history.  
  
He said something unitelligble and Elsie responded somewhat shackily from a combination of cold and fear,  
"Please, can you help us my sister is freezing to death." At the moment she suddenly felt like they were not going to freeze to death and it might be more likely they would meet a much quicker and more violent end.  
  
The dwarf responded in a rough voice slowly, "Are you a spirit?"  
  
"A spirit" Elsie replied?  
Elsie woke up she was cold and felt stiff and sore. Something that felt like ice was  
pressed against her face making her uncomfortable but almost numb. She pressed her hands  
down to push her self up and something painful burned into her palms. She opened her eyes  
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and it might be more likely they would meet a much quicker and violent end.  
  
The dwarf responded slowly, "Are you a spirit?"  
  
  
"A spirit" elise said somewhat confused. "No, I am just a little girl" (Elsie seldom refered to herself as a little girl but  
in the current circumstances it felt appropriate to her) "My sister needs help, can you help us?"  
  
The dwarf didn't seem to pay any attention to her response. "Are you a ghost then" he said?  
  
"No" Elsie said, I am a girl and this is my sister we are lost and cold"  
  
The dwarf continued to stare at them both. Elsie noticed he also had swung his shield around as if getting ready for a fight and he had raised his battle axe his whole body seemed tensed for sudden movement.  
  
"Sounds like something a spirit would say" the dwarf muttered.  
  
he shook his head a number of times then began to trudge noisly towards them. He approached loudly but also  
warily, as if the two sisters were a pair of wild dragons waiting to devour him.  
  
He came close puffing and blowing and stomping through the snow like a great noisy freight engine.  
  
Elsie felt a little hope but also worry as she stared at his bright battle axe.  
  
As the dwarf approached his manner changed a little, Elsie realized he was scared if that was possible for so fierce a figure.  
  
She decided to try to put him at ease.  
  
"Thank you" she said, my sister and I are lost and our other sister Susan is lost somewhere too.  
  
The dwarf didn't respond as he moved closer.  
  
When he got close enough for his axe to make short work of both of them he stood irresolute.  
  
"well he said, "If you are going to do something you better now, other wise I am going to try to help your sister"  
  
"Ok, thank you!" Said Elsie.  
  
His mannerism changed as he dropped the axe and quickly went to work he pulled off his large fur  garment and tenderly wrapped Addie in it.  
  
It reminded Elsie of a father and a small child.  
  
She also saw a flash of concern cross his small face.  
  
"here he said" Handing his other coat to Addie "no sense two of you freezing to death."  
  
"Thank you Elsie said.  
  
He muttered, "how did two of you get so far up in the mountains with no packs or warm clothes"  
  
He looked quickly at her out of the corner of his eye with a dark work as if his old suspicions were coming back that they were some  
kind of fey or spirit children or something worse trying to lure his guard down him in.  
  
"Your sister is in bad shape" he said I am gonna give her some YYY. We dwarfs like it for when we want to get a little rowdy, it also does a good  
job of warming you. Normally I wouldn't give it to a child but you sister looks like she could use a little warmth and a little rowdy spirit.  
  
He pulled out a thick and strangely shaped bottle and poured some into Addies mouth. Though his words were gruffly spoken his movements were full of concern.  
  
Addie sputtered a little and weakly opened her eyes. Elsie screamed out in joy, "Addie, Addie!" She grabbed her sister and pulled her close into a tight embrace. "Don't squeeze her to death the drwarf said not unkindly as he suddenly began cleaning something from his eye and muttering to him self in some strange and harsh language.  
  
  
As she laid her back down across her legs Addie smiled weakly at her. Elsie suddenly felt she could understand how the dwarf could mistake them for ghosts  
Addie looked pale and beautiful like a spirit frail and fragile, delicate and pale yet beautiful.  
  
Elsie looked over as the dwarf brushed something from his eye, was it a tear? She couldn't be sure but she managed to stop the flood of her own tears unleashed by all the emotions running through here.  
  
Her joy was short lived though as she remembered Susan was still out someplace in this vast mountain range.  
  
We have to find my other sister she said.  
  
We're gonna need someone to find us soon if we don't get to warmth and shelter He replied  
  
We can't leave Susan out here Elsie responded with panic in her voice.  
  
No we can't the dwarf said but we need to get you to warm then ill go back out and look for her.  
  
Oh thank you! Elsie said is there a city nearby?  
  
The drwarf laughed a short barking laugh. Yes if your up for a good 20  
days march and that's assuming it doesn't snow, if the snow comes you could be lost forever, but you'd freeze long before forever ever got here.  
  
oh no what will we do Elsie said.  
  
Her questions and mannerisms showing she had already lost most of her fear of the drawf and had come to rely on him to get them out of their situation.  
  
Well he said I'm traveling to a ziggurat it's a secret of my people so ill have to blindfold you as we get close but we will be safe and warm there, then ill load up on supplies and go back out to look for your sister.  
  
Oh I hope we can find her do you think we can Elsie said. Her words slurred together she had a tendency of speaking fast when she was excited or nervous.  
  
Well he said ill do my best and this snows a dratted bother but it will make picking up her trail up that much easier.  
  
Good it's settled then Elsie said we can both go and head out in different directions.  the dwarf was about to contradict her and say it was far too dangerous  but he could sense her steely resolve. She might not be a ghost but there was something far deeper then the small blond girl sitting in front of him showed.  
  
He decided to take a different tactic because he knew she was far too exhausted and he knew someone not used to these mountains could get lost easy and there were dangerous and dark things that haunted the night.  
  
So instead he said I think you would be better off tending your sister Susan and I would much prefer to come back to both of you warm and safe.  
  
Well I guess your right Elsie said how far is this place?  
  
It's a couple hours march from here he responded as long as it doesn't start to snow but it seems like a clear night so far but the weather can be dangerous and unpredictable in the mountains and these mountains in particular are particularly inhospitable. Even if we hurry it will be dark by then so we best get moving and make the most of the remaining daylight.  
  
He stood up abruptly picked up Addie and said well you ready for a night march? If you get tired you can ride on my back.  
  
I don't want you to carry both of us Elsie said, I'm not a little girl I can walk through the snow just fine.  
  
Oh ho ho so now your not a little girl not too long ago I seem to recall differently the drawf teased at her.  
  
Well that is true Elsie laughed. And if you didn't have to carry Addie I would  
take you up on your offer because I feel exhausted but I don't want to slow us down and I fear for Susan and the sooner we get back the sooner you can look for her.  
  
Righto said the drwaf lets move were making for the dark line of trees ahead. They set off trudging through the snow and speaking little they were both exhausted and the drwarf had his weapons fear and Addie he was carrying. He also had been setting a hectic pace (even for drwaves) and hadnt had much rest or sleep in a week, he had been relying on reaching the ziggurat for safety and rest and had been concerned of being caught in a blizzard.  
  
They hadnt been walking more then a half hour when, well maybe we should check in on Susan.  
  
Susan woke up she was cold and disoriented. She way laying on her back stating up at a beautiful pale blue winter sky. She felt to shacky to move but the cold was eating through her clothes so she pushed her self up and gazed at the massive and forbidding mountains all around her.  
  
She was in the same mountain valley that both Addie and Elsie were in but she didnt know it at the moment she felt terribly small and alone.  
  
I wish father were here she thought he would know what to do, but the thought didnt help her it just made her feel more alone and confused.  
  
She decided to look for Addie and Elsie and called out to both of them when she had a curious feeling she wasn't alone. She turned slowly to her right and didnt see anything and spin all the way back to her starting place only seeing a range of far off mountains cloaked in snow in every direction.  
  
She felt the panic leaving and though to her self, I'm just being silly and I need to stay calm. She had the thought a moment to soon because she realized with dread that on the far ridge their was a bear staring right at her.  
  
For a minute she felt her knees go weak and she felt too paralyzed to move. She snapped out of it and begin to run and stumble through the snowdrifts. It was painful and hard the snow was deep and it was exhausting work. She didnt dare to turn and see if the bear was after her she just plunged onward tell he kinda began to burn. She ran about 20 minutes when she stumbled and plunged to her knees in a snow drift. She caught herself with her hands and the cold snow shocked her hands. She sat gasping for air as she turned. She didnt see the bear anywhere and for a moment she felt her heart lift in hope but it didnt last Long the bear was definitely stalking her. It was close but not too close and had come up in front of her blocking her way.  
  
She wanted to cry and lay down in the snow but the thought of Addie and Elsie out ther somewhere alone made her feel fierce.  
  
She started running and the bear would trail her sometimes cutting her off sometimes letting her run. She realized with fright the bear was toying with her she knew it could catch her whenever it wanted but she refused to give up, luckily it was forcing her toward a forest of dark trees and she though if she climbed a small one maybe it would leave her alone.  
  
She had been running (and walking when she couldn't run anymore) for what seemed like hours, in reality it had been closer to about 45 minutes and she had covered a lot of ground in spite of the snow and icy covered valley.  
  
She had covered another mile and thought maybe the bear had given up but when she turned to look she saw it still behind her. But something ahead caught her eye thee figures walking ahead in the snow.  
  
She begin to call out as they got closer bear! bear! She relied that it was Addie and Elsie and She felt relief her sisters were ok, but then she realized she was leading a bear right towards them.  
  
They had seen her and were racing towards her a stranger was carrying Addie and she felt worry rush over her, was she ok?  
  
Susan Susan! Elsie screamed your ok!  
  
A bear! A bear is chasing me Susan screamed. The next few moments were all confusion Susan and Elsie embracing In a quick hug. And then Susan pointing at the large bear coming over the snow drifts towards them.  
  
At this moment the Drawf showed that he was both capable and brave he said hello you just be Susan in a calm voice handed Addie to Elsie and like lightning had Drawn his battle axe and shield and was striding towards the bear. He had out his shield up and was crouched  down low.  
  
Addie said oh please don't hurt the bear  
  
He yelled at the bear and crashed his axe on his shield. The bear seemed to lose interest it had risen up briefly then dropped down and ambled off most likely looking for easier prey.  
  
"Oh Susan I can't believe you were Chased by a bear, how brave of you and you too mr drwaf!"  
  
The girls hugged again while Elsie explained how they had met the drwarf and that they were hurrying to get Addie warm.  
  
After the chaos and fear everyone felt even more exhausted but they kept on. The drwaf encouraged them all and stayed behind with his axe out keeping a protective eye over the group. The dark was coming fast and by the time they reached the trees the evening had arrived. Luckily there was a full moon but still the forest seemed errie and quiet with just the sound of their breathing and the crunch of snow under their feet.  
  
If you were a bird on a branch in the forest (you probably would be wishing you had flown south for the winter) but if you hadn't  you would have seen four figures marching through the moonlight night not clad at all for a snowy night. In fact a bird was watching, silly humans, they won't last long, but a dwarf, a dwarf should know better he thought as he fluttered off.  
  
And the bird was right they were all getting cold and the heat from their running and marching had left them damp and now it was beginning to freeze on them.  
They took turns carrying Addie and were all soon feeling almost catatonic.  
A wind also picked up and chilled them to the bone.  
  
They marched on through the still forest as the bright moon reflected upon the snow covering the dark and silent forest floor.if they had been staying at a mountain cabin they would have enjoyed the walk and the dark blue of the evening sky and the strange light reflecting from the moon that made the dark pine and for trees quite visible.  
  
They began heading steadily upward as they approached the foothills of the mountain range. The mountains rose abruptly from the valley and the  
dwarf said encouragingly, "were almost there then we can get warm and a warm meal going.  
  
Oh I'm so hungry said Susan  
  
Me too replied Elsie "and cold" and right as she said that a wintery blast of wind blew through the trees and cut through their clothes chilling them to the vibe.  
  
After that they fell silent with their own thoughts,  all their energy spent. Clouds had begun to roll in and the moonlight was fading out. It was becoming harder to see and Now it was just one painful step after another. They had reached a rocky place and began winding their way up a slim path that was steep and covered in snow. Sometimes Elsie would stumble and have to catch her self with her hands in the cold snow. The last time she had stumbled she couldn't get up but lay panting too cold and exhausted to move.  
  
The drwaf gently helped her up "were almost there he said, your doing great I would say lets take a break but we really need to get to shelter.he looked up at the sky worriedly, the first small drops of snow were beginning to fall from the ominous clouds gathering across the western peaks far far above them.  
 from inside a warm cabin it would have been a beautiful night as the snow gently began to fall but out alone in the wild it was perilous.  
  
ok Elsie said as they continued their march. Out of the corner or her eye Elsie thought she movement in the trees to the right and it got her thinking about what other creatures may be up here besides bears. She decided to ask the drwaf at Least it would help pass the time.  
  
"You mentioned things worse then bears up here. What types of things she got out between tired pauses."  
  
Oh ho ho be replied so being tired cold and hungry isn't enough you want to be scared too?  
  
Well Elsie said letting out a small laugh maybe it will take my mind off of it.  
  
That's true the drwarf said well actually this valley and the mountains around here are fairly safe in fact that's the first bear I have ever seen in these mountains, im sure there are lots but they usually keep their distance from us.  
  
 Evil things generally don't come to this particular range but they do roam these mountains. In the lower foothills far from here their are goblins that hunt and prey on unsuspecting travelers. Before the fair folk died out these mountains were mostly safe but the goblins will pass over them from time to time and deeper creatures and spirits have been haunting them.  
  
There are far more evil and dark places the black mountains are so dark and dangerous no one will go near them. About 100 years ago a large and warlike group of drwaves set out to establish a mine in their lower hills. The expedition went badly they were haunted by nightmares from the very start. A small group of drwaves went Mad attacking and killing many of the other drwaves before they were subdued. That was a strange occurrence the aggressive drwaves had no recollection all had the same story that they were attacked by dark spirits and were fighting them off. A few days later they woke up and over half the party was dead, and not just dead it was a rather gruesome seen not fit for the ears of young children on dark nights.  
  
How far away are these mountains Susan asked.  
  
Oh quite far from here no need to worry but their evil influence has been spreading across the land.  
  
I should have kept my month shut said Elsie only half joking.  
  
I'm sorry the drwaf said, I should have saved those wild tales my father was one of the drwaves that survived. They ended up setting up another expedition to the north on an entire continent of nothing but snow and rock and ice. The place is still almost totally empty. The shifting ice can trap and crush even great ships. And the temperatures and Blizzards are life threatening.  
  
but a group of dwarves set out to mine the southern mountains. Some early explorers had found evidence of precious stones and also good sting metals for smithing and building. It awoke a fire in their dwarvish hearts far hotter then the Ice and snow that covers the lands.  
  
they built great ships and filled them with good and supplies and set out. I've heard it was a wonderous site. Not the least of which you don't see lots of dwarves on ships.  
  
 It was a rugged life for them but they all got fabulously rich. The great trader ships manned by humans and dwarves would come for the precious metals and stones every summer. With them they would bring food and tales of the outside world. My father said after the first year it was quite enjoyable they lived far underground and it was warmer down there my father was an adventurous soul and him and some of the more hardy dwarves would venture out and explore the continent.  
  
One night a group of about 15 of them were surrounded by strange glowing lights in the distance. They were all scared witless and lit a large fire everyone stayed awake watching the lights circle around them.  
  
Some of them swore they heard laughter, my father says he heard something but he thinks it was the wind.  
  
what do you think it was said Susan.  
  
Well I'm not rightly sure maybe something natural maybe creatures from the stars maybe some ice beings that live  down there.  
  
My father and some of the arcane researchers think there maybe a warm spot somewhere on the continent where trees and grass and forests are but no one has ever found it. It was mostly handed down from old legends legends older then the drwaves.  
  
Oh another thing said the dwarf, there the night will last for months in the winter and the sun won't set for most of the summer, it's very strange and fascinating.  
  
I wish there wasn't so much trouble id love to go exploring up there.  
  
I have some stories I can tell when we are safe and warm but we are in a very remote corner of the mountains long ago the drwaves mined these mountains my ancestors built were we are going to. We are in the blue mountains and right now the biggest threats are snow and cold and freezing or starving to death. That's part of why wee are safe most people even goblins won't come this far up here.  
  
that's very interesting Elsie said. I'd love to see that place.  
  
Addie had regained conscious a little and am said weakly I wouldn't mind either, if you would remind carrying me mr drwaf.  
  
They all laughed and both Elsie and Susan felt a pulse of joy and warmth as their hopes rose that Addie would be ok. The drwaf was glad too but he was also concerned the snow was now falling heavily and be knew they were on the verge of all freezing to death. As hardy as he was he knew he was at the end of his strength. His muscles burned and he felt shivers overtaking his body from the cold. He had had a much longer journey up into the mountains and hadnt eaten in 3 days.  
  
  
Addie said I feel warmer and better now I can walk. Her voice sounded weak and faint and the dwarf looked at Susan and Elsie questioningly.  
  
Are you sure Addie? Susan said.  
  
She didnt respond and hung there like a little rag doll. Both Susan and Elsie felt concerned for her again as they continued to trudge up the steep mountain path as the snow blew around them. It was coming down thickly now, blowing and swirling and making it difficult and treacherous to hike up the steep path.  
  
It would have been the type of storm that would be lovely to watch from inside a warm house with a fire burning bright and mugs of warm cocoa. But it was a terrible night to be out in. The wind picked up and the icy chill it drive felt almost angry as it pounded against them.  
  
Elsie felt totally numb, like she would fall over at any second and never rise again. She was about to fall over when Susan beat her to it, she just went to take a step and fell face first into a snow drift. The drwaf and Susan couldn't rouse her and the dwarf had a very concerned look on his face that was almost hidden behind the snow clinging to his beard.  
  
Finally they got Susan to her feet and staggered on.  
  
It began to feel like that's the only world Elsie had ever known just picking up one foot and setting it down further up the path. That and overwhelming exhaustion and cold. He clothes were soaked through and the wind ate away at her skin.  
  
She felt like she was about to give up when the dwarf gave a shout muffled by the snow but quite clear.  
  
We're close! That large stone on the left marks the entrance. They turned off on a side path sheltered by cliffs, the snow and wind were less here and the snow wasn't as deep. They walked between the Rock walls and soon came to a dead end. Elsie felt her spirits fall and Susan said quietly, were lost. Her voice was full of exhaustion and despair.  
  
  
No no the dwarf said excitedly as he fumbled for a key in his pack he had handed Addie to Elsie and pulled out a key. He fumbled as he tried to put it into a small hole and Elsie noticed his hands were almost blue he had given his gloves to Elsie and Susan and his hands had been exposed as he carried Addie.  
  
She realized how selfless and kind the dwarf was caring so deeply for strangers. He managed to get the key in and he shoved hard as the Rock wall  moved inwards. It wasn't the whole wall but simply a small part that was a door that perfectly matched the Rock face.  
  
Then the next thing Elsie knew she was inside a small dark narrow cave. She had to duck to avoid the low roof and she felt a pang of disappointment it was out of the cold but still freezing and dark. Then she thought what a brat I'm being at least will not die in here.  
  
Susan said oh it's lovely.  
  
Elsie knew she wasn't being honest and thought she would make a good diplomat or politician she was about to say so when she realized again she was just tired and irritable and she also realized how glad she had been to see Susan earlier that day so she said nothing.  
  
She cheered up quickly when the dwarf said my dear you most not know dwarves very well this is just the back door follow me. He led them  
all hunched over through a number of passageways and pulled out another key at what appeared to be another dead end in the cave wall.  
  
The key clicked and turned and they stepped inside the dwarf reached over and flipped a small switch and they saw they were at the foot of a stairwell hewn from the solid rock.  
the stairway was much longer then Elsie expected and she realized she was they were climbing up the inside of the mountain itself.  
  
Like I said we came in the back door the actual place is higher up we are almost there.  
  
They were all still dead tired but it was warmer in here and there was no snow too so they all found strength to keep going up the long stone staircase. They stopped at a landing where the dwarf used another key to unlatch a steel gate. This one wasn't hidden but was a strong defense against any intruders that had made it this far.  
  
Finally they had reached the top and went through the last door. All the girls were completely amazed by the inside it was beautiful and elegant but also cozy they had stepped into a a staging area coats of amore and sword and axes were along one wall.  
  
They moved out if this room into a large and well furnished kitchen.  
  
Oh it's lovely gasped Elsie  
  
It would be lovier if there was food Susan joked.  
  
Ill get on that the drwaf said. This place is well stocked with food. Will feast like kings tonight.  
  
Seeing the dwarf in the kitchen made him look even more fierce and warlike.  
  
He led them out of the kitchen to a beautiful dining room that had a table that would seat about 20 people (or drwaves)  
  
they then passed into a large gathering room elegantly decorated and went up a flight of steps they walked over luxurious carpet and came to a small cozy hall with 5 doors. The dwarf opened one door to a small cozy room with a bed and a table and a large comfortable looking chair. He went over to a window and said  
  
You probably have had enough of snow but these rooms are actually on the eastern side and are built into the mountain precipice. He opened the window and they had a beautiful view of the valley far away in the distance. They also saw the snow had picked  up intensely and had turned into a blizzard  
  
Now for the best part the dwarf said. Each of these rooms has a bathroom with a luxurious bath. He opened the side door to a room with a bath. I started the heating furnace when I came in so you should be able to take a hot bath any moment.  
  
Yay the girls all shouted nothing sounded nicer to Elsie at the moment. And ill be right back said the dwarf. The girls all laid down on the bed and Susan said I'm not sure i ever want to move again.  
  
I agree said Elsie, well no actually I disagree I think I could a manage to move into a hot bath.  
  
Elsie put her arm around Addie who was laying quietly she was awake but still looked rather pale and thin.  
  
I'm glad we all found each other said Susan. Yes me too said Elsie it really is lucky.  
  
At that moment the drwaf came in smiling broadly. I've brought some clothes normally dwarvish women would wear them but you can wear them while your wet clothes are drying.  
  
You can all take asking a bath as you want I am going to go down to the kitchens and whip us up a meal fit for a fairy queen!  
  
I picture a fairly queen eating lettuce and maybe some water and light Elsie joked.  
  
Ok for for a drwaves warrior he joked back but if legends hold true  the fair folks magic was Only rivaled by their cooking abilities.  
  
The dwarf left them and Elsie went to draw a bath for her and Addie will you be ok Addie she asked?  
  
Yes I'm feeling much better she replied and a warm bath will really helpline you could just help me to the bath.  
  
Yes of course said Susan and Elsie at the Same time.  
  
You can use the bath in this room so you wont have to walk as far.  
  
Elsie stripped off her wet and still mostly frozen clothes and settled into a hot bath she thought it was one of the nicest feelings she had ever experienced she sighed contentedly as the water warmed her body.  
she let the warm water soak over her and slowly warm her body. It was so comfortable she almost fell asleep but she caught herself and say up straighter. She couldn't believe how good the water felt as it slowly warmed every inch of her cold and tired body.  
  
As they warmed up they all began to realize how hungry they were.  
  
Addie finished first and she still felt weak but she felt much better she toweled off and put on a dress and blue sweater the dwarf had brought her it fit better then she expected she tied a chord around her waist to make it fit a little better and she decided to go say hi to the drwarf  while she waited for her sisters.  
  
As she headed down stairs she was greeted with a delicious smell of cooking.  
  
hello mr drwaf she said, that smells so good and also Thank you for carrying me all that way and for being brave and saving us from the bear.  
  
The dwarf was brave at facing most things but compliments were something he was not good with. He got nervous and stammered into his beard it was nothing and besides he said I've carried a lunch sack that weighed more then you but will remedy that once my meal is done .  
  
Can I help you she said?  
  
Sure he replied you can peel these carrots.  
  
There was a small wooden table with chairs around it and Addie sat down she had started to feel a little light headed and she took a minute to stabilize herself.  Are you ok the dwarf said noticing she seemed a little light headed.  
  
Yes I'm feeling much better she said a little tired but some food and sleep will do wonders.  
good well I think your going to like what I'm making, it's a good thing we keep this place so well stocked.  
  
  
Addie smiled  
  
well the dwarf said you all seem a lot less ferocious then when I first met you the dwarf laughed, he was busy stirring a pit and quickly moved over to a large mixing bowl.  
  
Oh Addie laughed ferocious? you must be teasing Elsie and I aren't exactly intimidating.  
  
Yes the dwarf said talking a meant off from his stirring  I wasn't excepting to find two young girls in so remote a place I thought for sure you were spirits or something darker.  
  
well we are just ordinary girls Addie laughed but how we got here is a strange story.  
  
I suspect as much said the dwarf. Well no worries my plan is tonight we relax eat dinner and then rest by a fire we have all been through a lot. Then tomorrow when we are good and rested (and after a big breakfast of course) we can share stories and decide what our plan is.  
  
That sounds good Addie said at that moment Elsie walked in her dress was far to Long and she pulled it up as she walked  
  
Hi Addie she said she was so happy Addie was ok she went over sat right next to her putting an arm around her skinny shoulders.  
  
That smells good Elsie exclaimed what are you making? I'm starving! Can you imagine if we were all still out in the snow? It would be awful how did you know about this place? We're you coming here on purpose  
She blurted out  
  
The dwarf waited patiently for her to finish all her questions. Well he laughed I'm making a lot if things or actually a feast and also dessert. It's a surprise though but it's almost done  
  
oh please tell us tell us Elsie said  
  
Haha well if you can't wait I can tell you he said good naturedly.  
  
Elsie felt kind of guilty kind of like when you don't out what your present is supposed to be. She also realized the dwarf was very kind and she didnt want to take advantage actually she said we can wait ill try to guess by smelling things.  
  
That's a good game he said  
  
I smell garlic Addie said and onions and I think maybe steak cooking I also smell raw carrots.  
  
You smell carrots Elsie asked I didn't know you could smell raw carrots Addie pointed over at the cooking area and said also I can see them and I helped cut them up.  
  
Oh Elsie laughed  
  
At that moment Susan came down she had taken longer then everyone else and she looked like she was going to a fancy party. (She got the nicest dress which gave her a bit of an advantage).  
  
You do know we are in the middle of no where Elsie teased her, were you planning on steeping out tonight? Maybe gonna do the fox trot with the bear which seemed to take an interest in you.  
  
Well if I remember right the dwarf mistook you for mountain trolls maybe if you  spent a little more time looking presentable you wouldn't scare people. Susan retorted  
  
He didnt think we were trolls Elsie exclaimed he thought we were fairy folk which are known for their magic and Beauty right mr dwarf.  
  
Eh what's that the dwarf said pretending he hadnt heard so he wouldn't have to take sides. He also opened the oven and pulled out a delicious looking loaf of golden bread it smelled delicious and set all their minds on food.  
  
We're just about ready to eat the dwarf said  
  
I can help set the table Susan offered oh I can help too Elsie and Addie chimed in together.  
  
That would be just fine thank you the drwaf said.  
  
The girls said good night to th dwarf and headed towards their rooms upstairs  
  
The dwarf had doubt them some comfortable sleeping clothes which they put on. It's strange we are so high up and yet still underground Susan said.  
  
Yes I rather like being underground inside a mountain.  
  
And what luck we ran into such a kind dwarf if we hadnt we would have froze or starved to death.  
  
Its a good thing I'm so tired Susan said otherwise I don't think I'd sleep a wink. I feel like a have stumbled into a fairy take. A rather rough one given how forbidding those mountains are.  
  
But there so beautiful Elsie said I don't think I've ever seen mountains so pretty and yes they are rugged I feel we maybe be up for a rough trek out of here.  
  
Yes and I would imagine we would need to bring food and camp supplies I think he said its many days tell we would reach a city. And if it snows like it's doing now we would need to be well prepared.  
  
Yes it would be a rough hike but the drawf seems very capable and he made his way up here ok with limited supplies so I think we can so it.  
  
What do you think Susan?  
  
Susan?  
  
 Elsie said  
  
I think she fell asleep Addie laughed quietly it has been a rather hectic day.  
  
Ill say Elsie replied  
  
Do you think you would rather be in an adventure or read about one Addie asked.  
  
Well right now being in one has been rather exciting but if we were still  outside in the snow I think I would say reading about one.  
  
Yes that what I think Elsie said also when you hear about an adventure the unpleasant situations are seldom as bad as when you have to experience them.  
  
I do hope we can find father soon Addie said  
  
Me too Elsie replied I'm sure we will, I miss mother a lot too Addie responded Elsie didn't respond for a little and Addie wondered if she had drifted off to sleep.  
  
Me too she finally said sometimes the sadness almost feels like more then I can bare. But I'm glad we have each other but i miss mother everyday she was so pretty she paused then went on and you need to stop scaring us if anyone else is going to get hurt or sick it's my turn its rather selfish of you always making everyone else worry about you.  
  
Ok Addie replied I suppose I could  be a little less selfish I do tend to hog up all the sickness attention.  
  
Did you hear that Elsie asked her voice suddenly full of excitement and mischief.  
  
I think so Addie replied stifling a giggle  
  
I'm pretty sure Susan just snored Elsie responded oh oh I do hope she does it again think of the fun we could have teasing her.  
  
Both girls lay still and breathless hoping Susan would make another noise.  
  
Eventually Elsie said disappointedly I think it was just a mumble  
  
Yes it's too bad Addie giggled  
  
Yes Susan's far to perfect Elsie said she must have some flaw we can use against her I mean besides being a pest who think shes Better then everyone else.  
  
Just at that moment Susan made a loud noise and rolled over she than to snore loudly. Elsie and Addie began to giggle uncontrollably Addie stuffed a blanket in her mouth to keep from laughing out loud. While gasping for breath Elsie said do you remember friar he was so big he broke the wood on our couch  
  
yes Addie said I did feel bad for him he was so embarrassed  
  
Yes well I bet Susan snores  
louder then him father said he didn't sleep all night one time when he shared a room with him.  
Susan's snoring had changed a little but the girls where laughing to hard to notice.  
  
The next thing they knew something came flying out of the dark and landed crash! Right on top of Elsie Addie and Elsie both screamed.  
  
there screams were stopped short by Susan's laughing "I heard you the whole time Elsie, you little monster! I woke up and heard you so I pretended to snore then I decided to attack you she said pinning Elsie down and ticking her. Addie had turned on the lights and all the girls lay laughing while Susan who still had Elsie pinned down and was sitting on top of her.  
  
Do you have anything you would like  
To say Susan asked clearly wanting an apology.  
  
Well yes Elsie said with feigned seriousness.  
  
That's more like it Susan responded with an air of dignity and waited for an apology. She was stil straddled over the top of Elsie sitting on her stomach and pinning her down.  
  
well elsie said I did make some comments about you being perfect and I'd like to say that then she blurted the last piece out in a rush that I was wrong your definitely  not perfect I hadn't seen your wild bed head in a while and forgot just how terrible you look, your poor future husband!  
  
Elsie! Susan began to tickle her again as she squirmed to get away.  
Elsie was surprised  how strong she was  and try as she might she couldnt get away. considering how graceful she was  
  
Your gonna end up a bar maiden in an old dirty bar serving drunk old sailors. And none if them will pay you any attention except when they want a drink and  
  
then theell say "hey you bar wench get me another ale" Susan said in her best sailor voice.  
  
you'll say we'll maybe the one with a patch on his eye and long dirty hairs not so bad he is only half drink but  
  
That was a pretty good impression Addie said yes Elsie chimed in you did sound pretty good.  
  
Susan sat waiting for Elsie to make another comment but Elsie didnt want to be ticked anymore so she held her tongue and tried to look innocent.  
  
The girls continued talking for another hour or so and then they all drifted off to sleep.  
  
They woke up but it was difficult to tell what time it was. Elsie was the first to get up and she padded quietly to the bathroom not wanting to wake anyone else  
  
Is that you Elsie Susan whispered  
  
Yes it is Elsie said I think Addie's still asleep  
  
I made a breakfast fit for a king  
  
Oh where is it all three girls asked at once  
  
The dwarf leaned back and patter his belly  
  
What do you think i have been doing for the last five hours he laughed  
  
Don't worry he laughed youve slept all the way into the afternoon and I (and my belly) didnt have the heart to wake you.  
  
Now before you think I'm a selfish glutton I thought we could have a light snack and since it's 1 pm we can eat a small snack then go and expire the caves and mines then will have a magnificent dinner and figure out our plans.  
  
That sounds wonderful the girls  all said. Their lunch was no too lift the dwarf had made some delicious bread and dispute what he said there was still plenty of food. He fried up more fresh sausage.  
  
We should explore he said. They went back out the backdoor and saw the deep snow coming down it looked like it hasn't stopped all night and when Elsie jumped in it it went up to her stomach.  
  
And that said the drwaf is why we will stay inside today.  
  
It sure looks pretty Addie said.  
  
Yes it is the dwarf said. He paused as clearly a thought crossed his mind the girls except for Susan didnt notice but the dwarf knew he had to leave soon on a dangerous  trip and travel a great distance.  
  
They went back inside already glad to be out of the bitter cold . Well the drwaf said cheerfully I was thinking if you feel up for it we could go explore the mines.  
Oh that sounds fun they all said we would love to go exploring!  
  
They enter mines.  
  
the caves widened out considerably as they made there way down a smooth steep road. It was about 6 feet wide and the floor was perfectly smooth.  
  
the dwarf said I've talked to lots of humans who say being by the ocean or in the woods or on a mountain makes them feel refreshed and joyful well for us dwarves give us a cave deep under ground.  
  
Susan followed up by saying but you must love the oceans and the forests and beautiful mountains?  
  
Yes the dwarf replied I do like them my mother always said we have a little fairy blood in our family line of course that's probably not true but we all do have a love for those things too, but all dwarves have a fierce desire for gems and gold and precious metals, for the shaping and forging of armor and trinquets and weapons. We also love to be deep undergoing. But we are nothing compared to the deep dwarves.  
  
Oh what are the deep dwarves Susan asked?  
  
well they are dwarves but almost as different from us regular dwarves as humans are from dwarves. They are smaller then us and much thicker. There also strong too for their size it's shocking how sting they are, there also very reclusive; they will almost never venture to the surface their terrified of it. Most of what people know of them is from some of their explorers that have ventured to the sky world as they call it. There homes and mines are far below ours but they touch in a lot of places and there are a few cities and outposts at these places where a lot of trade  goes on.  
  
Are they friendly Addie asked?  
  
Oh yes said the dwarf but their also strange and fierce and they usually stick to themselves. One of the major trade cities deep underground is khelad zilkan. It's a lovely city and usually there are drwaves and deep dwarves all about there are even a fair amount of humans at times and Long long ago some of the fair folk would come down from time to time.  
  
Who are the fair folk Elsie said.  
they had been traveling a long ways through  massive caverns small tunnels broad roads but always deeper and the tunnels seed hopelessly intertwined and complex. now and Susan whispered to Elsie I hope we don't get lost but it echoed more loudly then she intended.  
  
Oh don't you worry the dwarf laughed if We get lost ill eat my hat.  
  
Probably cause you'll have to cause will all be starving to death Elsie shot back then laughed at her joke the dwarf and everyone else also joined in.  
  
No the dwarf assured them that's one thing that I have noticed is different then humans dwarves keep their bearings far better under ground then humans. That's not to say we don't get lost I could get lost down here if I was careless but this is a relatively small mine. It touches on natural caves and that is where even a drwaf could lose his way.  
  
This is like how you might take an evening stroll near your home. You know how well your going you don't even really need to give it much thought.  
What natural caves do you mean Elsie said  
  
Oh there are huge underground places that are all natural they stretch for hundreds and hundreds if miles. Usually dwarves will Incorporate them into their own cities. Are you familiar with dwarven cities he said?  
  
No not all all Susan replied  
  
Oh well their wonderful And some are More isolated but the larger ones are usually built to take and tags of the massive natural caverns much of the deep dwarves domain is in these places. It's said you could get anywhere across the world inside of them but I don't know if that's true. There are some maps of some of the larger ones but there very incomplete and it's dangerously easy to become hopelessly lost.  
  
Even dwarves will take care when setting out on mining expeditions in these places.  
  
It's all very fascinating Susan said.  
  
Yes and of course when more for dwarves whose hearts are set aflame by the precious jewels and ores hidden beneath the surface.  
  
Of course there are dark and dangerous things beneath the surface too so you can't be foolhardy, but we won't speak of those while we are underground.  
  
They had come to a side cavern that branched out on their left the jagged opening full of boulders and uneven rocks.  
  
Ok this will be a little rough going but if we go a little ways in it will be worth it. Do you feel like it.  
  
Oh yes we do Susan said  
  
Ya I agree plus it will make us hungry for dinner then we can eat Elsie laughed.  
  
they got back and all felt exhausted Elsie realized they probably weren't all the way recovered from the day before.  
  
The dwarf could tell they were tired so he said i can make us a fine dinner and your welcome to do what you want while I am cooking. The girls were all ravenously hungry so they said oh will wait while you cook we can help to if you want.  
  
Oh that's quite nice of you to offer but you all seem pretty worn out here he said and he brought in some comfortable chairs into the kitchen for them.  
  
Any suggestions he asked?  
  
Well something warm Elsie said  
Yes some comfort food Susan laughed  
  
Ok I have just the thing e said and got to work.  
  
Addie and Elsie helped kneed the bread while Susan helped chip things up.  
  
The dwarf got pounding busy pounding steaks flat and roasted them on a grill. He then took them out and filled them with a mixture that he had made that smelled delicious full of flavors and smells like garlic.  
  
He then carefully wrapped each streak around the filling and placed them in the oven along with potatoes.  
  
Did you hear that Elsie said my stomach is saying it wants to eat.  
  
Well it's almost done the drwaf said cheerfully now we just wait but ill get some dessert going so we can bake that whole we are eating.  
  
Yay, I love dessert Addie said  
  
The girls and the dwarf ate every last bit if the dinner Elsie looked longingly back at the counter hoping she had missed something she still felt a little hungry but didnt want to be rude by saying anything.  
  
Don't worry the dwarf said seeming to guess her thoughts. I have cocoa, fresh cookies and popcorn with chocolate and nuts that I made I wanted us to have room so we could enjoy dessert while we share out stores.  
  
Elsie sighed contentedly that sounds just perfect.  
  
They all sat down in the small comfortable room in the giant seats they were all exhausted from their hikes so the warm fire and cocoa with cookies was the perfect ending to a long day. Elsie had insisted they all go jump in the snow and it was dark and cold and the snow was even deeper. They were all feeling still chilled and even a little Hungry by the time they settled into their oversized chairs.  
  
Addie was so tiny she had curled up in hers like a cat and Susan covered her with a blanket.  
  
Look out Elsie Said as she plunged into the seat next to Susan cuddling up against her big sister.  
  
Susan pulled a blanket around both of them.  
  
Elsie realized she had dozed off she woke to the dwarf bringing a tray of fresh cookies. She sprang out if her chair like it was on fire and then stood right next to the tray waiting politely for the dwarf to say she could take one.  
  
Oh please help yourselves take as many as you want I made plenty.  
  
I'd love to fill you all in but i don't  know how much you know He gave them a questioning look but he was far too polite to ask any direct questions about themselves.  
  
Elsie looked at Susan and they shared a look that seemed to say myles well tell him.  
  
Elsie decided telling him the full truth was probably the best they could share what they know and see what he would think.  
she had some trepidation as to what he would think she didnt want him to think they were all crazy  
  
Well she started looking at Susan for help already.  
  
It's a bit of a strange story Susan said. The mood seemed a little tense as both girls were reluctant to start. Luckily at that moment Addie was reaching for a cookie but she couldn't quite reach the table they were on, she was laying on the chair with Elsie and kept leaning forward when crash! She fell off knocking the plate on top of her everyone laughed and luckily there were only two cookies left Addie got up laughing at her clumsiness does any one else want the other cookie she said her pretty  pale white face a little red from embarrassment.  
  
Ill take the one with less blanket hair Elsie laughed  
  
Here ill to get some more the drwaf said does anyone want some more cocoa  
  
Oh yes please all three girls said at once  
  
great he said ill be back soon.  
  
I can help Carry things Susan said getting up from her comfortable seat  
  
Oh thank you that's very nice of you the dwarf said.  
  
They were back shortly with a tray of cookies and and more hot cocoa.  
  
They settled in and Elsie felt more comfortable to tell their story.  
  
Well it's a bit strange she said but I don't think we are from this world.  
  
What the drwaf said next made Elsie much more comfortable that he would believe them.  
He slapped his knew (nearly upsetting his cocoa) and said hah! I knew it, well I knew something was different about you!  
  
So the old myths and legends are true there have always been stories of world walkers. And dwarves are generally shrewd and not easily tricked but when I first saw you all I just knew there was something unique.  
  
yes Susan said so we know nothing about your world at all.  
  
Oh yes well I can fill you in on everything the dwarf said.  
but first are you planning to stay here, and did you have any reason for bein up in this mountain range?  
  
Well actually we were in danger and being chased in our world we stumbled into this world by accident but it wasn't a total accident out parents went missing and some scholars we talked to thought that they might have been taken to this world.  
  
But we just got here and it wasn't a hot day where we were but it was a warm fall day and we were not dressed for this harsh climate. if we hadnt found you I'm sure we would al be dead from the cold.  
  
Yes it sure was lucky the dwarf said. Do you have any idea how to get back or how to search for your father?  
  
No I'm afrid we don't Elsie said there were two men helping us and they knew more but for some reason they didnt make it.  
  
Yes I'm not surprised the dwarf said most of the ancients txts and legends say that world walking takes great magic I my powerful wizards, sorcerers or gods were rumored to have done it.  
  
At that moment Elsie went to take a sip of her cocoa but bumped the rim spilling some down her shirt. Well I can assure you she laughed we are none of those.  
  
Everyone laughed including the dwarf but he wasn't entirely convinced.  
  
Well he said i think the best thing would be to speak with the Atlantans. They are ancient and very wise.  
  
The only bad thing is that i need to be at an important meeting and I was supposed to meet someone here but they haven't arrived  which makes me very concerned. I am going to search for them and also travel to the meeting but I am going to have to travel fast,  fast even for a dwarf. I think it will take about two weeks to get there and two weeks to get back.  
  
Are we coming with you Elsie asked?  
  
The dwarf looked a little uncomfortable it was obvious he didn't want to be rude, Susan saw and interjected do you think we could keep up? How fast will you be traveling?  
  
Well he started trying to be carful that his words didnt offend.  
  
Ill be traveling with two weeks of food, warm clothes and a tent and backup firewood so I don't starve it freeze to death. So I will be traveling with a heavy load, ill probably travel 18 hours a day. It's going to be rough but it's important I get there on time, the pace will be more leisurely on the way back. Have you had much conditioning for lot hikes?  
  
Not enough for that level Susan said  
  
Elsie looked disappointed but it was obvious she realized that Susan was right.  
  
The dwarf looked relieved but it was obvious he wanted to make sure things were ok, he was very kind hearted beneath his warlike exterior  
  
Your obviously all very spirited and I realize it is not fun to feel left out but there will be more adventure very soon and I don't know your past but I think this month would be good for you to spend training and getting into condition.  
You will have plenty of good and you can explore the caves but don't be to adventurous they are very easy to get lost forever in.  
  
And actually that gives me an idea follow me.  
  
They all got up out of their warm cozy chairs and followed him.  
they went out into the hall that led towards the underground caverns and into a side hall he uses a key to pass through a large metal gate. That gate is to keep people out if we were ever invaded dwarves always build with security in mind which is why it's so hard to conquer or overtake a dwarven city. Of course this isn't a city but it still has many layers of defense. It's never been invaded or when attacked its relatively newer and so remote and hidden its stayed quite safe.  
  
there were a few of the fair folk who knew about the place but we were peaceful with them and it was right around the time they all disappeared.  
  
It's a sad loss too.  
  
They had now entered a fairly large natural cavern. There were two small round stone towers here and a wall between them at the place where the cavern was the skinniest. A wall stretched between them with a study wooden gate enforced by metal bars.  
The two towers  were about 30 feet high and the wall between them about 20 feet high.  
  
This is the main entrance and where the place would be most susceptible to attack.  
  
Why didnt you build the wall farther up in the cavern where it's smaller and narrower Susan asked?  
  
Ah a good question he said the main reason is that the idea is that they wanted to be able to have room to shoot their crossbows and arrows and see their enemy.  
If they breached these walls we could retreat back to the smaller gates but then we couldn't really see the enemy or fight back. The other reason is we are dwarves and mining and building is what we do. When this was built the dwarves were incredibly wealthy and powerful.  
  
They had preceded across the large expanse of the underground cavern and arrived at the tower on the left side it was hewn from large pieces of rock expertly placed together and reminded the girls of castles they had seen in England and France. It was also very different because it was only two towers and a wall deep beneath the ground. The wall between the towers was about 60 feet wide.  
  
The dwarf used his key to unlock the wood door and they went in. the interior was about 15 feet with a staircase going up and also one going down.  
  
I wasn't expecting that Addie laughed as they went down the flight of steps!  
  
Me neither Elsie laughed you dwarves sure are cleaver.  
  
Thank you the dwarf said clearly appreciative of the compliment. When they reached the bottom which was about twenty feet down they came too a large room full of beds and a small kitchen.  
  
Oh it's rather cozy Elsie said. The dwarf opened a small door and here is the armory which is why I brought you all down here.  
  
The walls were covered in the most beautiful and intricate weapons and bows and armor Elsie and the girls had ever seen.  
  
Breathtaking she managed to say.  
  
Yes these weapons and armor are of the finest craftsmanship and quite valuable. I want you all to be prepared if you meet another bear or something worse.  
  
Also while I am gone it will be good to practice wearing and marching in your armor so that your conditioned when we leave. It will be immensely uncomfortable at first but when you get used to it you will feel strange without it.  
  
Also ambushes have been more frequently of late and it will be a comfort to know that a stray arrow won't be nearly as deadly.  
  
He took down a beautifully wrought piece of almost delicate looking chain mail. I think this will fit you he said as he handed it to Elsie.  
  
Oh goodness i was not expecting that! it's light she said as she took it from him, here feel this Susan she said handing the armor to her older sister.  
  
Oh my Susan laughed that is light how well does it protect you she said as she handed the armor to Addie to feel  
  
Oh don't you worry the dwarf said that is a very expensive piece that was cunningly made. It's actually quite valuable and works better then most heavier armor  
  
Elsie slipped it on over her short  
  
you look quite dashing Susan said  
  
Do I look fierce Elsie said trying to scowl and not laugh at the same time.  
  
Addie giggled  
  
The dwarf was still inspecting pieces here try this one on he said handing piece to Susan. Susan put it on but it felt a little loose.  
  
To big he said not to worry try these one he handed her another piece she put it on and it slipped on perfectly  
  
Oh you look beautiful Addie said  
  
Susan laughed i don't want to look beautiful I want to look fierce like Elsie she pulled a serious face and Elsie said hey that's pretty good you could definitely scare something  
  
Something? Susan responded something as in what?  
  
Oh maybe a small cat or a timid chicken.  
  
Everyone laughed  
  
The Elsie said well actually you do look pretty fierce like a warrior maiden.  
  
The dwarf handed a small delicate looking piece to Addie who tried it on and found it for perfectly.  
  
Oh you look adorable Elsie said going her little sister a big Hug.  
  
Thank you Addie said Hugging Elsie back. Oh but I do think I prefer hugs wothout armor on.  
  
The dwarve gave each of the girls a sword a dagger a bow and Susan also got a spear. He also gave them widen training spears and light helmets that fit under a hood.  
  
The girls looked at the larger dwarven helmets that were grotesquely and hideously fashioned.  
The dwarves have a tradition of fashioning their helmets to be as scary as possible. All except for zeeel the rabbit. During the great goblin and human wars he fashioned his helmet like a cute bunny. He would even paint it. He was so feirce and  deadly that soon the enemy would flee at the site of his mask.  
  
Interesting Susan said.  
  
I don't like arming people but the world is much more wild and dangerous now then it's been in a long time. Hopefully there will be no need to use any of these things but it will make me glad to know that you have some protection.  
  
It was getting late but the dwarf wanted to show them the basics of sword craft and how to practice.  
  
They left the courtyard and went back to the area behind the wall and towers where he showed them an archery range and targets and also posts on which to practice sword strokes.  
  
You can also practice with each other but make sure you wear your armor and don't hurt each other. He then showed them some basic defensive moves how to thrust parry and slash. They practiced on the wood posts and then practiced with him he was an expert teacher and the girls were shocked how quick he was. And whole he was a good teacher he was very gentle the girls were safer then if they were playing with a puppy. He then showed them the basics of archery and recommended they spend their time at that.  
  
The nice part of archery is you can use it to hint and keep your opponents at bay.  
  
I'm going I be gone about five weeks he said when I get back I will rest up and then I plan to hike us out of here. It will be dangerous and also a rugged and exhausting trip and we will all have to do it with our weapons and packs. I think a month should be a good amount of time to get conditioned if you go outside though be careful the mountains are treacherous and you can quickly find yourself in whiteout conditions.  
  
I actually wouldn't recommend you go far but you could practice hiking up the sheltered path that leads here. It's steep and has deep snow and if you hike up and down it once that would be a very good work out.  
  
You can also practice your weapons skills. I also think it will help you fight off boredom. Some other things you can do would be to practice your cooking and have fun making meals, there are a few books I will show you and also there are some games you will enjoy.  
  
Thank you Susan said I'm sure will be fine you'll come back to find sword maidens she said with a smile.  
  
Good he laughed and I never want to encourage anyone to fight or Become a warrior but it's good to be able to defend yourself.  
  
Oh and one other thing you can explore the caves just don't get lost down there. It would be best to do small trips and be aware of whats around you then slowly venture out. The start of this cave is less complicated then many caves. All the same about a mile in it starts to get much more complicated so you would want to be careful.  
  
After they finished archery practice and sword drills they headed back up to the main front room and settled back into their comfortable seats. They were exhausted now and all felt a little hungry. The dwarf went and got some more cookies and cocoa for everyone and they cuddled into blankets in their chairs and relaxed. They also lit a large fire which helped even further to warm them up.  
  
I have to leave tomorrow. Ill be leaving early but I feel you will all be well prepared while I am gone. You have enough food to last a couple of years so help yourselves and have fun cooking and trying out new things.  
  
Also when I come back will probably have a rather difficult hike out so it would be good to get into good shape and spend time practicing archery and your swordsmanship.  
  
The girls were all sad and reluctant to see him go and Elsie still wanted to go along with him but she knew he was right.  
  
The dwarf said I am sorry I can't bring you this time but this is going to be a very dangerous and rigorous trip. I think by this time tomorrow if I did let you come you would all be regretting it and wishing you were warm and safe and comfortable back here.  
  
We like it here Addie said I'm sure it will be fun but we will miss you  
  
Yes Susan agreed we will practice and be ready when you come back.  
  
Good said the drwarf then when we hike out we can take it easier then hopefully.  
  
We will miss you Elsie said and do be careful your self.  
  
Oh I will dont you worry he responded. I'm going a little out of my way to avoid the goblin infested parts of these mountains.  
  
The girls decided to explore the caves. We should pretend were on an adventure Elsie said.  
  
Well we kind of our on an adventure I'm not sure we need to do any pretending.  
  
That is a very good point Elsie said and come to think of it as we explore the caves I don't think I would want any more adventure, I mean isn't most adventure getting lost or fighting something  
or finding lost treasure Susan interjected  
  
That kind if adventure I could handle Elsie laughed  
  
Yes Susan said its definitely not  sitting on a couch sitting on a couch  junk food.  
  
That's true Elsie laughed all though wait a minute we have been doing a lot of sitting in comfortable chairs and eating and we are most decidedly on an adventure.  
That's a good point Susan said  
  
I like the point about treasure Addie added.  
  
yes we should look for gold Elsie said!  
  
What does gold look like said Susan?  
  
Well, it kinda looks like the color gold I wild imagine Elsie laughed.  
  
Yes but I mean in a mine is it mixed in with oar  
  
Hmm I'm not sure said Elsie  
  
We can just look for anything that we think is gold.  
  
the girls spent the afternoon exploring the caves but they did not go in very far they didnt want to get lost. They came back exhausted but decided to go look at the snow, so they trudged tiredly  up to the back door and went outside. It was getting dark and a gentle blanket of snow was slowly covering the evening world.  
  
Just think Elsie said that poor dwarf is out in this weather.  
  
I know Susan replied, he is very capable so I'm sure he is safe but I doubt he is very comfortable or warm.  
  
Even though Susan said that she was a little concerned for his safety as were all the girls.  
  
Well we should make dinner and a nice dessert. That sounds lovely said Addie. They ended up making fresh bread, steak and for dessert they  
made cinnamon roles  
  
  
after dinner they relaxed and curled up on the soft carpet  in front of a warm fire and talked together.  
  
Well we didnt find any gold Elsie said  
And we also didnt die or get lost and considering we got in better shape I'd say it was a good day. They all tool hot baths before they settled into they cozy beds. They had brought a third bed in and all slept in the same room together.  
  
They spent each say practicing at archery and swordsmanship. They also went on longer and longer hikes in the caves and would hike to the bottom of the snowy trail that led up to the entrance to the dwarven cave.  
  
Each day they would push themselves a little more and were all excited at the progress they were making.  
  
The days quickly flew by and turned to weeks.  
  
as Time ticked by still there still was no sign of him. It had been six weeks and the girls knew he had said four weeks. After the first storm things had been relatively calm but lately winter had come on in fill force, everyday the girls would hike outside to her in better shape but the fierceness of the mountains winter storms had made it almost impossible to go out. But the last two weeks had been relatively clear and they felt sure he should have been back by now.  
  
I bet he just got delayed by the snow or maybe he realized that it would be dangerous and decided to wait.  
  
Yes I hope so Elsie said but deep inside something worried her that something had gone wrong. Addie and Susan felt the same way.  
  
I think we should go out and look for him Elsie said you know he would do that for us.  
  
Yes he would but I feel he knows more about mountain travel then we do. I don't know how we could even find our way back here. And think how sad he would be if be headed back in the spring and found our lonely bones on the mountains laying in the summer grass.  
  
Yes that's true, what do you think Addie?  
  
Well she said I think we should keep exploring the caves and practicing our archer and swordsmanship and then plan to set out in the spring, she paused then said whenever that might be.  
  
They made vegetable soup with need broth and drag baked bread for dinner. After they had cleaned up they sat in their warm comfortable chairs sipping cocoa by the warm fire that Susan had made.  
  
You sure are getting amazing at making cocoa Susan said to Addie.  
  
Oh thank you Addie laughed I like doing it and the cocoa they have hear is quite amazing,  
  
I bet it's expensive Elsie mused,  
  
Ya Susan replied cocoa is only grown in warm areas and I am sure anywhere warm is far far from here.  
  
Susan yawned sleepily, well I'm gonna go get some more cocoa does anyone want some?  
  
Yes please both the other girls chimed in.  
  
The girls hasn't waited very long when Susan burst back in the room and slammed and locked it shut.  
  
Elsie was jolted out of her peaceful reverie with a tinge of fear.  
  
What's up su she said with a nervous voice.  
Someone's down there she whispered someone came in and there Hooded in a black cloak and wearing all black.  
  
Maybe it's the dwarf Addie said hopefully.  
  
No not unless he has grown and gotten much thinner.  
  
All the girls were standing now.  
  
I'm sure she saw me too Susan said. I was so scared and I bolted up here.  
  
Susan's face was white and so were the other girls.  
  
Oh no what well we do Elsie said clutching Addie. We left all our weapons down stairs I can believe we were so foolish.  
  
Well we thought we were safe here . I mean everybody is locked and bolted you saw how hard it is to get in. Susan whispered.  
  
Oh no Elsie groaned quietly.  
  
What is it Susan said.  
  
I hope they didnt take the key from the dwarf. All the girls felt even sicker at that thought if it were possible considering how worried they were.  
  
Well Susan said gliding silently over to the fire and picking up the fire poker. She handed it to Elsie and face Addie a small log and she grabbed one that was burning at one end out of the fire.  
  
Elsie could tell she was still nervous and Ashen faced but she had a steely. Resolve about her now.  
  
Should I hide behind the door and hit him when he comes in Elsie asked?  
  
Yes I think that's a good idea Susan said.  
  
what of it is a friend though Addie  said.  
  
Hmm Susan thought pensively well here is what will do ill hide behind the door and if they seem dangerous ill git them in the head. Ok we should trade weapons then Elsie said handing the medal fire rod to Susan who went and hid where the door opens.  
  
They all felt a little braver now that they had a plan. However those feelings were about to go quickly away as bang bang bang someone knocked roughly on the door.  
  
Elsie felt her knees go weak but she stood firm an tried to look brave. Susan out her finger to her lips wanting them not to make any sound.  
  
A second later they heard the worse sound they could imagine as at hey heard a key slide into the lock, click and turn.  
  
The door creaked slowly open and Elsie felt she was going to pass out from fear her shacking knees made it hard to stand.  
  
The person entering and the girls were all about to be in for a very big surprise.  
  
The cloaked stranger was shocked to see two small girls but also sensed the presence of someone else.  
  
Why your just girls one of the most beautiful voices they had ever heard came out of the dark cloak.  
almost at the same time the girls said, your a girl!  
  
They all still felt the stranger could be dangerous but she said again in her beautiful voice please step out from behit the door and ill come in. I don't want to hurt you if you truly are just girls. But who are you and what are you doing her and how did you get and how did you get in, are you with anyone else. She rattled off the questions in a quick succession.  
  
Elsie stepped timidly out fe behind the door still holding the medal poker.  
  
The stranger threw back her clock and the girls gasped it was not what they were expecting.  
  
Your beautiful Elsie said quietly.  
and she was she had perfect features and blind hair. She was also much younger looking then they expected. She looked like she was about college age.  
she looks like mother Addie whispered to Susan and Elsie.  
  
Why thank you the stranger laughed.  
She had a nice kind laugh and the girls felt completely disarmed around her.  
  
Wait a minute said firmly remembering when she had met the dwarf. How do we know your no a ghost or a spirit.  
  
Well I suppose you don't she smiled but then again how do I know your not.  
  
Elsie bit her lip not quite sure what to say.  
  
You can call me Hannah the girl said. Is that cocoa she looked longingly at the cup. Susan realized now after the fright that she looked cold and tired. Here please sit down Susan said are you hungry? Will go get you some food.  
  
Oh I would love that she said. And while we are eating we can trade stories?  
  
As they left Hannah slowly undid her cloak and loosened her sword.  
  
I think we can trust her Elsie said  
  
Me too agreed Addie  
  
Yes Susan said actually I was thinking she reminded me of mother.  
  
I thought the same thing Addie and Elsie responded. Very pretty and kind.  
  
Yes she is very beautiful Susan said, not someone you expect to see breaking into your house.  
  
Well she did have a key Elsie laughed so maybe she didnt break in after all.  
  
I thought she reminded me of a fashion model. Susan said  
  
Yes she is rather stylish looking even in a black traveling cloak.  
  
But do you think we can trust her Elsie said?  
  
Hmm Susan pondered well do we have a choice? We can't exactly ask her to leave and go sleep in the snow.  
  
Ya that wouldn't work so good Elsie said. I hope we can trust her I mean she seemed so nice.  
  
Yes Addie agreed I liked her she seems nice like mother was.  
  
When they got back to the room she had fallen asleep. She looked even prettier the girls all thought, she is younger looking then I realized Susan whispered not wanting to wake her. She woke up though and smiled at the girls. Sorry about that she laughed I must have drifted off I have had little sleep for days and not much food either. Is zz here she asked? I was supposed to meet him. Oh no he was supposed to be back Elsie said but we don't know where he is we have all been concerned.  
  
A look of worry passed over hleys face. Oh that's not told she said. He is very capable I do hope he is ok.  
  
  
We brought you some food Elsie said and Susan handed her some of the beef stew and bread they had made for dinner.  
  
Oh thank you she said and began to eat, who made this she managed to say through mouthfuls it's delicious. Oh we all did but Addie did the spices and flavoring.  
  
Oh well it's amazing she said. I haven't had a meal this good in a while.  
When she had finished eating the girls brought out cocoa and cookies. As they were going down to the kitchen to get them Elsie said she is so beautiful and elegant she reminds me of a princess, well a not spoiled princess she laughed. I feel like we can trust her to Susan said, what do you think Addie?  
  
Well she liked my food so I say yes we can trust her and laughed.  
  
I'm not sure that's the best way to judge  pretty sure ... Would like your food.  
  
As they brought the cookies and cocoa up the settled into the warm couches by the fire Addie gave Haley a blanket and she cuddled up in it. Thank you girls for your hospitality she said. If you want I could fix us breakfast tomorrow?  
  
Oh that would be nice Susan said.  
  
Also if I'm not prying I'm curious how you ended up in such a remote location?  
  
The girls all looked at each other reluctant and insure how much to reveal.  
  
Haley was very perceptive and saw the look, she quickly said its ok of your reluctant we can talk abou something else.  
  
Well Elsie said I would be ok talking about it by you might not believe us?  
  
Well I'm a fairly open person Haley said I would like to hope that I'm not gullible but all of you girls seem trustworthy.  
  
Well Elsie said there are some people who think that I make up stories and here she looked over at Susan, Susan jumped in, well I think in light of present circumstances I'm much more likely to agree with you then not and she smiled and also Susan followed up with who would believe that I got chased by a bear and lived!  
That is true Elsie laughed.  
Well anyways Elsie went on were not totally sure how we got here we sort of stumbled into wherever it is we are.  
  
When we got here we were in the range of mountains and that's when we stumbled upon the dwarf who so kindly helped us all.  
  
They were all getting ready for bed when Addie said should we see if she wants sleep in here.  
  
I wouldn't mind Elsie said.  
  
They sat around talking and the girls told her how they were leaning swordsmanship and archery. Oh we can practice together if you like  not the best she said but know a few tricks and she smiled. Oh that would be lovely Susan said and Elsie and Addie both agreed.  
  
So Haley said it sounds like your bit totally sure where you are and your also looking for your father. There is a large counsel taking place and I am planning to leave for it. I was thinking we could spend a few more data here and get all of our supplies ready then head out. It will be a difficult joinery but the wizards are very wise and I think they could help you.  
  
I think they also would be able to understand works walkers better.  
  
Are you familiar with where we are she said? This place is not very inhabited.  
  
The next day try woke up and went and had breakfast then practiced swordsmanship and went on a hike outside. It was overcast but not too snowy and they made it a little farther then headed back.  
  
I like it hear Susan said its cozy all tucked away in our little fort. Me too Addie said.  
  
They made dinner and that night all sat up in the room talking, Haley said well I am planning to join the counsel. It's a couple weeks traveling from here. I think it would be good for you girls if you joined but feel free to do what your comfortable with. It would be a little safer and easier to make the journey during mid summer but that's many months from now but the journey will be difficult so do what you think is right. I am afrid that things have been gettin steadily worse and we might not have safety like we used to have for many years.  
  
Elsie looked at Susan and Addie and their looks seemed to agree with what Elsie was thinking.  
  
I think we would like to go with you, right? She queued the other two girls.  
  
Yes they both agreed.  
  
Oh good Haley said. She looked relieved and said "I feel like we all get along really well so it will be nice having you all along. I think will plan to leave in 3 days if that works for you?  
  
Yep sounds great Elsie said, though ill miss this place and the food!  
  
yes will let's live it up while we still can Haley laughed.  
  
The next morning they all explored the caves and then winded their way up to look at the outdoors. It was overcast but the snow was not as bad and they decided they would leave in two days.  
  
They went back in and made steak soup and fresh bread and an apple pie for dessert.  
  
Exhausted after the day they settled into their nice comfortable chairs by the fire for the evening. Would you like to spend the night with us tonight Elsie asked.  
Yes you should Addie said, we won't talk to much.  
  
Oh I would love that Haley said.  
  
Will all be sleeping together in a tent soon Susan laughed so We might as well get used to it.  
  
Susan snores like a giant lumberjack Elsie laughed.  
  
I do not Susan replied to both Elsie and Haley going a little red in the face.  
 well I can sleep through anything Haley laughed.  
  
ok Elsie said I have b idea whoever is a snorer has to be on guard duty.  
  
the girls were all excited they had spent the last day packing and were leaving. Haley was a laid back traveler so far they had slept in, made breakfast and were just now getting ready to leave. It still was fairly early but Elsie was glad she felt normal she had never liked gettin up to early for trips it made her feel weird the whole day.  
  
Ill be sad to leave this place Susan said. It's nice and comfortable and feels a little but like home now.  
yes I've always really enjoyed it here, Haley replied. I have been here twice and both times really enjoyed it. Maybe will get a chance to visit the great dwarf cities in the birth. They are absolutely amazing and gigantic. But they are nice when you get used to them. They all headed up to the entrance  and locked it securely before setting out with packs full of supplies blankets tents and other things. Elsie had tried to pick up Haley's lack and was surprised how heavy it was. She couldn't barely lift it. Are you sure you can carry all that Elsie said? Oh yes I'm used to heavy packs Haley laughed.  
  
luckily they all had snow shoes which made it much easier to travel across the snow. They set out down the windy path out of the valley. One good thing is that most of the trip  wil be more or less downhill.  
  
Oh that is nice Elsie said.  
  
Also when we get out of the snow will travel through beautiful mountains and forests.  
  
They traveled for about a week through the mountain passes. Always more or less heading downwards. They passed many amazing views as they traveled. At first all they saw were rugged snow capped peaks. As they traveled further they started to spot mountain peaks in the distance that looked a little less white. The heavy snow around them also began to be less thick.  
  
Then one day as they were walkin Addie exclaimed oh look up ahead grass I see some green grass! Yay they all cheered, snow is a lovely thing but it doesn't make for a good traveling companion unless your being pulled in a sled to someplace warm. Even then if you don't have a warm destination to get to by the end of the night it can become rather unpleasant, though lovely to look at or to spend an afternoon playing outside in.  
  
That night when they stopped for camp the evening air felt a little warmer (though still not warm enough).  
  
They quickly set about their evening tasks, usually two people would work on setting up the tent and camp one person would gather firewood and one person would cook.  
Elsie was getting better at cooking but she had a tendency to burn or undercook everything.  
 when she had almost burned the dinner the night before Susan had caught her. Fathers right she has said with a laugh you don't have a very long attention span.  
  
But tonight Addie was cooking and she was very good. She also was a quick Learner from Haley about cooling over an open fire which is much different then cooking in a nice kitchen.  
  
Addie was busy preparing a small loaf of bread and planned to warm up some of the meat they had left.  
  
as They made camp there was a bright crescent moon that hung over the mountains and a few pale clouds illuminated against the dark colors of the swiftly fading sky. The smell of the camp fire was good as it filled the air around their little camp.  
  
After they had eaten they all say around the fire talking. They were getting in better shape and their bodies felt less exhausted and sore as they had the first couple nights.  
  
We should tell scary stories Elsie said!  
  
That is a terrible idea Susan replied, you do realize we are out in the middle of the wild in dark woods in the middle of the night.  
  
Oh fine, Elsie said you wouldn't want to tell scary stories if we were sitting on a crowded beach in the sunshine.  
All though Elsie said with a mischievous smile after pausing if we were about to swim id probably  wanna tell stories about sharks she said. SHark she yelled as she lunged at susan with her mouth open.  
  
Susan caught her and rolled over on top of her Elsie was laughing to much to fight back so Susan pinned her down.  
  
Does the shark like to eat dirt Susan laughed dangling a handful over her face.  
  
You wouldn't Elsie said indignantly as she began to squirm.  
  
Susan opened her hand and elsie shrieked.  
  
Something hit her face.  
  
Haha Susan laughed it was just a piece of meat.  
  
Sharks like meat Elsie said vending her head and taking a bite out of it.  
Eventually Susan let Elsie back up.  
  
Haley was smiling she enjoyed being around the spirited girls and even though they liked to tease each other it was obvious how much thu all loved each other. Haley though that love was almost not strong enough word for how they treated Addie they adored their little sister.  
  
As they settled around the campfire with cups of warm cocoa Haley told them about where they were. The whole place she said is fairly uninhibited. Which is why we don't need to be as cautious about safety as we will later. The only place where humans live is on the western coast and even there I don't think there are a lot of cities. I haven't been that way in a whole so things very well might have changed.  
  
What do you mean by humans Susan asked.  
  
Oh Haley said then paused well there are not many dwarven settlements or other civilized creatures.  
  
Oh Susan said do dwarves live here?  
  
Yes Haley said they have some if there smaller cities far in the north but there great empires lie over the seas to the far to the west. That is where many humans live and in the great continents far to the south.  
  
What are those like Elsie asked?  
  
Oh they are wild I have never been but I heard they are full of deep jungles and strange creatures.  
  
  
Has where we are ever been very inhabited Elsie asked.  
  
All the girls thought they noticed a brief look of sadness pass over her face.  
  
Yes long ago the fair folk lived here. Humans called them elves but they have all disappeared she said sadly.  
  
You can still find Some of their overgrown cities amongst the woods.  
  
Oh my Susan said have you ever been to one?  
  
Yes i have seen a lot of them she replied even though they are overgrown they are still  quite lovely. But they can feel a little sad.  
  
What are they like Elsie asked? Well there are all different kinds. Some of them are made from white stone, some of them were built in trees. They always blended in well but now over the years they have become a part of the land.  
  
How long ago Did they disappear Addie asked  
  
It's been a long time she said over 300 Years.  
  
Oh wow well I hope we get to see one Elsie said. Yes all the other girls agreed.  
  
The next morning they woke up and packed up the camp. The day was there most enjoyable day of travel yet. The snow was almost all gone and they spent the day walking through beautiful pine and fir and ash woods.  
  
They spotted fast flowing mountain steams tumbling down the hills.  
  
Pretty soon Haley said we are going to have to cross one of them and unfortunately it's doing to be terribly   cold. Most of these mountain streams are snow Melt and they are always cold and can be quite swift. The one we will have to cross is about knew deep I am making to a place where the river will be widest so that it will be shallow but to be careful will string a rope across.  
  
Will probably go slowly and string a rope across the River to be safe.  
  
Ill also go first and make a fire on the other side in case anyone falls in the cold can be deadly. We should get there about dusk so we can camp in the far side of the river.  
  
The girls all agreed this was a good plan.  
  
They continued hiking the foresty hills were rigged and at points the think undergrowth was a struggle to get through but Haley was a skilled pathfinder and they managed to stay on clear ground.  
  
Eventually they came out from the trees to the bank of a swift flowing river.  
  
  
Brr that looks cold said Elsie.  
  
It is Haley laughed I wish we could go around it but that woul take months. We arrived at a good spot from here we just need to head upstream a little. It was a but tricky heading up stream because the bank was overgrown but eventually they made it to a place where the river was fairly wide. It was still swift though.  
  
Ok Haley said its deeper then I expected so will have to be careful. I think that I will tie a rope around my waist then you girls can secure it and pull me back if the current is to strong. I can go first and build a fire then warm we can get everyone else across and make sure that can get warmed.  
  
Ahh Haley let out a small squell as she stepped in. It's cold all right she said. The girls kept a right hold on the rope and also tied one end around a tree.  
 She waded bravely forward and at one point the water came up to her waist. She stumbled and the girls yelled encouragement she finally made it shivering and cold. She stripped off her wet clothes and put warm ones on and wrapped in a blanket as she started a fire.  
  
Are you ok Susan yelled across the river banks.  
  
Yes Haley yelled back her voice shacking from the cold.  
  
Once she got the fire going she yelled back I'm gonna come back and help you girls across its deeper and swifter then I remember.  
  
Elsie yelled back no you don't have to so that you will freeze! I'm ok she yelled as she plunged back in the river.  
  
She is too nice Elsie said  
  
I know I agree Susan and Addie bother agreed.  
  
Haley came back over and fought the strong current. She was shivering with cold when she made it.  
  
Are you sure you should do this Elsie asked with concern in her voice.  
  
Yes Susan added in as she handed her a blanket we don't want you to get to cold!  
  
No it's ok she said we can just hurry and get it over the river is really swift and ill feel better If I know I helped you get across. Who wants to go next?  
  
The girls all looked at each other. I guess I can try it next Elsie said.  
  
Ok Haley said just hold on to the rope we strung across and ill help guide you to.  
  
Ready? Haley said.  
  
Yep lets do this, Elsie gritted her teeth and stepped into the water. She was barefoot because she didnt want to her her feet wet.  
  
The cold water was a complete shock oh my she gasped out.  
Yes it's cold Haley said. Once we are across you can snuggle in a blanket by the fire.  
  
They made it about 15 feet when Elsie lost her balance as the river abruptly fell the water rose up to above her waist and she felt her self going numb with the shock of cold water. The current was also strong and she felt her feet being swept from under her. She felt her legs  
swept from under her and stumbled under the water it happened so fast  and she lost hold of the rope. At that moment Haley's strain arms grabbed her and steadied her. I got you she yelled over the loud torrent threatening to drown their voices out.  
  
Elsie felt her body going numb and the feeling going away in her bare feet. She stumbled clumsily and felt Haley's strong arms steady her. The water was almost up to her chest and she felt Almost dizzy from the rushing water and it's tremendous pressure and also the loud noise. The water felt angry like I wanted to hold her head under and watch as she drowned. She kept moving forward one foot at a time and was greatly helped by Haley.she realized  Haley  
was singing a gentle song and she felt more strength.  
  
finally they had made it and she stumbled out dripping wet into the rocky bank. She clambered fully out of the water and have Haley a wet hug.  
 thank you she said through shivering teeth. She felt her whole body shivering almost convulsively. There was a wind that are right through her clothes and chilled her to the bone.  
  
they both staggered to the fire and the warmth felt delicious. If you want you can change into something warmer and wrap up by the fire with a blanket.  
  
Ok I will Elsie said. Are you sure your going to be ok she asked, worrie about Haley.  
  
Yes ill just think about how nice it will be to be warm soon. She smiled a weak smile and plunged back into  
the river.  
  
Elsie sat by the fIre with a blanket wrapped around her watching. She was worried for Haley and hopes that they would all be safe and warm soon. She rummages he cold and numb fingers though the packs and found cocoa, she then for some water and put it on so that they would have something warm to drink. Haley started back across with Addie perched on her back. They struggled across then she for Susan.  
  
Haley looked so exhausted and tired from the three trips. Ill make dinner tonight Elsie said you should reset and get warm by the fire. Elsie cooled some bread and they all sat huddled by the fire while it was warming up.  
  
Who wants to swim in the river tonight Susan joked.  
  
Oh me Elsie said with a laugh.  
  
That was cold Haley said I'm sorry we had to do that. There really is no other way around the river.  
  
Thanks for carrying me Addie said.  
  
Yes hour welcome I think it would have been too deep for you.  
  
I wish we were all snug in our beds back up in the mountains Susan said. Yes that would be nice tonight an a hot bath.  
  
At least we have a nice warm tent and blankets that we can snuggle up in Elsie said pulling the blankets tighter around her.  
  
Yes Addie said and  
  
Good night Susan I love you  night Addie  
  
Good night Haley love you, errr Elsie paused I mean I like you. There was another pause then everyone burst out laughing.  
Should I be offended Haley teased  
  
No no I'm sorry Elsie laughed.  
  
I mean I loved the warm bread we had for inner so I guess I can say I love you.  
Love is a strange word. What I mean is that you feel like family it just sort of slipped out.  
  
Well you do to Haley laughed. I suppose sleeping together in a tent will do that.  
  
They see out and it felt like they were walking through a dream. Waterfalls and small creeks fell from pine clad hills.  
  
Overall the terrain was fairly rugged and mountainous. After days and days of hiking through the mountains they they reached much gentler forested hills. They finally came to a small dirt path.  
  
it was a nice evening as they winded their way through the shadows. The warm night air was pleasant and their feet crunched on the fallen autumn leaves through the branches of the beech and alder and oaks and pines they caught glimpses of the stars far overhead. After a whole the trees opened and they were walking through soft grass tall trees spread out around them but they grew far enough apart they caught more glimpses of the night sky a rich shade of dark blue.  
  
  
It had rained that day but the clouds had started to give way as dusk fell swiftly.  
  
The stars came out bright and clear faint moonlight illuminated the scatters clouds that still lingered across the night sky.  
  
The night air smelled fresh as they quietly winded there way through the forest and trees. The tall pine and for trees stood silently like dark specters.  
  
  
Steep  mountains steep and rocky and impregnable. Pine and fir and evergreen trees grew in places where the ground was gentle enough to support them. They also caught glimpses of what looked like aspen trees high up in the mountains.  
  
This is the same range we were in earlier we could have gotten here by traveling north through the mountains but it would have taken many years if we ever could make it at all. The storms further can be sudden and violent.  
  
Now we will continue north and at some point we should hit a small road that leads to the city. There aren't ma y farms or people around here most of them live father north and west of here.  
  
Years? Addie asked  
  
well not actually Years Haley laughed but a very very long time you would be constantly trying to scale massive icy peaks of snow and rock and climb and descend cliffs. Of course there are paths and areas where the mountains are less steep but most people that cross the mountains do so across them.  
  
event then it's still not very populated. Long ago only fair folk loved here but it was always mostly oceans and woodlands and mountains. The city we are going to was built by the fair folk but when they disappeared humans took it over.  
  
Steep  mountains rose rocky and impregnable on their right hand side as they continued north. Pine and fir and evergreen trees grew in places where the ground was gentle enough to support them. They also caught glimpses of what looked like aspen trees high up in the mountains. They were traveling on a dirt path that winded through woodlands. They were still rather high up and te ground to their left slopped downwards and the grout to their right rose up to the towering mountains.  
  
Eventually the path began to descend and they found themselves in an grassy area on their left they could see more gentle mountains covered in pine and for and the towering mountains continued to rise to their right.  
  
  
This is the same range we were in earlier we could have gotten here by traveling north through the mountains but it would have taken many years if we ever could make it at all. The storms further can be sudden and violent.  
  
Now we will continue north and at some point we should hit a small road that leads to the city. There aren't ma y farms or people around here most of them live father north and west of here.  
  
they continues along and as late afternoon closed in they hit a larger road that seemed well traveled. The road turned and Elsie thought they were going to run straight into the cliffs.  
As they got further they saw that the it was a wide opening between steep cliffs and the road ran ibti that.  
  
  
Steep mountains rose on both sides and a beatific brick wall woth round towers stretched across the opening.  
  
One two three four five six seven eight towers Addie counted. That's a very long wall!  
  
Yes it is Haley said. Who lives here again Elsie asked feeling a bit nervous after being away from people for so long. She also wondered who they were and what their lives were like.  
  
I can see why people become hermits she joked.  
  
It will be fun Susan said the followed up with what are they like?  
  
Oh their very nice Haley said. Kind and intelligent. There is a beautiful university that people come to earn at.  
  
There also very prosperous. In the north there is a port city and air of trade comes in from dwarves there are also some small dwarven settlements in the north too who lay quite well for the food that people grow.  
  
As they reached the main road it was quite large. They traveled up to it and soldiers stood at attention on either side. There were also soldiers on the wall tops.  
  
As they entered the gate they saw the city was bustling with life.  
  
Trees were everywhere and quaint little cobblestone paths wound through out there were also trees everywhere so at times you felt you were lost inside a tiny forest.  
  
Haley explained it seems like a lot but there are three of these miniature forests inside the city.  
  
Steams and creeks flowed everywhere with sturdy wooden or stone bridges to get across them. I much prefer crossing streams like this Elsie said with a laugh.  
  
The forest wasn't very long but they traveled up jill to get through  it. and they emegerged on the other end. They were actually much higher up now and they turned and looked out over the valley. The people were all very friendly and would smile and say hello.  
  
What a lovely place Susan said. It would be grand to live here.  
  
Yes I agree Haley said and tonight wil be able to take warm baths and have a hot meal.  
  
That sounds lovely said Elsie.  
  
  
  
Oh my are they?  
  
Friends Haley cut him off very close friends she said with a smile.