**Bravery, but in all the wrong places.**

Cluym, the young, necromantic, elven mage walked into his mentor’s room. The old mage had been dead for a while[[1]](#footnote-1) but before he passed he had left a letter for Cluym. As his apprentice looked at his mentor’s final words he had difficulty in understanding their meaning. He understood each word’s meaning individually, but his mind fogged over as he tried to hold them all in his head together. After ruminating on the letter for a few minutes a word came to his head, Phandalin. Now is a good time to mention that Cluym, despite being a subpar necromantic mage, had an extraordinary ability. If he didn’t know something he could get a sense of who would have this missing knowledge. It would be a very useful ability, if Cluym wasn’t a bit dim. He was convinced that Phandalin had something to do with mature cheese. He was mistaken, and it wasn’t until he had spent many long hours in the library reading through such page turners as ‘Cheese through the ages’ and ‘Huel’s complete guide to cows, milk, and associated dairy products’ that he stumbled upon a singular reference to the Phandalin white. A delicate soft cheese invented by Hawk, and named after his place of birth. Now realising his mistake, Cluym packed his belongings and headed out to Phandalin. Well, he headed out to the nearest village to get directions to Phandalin.

Some days later, in the quaint little village of Wyevale, the locals were enjoying quite a show in the tavern. I say ‘the’ tavern, but Wyevale technically had two. Although the tavern on the eastern side was usually called an alehouse and attracted a more, refined clientele. A bardic hill dwarf had taken up residence and had been drinking since Thursday. Usually, after their coin purse had been drained, the regulars would have chucked the dwarf out. However, this dwarf really knew how to play the harp. The music brought in plenty of custom for the landlord so he reluctantly let the dwarf stay free of charge. The evening was only just beginning but the dwarf had drawn such a crowd that there was barely any standing room left.

Up on stage, Yomada was a bit distracted. After a few moments of silence, the dwarf looked down to see they had been strumming about two foot to the side of their harp. Yomada hopped off their stool, nudged it to the side, and resumed playing mostly where they had left off. Something still bothered them though, it could be the… five; six days of drinking? What day was it again? Well Alan was sitting in the corner and he and his wife had been going through a rough patch recently, they always argued all Monday night so he would end up in the bar on Tuesday. It could have been the six days of drinking, but that was nothing new for Yomada. It could be the harp, something didn’t quite feel right. Or maybe it was the notice board[[2]](#footnote-2). A new notice had been added. Yomada stopped mid-chord and stumbled over to have a closer look. After dodging under a few legs, and treading on every foot between the stage and the notice board, Yomada peered to see what was written there. In big bold letters the parchment announced ‘BARDS WANTED IN PHANDALIN, LARGE PAYMENT, CONTACT MERRY’. The dwarf stood there swaying for a few moments letting the words become less blurred. They then swung their fist to the right aiming to hit the nearest person on the arm, forgetting the usual height difference between humans and dwarfs. A rather angry looking patron turned around to see who had hit them on the backside.

“Where’s this Phlandulum then?” Yomada asked.

“What? Oh, it’s up north somewhere.” The patron replied turning back to his friends.

“Oh, and who’s this Merry?”

The patron sighed, “That guy over in the corner,” pointing vaguely in the right direction. Yomada looked along the outstretched arm.

“You mean Alan?”

“No, that’s Merry, he put the sign up.”

“Right, and where’s this Philandrum?”

“Just talk to Merry,” the patron grunted as he shoved the dwarf away. Slightly confused, Yomada crossed the tavern.

“Alan! How are you?”

“It’s Merry,” ‘Alan’ growled back in a thick Scottish accent.

“Hey Alan, how’s the wife? Still having troubles?”

“No, I’m happily married.”

“But it’s Tuesday, you’re in here because you and the missus have fights on Monday.”

“It’s Thursday and I’m always in here, I’m the landlord.”

“Whatever you say Alan, what’s this about bards in Philandlinum?”

“It’s Merry, and yes, that seems perfect for you. They’ve opened up a new theatre in Phandalin and they need entertainers to fill the slots. Probably about eight shows a week, and they’re willing to pay handsomely. More gold than you’ve ever earned I’ll bet. And the best thing about it is it’s about a weeks travel north of here, that means you’ll be far away from me.”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say Alan, after I brought in all these customers for you. But I do like the sound of the gold.”

“Merry, and I must admit you know how to play a tune. And these idiots seem to like it for some reason. But even so, it’s probably time you moved on else you’re likely to be pinned up on the notice board by your ears.”

“Right, I don’t want to over stay my welcome Alan. I’ll leave in the morning,” Yomada stumbled away leaving Merry furiously wiping a mug and turned to address the crowded tavern, “Right lads, ladies, and creatures unknown, who wants to go philandering?”

A faint chuckle and some cheering spread through the tavern. Most people went back to their drinks but one well-dressed half elf stepped towards to the drunken dwarf.

“If you mean Phandalin then my cousin and I were heading in that direction,” he announced. It was this precise moment, as luck would have it, that Cluym walked through the door. His elf ears tingling.

“Did someone mention Phandalin?” Cluym enquired.

“Aye,” answered the half elf, “my cousin and I are…”

“Hey, back off elf. These are my travellers, find your own,” Yomada interrupted. A brief verbal scuffle ensued between Cluym and Yomada with a few short jokes and pointy ear references thrown in for good measure. By the end, they had decided that Yomada was too drunk to care and Cluym too persistent to back down, so they would both travel with the half elves and neither of them would be happy about it. Yomada left to continue playing the harp and Cluym stayed to inform the half elf what was happening.

“Um, sure… I guess. Just so long as you both pay for the horse feed. I’m Thogold Silvereye[[3]](#footnote-3), and that’s my cousin Cruben by the way. We’re merchants. Just thought you’d like to know who you’re travelling with,” the now slightly bemused half elf said, clearly hinting for Cluym to offer the same information.

“Is the dwarf playing that harp upside down?” Cluym asked. Up on stage Yomada finally realised what had been bothering them, and subtly[[4]](#footnote-4) turned the harp the right way up.

The next few hours passed mostly uneventfully. Yomada pointed Cluym towards Derek on the bar to sort out lodgings overnight. Davey, as he was known to everyone else, took great pleasure in directing the elf to Yomada’s room. Music was played, drinks were drunk. A fairly standard night.

After a while, Yomada set about earning some coin before leaving Wyevale. Sure, playing the harp was rewarded with food and lodging but not much money. That is why the dwarf had to resort to some slightly less legal means. Playing the harp taught dextrous, nimble fingers. Being a bard taught charisma and confidence and how to make people like you, or at least be friendly for a short time. And when all else failed a few magic tricks could be used at a pinch. The first mark was a human who obviously couldn’t handle their drink too well. Yomada started talking to him and encouraged him to keep drinking, and to keep up appearances the dwarf started drinking from an ornate silver hipflask. Now this hipflask was actually a curious magical item. Any alcohol imbibed from it had double the effect. However, any water drunk from it had a powerful sobering effect. It wasn’t long before the human could barely sit up without holding onto the table, yet Yomada had used the hipflask to gain a clear head. It was quite easy to convince the patron to lend Yomada a few coins, of course with the promise of repayment… whenever they next happened to be passing by. A cursory glance of the remaining patrons revealed that everybody was either too sober or too poor to be of any value.

In search of further rewards, Yomada left the inn. Late at night the nearby streets were usually littered with drunkards who had either stumbled out of the inn or who had been thrown out. On this occasion, there was a solitary figure lying face down in the mud. After a thorough check it became clear that this unfortunate soul had either spent all their money on beer, or had already been robbed. Most rogues would cut their losses and move on, but Yomada was a cut above. Under the guise of being a helpful soul, the dwarf helped the man up and escorted him home. It wasn’t easy supporting a semi-conscious person a good two foot taller, but the thought of ransacking an empty house kept Yomada going. What Yomada didn’t count on was the drunkard still lived with their parents. After stumbling through the door, a half concerned, half annoyed woman came storming down the stairs. Unfazed, Yomada described finding her son and bringing him home. She was so grateful that after the two of them had manhandled her son into bed she produced a small pouch and offered it in reward. Yomada humbly accepted and went to leave, making sure that the woman was sufficiently distracted by her son that she wouldn’t notice the dwarf taking a golden chalice that had proudly been displayed on the mantelpiece. Satisfied with the night’s ill-gotten gains, Yomada headed back to the tavern whistling a jaunty tune. The merriment quickly left upon seeing the smiling face of Cluym, sat in the corner of what used to be Yomada’s room. After a brief, civil discussion[[5]](#footnote-5) they decided that since Cluym only needed to meditate and not sleep, he would take the chair and Yomada could keep the bed. Before going to sleep, Yomada decided to check what was in the pouch and was disappointed to find a fresh batch of heart shaped scones. They tasted wonderful, and were surprisingly filling, but it wasn’t quite the monetary reward the dwarf was looking for.

Yomada woke to the sight of Cluym’s still smiling face. After an exchange of insults, Cluym went to check on Thogold and Yomada lazily enjoyed a final breakfast on the house. With everything packed and ready, the party made their way to the stables and said a final goodbye to the innkeeper.

“Thanks Alan, it’s been fun.” As the group left they could faintly hear the words ‘It’s Merry’ rattle through the door. After preparing the cart, and setting up the harp in the back, they were off. The plan was to head north to Phandalin, stopping at the villages on the way to restock supplies. If all went to plan, it shouldn’t take much longer than a week[[6]](#footnote-6). The first two days passed without incident. There was some talking interspersed with harp music. Our reluctantly adventurous duo finally learnt things about their travelling companions. The Silvereyes were merchants who travelled frequently from one shore of the Kingdom to another, trading goods until their purse was full and their cart empty. Thogold was the brains of the operation and Cruben was… his cousin[[7]](#footnote-7). They were currently on their way back to Phandalin to fill their cart again before sailing north to Tor. Rumours had been whispered that there had been a change of regime, and the new leaders were trying to get their hands on as much gold as possible in an attempt to line a fortress with it. An odd thing to do of course but when magic, and more importantly large monetary rewards are involved, it’s usually best not to ask too many questions. The party also learnt not to trust Cluym with the campfires. His method of lighting them involved a far too powerful ‘burning hands’ spell that turned a log into a charred matchstick. It was on the morning of the third day that things started to go wrong.

The party arrived at Donregan, the first village on their route, early in the morning. They needed to refill their food supplies, and giving the horses half a day’s rest would do them some good. The cart stopped just in front of what served as the main gateway into the village. In years gone by it may have served some defensive purpose, but now it was just three pieces of wood precariously nailed together with the name Donregan barely visible. What could be seen on closer inspection though was the phrase ‘the happiest place in the Kingdom’ more recently scrawled onto it. Just inside the village boundary was a rickety shack that served as the stables, and as the party approached they noticed someone who appeared to be the stable master.

“Hello, beautiful morning isn’t it? We haven’t had visitors for a while now,” the stable master said, gormlessly grinning at the newcomers. He seemed unusually happy, especially given how early it was, but maybe he was just one of *those* people. Both Yomada and Cluym were distracted by this chirpy fellow but Thogold, as always, had business on his mind.

“Yes it is, I wonder if you could help us. We’re just passing through but we need to restock our food supplies. I don’t suppose you could point us to the right person, I’m sure you’re busy but there doesn’t seem to be anyone else around this early to ask?” This prompted the others to look around. Donregan was by no means a large village, but even so, you would still expect to see a handful of people feeding animals or generally going about their business. Thogold was right though, other than the stable master there were no other signs of life.

“They’ll all be down in the tavern I suppose,” the stable master replied, still grinning like the Cheshire cat, “I’ll take you over to meet them. They’ll be thrilled to meet some newts like yourselves.”

“In the tavern this early? Now this is my kind of village,” Yomada interjected, and cheerfully followed in the direction the stable master was pointing. The others were a bit more concerned, and confused about the ‘newt’ comment, but decided to follow anyway. As the group wandered down the street towards the pub, a keen eye would have noticed shadows darting between the buildings. Unfortunately: Cruben was watching a butterfly; Thogold was practising his haggling technique in his head; Yomada was too excited about the prospect of an early morning pint or seven; and Cluym was staring the stable master in his eyes. Not the you-are-so-beautiful-do-you-know-a-room-we-could-rent-for-the-night kind of stare but the your-eyes-are glazed-over-in-a-weird-way-and-you-are-inhumanly-happy-are-you-possessed-by-some-malevolent-spirit kind of way. Cluym decided the absolute best way to figure out what was affecting this person was to sneakily cast a charm spell on them and get them to tell all their secrets. In what would become the start of a long sequence of failures for our mostly incompetent duo however, the spell fizzled and did nothing. Pondering on why the spell didn’t work was probably the reason Cluym didn’t notice the small amounts of movement out of the corner of his eye[[8]](#footnote-8).

“Isn’t it a bit early to be in the tavern? And besides, surely not everyone will be in there? A village this big can’t possible fit in one building,” Thogold enquired.

“Don’t worry,” the stable master grinned, “Just come with me into the tavern and you’ll see.”

Yomada was still pleased with the idea of a liquid breakfast. So pleased in fact that the dwarf didn’t notice the stable master pushing the group along with a slightly firmer arm. Cluym however, was now very suspicious. He decided to try something a bit more forceful this time and tried to cast a sleep spell on the villager. Not only did this not work again, little did Cluym know this now left him defenceless[[9]](#footnote-9) in a decision he would all too soon come to regret.

“I don’t suppose this tavern of yours has any good, strong whisky?” Yomada enquired.

“Of course, I even think they have a bottle or two of some old dwarven whisky,” the stable master cheerily said.

At this, the copper piece finally dropped for Yomada. It was notoriously hard to get a hold of dwarven whisky, you usually had to pry a dwarf off the other end. A small village tavern would be very unlikely to have half a bottle, let alone two. The whole party, except Cruben of course, now suspected something was wrong and stopped walking towards the tavern.

“Oh come on, the tavern’s just over there. It’ll be right fun. We all love newts here,” the stable master said still grinning like a madman. It was at this point that Yomada decided to slowly start backing away towards the cart. Realising that the party was not going to cooperate any more, the stable master took a different approach.

“Everybody!” he yelled, “We’ve got some newts out here!”

A brief moment passed and then a surge of people came storming out of the tavern, all of them chanting the word ‘Newts’. It was surprising how many people this tavern could hold, and just how quickly the mob was moving towards the now stunned party. When Thogold and Cluym finally decided to run for it, they found out their survival instincts weren’t quite as finely tuned as Yomada’s who was a good half a street ahead of them and already running at full pace. It wasn’t long before Cruben was swallowed by the mob. One minute he was there, the next he had been replaced by three villagers, all wearing the same grin the stable master had. Thogold was next to be overtaken. He tried his hardest to fend the villagers off, but there were just too many. At the sight of half of his party disappearing into the advancing wall of flesh, Cluym decided to take action. He turned to face the mob and tried to cast a spell, but he realised too late what he had done earlier and instantly regretted wasting those spells on the single villager[[10]](#footnote-10). This small delay was enough for a villager to grab him by the arm. Not known for his physical strength, Cluym was unable to escape the grasp and was soon grabbed by two more villagers. He felt himself being lifted off the floor and then he was consumed by the mass.

Up ahead, Yomada had no idea what had just happened. Turning around to look was a mistake a lot of people made when fleeing, and this dwarf had a lot of experience in running away. Without the delay of worrying about anyone else, Yomada managed to reach the cart and immediately started to get the horses ready for a speedy exit. The mob was gaining fast though and Yomada was forced into taking action. The dwarf started singing a low, rumbling song, channelling the natural magic of the world. As the tempo increased Yomada raised a hand into the air, and as the fanatical villagers approached they were surprised to see the dwarf produce a harp[[11]](#footnote-11) and play a powerful, magical chord of music. A deafening thunder wave emitted from the harp and the villagers were hit by a wall of sound. Half a dozen or so of them were flung backwards into the air, hitting into the villagers behind. However, there were too many of them and in an instant the empty space had been filled. The dwarf was soon surrounded, the sun blocked out by grabbing hands and arms. The last thing Yomada saw was a sea of grinning faces before being carried away.

The party awoke some time later. It was hard to tell how long they had been unconscious, it was still daytime but it had become overcast and the sun was no longer visible. They found themselves in a rather large field that housed a solitary sheep. It most likely used to house more livestock, but now the owner needed the space for the four long banquet tables and the stage, complete with orchestra pit. As you can imagine, this is not what anyone expected to wake up to.

“Ah there you are sleepy heads,” the stable master said still grinning, “Sorry about that, some of the guys got a bit too excited. As I said, we haven’t had newts round here for ages. You’re just in time for the party though.”

“So you’re not going to kill us then?” Cluym asked hopefully.

“Kill you? Why would we want to do that? You’d miss the party,” the stable master answered smiling through every syllable. As if it had been rehearsed meticulously for weeks, the second the stable master said party the villagers from earlier entered the field and started merrymaking. There was singing and dancing, groups talking and laughing, the banquet tables were suddenly filled with piles of delicious food. Everybody was holding either a glass of deep red wine or a tankard of ale. As Cluym watched the feasting he noticed something odd about the food. He tried to concentrate as people took food from the middle of the table, but it felt like his eyes didn’t want to watch what was happening. When he finally could focus again the plates in the middle looked untouched, yet everybody sitting at the table had full plates and were merrily eating. The same thing happened with the drinks, people would drink from their glasses but the amount of liquid appeared to remain constant. In Cluym’s professional opinion, something was up.

“Quite a party you have here,” Yomada remarked, “Do you do this often?”

“Oh we’re always partying we are. Why would we do anything else?” the stable master replied.

“And what’s with calling us newts?”

“Well that’s just a bit of fun, ‘new people’, ‘new-ts’. The guys like it, keeps them happy.”

“OK. Final question, I don’t suppose you guys like harp music?” said Yomada, always on the lookout for a good audience, “I am a bard of some considerable talent and fame.”

“Do we? We love it! Come on, I’ll take you to the stage,” the stable master said leading Yomada through the crowds, “Hey guys, we’ve got a bard!” A large cheer went around the field. Up on stage Yomada made a grand show of producing a harp from thin air to raucous applause. The dwarf then went on to play song after song. The villagers were the best audience anyone could ask for. They cheered and applauded at all the correct times. They danced to the uplifting songs and were moved to tears by the sombre ones. Yomada knew on some level that no audience was this good, but didn’t really care.

Unlike the villagers, Thogold and Cluym were not having a very good time. They had heard Yomada’s full repertoire several times on the way here and were sick of it. They decided to use this time to try and find out what had happened in this village. All they could get from the locals though was that about six months ago, ‘the party’ started. Around that time their leaders left and the population slowly started to fall as others left as well. Whenever anyone new arrived they were invited to join in ‘the party’ and that’s all that anyone who lived here did nowadays. Despite their unusual welcoming method, the villagers actually seemed relatively harmless. Cluym decided that it was probably best not to consume any of the food or drink, just in case.

When Yomada had finished playing for the villagers[[12]](#footnote-12), Thogold caught them up on what he had found out. After a brief discussion, the group decided that it was probably safe to just walk out and leave, but just to make sure Yomada had an idea.

“Friends,” the dwarf said, addressing the villagers, “it is your lucky day. My friends and I are actually a travelling troupe of world famous actors. I know, it is hard to believe that one dwarf can be so talented but I am no ordinary dwarf. We were just passing by your quaint little village on our way to the opening performance of our new play. However, I have managed to convince my fellow performers to give you all a little preview. We just need to quickly go back to our cart and change into our costumes, but we’ll be right back. Keep the stage warm!”

A large cheer rose up and people starting moving chairs towards the stage as the four travellers snuck out at a brisk pace. Once they left the field they headed straight for the village square. The tavern the villagers had poured out of earlier was on the corner of the square, so they figured they could find their way back to the cart from there. As they approached it though a figure popped into existence directly in the middle. He was an old looking man, wearing a bright red robe with a pointy hat. He briefly looked around before spying the group and headed towards them.

“Have you seen my daughter? I haven’t seen her in a few days,” the old man asked.

“Um, no, can’t say that we have. We only arrived here this morning, sorry,” Yomada replied, continuing to back away slowly towards the cart.

“Oh well, if you see her tell her that I’m looking for her,” the old man turned around and started walking away, “I don’t know where she could have gotten to.” He continued to mumble to himself until he disappeared as quickly as he had appeared. Eager to avoid any further delays, the group picked up the pace to a jog[[13]](#footnote-13). They had almost reached the stables when Thogold had a realisation.

“We’ve got a problem. We stopped here to restock, we don’t have any food left.” After a quick think, and a lot of swearing, it was decided that they would investigate the large houses on the outskirts of the village and try to scavenge as much food as possible. In an unexpected show of bravery, Cluym volunteered to be the first to enter and rummage through a house. He hadn’t had a good day so far and secretly wanted to try and prove his worth.

The door to the first house they approached was slightly ajar. Cluym slowly creaked the door open and peered into the dim house. A few minutes later he determined that nothing living was inside the first room and finally entered the house. There were no obvious signs of food, but the next room appeared to be the kitchen. Cluym took a few steps towards it and suddenly froze when he heard an ear shattering crash just over his shoulder. This was quickly followed by a loud guffaw from Yomada, who had obviously thought it would be very funny to cast a minor auditory illusion to scare Cluym. However, the noise also startled something in the kitchen, and a scuffle of movement could be heard coming through the doorway. Not wishing to blindly enter a room with an unknown creature, Cluym decided to be smart and use some magic. He conjured a spectral hand in mid-air and floated it into the kitchen[[14]](#footnote-14). Using the disembodied hand, he was able to root around the cupboards and find a crusty loaf of bread. Spoils in floating hand, Cluym made a quick exit. Outside he was quite pleased with a job well done, that was until Thogold broke it in half to reveal that the elf had actually looted a crusty loaf of mould.

“When did you say ‘the party’ started? Six months ago?” Yomada enquired. “I’m guessing there may not be any edible food left.” The group stood in the middle of the street for a while, thinking what to do, when they finally noticed what they should have done upon entering the village. Darting between the shadows, squinting whenever the sunlight hit them, were small groups of kobolds. These small, reptilian humanoids were scavengers, living off whatever they could find that seemed vaguely edible. This sometimes included bark and dirt. A mostly abandoned village would have provided a five star meal for these creatures, and they had clearly made themselves at home here.

“I’m really getting sick of this place. There’s not going to be anything left here and Wyevale is only two days away. It may not be the nicest journey but it will be better than staying here any longer.” Before getting a response, Yomada headed off to the stables. The others reluctantly agreed that it was probably for the best and followed. Unfortunately, when they reached the stables they were greeted by a pack of six kobolds foraging through their cart.

“What are we supposed to do now?” Cluym asked.

“You’re a wizard right, I don’t suppose you can create a large amount of light? They didn’t seem to like the sunlight, maybe we can scare them away,” Yomada suggested.

“I’ve got just the thing, leave it to me,” Cluym sneaked over to the cart out of sight of the kobolds. He placed a hand on the front of the cart and it instantly started to emit a pale light[[15]](#footnote-15). This did have an effect on the kobolds, but not the desired one. Now that they could see what they were doing a bit better, their foraging increased speed. It turned out that kobolds very specifically didn’t like sunlight, any other form of light was fine.

“Any other brilliant ideas?”

“We could try fighting them, but I doubt you’re any good with a sword, and if I cast a thunder wave it will destroy the cart.”

“There are two horses and only two of us,” Cluym whispered conspiratorially, “We could just take the horses and ride out of here.”

“What, and leave our companions out here alone with no food or a means of escape and surrounded by vicious creatures? I like the way you think, sounds like a good way out of here. Leave this one to me.” Yomada wandered over to Thogold.

“Right, we’ve got no choice but to fight. If we spread out and circle the cart, hopefully we can surround and confuse them. Now of course, we don’t want the horses to get hurt so Cluym and I will move them away from the cart first. You head towards the back and keep an eye on the kobolds. When the horses are safe, we will wait for you to distract them and we will attack from behind.” Yomada had spent a lifetime learning how to read people and lie convincingly. After travelling together Thogold had learnt to trust Yomada, which was a big mistake. He followed the dwarf’s plan to the letter, and patiently watched as they moved the horses away from the combat zone… and kept moving them… and kept moving them some more… and then mounted the horses. And then kicked himself very hard.

Far away from the kobolds, Yomada and Cluym were quite pleased with themselves. It was as they were riding as fast as the horses would go, however, that our cowardly duo first suspected that Thogold was more than just a merchant. The first clue was the arrow that suddenly appeared in Yomada’s shoulder. The second clue, and admittedly it was quite a large clue, was Thogold shouting, “I’m a ranger you bastards, we could have easily fought these kobolds and killed them. Now bring those horses back!” It made sense when they thought about it, transporting a cart filled with valuable goods must have been quite dangerous. The only reason Yomada hadn’t tried to take the cart earlier was Thogold was the only one who knew where Phandalin was and he wouldn’t let Yomada look at the map. It made sense that he would be competent with some form of weaponry, it was just their bad luck it happened to be a bow. This was when Yomada finally resolved to talk to any potential future companions, if only to find out if it were safe to stab them in the back figuratively without being stabbed in the back literally in return.

It was a gruelling couple of days that followed. Yomada had managed to patch up the arrow shaped hole with a healing word or two, but it still hurt a fair bit. The two kept their eyes open for any small animals they could catch and eat, but neither of them were any good at hunting. They spent most of their time in painful, starving silence fuelled only by cowardice and determination to make it back to the comfort of a tavern in Wyevale. Not Alan’s[[16]](#footnote-16) tavern of course, that would be a bit dangerous. Fortunately, Yomada knew a few of the locals at the ‘alehouse’ and was sure that fancy people would love a harpist even more than the rabble at Alan’s place.

The duo were a couple of hours’ ride from Wyevale when their progress was forcibly stopped. The narrow road into the village was flanked by densely packed trees, this meant that travellers looking to pass had to negotiate carefully. Heading towards the dwarf and the elf was an eight deep convoy of caravans, escorted and flanked by riders with a tail of people walking behind. It was an impressive sight, and it obviously housed someone very rich and powerful, but it was also standing between two weary travellers and their first chance of food in over two days.

“Look, you’re not as experienced with people as I am so just leave the talking to me,” Yomada said, edging his horse forward a few paces, “Hail travellers, I’m sure you have important business to get to. I am but a simple bard and this is my… travelling companion. We are just looking to reach yonder village and procure some much-needed nourishment. We do not wish you any delay, so if you would hold for just a moment and let us pass we will be on our way.”

“Why are you talking like that?” Cluym said indiscreetly.

“Shut up.” The two started squabbling again. The elven driver of the lead caravan sat, confusedly watching the pair. After a while he picked up a lengthy scroll of parchment from the seat next to him. He unrolled it and tried his best to read what was written.

“The High Priestess of… of Tor re… requires and and requests your presence. Please dismount your stee… horses and join the presses… the precisi… the preseas… the people at the back.”

“Well that is a gracious offer, and please extend our warmest thanks to the High Priestess, but unfortunately we have urgent business elsewhere and it is not possible for us to attend,” Yomada respectfully declined, not wishing to go back to Donregan for numerous reasons. The driver looked bemused and returned to the parchment.

“Please dismount your horses. Do not worry, they will be cared for. We only wish for you to join us on our journey,” the driver replied, this time with a little more confidence. Yomada thought a change of tack might provide better results.

“Don’t I know you?”[[17]](#footnote-17) The driver shuffled in his seat and looked back at the scroll.

“The High Priestess of Tor requires and requests…”

“Yeah, I know you. You’re Alan’s son.”

“The High Priestess…” the driver started again in vain.

“How is Alan doing nowadays. Does he miss me much?”

“I don’t know anyone named Alan. I am Eridan Tarmish, son of Merry, the innkeeper at Wyevale.”

“That’s the guy, is he still having problems with his wife?”

“My parents are happily married and have been for many years,” Eridan said confused.

“Well I’m glad to hear it. It was great catching up but we really need to get going so if you would just let us by,” Yomada tried hopefully.

“Yes, and we really don’t want to go back the way you’re heading. We stole these horses from some merchants back there and left them to be eaten by kobolds,” Cluym chimed in[[18]](#footnote-18). Both Eridan and Yomada were stunned into silence. The dwarf recovered quickest.

“What my simple-minded friend means is that we used these horses that belong to **our** party to escape the dangerous village up ahead to find aid in rescuing our friends. As you can imagine this is quite an important task so we must get on our way.”

“You called me friend,” Cluym said equally surprised and delighted. Eridan stared from one to the other and then reluctantly put his scroll down.

“Look, I’ve been paid good money to drive this caravan and to read from this scroll to anyone who we meet on the way. Can you please just do as you’ve been asked?” Yomada heard the desperation and frustration in Eridan’s voice and decided to take it easy on him. Besides, there was one more trick the dwarf could try.

“I beg an audience with the High Priestess of Tor!”[[19]](#footnote-19) A visible wave of relief washed over Eridan’s face.

“Yes of course, she’s in the caravan behind this one,” as he said that a rather large, well-armed guard opened the door to the caravan behind his. Yomada instantly regretted asking to speak with an obviously very powerful and, most likely, quick to anger High Priestess, surrounded by walking suits of armour holding very pointy blades.

“Just one quick question, what race is the High Priestess? Just so I know the correct curtesy.”

“Oh, she’s an elf. A very beautiful elf,” Eridan said with a grin.

“Why am I surrounded by elves everywhere I go?” Yomada mumbled whilst dismounting. Cluym followed suit, but stayed a cautious few steps behind. The dwarf approached the opened door and bowed low, avoiding looking at the High Priestess out of respect.

“Your highness, I have some grave news about the road you travel and humbly request that we may speak so that I can warn you.”

“Welcome,” a fair voice drifted out of the caravan, “Thank you for the warning, please enter and we shall discuss this matter.”

Following the invitation, Yomada finally looked up and saw the High Priestess, a beautifully enchanting dwarf. This took Yomada by surprise.

“Is there a problem traveller?” the High Priestess asked, noticing the hesitation.

“Well, it’s just that your driver up front said you were an elf. I wasn’t expecting to be greeted by such a beautiful dwarf.” Upon hearing this Cluym peaked round the door and was also taken by surprise.

“What do you mean, she is an elf?” The High Priestess simply sat smiling, motioning for them to enter.

“This is going to be interesting,” Yomada said, and entered the caravan.

**There, back, and there again.**

*Yomada was on stage, in the middle of a deep bow, but the audience was deadly silent. Sat in a private box on the side of the balcony was the stony-faced Lord of the city. All eyes in the theatre were on him. The evening’s entertainment had started well, and the hint of a smile had even flashed briefly on the Lord’s face, but any trace of mirth was long gone. The first joke at his expense was taken in good humour, the remaining, relentless satire was taken less favourably. The Lord slowly rose from his seat and pointed at Yomada.*

*“Arrest that impudent actor on the charges of inciting civil unrest and treason. Schedule their execution for tomorrow at dawn, let’s see if they manage to draw a larger audience than tonight’s farce.”*

*The city guards were caught by surprise. A small contingent always followed the Lord, but it was mostly for show. Being guard to the Lord was a much sought after job, because you got to attend all the fancy events and had to do next to nothing in return. Up until now their hardest task had been stifling their laughs at the play that they had found quite entertaining. Whilst the guards fumbled around trying to rush down the narrow staircase from the private box, Yomada made a quick exit stage right and fled from the theatre. It was on the way out of the city, hiding uncomfortably in the back of a farmer’s cart full of turnips, that the dwarf decided to never deal with Nobility again.*

Yomada distractedly shuffled along the seat opposite the High Priestess, trying to maintain a respectful distance but staying within fleeing range of the door. Cluym, who was more sceptical, stayed outside the caravan peering in.

“What is this troubling news that you carry?” the High Priestess enquired, snapping Yomada out of their reverie.

“Ah, yes. Um. The village that you are heading towards, Donregan, there’s something going on there,” Yomada paused, observing the High Priestess’s quizzical look. “I mean the villagers appear to be charmed in some manner and the place is mostly abandoned, save for vicious roaming hordes of kobolds. Oh, and there was this old guy in red who just appeared and disappeared. He said he was looking for his daughter but he might have had something to do with what was happening in the village. Regardless, I suggest that you give the village a wide bearth.”

“That sounds like a member of the Order of the Red. I doubt they have done anything untoward, but I would be interested in talking to them. As for the kobolds and charmed villagers, that is troubling news indeed. Thank you for warning us. I’m glad that we have two knowledgeable travellers such as yourselves joining our convoy.” The High Priestess continued to smile sweetly. Most people would have described it as an innocent smile, but Yomada knew better.

“Yes, about that, my friend and I have some very important business to take care of in Wyevale. We saw the direction that you were travelling and felt honour bound to warn you, but we really must continue on our journey.”

“Oh, but first you must tell my Maester everything you know about the troubles that lie ahead.” Somehow, with no obvious means of being summoned, a tall, well-built man in a scrupulously neat uniform appeared behind Cluym leaving him no option but to finally enter the caravan. Once everyone was inside, the Maester firmly shut the door.

“These fine adventurers have suggested that we avoid the next village due to an infestation of kobolds and potentially related magical goings on. However, I’m sure that with their help our guards will be able to handle whatever lies ahead, don’t you agree?” The High Priestess looked to her Maester who very briefly nodded, without breaking eye contact with the newcomers.

“There will probably be a very annoyed ranger and his cousin there as well, if they weren’t killed, looking for his horses that we stole,” Cluym chimed in.

“The party’shorses that we were using to get help,” Yomada corrected.

“Well everything has worked out perfectly then. You can accompany us if you wish to Donregan where you can sort out the matter of the ownership of the horses with your friends.” Yomada knew this was less of an offer and more of a statement of what was going to happen. Begrudgingly, the dwarf accepted their fate.

“Talking about our friends, they mentioned that there had been some… political changes in Tor and that now there is a high demand for gold,” Yomada ventured, always looking to make the best of a bad situation. “Maybe I could be of some help.” At the mention of gold, the High Priestess became visibly intrigued.

“Do you have any?” She asked a little forcibly.

“Well I do have this,” Yomada said producing the golden chalice they had ‘obtained’ in Wyevale, “I’m sure you can have it for a…” Before the dwarf could finish the sentence, the golden chalice started to float towards the High Priestess. She held up a hand and gently touched the tip of a finger against the chalice. Yomada watched in dismay as it vanished, and subtly positioned their coin purse out of sight. The High Priestess looked at the dwarf like nothing had happened.

“Yes, well, I’m glad to be of service,” Yomada decided on a different approach, “I don’t suppose you have any food? We’ve had a few rough days of travel without rest or nourishment and I’m famished.”

“Only because we didn’t take the bread that I found,” Cluym interjected, still hurt that his efforts had been for nothing.

“Of course we do,” the High Priestess said ignoring the elf, “I’ll instruct the quartermaster to bring you some refreshments from our stocks.” As soon as she finished speaking there was a polite knock on the door. The Maester opened it to reveal someone holding a joint of ham in one hand and a tankard of ale in the other. Yomada greedily accepted the food, downing the ale in one and letting out a loud belch. Very briefly, a look of disgust crossed the High Priestess’s face before returning to the sickly-sweet smile[[20]](#footnote-20).

“Well then, I’m sure the quartermaster can show you both to a berth in one of the caravans. If you’ll leave us now, I have much to discuss with my Maester.” Yomada and Cluym exited the caravan, quite relieved to still be in one piece.

“She stole your chalice,” Cluym said.

“No, I used the chalice to gain favour with a clearly very powerful potential ally, and most importantly to obtain food and drink,” Yomada replied through a large mouthful of ham.

“I didn’t get any food,” Cluym grumbled.

Over the coming days, our duo attempted to learn from previous mistakes and took the time to get to know the people in the convoy. Admittedly, Cluym grew bored of this very quickly and dedicated most of his time to meditation and practising arcane rituals. Yomada, on the other hand, enjoyed having an audience again, and what’s more, most of the convoy had been recruited in Wyevale so they were already acquainted with the bard’s work. From talking to old friends[[21]](#footnote-21) Yomada learnt that three days after the party had left, the High Priestess arrived in Wyevale. She was looking to recruit followers of all kind; guards, cooks, stable hands, with the promise of payment upon reaching Tor. They had each been promised as much money as they would earn in half a year, but curiously only in silver and copper pieces. This last piece of information made the dwarf clutch their coin purse, filled with gold pieces, even tighter.

There was one downside to being surrounded by Wyevale residents, Yomada had managed to annoy quite a few of them in a short amount of time. One such unfortunate example was Davey, the barkeep at Merry’s tavern. It turns out that it was his son that Yomada had escorted home in a drunken stupor. Davey hadn’t noticed the missing chalice, but he was interested to know how Yomada had ended up with some of his wife’s special, heart shaped scones. The dwarf managed to handle the situation with great charm and tact, although Davey wasn’t best pleased about the jokes concerning his wife’s incredible prowess in the bedroom. These were jokes that Yomada may not have made if they’d known that Davey was in charge of serving food to the members of the convoy. Luckily, the bard had been sharing war stories with a dwarven guard[[22]](#footnote-22), and using some small amount of magic, was able to convincingly disguise themselves as the guard long enough to get some food.

Unaware of Yomada’s hijinks, Cluym had been working on a project of his own. He had decided quite early on that he didn’t trust the High Priestess, something about being forced into joining her group without any mention of payment just didn’t sit right with him. He was also curious about something Yomada had said - the dwarf had seen another ‘dwarf’ sitting in the caravan when she was clearly an elf. Rather than confront her directly about this[[23]](#footnote-23), the mage had decided to spy on her. After some thought, and intensive reading, Cluym had prepared a ritual to summon a familiar. One night, whilst most people were asleep, he sneaked out into the nearby woods and started to perform the summoning. After ten minutes of concentration a small white light appeared, floating a few feet in front of him. As the mage watched, he saw the light slowly expand and take on the shape of a small brown sparrow. The sparrow flew over to his shoulder and tweeted.

“I think I’ll call you sparrow,” Cluym said, not being very inventive. On his way back towards camp, Cluym noticed that there were lights still on in the High Priestess’s tent. Thinking this was a perfect opportunity to try and sneak some information, the elf found a decent hiding place and instructed his familiar to fly towards the tent.

Familiars and their masters share a magical bond. They are telepathically linked, hence the master can command the familiar with ease and control it almost as an extension of themselves. Furthermore, if the master concentrates, they can see through the familiar’s eyes. This can be quite a disorienting experience for someone who has never used these magical powers before, because rather than just seeing what the familiar sees, the master experiences the world as if they were that creature. The master loses the use of all of their own senses and gain the familiar’s. Experiencing the world as an animal is an unsettling thing, they act and think on instinct. They see what people see, but rather than labelling things with names they just know on a primal level if the thing is edible or dangerous or useful.

A few minutes later, when Cluym had somewhat become accustom to this new perspective on the world, he sent sparrow to carefully peer into the doorway of the tent. The tent was elaborately decorated with fine silver ornaments and purple silk cushions. There was a large, oak desk with papers strewn across it; a delicately painted room partition; there was even a four-poster bed. As sparrow watched intently, he saw movement from behind the partition. A small creature flew over towards the bed. Cluym urged sparrow to get a closer look, but as soon as the bird crossed the threshold a strong gust of wind blew the familiar away from the tent with such force that it broke Cluym’s concentration and he snapped back into his own consciousness.

Eager to inform Yomada of what he had discovered, Cluym rushed over to where the dwarf was sleeping. By now he had learnt that Yomada was usually a very heavy sleeper, but he had one trick up his sleeve. The elf reached for Yomada’s coin purse.

“Ger yer hanns off mi gol… mi money you stinking elf.”

“Yomada, I’ve got to tell you something. I just had a look in the High Priestess’s tent and…” Cluym stopped mid-sentence. Yomada watched as thorned vines grew around the elf and ensnared him. As they restrained Cluym, he drooped forwards unconscious, revealing an arrow lodged in his back. The vines appeared to have grown out of the arrow itself. Yomada sprang into action.

“Guards! We need guards out here, we’re under attack.”

“Don’t move you despicable thief,” a voice carried out from the trees behind the limp body of Cluym. Yomada recognised the voice and, squinting, he saw the silhouette of Thogold in the distance, bow drawn, arrow notched.

“Guards, help!” Yomada yelled, not too happy about the reunion. Thogold took a few more steps towards the dwarf, but stopped when he saw four armoured guards running in their direction.

“Who are they?” Thogold asked, clearly not expecting anyone else to be around. Yomada pounced on the moment of confusion, always the opportunist.

“Thogold, thank Olidammara[[24]](#footnote-24) you’re alive. When we saw the situation was hopeless in Donregan, we rode as fast as we could to get help. We found this convoy and convinced them to aid us in your rescue,” Yomada lied. Thogold looked very dishevelled, he clearly had barely survived in the wilderness up until now and was probably just relieved to see people again. If it meant a safe place to rest and have some food, he was willing to believe anything the dwarf said.

“What is all this commotion?” The High Priestess, who had heard all of the shouting, had decided to see what had happened.

“Ah, your highness. This is one of the friends I was telling you about. There was a brief misunderstanding but we’ve sorted everything out now.” Yomada turned to Thogold, “Thogold, this charming half elf, I’m assuming for you, is the High Priestess of Tor.”

At the mention of being a half elf, the High Priestess gave the dwarf a curious look. Thogold immediately dropped to the floor in an overly complicated bow. Satisfied that everything was fine, the High Priestess turned back to her tent.

“If there are no problems then I suggest you all return to your beds, quietly. Oh, and you should probably tend to your friend,” the High Priestess motioned in the direction of Cluym. Following orders, the guards returned to their posts.

“Get up you fool, she’s left,” Yomada told Thogold, “Where’s Cruben?”

“He’s talking to a squirrel over there somewhere.”

“Sounds like Cruben. Why did you shoot us?”

“It was only a warning shot. It wasn’t supposed to knock him out.” Thogold pulled on the arrow in Cluym’s back and the vines retreated. Yomada used a few healing words to patch the elf up, and they all settled down for some well-earned rest.

It was mid-afternoon of the next day when the convoy reached the gateway to Donregan. The village looked just as deserted as when the party had first arrived. Thogold’s cart was still parked in the stables, sans contents and slightly nibbled. Taking heed of Yomada’s warning, the High Priestess had decided to stay in her caravan and sent the guards ahead with the dwarf and the elf. Feeling braver now there was a wall of eight armoured guards to hide behind if necessary, Yomada boldly strode ahead into the village. The bard spotted two kobolds hiding in the shadows next to the closest house. With more showmanship than truly necessary, Yomada produced their harp and created another deafening thunderwave. Not only were the two kobolds killed upon impact and thrown backwards, but the corpses of another four kobolds that had been hiding just around the corner, also flew backwards.

“Well that was easy,” Yomada said surprised, “I guess we could have easily dealt with them the last time we were here. Oh well, you live and you learn don’t you Thogold?”

Thogold glared at the dwarf. Not wanting to be outdone, and armed with the knowledge that kobolds weren’t actually that strong, Cluym set out to even the kill count. He bravely charged into the house the kobolds had been hiding near, and spent the next twenty minutes meticulously assuring the house was empty. Meanwhile outside, the guards and Yomada found some more kobolds further into the village. These ones acted quicker than their fallen friends and got a few good stabs in on the dwarven guard by swarming around him. This just made it easier for the guard to kill them in one great swing of his battle axe. After the last few stragglers were diced, sliced, squashed and impaled; Cluym emerged from the house triumphant.

“Don’t worry guys, there aren’t any kobolds[[25]](#footnote-25).”

Attracted by the commotion, the stable master appeared to greet the newcomers. Even though he was still clearly unnaturally happy, he had enough sense to not call the High Priestess a newt. As a few guards helped to patch up their injured comrade, the rest escorted the High Priestess as she was led towards the tavern. Yomada and Cluym, for want of something better to do, tagged along at the back. Yomada was still a little annoyed by their last visit here and how they had managed to not notice basically everything. To make up for this, the dwarf was scrutinising every shadow, every slight movement and the way to the tavern. This vigilance paid off. Nestled between two houses was a staircase leading down into what appeared to be a small, underground storage room.

“Hey, you! Guard person. There’s a hole over there that looks like a perfect kobold hiding place. Don’t you think you should check it out?” Yomada said addressing the nearest guard.

“If you want a look down there go ahead, I’m fine right here thanks,” the guard replied. Yomada had spent a lot of time around humans, and had quickly learnt how to manipulate them.

“Alright, but it’s your job to protect the High Priestess and I’m sure she wouldn’t be happy if she was ambushed by kobolds from behind. Especially if a certain guard could have easily prevented such an attack.”

“Fine,” the guard sighed, the dwarf’s goading playing on his sense of duty. He walked over to the staircase and took a few steps downwards. “It’s too dark down there, one of you two check it out[[26]](#footnote-26).”

“Don’t worry, I can fix that,” Cluym, not too pleased at the prospect of being surrounded underground by kobolds, stepped towards the guard and touched his sword. It instantly started to emit a bright light. Not expecting his sword to be turned into a torch, the guard dropped it in shock. “There you go, lead the way. We’ll be right behind you.”

The guard cautiously picked up his sword and slowly edged down the stairs, waving it in front of himself. Cluym followed a good ten steps behind. Yomada stood at the top of the stairs waiting to hear either the all clear or screams of agony. As the guard approached a doorway, he saw a lone kobold standing just inside. He swung his sword at the creature, but missed drastically, the glare from his sword throwing off his aim. The kobold, surprised and squinting at the light, tried to stab at the guard in return but also missed by quite a margin. Wanting to gain some glory through combat, Cluym rushed into the room. This was unwise, something that he learnt upon seeing the five other kobolds, aiming their slings in his direction. He backed out behind the guard and yelled up the stairs to Yomada.

The dwarf was faced with a choice; rush in to help against an unknown foe and potentially get overwhelmed, or risk the lives of Cluym and the guard by going to get help. It was actually quite an easy choice, Yomada ran towards the guards still protecting the High Priestess who were just about to enter the tavern. To speed up getting reinforcements, the bard used a simple magical trick to project a voice demanding aid. The guards looked towards Yomada, who was waving furiously and pointing towards the staircase. They got the hint and three of them went to investigate.

Always the hero, Yomada let the guards rush in first and, of course, stood a distance behind them to not hamper their combat skills. This should have been a good plan, the guards up front fighting the kobolds while Yomada and Cluym stood behind giving magical support. In fact it did work for a while, the guards managed to slice a few of the attackers and Cluym distracted the others by throwing balls of fire and bubbles of acid, all the while Yomada was using powerful words and melodies to inspire the party to greater feats of strength. This all came to an abrupt halt when three rays of fire came hurling at Cluym from behind the kobolds. The elf was momentarily engulfed in flame, and as the fires dissipated he fell to the ground unconscious. Looking towards where the fire had emanated from, Yomada saw one of the kobolds who was holding back. This one looked slightly taller, stronger and most likely the leader of the kobolds. It had shiny trinkets dangling all over its clothing, signifying both its higher status and its spell casting abilities.

This greatly changed the shape of the battle, up until now it had been fairly easy but the kobolds seized the opportunity to attack with the enemy wizard downed. Even after Yomada revived Cluym with a soothing song, the fight was more of a struggle. Blades reflected the light of fire being thrown into the melee from both sides. Nobody could get the upper hand. Yomada knew the kobold sorcerer needed to be taken down quickly. The dwarf tried to think of something they could do to stop the kobold from casting spells, but there was nothing the bard could do. Then, a moment of inspiration came to Yomada. Remembering what had happened earlier, the dwarf started a new song. This was uncharted territory, the bard was pulling words and chords from the natural forces surrounding them, desperately trying to recreate a spell they had seen earlier. With an almighty crescendo Yomada pointed at the sorcerer and… nothing happened. In frustration, Yomada picked up a dagger one of the other kobolds had dropped and threw it at their leader. The blade hit the kobold in the chest and vines sprung out from the wound, wrapping the kobold into a tight ball[[27]](#footnote-27).

Usually, spells have a somatic component. A series of gestures that need to be made, that become impossible to perform when encased by vines. What Yomada didn’t know was that this particular kobold only needed to concentrate to cast spells. The battle continued much as before, but the kobold’s numbers had dwindled, and when the guards reached the sorcerer it couldn’t put up any resistance to their attacks. With the kobold leader about to draw its last breath, Cluym’s familiar, sparrow, flew over to it and landed on its shoulder. The ghostly image of a hand briefly appeared where the bird had landed and a wave of coldness spread through the sorcerer, finally killing it.

Relieved, the party relaxed and checked to make sure everyone was alright. They were all carrying injuries, some more severe than others. One unfortunate guard was lying face down on the floor, dead. His companions circled around his body on their knees, grieving.

In the corner where the sorcerer had been was a large pile of metal objects. This was where the kobolds had hoarded the items they had scavenged from the village. Just a cursory glance was enough to see that there was plenty of gold in the pile. Attracted by the promise of wealth, Cluym went to investigate.

“Did you see that?” Yomada exclaimed, “That spell I cast was amazing. I took care of the big threat so you guys could finish off the rest. I tell you, songs will be written about today. Mostly by me, but once the word gets out there… instant folk tale I’m telling you. The heroic bard saves the day.”

The guards were staring at Yomada with a look that said the dwarf should probably shut up. Seeing the hatred in their eyes, Yomada thought it would be a good idea to give them some space and tell the High Priestess what had happened, hopefully getting into her good books by leading her to the gold personally. The dwarf set off towards the tavern, giving the guards a wide berth.

Over by the pile, Cluym wasn’t having much luck. There were forks and plates, odd pieces of metal that had once belonged to something, but nothing of value. Sure there was gold, but he didn’t want to risk hiding it from the High Priestess. He could sense something though. He could feel the faint presence of magic coming from inside the pile. It took him a little bit of digging before the elf managed to extract a golden ring. It was a simple band without markings, but he could tell it had some magical properties. As Cluym heard Yomada returning, with the High Priestess in tow, he hid the ring in a pocket.

“… and then I valiantly risked life and limb to cast a powerful spell strong enough to take the sorcerer down and secure its hoard of gold for you. I did tell you about the spell didn’t I?”

The High Priestess had stopped paying attention to Yomada after the first mention of gold. She walked over to one of the guards, who seemed to have taken the death harder than the rest, and placed a consoling hand on his shoulder. She knelt down beside him and started to pray over the body. The guards bowed their heads. At the end of her prayer, the High Priestess placed her hand on the dead guard’s forehead and a wave of pale light spread outwards, filling the room for a moment. As the light washed over the people in the room, their injuries began to heal and fade.

The High Priestess stood and walked over to the pile of metal in the corner. She raised her hands and the pile began to float a few feet off the floor. Cluym, who was standing not far behing the High Priestess, could feel the ring vibrating in his pocket. A faint pop echoed around the room as roughly half the pile vanished. The remaining metal floated back down to the floor and silently came to rest. Cluym’s ring became motionless. On her way out of the room, the High Priestess instructed the guards to take the body back to the convoy and then to meet her in the tavern.

“What do you want us to do?” Yomada asked. The High Priestess didn’t acknowledge the question and left. Cluym approached the guards.

“I might be able to do something. I can’t promise anything but I might be able to bring him back.”

“Please, if there’s anything you can do please try.”

Cluym placed both hands on the body of the guard. In his time with his mentor, Cluym had seen great feats of magic performed. He knew that it was possible to bring the dead back to life. The most powerful necromancers could restore the life of a person who had died centuries ago, merely by saying their name. Most necromancers though needed to attempt a revival moments after death. Cluym hadn’t actually mastered any of these techniques. He had barely started his training when his mentor died[[28]](#footnote-28). Having seen Yomada channel the wild magic earlier had inspired him though. The elf could feel the magical energies filling his body and flowing into the guard, but it was too powerful and fast for him to direct. He lifted his hands knowing he had done… something, but he had failed to revive the guard. The others looked at him with a knowing look of disappointment, but knew it was too much to ask of the mage.

As the guards cared for their fallen brother-in-arms, Cluym and Yomada walked towards the tavern. They were arguing about who had been the most useful in battle. Cluym’s argument was that he had performed the killing blow on the sorcerer. Yomada countered that by saying it was actually sparrow who had killed the sorcerer, and Cluym had needed reviving after being knocked out in one hit, again. And of course, Yomada had succeeded in ensnaring the sorcerer. Neither side was willing to back down when a figure popped into existence in the middle of the village square. She was wearing the same bright red robe and pointy hat that the old man had last time they were here, but she was much younger.

“Have you seen my father? I haven’t seen him in a few days,” the woman asked.

“Let me guess, old guy? Wears the same robe and hat? Also likes to appear and disappear?” Cluym ventured.

“That sounds like him, do you know where he is?”

“No, we saw him here about four or five days ago. He said he was looking for his daughter.”

“Ah, I think I know where he would have gone,” she turned to leave.

“Before you vanish,” Yomada interrupted, “I don’t suppose there are any others like you near here? Dressed in red I mean. We have a few questions we’d like to ask them.”

“We do?” Cluym asked confused.

“Shut up,” Yomada growled at Cluym, jabbing him in his ribs.

“Of course,” she replied, “The Order of the Red resides in that tower over there.” As she pointed towards the east, she vanished.

Yomada and Cluym looked in the direction she had indicated and, sure enough, on top of a small incline, at the end of a winding path was a mage tower. You could tell it was a mage tower because its design defied conventional architecture… and gravity. It extended upwards in a rather chaotic manner. It bulged outwards in places, become impossibly thin in others. Parts of it slanted at forty-five degrees, and in places it looked like a section of the tower had slid sideways, independently of the rest of the tower, and now appeared to be attached by nothing more than maybe a brick or two. It was a terribly hard thing to miss, but the ever-attentive duo had managed to somehow.

This was enough to push Yomada over the edge. Not seeing kobolds running about in the shadows is excusable, they were trying not to be seen. Not noticing that the villagers were charmed is understandable, being charmed and being drunk look quite similar. Even not realising the bread was mouldy was perfectly reasonable given the urgency of the situation. But spending hours in a village and not even looking east long enough to see the absolutely unmissable, eyesore of a tower was beyond belief. Without any word to Cluym, Yomada wandered off, determined to investigate every square inch of the village. Not even the smallest pebble was going to go unnoticed again.

“Where are you going? Why do we want to talk to the red guys?” Cluym called after Yomada. The dwarf was too occupied carefully making notes about the curious route an ant was taking. “I guess I’ll just go and talk to them myself.”

Cluym set off towards the tower. Despite all the fire, sword fighting and death; it was actually quite a pleasant day. This side of the village didn’t have many buildings, it was quite open and green with a sweet smelling row of flowers alongside the road. About half way up the incline was a fountain. It was still running despite the obvious lack of maintenance. A simple conjuration kept the water flowing. When Cluym reached the foot of the tower he was faced by a large, imposing, wooden door. He knocked. It seemed unlikely that anyone inside would be able to hear the door unless they happened to be on the ground floor. After a few moments of silence, Cluym raised his hand to knock again.

“What do you want?” A voice carried through the door.

“Um, hi. I don’t really know. My dwarf friend wanted to ask you some questions but he’s wandered off. I don’t know where he’s gone. He’s been acting a little odd since we met the High Priestess of Tor, although I guess he’s always been a little odd.”

“Did you say the High Priestess of Tor is here?” the door enquired.

“Yes, she’s gone to the tavern. I don’t know why she did that either. Nobody tells me anything.”

The door was silent for a moment and then creaked open. Four wizards, all wearing the same red robes, burst out cheerily talking amongst each other. They walked straight past Cluym, down the road towards the tavern. The door slammed shut behind them.

“Great, more people leaving me. What am I supposed to do now?”

1. The cause seemed natural but some say it was due to his massive disappointment in his apprentice. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Now, if I’m being honest, notice board is a slightly poetic way of describing a flat-ish section of wall that people stuck parchment to with knives. The landlord had tried to stop people from using the ‘notice board’ but he had been thus far unsuccessful due to poor timing. Asking muscle bound drunkards whose height far outstretched their IQ not to do something whilst they are still holding their knife is not usually advised. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The one thing Cluym and Yomada did have in common, other than a desire to go to Phandalin, was neither of them were any good at asking for or remembering names. As you can imagine this would get them into trouble on quite a few occasions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. As subtle as a drunken dwarf that’s manoeuvring a harp a foot taller than them can. That is to say only seven drinks were spilled, one foot crushed and three separate bar fights started. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In other words, a half hour shouting match that ended when ‘Alan’ burst in and informed them that he would throw them out if they didn’t shut up and, once again, that his name was Merry. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. If all went to plan though, there would be no story to tell. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The best way to describe Cruben was he had both the intelligence, and personality, of a puppy but the body of a half shaved grizzly bear. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It is a common belief in these parts that there is no free will and everything that happens is dictated by the gods. Criminals try, and fail, quite often to use this as an excuse for their actions. It is however, fundamentally incorrect. The gods, like anyone else, only want to be entertained. There is no fun if you know what is going to happen so the gods merely set things in motion. Whichever god set these events in motion was currently slapping themselves on their forehead in dismay at how imperceptive Yomada and Cluym could be. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Wizards are quite often found accompanying adventurous parties, brought along for their impressive spell casting abilities. These powerful spells come in quite handy in battle to either protect allies or smite foes. The one downside to wizards though is that casting spells takes a lot of energy. Most wizards can only cast a few spells before they need a long rest to recover the spent energy. At this point, given their affinity for staying indoors and reading books, they become as useful in battle as knitted, woollen chainmail; if you’re lucky they will get in the way of an enemy’s sword and extend your life for a whole two seconds. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Told you so. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is a subject that has needed to be addressed for a while. How does a 4 foot 3 dwarf transport a 5 foot 4 harp around, let alone deftly produce it in the middle of a battlefield. The short answer is magic. The long answer is a cheaper version of a ‘bag of holding’, a magical item that opens up into a pocket dimension and thus can hold more within than it looks like it can without, that curiously, yet purposefully, can only store harps and sewed into the inner lining of Yomada’s jacket, hence called a ‘pocket of harping’. This, combined with a fair amount of dexterity, years of practise, and more bruises from failed attempts than can be remembered; creates quite a spectacle when successfully pulled off and more often than not is more useful in surprising the enemy than it is for its aid in casting magical spells. But most people just stick with the short answer. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Well, after the three standing ovations and four encores. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. More of a sprint for Yomada’s shorter legs. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Before you start complaining about continuity errors, there are different levels of magic. Cantrips are simple spells that any magically inclined being can cast at will. Basically, a cantrip is like a street magician producing a coin from behind your ear and a spell is like a Vegas duo sawing a woman in half. This was a cantrip, Cluym still couldn’t cast spells. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Another cantrip, you’re not going to catch me out that easily. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “It’s Merry!” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Even though they don’t physically exist in every reality, the spirit of a call centre is a universal constant. There is always someone, somewhere, desperately trying to get a complete stranger to agree to something they don’t want by simply following a script written by a third party with a very limited imagination of how a conversation could go. Yomada instinctively knew that the best thing to do was to steer the conversation completely away from where the seller wanted it to be. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. You remember I said Yomada wasn’t very good at getting to know the people he travelled with and that this got him into trouble quite often. Well Cluym had an odd quirk where he was completely unable to lie, and the thieving, cheating, lying bardic dwarf had chosen to team up with him. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. In other words, “Can I speak to your manager?” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This was all Yomada needed to prove that she wasn’t really a dwarf. If she was a dwarf, she would have been impressed by the echo that Yomada had managed to produce. Dwarves took their drinking very seriously. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Well, people Yomada hadn’t cheated or stolen from. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. For dwarves, sharing war stories was basically just reciting an extensive list of people whom some grandfather, or other ancestor, had headbutted so hard they ended up three inches shorter. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Cluym wasn’t exactly smart but he also wasn’t Cruben levels of stupidity either. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The god of music, revels, wine and tricks. Who else would Yomada worship? [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. If it’s possible to bleed sarcastically from a kobold stab wound to the chest, that was the dwarven guard’s response. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Because dwarves usually spend a lot of time underground, their eyes have developed to see in even the darkest conditions. Similarly, elves are native to dark, gloomy forests and have too developed such good vision. Humans, however, usually only spend time in dark places when they have done something they really shouldn’t have and a kindly law enforcer has given them a tour of the inside of a cell. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Magic users spend a long time trying to learn spells, it takes time and effort to master them and be able to cast them at will. Even given the necessary time, there are still many spells that cannot be learnt because their power is too strong or drawn from forces the caster doesn’t have access to. However, the world is saturated by magic. Anyone who knows how to use magic can try and channel the wild magical energies surrounding them to bend reality to their will. This is a very hard task, and usually has unintended side effects. Yomada was lucky, this time. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. He had been learning for a number of years but just hadn’t progressed much. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)