

So, you want a story? A thrilling tale of yester-year? Something relating to my youth, you say? Ah, yes, I see, you want to know how it all began! Well, I could entertain you with tales of my childhood, growing up on my father's farm in the Yeomanry. Or perhaps regale you with my first adventurous journey to Greyhawk, after having gained my apprenticeship with my Master. But neither story is how my adventuring career *really* began. Well, it all started with . . .

# **That Infamous Key**

by **Anthony “MysticScholar” Hargis**

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## **Chapter One**

It was in the City of Greyhawk, during my youth, of course, as all such things commonly are. It began when I was still officially residing in the Students' Quarter of the Clerkborg, quite near the junction of Eastwall Street, College Road and the Street of Temples. I had just finished two years of study at the University of Magical Arts.

I ended my day by delivering a message from my Master to the Sages' Guildhall on Hardcobble Way and had decided to stop off for an evening of leisure at the Blue Dragon Inn, located in Cairn Court.

(Back then I called exploring the Foreign Quarter 'living on the wild side.' What can I say? I was a mere stripling lad, just experiencing my twenty-third summer. And yes, I know what you're thinking, but the Blue Dragon Inn was a different sort of place in those days, just a cheap imitation of the Silver Dragon Inn and not a serious rival. You must remember that this was long before Gustin Longpike, the Perrenlander, acquired the establishment. Anyway . . .)

I was enjoying my ale and watching an all-night game of Linn Lan; some dandy from Leukish was attempting to fleece a couple of fat merchants. That's when I heard a commotion outside in the common. Curiosity and the 'thrill of adventure' made me go to the door for a quick look. The night sky was just beginning to turn gray in the early morning, though it was still one half of a turn of the hourglass before actual sunrise.

It turned out to be nothing too terribly serious, just some shopkeeper making noise about his place having been robbed. I shrugged my shoulders. I mean, really, in a city that was practically ruled by the Thieves Guild this sort of thing was not exactly an unusual occurrence, especially in the Foreign Quarter.

A hodgepodge of people had initially gathered in the street to witness all the hullabaloo, but it seemed that the culprits had been caught and most of the spectators were now drifting off to other interest. Two men were to be seen sitting on the curb and were being guarded by yet two other people, one a large northern barbarian, judging by his dress and the other a young Baklunish woman, dressed in the gray tabard of a cleric of Istus, her holy symbol prominently displayed; a golden spindle, wrapped in a sort of shroud and capped by a white faced death mask.

I recalled having seen the two of them earlier in the evening inside the Blue Dragon Inn and remember thinking that they seemed a rather odd pairing; a man of obvious Suel descent and a Baklunish woman . . . together? Really?

The barbarian stood at least four inches over six feet and weighed maybe two hundred and thirty pounds, though you would have been hard pressed to find any fat on the man. He was clad in leather breeches and the long sleeves of a woolen shirt could be seen protruding from under the elbow length sleeves of his chain mail shirt. Over all of this he wore what could only be a white bear skin vest; one of the great white bears of the north, no doubt.

(I had learned of these animals in my studies at Grey College, but had not yet actually seen one. According to what little I then understood of Ice Barbarian culture, I knew the warrior would have killed the animal himself, in a rite of passage; such garments are not bartered among his people).

He carried an uncovered, double headed *Great-axe* of considerable size in his right hand, while on his left arm was a round wooden shield with a roughly painted white bear as its device. A horned, steel helmet sat upon his head and from under this protruded shoulder length yellow hair. He also wore a leather belt around his waist, from which hung various pouches, as well as a great knife. Another knife handle could be seen protruding from his right boot.

The cleric was perhaps five feet, seven inches tall and no doubt in excellent shape, given her apparel. In addition to her tabard, she wore chain mail, gauntlets and greaves of what looked to be elven make. A belt of ornamentally embossed leather -- dyed black, but with the embossed figures outlined in silver -- girded her waist. From this belt hung various pouches, and two daggers; one obviously a weapon and another smaller, jeweled dagger no doubt used for ceremonial purposes. She carried a *Heavy mace* in her right hand; a *Spiked-gauntlet* encased her right hand as well. A small shield adorned her left forearm, her helmet was slung over her shoulder, revealing straight, shoulder length hair, glossy black, like a raven's feathers.

A man that could only be the establishment's proprietor was busily rummaging around his ransacked shop, apparently trying to determine exactly what had been taken. The two thieves had seemingly been searched already, since various items were spread out on the street in front of them.

I happened to look up the short street which connected Cairn Court with Horseshoe Road and noticed a halfling looking on with what appeared to be wide-eyed wonder. I recognized him as a member of the Hairfoot clan. I remember chuckling to myself at the wide-eyed innocence of halflings and was turning to go back inside. That's when the sign above the shop caught my attention, it read 'Meldorp's Locksmithy;' the man was a locksmith. That fact made things just a little more interesting to me.

I now took particular note of the obviously mounting frustration of the locksmith, which clearly demonstrated to me that it was probably more than just the contents of his money box that had gone missing. This fact, coupled with the pairing of a Suel barbarian with a Baklunish cleric, made the entire situation simply too irresistible for me.

The proprietor came out of the shop all in a huff and began picking through the various items spread out on the street. The thought then occurred to me that the missing item must not have been very large. Not finding what he was looking for, 'Meldorp' stood over the two thieves shaking his fist at them and demanding to know where 'it' was. I decided to move closer and so did the halfling.

"The Watch should be notified at once," the cleric of Istus was saying.

"No, no, no," the locksmith hurriedly replied, waving his hands. "That simply won't do."

"The thieves were caught red handed with the proceeds of your strong box," the cleric insisted.

"Yes," agreed the barbarian. "Turn them over to the City Watch and have done with them."

"But if the Watch takes them, I may never recover my property!" countered the locksmith.

"We have your money here, as well as other items of property belonging to you," insisted the cleric. "What else is missing?"

"It is a key," the locksmith replied softly, casting furtive glances left and right. "A very special key; made for an important person." This explanation seemed to lack a certain sincerity. He continued, "If it should be discovered that the key is missing, there could be serious trouble for me. If the Watch starts investigating all will come out and I may never get the key back!"

"Then let us put them to the question," said the barbarian, testing the edge of his weapon. "They'll tell us about this key, or suffer the consequences!"

I stepped into the street then and approached the group. The halfling also boldly approached, but the five of them looked my way and the halfling escaped their notice. They could easily discern that I was a wizard; I wore a red robe embroidered with golden runes of protection and carried a staff of bronzewood, capped with a large ruby, clasped in a Bronze Dragon's claw.

"Perhaps a further questioning of these two would prove useful," I acknowledged, as I approached. "But not if *that* method is used."

Meldorp quickly turned upon the thieves again. "Where is my key? What have you done with it? Answer me!" He kicked the closest one.

The kicked thief spit at Meldorp. "Piss off!"

"As I said, that's not going to get you the answers you seek, master Meldorp," I continued. "Perhaps if I were to speak with them?" Saying this, I pulled a blue vial from out of my robe. It brought an instant reaction.

"Here! What's that?" demanded the second thief, somewhat alarmed.

"Something that's going to get master Meldorp the answers he seeks," I replied. "Although you might not find it quite so enjoyable." I smiled at him.

"Now wait a minute!" said the first thief, truly alarmed now. "You can't use magic on us! It . . . it ain't legal in the city!"

"That's right!" shouted the second thief.

"Is this true?" asked the cleric, turning to look at me.

I shook my head at her. "Actually, you're a bit misinformed," I replied to the two thieves. "I am free to use magic within the city of Greyhawk to assist in the apprehension *and the interrogation* of criminals." I smiled at them. "That would include the two of you." I waved my vial at them.

They panicked.

"That's not necessary, master Magician!" cried the first thief. "Really!"

"Yeah!" the second thief affirmed. "We'll tell you anything you want to know!"

"Well, it sounds as though they're going to cooperate with us after all," said the cleric. She chuckled.

"Too bad," chortled the barbarian. "I would have been very interested in seeing just what that potion did to them." His smile revealed strong white teeth.

"Now, now, there's no need for that!" cried the first thief, shaking. "Didn't we say we'd tell you what you wanted to know?"

"We're listening," I replied, once again waving the vial before their faces.

"Sure, sure. I'm Marek and this here's Flegon. We were out drinking last evening, over in Barge End and were just making our way back to The Strip. Well, we just came through the Cargo Gate when we meet this fellow who tells us about this here shop and how it's easy pickings. So we came on up to look it over. The shop door was wide open and so we started to help ourselves. That's when these two showed up." He jabbed his thumb at the barbarian and cleric.

"So, who was this 'fellow' you met?" asked the barbarian.

"Uh, I can't really say for sure," replied Marek furtively.

"We ain't never seen him before," Flegon volunteered.

The cleric laughed at that. "Certainly. A complete stranger stopped you and told you to come and rob this place . . . and you did it?"

The barbarian used his huge axe blade to lift the chin of Marek. "What about that? Eh? You trusted a complete stranger?" Then he looked at Flegon.

Flegon swallowed, hard. "Well, he might not have been a complete stranger. We might of seen him once, or maybe twice before," he stammered.

The barbarian lifted Marek's chin still higher. "Well?" he growled. "Did you or did you not 'see' him before?" There was no mistaking the menace in his voice.

"I . . . I could've been wrong," admitted Marek. "Yeah, yeah, I remember now! We was drunk and . . . and I didn't recognize him at first. Right Flegon?"

"Yeah! Yeah! We was drunk!"

Squatting down, I looked at Marek over the blade of the axe. "I think my rather large friend would like to decapitate you." I spoke softly and held the blue vial before him. "This would be . . . unpleasant, its true, but at least it won't kill you."

"No!" Marek cried. "I'll tell you anything you want to know!"

"So, then, who is this friend of yours?" I asked.

"Ain't no friend, I mean, not really. Err, he's called Irontusk. He's a half-orc and hangs out in Barge End," Marek answered.

"Does he have my key?" demanded Meldorp.

"We don't know nothing about no key!" insisted Flegon.

"You lie!" Meldorp screamed and kicked the thief.

"That's not accomplishing anything." I stood and placed a restraining hand on the locksmith. "And I don't think they do know anything about your key."

"Then we'll probably need to find this 'Irontusk' person," said the cleric.

"Anything else that you can tell us?" asked the barbarian.

"That's everything we know," Marek swore. "May Osprem drown me if we're lying!"

"Would the two of you, or maybe this 'Irontusk,' be connected in any way to 'The Weasel'?" I asked. "Or maybe 'The Duke'?"

"No, not us!" said Marek. "Flegon and me only works the docks!"

"Well, sometimes . . . that is, I think that sometimes Irontusk works with the Green Daggers," supplied Flegon. "But they're not with the Guild though. They work out of Barge End, I think."

At that point we were interrupted by the sound of marching boots. A squad of the City Watch, no doubt from the Horseshoe Road Watch station, came around the corner and marched down the street and into Cairn Court.

"Ah, now that's a bit of a relief," I said. The cleric of Istus gave me a questioning look. "Several establishments on this street pay the Guild of Nightwatchmen to patrol the area." She raised an already arched eyebrow. "The Nightwatchmen are mostly comprised of Cuthbertines." I supplied.

She sighed and kissed her holy symbol. "Thanks to Istus."

It was the barbarian's turn to look puzzled.

I answered his unspoken query. "I am an adherent of Boccob, your friend is a disciple of Istus. The followers of Saint Cuthbert are rather . . . 'devout,' to say the least. Their 'questioning' of us in this matter would have quickly become one long and boisterous religious debate."

He gawfed loudly.

Theldrat Meldorp, for that was the proprietor's full name, gave his story to the Sergeant of the Watch, but curiously failed to make any mention of the missing key. The rest of us therefore followed his lead and said nothing of it. Not having participated in the actual apprehension of the thieves, there was little for me to say anyway.

Interestingly, the Sergeant of the Watch questioned each of us as to our whereabouts on the previous evening, specifically whether or not any of us had been near the Great Library at any time during the night. I could only speak for myself, but each of us denied being anywhere in the vicinity of the Library.

(It seems that a very rare book had been stolen by a cleric of Boccob. Being an adherent of Boccob myself, I found that fact hard to believe, but filed the information away in my mind for future consideration.)

So, having given our names and residences within the city to the Watch, we were done and allowed to continue about our own business; the barbarian was sternly warned to return his Great-axe to its leather head case while in the city. I was also now a little more acquainted with my two new 'companions.'

The warrior was Wolfsire, an Ice Barbarian of the far northern Kingdom of the Cruski, located on the Thillonrian peninsula, in the far northeastern corner of the Flanaess.

And the cleric was Eileen, a servant of Istus, from the Caliphate of Ekbir, located on the Dramidj Ocean in the Baklunish west.

Apparently, Eileen and Wolfsire had been traveling together for the last couple of years in pursuit of some item and had arrived in Greyhawk by way of Rel Mord. Not knowing any better, they were staying at the Blue Dragon Inn.

(I knew the 'item' searched for had to be something rather rare and special, if a cleric of Istus cared enough to search for it. In such matters, Istus is almost as uncaring as Boccob himself!)

And then there was myself, originally from the Yeomanry, but having been in Greyhawk for the past eight years. A student, formerly of The University of the Flanaess (two years) and Grey College (four years) and the University of Magical Arts (two years), a protégé of Maldin, Archmage and co-owner of 'Maldin and Elenderi's Shop of the Arcane' in the Artisan Quarter and serving my final four years of a twelve year apprenticeship with him.

(There remain few today who know my 'true' name. Given that such knowledge can grant the possessor mystical power, you will forgive me if I withhold it here. I am now known to most simply as 'The Mystic Scholar of Darkgate'.)

After the Watch had departed, Theldrat turned his attention back to the three of us. "Please good sirs and lady, I will pay you what I can to retrieve my key for me."

"And what can you pay?" Wolfsire quickly asked.

"I . . . I can pay as much as . . . ten gold pieces," answered Theldrat.

"Ten gold pieces?" repeated Wolfsire, incredulously. "That's not much of an offer, considering that there's three of us!"

(Wolfsire was apparently counting me in on this.)

"Please, sir," Theldrat implored, wringing his hands. "The key is for an important person. If this person should discover its loss, I could be ruined! My reputation means much to me, but I am not a wealthy man!"

"I don't mean to sound greedy, master Theldrat," Wolfsire replied, touched by the shopkeeper's plea. "But I don't think Eileen and I are going to be able to do this alone. We don't know Greyhawk and will certainly need help."

"True," admitted Eileen. "I've only passed through Greyhawk once before and Wolfsire's never been here at all." She turned to look at me. "Perhaps, if the Magician were to help?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I'm not sure how much help I can be. I've lived in the city for the past eight years, it's true, but I've spent most of that time in the Clerkborg, or the Artisan Quarter and I've only just emerged from two years of intense and secluded study, confined within the great pyramid of the University of Magical Arts. I've never been to Barge End and only know it to be a gathering place for the Rhennee boat people." I shrugged again.

"Excuse me."

I turned and found the Hairfoot halfling now standing behind me. He was dressed in clothing common to his kind, woolen breeches and shirt, with a leather vest. One small pouch hung from his rather broad leather belt, along with a small knife and what looked to me like string. There was a larger pouch slung across his right shoulder and hanging at his left hip and – given the bumpiness of the pouch – I realized that the 'string' was actually a sling and the pouch held his sling stones.

"Perhaps I could help?" he stated.

"You?" asked a surprised Wolfsire.

"And why not?" demanded Eileen, reproachfully. She grasped her holy symbol and her eyes took on a far-away look. "I see him woven into the thread of this escapade, though I cannot see the part he is to play."

"Who are you, my friend?" I asked.

"My name is Bubbagump," he replied. "Bubbagump Grumblefoot. I know Barge End and have heard of the Green Daggers. And I believe that I've seen this 'Irontusk' person a couple of times. In any event, I think I know a woman of my people, living in Shack Town, who may be able to help."

"That's wonderful!" exclaimed Theldrat. "Then it's all settled!"

"Not so fast, master locksmith," Wolfsire cautioned. "We haven't agreed to help yet. There's still the matter of the money."

"Actually," I interjected, "I'm more interested in this escapade for other reasons. I don't require any money for my help. At least, not at this time."

"The same for me also," agreed Eileen. "Wolfsire, you concern yourself with money when your fellow man is in need of your help?"

"If it hadn't been for my concern for money, these past two years, we'd have starved to death already!" countered Wolfsire.

"If that is to be our fate." It was Eileen's turn to shrug.

"Now, hold on a minute," I said, coming to the barbarian's defense. "Wolfsire's concerns shouldn't be dismissed so easily. What say you, master Theldrat? Ten *orbs* apiece for our friends, Wolfsire and Bubbagump?" The halfling's eyes grew wide and I realized that ten orbs were a great deal of money for him.

Theldrat alternated between wringing his hands and twisting his mustache. That the key was important to him was obvious and my suspicions grew.

"Very well," Theldrat agreed. "Twenty gold pieces to be shared among you, however you wish!"

And all my suspicions were now confirmed. No key in all the Oerth could be worth twenty gold pieces, unless it was something very special indeed. There was more to this than met the eye and I was too curious not to participate in the escapade.

So Eileen and I looked at Wolfsire.

"Very well," he agreed. "We will do this."

"Excellent!" cried Theldrat.

Eileen and I nodded agreement. I slapped the halfling on the shoulder. "Well, Bubbagump, lead on my new friend! We head for Shack Town, then on to Barge End!"

Ah, nice warm cider, on a cool Sunsebb evening in front of the fireplace, nothing quite like it! And these muffins! Have you ever tasted their like? I really *must* get the recipe from Mrs. Hildegard. Huh? What? Oh, I am sorry . . . the story! Of course, how obtuse of me. In my defense I really *must* blame Mrs. Hildegard's excellent muffins for my lapse. Now, where was I? Oh, yes! I was talking about . . .

## **That Infamous Key**

### **Chapter Two**

"We'll take The Processional to the High Market and then take Wharf Road to the Wharfgate," said Bubbagump, heading in that direction.

"Why not just head up The Strip to the Cargo Gate?" I asked, following him. Wolfsire and Eileen were right behind us.

"Because the Dockway is coming to life right now," Bubbagump answered. "It will take too long that way. Marek and his friend Flegon came into the city that way because the Cargo Gate and the Highway Gate are the only two gates opened at that hour; the Wharfgate was closed when those two re-entered the city, but now it's open."

The Processional is the heart of the city of Greyhawk. The roadway is over one hundred feet wide for most of its length and commerce abounds here. If the street were not just 'waking up' – a fact for which I was grateful – we would have been accosted every step of the way by tradesmen, hawkers and performers of every type, not to mention clerics seeking donations, beggars asking for handouts, as well as the nefarious cut-purses and pickpockets who thrived amongst the crowds.

"Magician, you mentioned what I take to be two names when you questioned the thieves," said Eileen. "'The Weasel' and 'The Duke.' Who are these people?"

"'The Weasel,'" I began, "is the Master Thief in charge of the Thieves Guild's operations in the Foreign Quarter, which is where you're staying. More information on him I do not have. As for 'The Duke,' that is Duke Garand and he is 'The Boss' of the Foreign Quarter. He is not an actual nobleman, but rather a loan shark and he has an interest in nearly every business in this part of the city. If those two had been working for either of those men, it would have made things much more difficult for us."

"I see," said Eileen. "Being foreigners here, we thought that was the place for us."

"It's too expensive, all things considered," Wolfsire grumbled.

"The owner of the Blue Dragon Inn – a Felipe Namarhz – tries to mimic the Silver Dragon Inn, on the corner of Hardcobble Way and The Processional," I informed them. "Unfortunately, while this includes the Silver's prices, it does not include the Silver's quality. Most adventuring travelers visiting Greyhawk prefer staying at the Green Dragon Inn, over on the corner of Cargo and Blue Boar streets, in the River Quarter. You'll find it much more within your means."

"Sounds like we'll be moving," said Wolfsire.

I nodded. "You should."

At the Garden Gate we signed the register and passed through without incident. The guards here were familiar with me and knew of my Master, the Magician Maldin, who was on good terms with such luminaries as Otiluke, President of the Society of Magi and Kieren Jalucian, Guild-master of Wizards and it did not hurt that both these men were Oligarchs of Greyhawk.

(Otiluke's loss in Harvester 584 CY was a terrible tragedy. His home in the Foreign Quarter – on Summoner Court – remained empty for many years. Traveling with Wolfsire put me in mind of one of his works; *Gazette on the Norse Climates*. Though not the wisest of men, he was a towering intellect, with many spells accredited to him.)

Also, it was well known that Maldin dined several times a year at The Wheel of Gold with the Lord Mayor, Nerof Gasgal. Deference was therefore shown to my Master by such underlings as these and – by extension – to myself.

The sun had been up for over an hour by the time we reached the High Market and traffic was at its peak, thus slowing our travel. In addition, the various fragrances of lotions and perfumes, the sparkle of jewelry and colors of silks, sufficed to catch Eileen's notice. Bubbagump could hardly take his eyes off of the many fruits and vegetables on display, whilst Wolfsire's eyes were firmly fixed on the abundant weapons and armor exhibited. For myself, I was always taken in by the bouquets of the many liqueurs and wines available. But the High Market was where the rich and well-to-do shopped and the goods were expensive.

(And I was far from well-to-do, though I lived well enough on the money I earned and the allowance given me by my Master.)

Needless to say, each of us was delighted by our own particular taste and so we lazily wended our way through the market. But we finally emerged from out of all the hubbub onto Wharf Road and headed for the Wharfgate. Along the way my new friends were amazed to see the elegant homes and buildings located here and we were slowed again as I pointed some of them out: The Wheel of Gold, the home of Otto, renowned gourmand and a member of the Circle of Eight, the celebrated Botanical Gardens, the Patrician's Club and Lord Henway's Menagerie. They soaked it all in while plying me with many questions.

The Watchmen at the Wharfgate were more diligent than their counterparts at the Garden Gate and we had to give our names *and* residences within the city to them. Once again my Master's identity eased the way and I purposely informed the guards that we would return later in the day, so as to facilitate our re-entry.

I had never been through this gate before and I found the view breathtaking. I could see along the length of the Selintan River for many miles. This magnificent panorama made quite an impression upon all of us and we paused for several moments.

"Down there is Barge End," Bubbagump finally said, pointing.

We all looked down to see an area of the river which was simply jammed with boats and barges of all types and sizes. This, then, was where the Rhennee gathered together and lodged when they congregated in Greyhawk.

"That group of buildings to the north is Shack Town," Bubbagump pointed again.

"Bubbagump, how does a half-orc dwell amongst Rhennee?" asked Eileen.

The halfling shrugged. "He could be an 'honorary' Rhennee, such things happen. But the chances are that Ironstusk simply works there, as do many river folk. He probably stays in Shack Town, like my friend."

"The road below seems to fork," Wolfsire commented, as he started down the road.

"Yes," said Bubbagump. "It used to be that you had to hire a boat to get to Shack Town, or travel across the barges of the Rhennee, which they sometimes mind. So the residents of Shack Town, with some help from the Temple of Saint Cuthbert, built a road along the river's marshy banks."

"Saint Cuthbert has a temple in Shack Town?" I asked, surprised.

"Not really," Bubbagump answered. "But Brother Nicholi Nortoi, a cleric of Saint Cuthbert, built a shrine there."

We turned left, onto the fork leading off the main road and were shortly presented with yet two more choices; one road leading north to Shack Town and another straight to the river and Barge End.

"We'll go to Shack Town first," said Bubbagump. "We'll see if Solnia is home. If not, then she's probably working the barges."

(The road through this marshy area was infested with mosquitoes, naturally. I hadn't been anywhere near the river in the eight years since coming to live in the city and so I was unprepared for this particular situation. I have since kept a small cantrip ready for all such discomfits.)

The road through Shack Town itself – if it could be called a 'road' – was soft and boggy and the 'homes' were little more than ramshackle, thrown together hovels. The place was not large and we soon arrived at the home of Solnia, she wasn't there however and so we turned back towards Barge End.

Coming into Shack Town we had passed by the shrine to Saint Cuthbert, but had not seen the priest, but he was there when we returned. There was a small building – nicer than the others here

– situated behind the shrine and the priest was standing in front of it, surrounded by several others. He knew our halfling guide.

"And how are you this day, Bubbagump?" the priest asked.

"I am well, Brother Nortoi," he replied. "And yourself?"

"As always," Nortoi replied with a smile. "Who are your friends? It is easy to see that they are not from around here."

"We are from the city," I admitted. "I am a student at the University of Magical Arts and this is Eileen, a cleric of Istus and Wolfsire, both of them visitors to our city." Both nodded their heads at the priest.

"Welcome," said Brother Nortoi, warmly. "It is not often that respectable people come among us. Our visitors consist mostly of those 'fleeing' the city, for one reason or another. Their only desire is to be 'lost' amongst our humble homes."

"We understand that you strive to do good work here, Brother Nortoi," said Eileen, indicating the old men, women and children gathered around him.

"I do what I can, daughter of Istus," he replied. "Though, I cannot do as much as I'd like."

Eileen looked at me. "Surely our mission is not so urgent that we cannot spare an hour for those in need?"

Wolfsire groaned. Eileen was obviously not as stoic, or indifferent, as most of her brethren.

I shook my head. "I hardly think so. The object we seek has undoubtedly changed hands by this time and we're still in the process of gathering intelligence, it would be imprudent for us to hurry."

Eileen nodded satisfied agreement. "Brother Nortoi, I see among those gathered here some who are in need of healing."

"That is true, daughter of Istus," he acknowledged, spreading his hands. "I can only do so much each day."

"Then, may I be allowed to perform healing for your congregation?" she asked.

"It would be most welcome," he beamed.

Realizing that this was not a bad notion, I reached into one of my pouches – a bag of holding – and drew forth two vials. "I can offer some healing potions from my supplies, if it would help." I handed them to Brother Nortoi, who accepted them with pleasure, thanking me profusely. Then he and Eileen entered the small building behind the shrine to perform their work. Bubbagump took the opportunity to mingle with the folk gathered about, while Wolfsire pulled me aside for a private talk.

"She's always doing something like this," he whispered fiercely. "And if that isn't bad enough, now you're encouraging her! We may well need her healing – and your potions – before this is all over!"

"She does seem overly 'compassionate,' for a cleric of Istus." I smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. "Wolfsire, my new friend, have no concerns on that score. I have several more potions in my pouch and I'm sure Eileen will save a healing spell, or two. Besides," I lowered my voice, "making friends here may go far in helping us. You heard Brother Nortoi, many come here to hide. We may well find ourselves returning here for one reason or another."

Wolfsire 'growled' a grudging agreement and muttered an oath to Vatun – the missing god – under his breath, then someone tugged at his vest. When the north-lander and I looked down, it was a small child offering him a meat pie. Wolfsire's face instantly softened.

"Thank you, little one," he said gently. "But I've already had my breakfast this morning." He looked about and seeing a small battered stool dragged it over sat down upon it, placing the child upon his knee. I smiled at that; the Ice Barbarian had a soft and warm heart after all.

After Eileen's promised hour, we were on our way. Not being rich, I still had some funds and left Brother Nortoi with a *lucky*, to purchase any necessities for his flock. With the copious thanks of the inhabitants and a rich blessing from Brother Nortoi, we were gone.

(I've always remembered that; a Cuthbertine blessing devotees of Istus, Vatun and Boccob! Afterwards I thought that maybe – just maybe, mind you – every devotee of Saint Cuthbert wasn't maniacal after all.)

Coming at last to Barge End, we entered a small road lined with wooden buildings on both sides. Most of these were warehouses, though some few were used as living quarters, with one or two being drinking establishments. These types were to be found on the landward side of the road.

(I use the word 'building' generously here for they were little more than shacks. Still they were rather well put together, given that they had obviously not been built by skilled craftsmen.)

On the river side of the road the buildings were obviously all used as warehouses and these stretched right down to the water. Interspersed between some of these buildings were alleyways and at the far end of each alley was a dock which extended out some twenty feet or more into the water. There were lots of boats and barges moored here and if you wanted to catch even a glimpse of actual water, you had to look out well beyond these moored water-craft.

Bubbagump led us down the first of the alleys. "Solnia can usually be found working down here."

"What does your friend do here?" asked Eileen.

"She usually helps local fishermen separate and clean their catches," Bubbagump answered. "She gets a couple of *commons* and maybe two, or three fish each day."

The alley we were in was about sixty feet long and ten feet wide and it took a couple of minutes to reach the end of it. Once there it was easy to see what Bubbagump had been talking about earlier. The only way to reach the other end of the docks from this spot was to alternately walk and jump from boat to boat and barge to barge. I took this in at a glance as we proceeded onto the dock.

Bubbagump saw his friend in the first boat. "Hey, Solnia!" he called.

She was a young halfling lass, pretty in her own way and she looked up at Bubbagump's call. She smiled at him and started to wave, then caught site of Wolfsire, Eileen and myself. She suddenly looked tense and began turning her head this way and that, as if searching for a path of escape.

"Solnia, it's okay," Bubbagump reassured her. "These are friends of mine."

"Friends?" she asked, uncertainly. "Does that mean you owe them money? Are you in some kinda trouble?"

"No, Solnia, no," said Bubbagump. "Just the opposite! I'm getting paid!"

"Paid?" she was surprised.

"Yes," I interjected. "Ten *orbs* in fact."

"Ten *orbs*?" her eyes grew wide. "What does he have to do?"

"We're looking for someone, a half-orc named Irontusk," Bubbagump answered. "He robbed a place over in the Foreign Quarter."

Solnia turned pale as Bubbagump spoke and I knew that something was wrong; Solnia was somehow tied in with Irontusk. I quickly looked about, but saw nothing immediately suspicious. I caught Eileen looking at me and could tell that she had quickly put two and two together as well.

"Oh, Bubbagump," Solnia whispered.

"What's wrong?" Bubbagump asked.

"Nothing," she said. It was a lie. She was nervous, even scared, both of us and of Irontusk. I was certain of it.

"She is somehow involved with this 'Irontusk.'" Eileen said it.

I immediately squatted and flashed a *noble* before Solnia's eyes as she started to jump from the boat. "Now, everyone just calm down and act casual," I said, for everyone's benefit. Solnia stopped. "Solnia, Eileen's right, isn't she?" I flipped the coin over and over between my fingers.

Solnia's eyes were fixed upon the coin as she first nodded her head and then quickly shook it. "No, I didn't do anything!" she cried.

"Shush! Keep your voice down," I urged her. I quickly looked about, insuring that her outburst had not attracted any unwanted attention. "No one said that you 'did' anything. But you're associated with him, right?"

"Where is he?" demanded Wolfsire, in a low but harsh voice.

Eileen slapped him on the arm. "After we're gone, she still has to live here!"

(Eileen is still a very perceptive and quick thinking woman to this very day.)

"So?" the barbarian was puzzled.

"So, unless you plan on murdering Irontusk, she still has to 'live' with him." I supplied, while still holding Solnia's attention. "And if she betrays him, her life is going to be very short." Solnia nodded her agreement.

"Is he your friend?" asked Eileen.

Solnia shook her head again. "He treats me rough, sometimes. But he also protects me from those who would do worse!"

"See?" I asked Wolfsire, over my shoulder. "Now, Solnia, I'll give you this noble if you'll help us. Nothing that will get you into serious trouble," I quickly added. "All I ask is that you give us a head start. Point us in the right direction and then you can shout a warning to him; he'll never know."

She looked at Wolfsire. "You won't hurt me if I warn him?"

Eileen struck Wolfsire's shoulder again.

Wolfsire winced and shook his head. "No, lass. Just let me start moving in his direction as the magician asks and everything will be find."

"Will you hurt him?" She looked at me.

(It was easy to see that while she feared Irontusk, she feared losing her protector even more. I determined then to do something about a situation that I found utterly deplorable.)

"No, girl," Eileen reassured her. "We just want to know what he's done with the stolen property."

"Well, you're a cleric of Istus, so I guess you can't lie," Solnia said.

"A cleric of the Lady of Our Fate does not lie," Eileen guaranteed her, while holding her holy symbol.

"He's working on a barge, tied to the end of the next dock," Solnia said, snatching the coin. "He's the only half-orc over there and one of his tusks is capped with iron."

"Of course," I said as I stood. "Thus the name. Okay, Solnia, here's what I want you to do; let Wolfsire and Eileen walk to the end of this pier, Bubbagump and I will start back down the alley. When you see Eileen reach the end of the pier, you can shout your warning."

"Do it for me, Solnia," Bubbagump added.

"You're my friend, Bubbagump," she said. "I'll do it for you."

"Okay," I said. "Everyone knows what to do."

We paired up and moved off. Once out of sight, Bubbagump and I began to run, but before we could reach the end of the alley we heard Solnia shout her warning. It was quickly followed by a loud crash and curses. The chase was on!

"This way!" shouted Bubbagump. "Hurry!"

Behind us we could hear the shouts of angry bargemen and dock workers, multiply. But these sounds faded into the distance as we neared the street. Bubbagump turned right at the end of the building and I followed.

"Take us to the last pier!" I cried out.

As we crossed the entrance of each alleyway we could just make out the sounds of pursuit coming from the opposite end. Shouts, curses and the crashing and smashing of boxes and crates could be heard. Though Bubbagump and I were traveling faster on the street than the others could over the barges, we had to cover a greater distance overall and so were barely catching up with them.

We turned the last corner and ran for the last pier. The sounds of the chase were growing ever louder and I knew it would be a close thing. As Bubbagump and I cleared the side of the last warehouse and burst upon the pier, I saw Irontusk leaping onto the dock from the barge on our right.

And I could see Wolfsire not far behind him, the athletic barbarian had done an excellent job of keeping up with the half-orc, leaping, twisting and otherwise dodging the obstacles Irontusk had tried to place in his path. Eileen was further behind, handicapped in this endeavor by her armor.

As Irontusk landed on the quay he made an effort to launch himself onto a barge moored on my left. I had prepared myself for meeting up with Irontusk under just such a circumstance and, as the half-orc made his leap, I cast the spell I had prepared.

(The spell is a rather simple one, designed to *Daze* the target. Unfortunately for Irontusk, the spell does not hinder gravity in anyway. Irontusk could not respond to the barge's deck, which was rapidly 'rising up' to meet him and he landed with a heavy crash. As my former master, Maldin, is so very fond of saying, "It's not the fall that gets you, it's the sudden stop!")

I was glad that the spell had proved effective for Irontusk was a large, hulking brute and any fight with him would have been physically challenging to say the least. But Wolfsire was upon the half-

orc before the spell's effects could wear off and the barbarian quickly removed his *Great-axe* – which had been strapped across his back in its leather head case – and placed the naked blade against the half-orc's throat.

"Just stay right where you are," Wolfsire snarled.

Eileen caught up a moment later.

"Enjoy your exercise?" I asked her, still breathing heavily myself. The cleric gave me a dark look and swore an oath.

(Eileen can actually swear very prettily!)

The wild look of desperation in Irontusk's eyes was quickly replaced by a look of defeat. Recognizing my attire, he readily discerned that magic had been employed against him. At that point, a look of resignation came over him and he accepted the obviousness of his situation.

Yes, just put another log on the fire; that's fine. It really is nice of you to visit with me of an evening like this; a break from study and research and all that. You are a sweet girl and a fine apprentice too, I must say. Did you enjoy your muffin? Excellent, aren't they? And the cider! Hmm? What? The *story*? You mean I didn't finish it? Well, now that you mention it, I suppose I didn't at that! Ha, ha! The mind, it's the first thing to go you know! No, no, no, catching the half-orc did not end the search for . . .

## That Infamous Key

### Chapter Three

The owner of the barge – a local surprisingly and not a Rhennee – was a bit out of sorts given all the ruckus taking place aboard his craft, but I produced another *noble* and he was mollified.

We were at a loss as to where we should take Irontusk for his interrogation and then Eileen suggested that Brother Nicholi Nortoi might be willing to assist us in this matter. I agreed that it was quite possible, given that the priests of Saint Cuthbert have no love for criminals – their followers swell the ranks of the Nightwatchmen – but it was not by any means certain. But thinking of the cleric put me mind of a way to accomplish two goals; getting the information we needed and helping the halfling lass, Solnia.

So Irontusk was gagged and trussed up like a hog for market and thrown into the back of a cart that Bubbagump had miraculously procured for us. The halfling then proceeded to inform me that we could rent the rig for a *noble* a day, or buy both cart and donkey outright, for 'just' seven *orbs*.

(First, I wasn't taken in by the proffered price; either the donkey and cart were going for half the normal value, or they were *stolen*! Second, I was beginning to feel that the halfling was just a bit 'free' with *my* coins.)

My three companions looked at me expectantly. "What, in all the Oerth, am I supposed to do with a donkey and cart?" I inquired.

"A gift!" Bubbagump cried out. "For Brother Nortoi!"

(The halfling's affection for the mild mannered cleric of Shack Town was easy to see and touching, but what I *didn't* see was anyone else volunteering coins!)

"It will go far in procuring his aid in this matter," Eileen interjected, noticing my expression.

"I don't think we need his help so much as to pay seven *orbs* for it!" exclaimed Wolfsire.

"No, I wouldn't think so," I readily agreed. "Especially since they're my *orbs*! Still," I was thoughtful. "There is the problem of Solnia."

"What problem?" the barbarian asked.

"Her safety," I retorted. "I want to stop Irontusk's bullying of her, but I need to do so without causing her to lose what little protection she has in this lawless place. You might recall her implication that there are 'others that would do worse'?"

Although I was willing to go far to aid the little halfling, I still shook my head and grumbled under my breath, "This idea of mine is going to bankrupt me."

Wolfsire laughed, nodding agreement. "Welcome to my world, Magician. Eileen is always doing this sort of thing to me."

Seven *orbs* constituted half my remaining purse, but I needed to make certain that Brother Nortoi would willingly play his part in my plan; so there was nothing else to do but buy the rig.

I was taking a considerable monetary risk, but the memory of Meldorp's intense desire to have the key back urged me onward. I was gambling that the key would be something of such importance – or, at least, of such *interest* – that my Master just might reward me for its acquisition.

(Of course I realized even then that it could all be nothing more than 'smoke and mirrors,' but as my former master, Maldin, is always saying; "In for a *common*, in for a *plate*!")

So we covered Irontusk with a tarp, then threw in a couple of crates of potatoes and other vegetables, as well as two sacks of flour, in answer to the pleas of Bubbagump and at the cost of yet another noble. This was all just a cover of sorts, we wanted to move Irontusk over to Shack Town as inconspicuously as possible; which wouldn't be easy given the fracas that capturing him had caused.

Bubbagump took the donkey's lead rope and moved the cart along at a walk. Eileen, Wolfsire and I fell in behind the cart, just out of Irontusk's hearing and I explained my idea to them; the incident with Marek and Flegon earlier that morning gave me the notion.

Brother Nortoi greeted us warmly upon our return and we quickly outlined what had occurred. When we asked if there were someplace where we might question Irontusk, Brother Nortoi offered us a room in his humble home.

Insuring that the half-orc was bound securely, we returned to the outer room and discussed my plan. In an effort to foster the cleric's receptiveness to my proposal, we offered him the gift of the donkey, cart and food to assist him with his work among the poor. Brother Nortoi was so delighted that he immediately blessed us – again. Our desire to aid Solnia swayed him further, since the cleric was well aware of her situation and agreed something needed to be done.

Everyone had their own suggestions regarding my proposal and all realized that a little adlibbing would be needed as the plan unfolded. All agreed to follow my lead, so we entered into the room

where Irontusk was bound to a strong, oak chair. I moved to a table along the wall, drawing from my robes that same blue vial which had caused Marek and Flegon such discomfiture.

"No, no, I can't have any permanent damage done to the creature," I informed everyone. "My Master simply would not approve. We should begin preparing the beast for transfer into the city."

"Good, let us be done with the entire matter," Eileen nodded. "We mean to collect our reward."

"Of course!" I assured her. "My Master will pay you handsomely for as fine a specimen as this." I pulled my spell book from my robes and laid it upon the table. "He's always able to use such creatures in his experiments." As I flipped a few pages I could see, out of the corner of my eye, the half-orc's eyes begin to bulge from their sockets, the veins throbbing at his Temples; like many commoners and demi-humans, Irontusk had an illogical fear of magic.

"I can appreciate your Master not wanting him *mutilated* in anyway," said Wolfsire. "Or missing any of his body parts, but surely a *little* torture wouldn't hurt anything?" He looked at Eileen. "We still need answers."

"He is a common criminal," Brother Nortoi volunteered. "As such it is permissible – under the law – to place him on 'the rack' for a time." He looked at me. "Perhaps he will supply them the information they seek? Afterward, he can be turned over to the Watch for additional punishment."

"As you said, the creature is a common criminal." I replied, dismissively. "Who will care if it goes . . . 'missing'?" I shrugged, "No one." I looked at Wolfsire. "And it will be '*dismembered*' . . . eventually."

"As a cleric of The Cudgel, I can hardly approve of your using this person for magical experimentation!" Nortoi insisted. "Criminal though he may be. He should be turned over to the authorities!"

"I thought you wanted money?" I asked, looking from Wolfsire to Eileen. "I can certainly appreciate your desire to find out about this stolen 'key' you spoke of; you want all the money you can get! But I understood you to say that this 'Meldorp' fellow has only promised you a couple of *orbs*. And the Watch!?" I added contemptuously, looking at Brother Nortoi. "What could they possibly offer; a few *commons*?" I guffawed. "This orcish *thing* is no important criminal, just a common thief! Now, my Master, on the other hand, is offering you ten *plates* for such a specimen!"

"That's a fortune!" Bubbagump exclaimed.

"Besides, the creature will not be used for 'magical experimentation,' as you say," I retorted. "Its body parts are to be used for . . . *spell components*."

"What is it, exactly, that your master plans to do with him?" asked Eileen.

"Why, *Polymorph* the beast, of course!" I cried. "Unfortunately, potions of *Longevity* require the body parts of elves as a crucial ingredient. Now, my Master is *not* an evil man and would never

consent to the killing and butchering of *real* elves; noble race that they are. But! A polymorphed half-orc? Humph! Who in all of Greyhawk is going to care if *it's* chopped into pieces?"

Irontusk's muffled scream could be clearly heard as he struggled mightily against the thick ropes that bound him to the chair.

"You can really turn him into an elf?" asked Bubbagump, wide-eyed.

"Certainly," I laughed. "Why, I can even turn *you* into a radish! And then," I leaned down to look him in the eyes, "I could turn your friend there into a rabbit!"

Bubbagump squealed and ran to hide behind Wolfsire. Irontusk began to thrash around madly, desperate to escape his bonds. There was a crash as he fell over onto the floor, taking the chair with him.

"Those who serve the Lady of Our Fate are aware of the many destinies possible for a creature such as this," said Eileen, looking down at Irontusk. "A fate far worse than that proposed by the Magician could easily befall him."

"Yeah, I guess that's true," admitted Wolfsire. "But, people can change! Isn't that right Brother Nortoi?"

The cleric spread his hands and shrugged. "It has been known to happen. On a few *rare* occasions, of course."

Wolfsire pointed at the prone Irontusk. "Do you think that a half-orc fellow like this can change?"

Seizing upon this proffered opportunity at salvation, Irontusk began to vigorously nod his head in affirmation.

"It would not be unheard of," Brother Nortoi conceded, looking down at Irontusk. "I suppose I could take him in hand and teach him the ways of The Cudgel."

Irontusk's eyes were pleading with the cleric to do just that.

Turning to Eileen, Wolfsire said, "Tell you what, let me question him about the key. If he cooperates we'll cut him loose, with the stipulation that he has to study with Brother Nortoi and turn over a new leaf. If he doesn't . . ." Wolfsire shrugged.

"Hmm," Eileen seemed to ponder this. "It might work. But I'll only believe it if he *fully* cooperates with us. No holding back!" She looked meaningfully at Irontusk. "Or the Magician can have him."

The half-orc's facial expression revealed his terror.

I was all aghast at this turn of events. "But, what about the generous bounty my Master has offered?"

"Saint Cuthbert teaches us; 'Unceasing effort should be made to bring unbelievers into the fold,'" Brother Nortoi pronounced solemnly, grasping his holy symbol – a crumpled hat. "And that's certainly much more important than mere *money*."

Eileen seemed skeptical, while Wolfsire and Bubbagump nodded agreement.

"I don't know," I replied, thoughtfully. "My Master is not above assisting a being to 'redeem their soul,' certainly. But what if this . . . *animal* . . . should be playing you false? My Master would grow wrathful with me for letting it go! He sent me with you for the specific purpose of acquiring just such a specimen as *this!*" I stabbed my finger at Irontusk.

"He's still *our* prisoner, however," Wolfsire pointed out. "To do with as we please!"

"It's true that we haven't yet sold him to you," Eileen was forced to acknowledge. "No money has exchanged hands."

"That's true!" Bubbagump nodded emphatic agreement.

"I bare witness that I have not seen any monies change hands," Brother Nortoi solemnly intoned, still grasping his crumpled hat.

"Well," I sighed. "I suppose I can always find some other . . . *beast*, to serve my Master's needs. But I will expect your assistance in procuring one!"

"Very well," Eileen agreed.

Wolfsire and Bubbagump nodded.

"Of course, there's always a chance that the creature will prove uncooperative," I continued, looking down at Irontusk. "One can always hope so anyway. You'll agree to sell the creature to me under such a circumstance?"

They agreed and so I left it to the four of them to handle the interrogation of our prisoner. Wolfsire reached down and removed the gag, none too gently.

"I did it!" Irontusk cried out. "I stole the key from Meldorp's place!"

Soon he was telling us everything.

Two days previously, Irontusk was approached by two members of a group of thieves calling themselves the Green Dagger Gang. They hired him to steal what they claimed to be a 'plain copper key' from Meldorp's Locksmithy. They offered him one hundred *orbs* to do the job.

He had only ever met two of them; a human male, who seemed to Irontusk to have been sick and a rich-looking elf. Both were dressed all in black and each had worn little green dagger ornaments pinned to their cloaks. Irontusk had delivered the key to these two individuals early this morning, after attempting to throw off any pursuit by setting up Marek and Flegon to take the fall for the

burglary. To demonstrate his complete cooperation, Irontusk offered detailed directions – and a crudely drawn map – to the Green Dagger's Guild-house, in the River Quarter.

After Irontusk had finished his tale we searched him. He didn't have much; a club, an especially nice piece of studded leather armor, a *tangle-foot* bag and a belt pouch containing some seventy-nine *orbs*; the half-orc explained that he had lost some of it gambling earlier that morning. The five of us then went back into the outer room to discuss our next move.

"The *orbs* are forfeit," I said. "I'm sure you'll agree, Brother Nortoi, that Irontusk should not profit from his criminal activity?"

"The Cudgel teaches us; 'The word of The Cudgel is law,' and again, 'Honesty, truthfulness, practicality and reasonability are the highest virtues.'" Nortoi earnestly intoned. "Irontusk must forgo his former life completely and so may not profit from his ill-gotten gains. I assure you that – although this little subterfuge was necessary to get any information out of Irontusk – I am most genuine in my resolve to assist him in 'turning over a new leaf,' as you said. The Cudgel truly does teach us; 'Unceasing effort should be made to bring unbelievers into the fold.' There are three Orders of Priesthood within my faith, each with its own unique calling. I am of the Order of the *Chapeaux* and bringing new worshipers to the veneration of Saint Cuthbert is my Order's particular calling. But what will you do with the money?"

"The money shall be used to aid us in seeing this affair through to its conclusion," I said. "I must honestly confess that this little adventure has been draining my personal purse, something I did not foresee."

"Perhaps not," said Eileen. "But it is now obvious that you were meant to play a key role in our great adventure. The Lady teaches us; 'Accepting your destiny is the greatest service you can make to yourself.' As Irontusk's destiny lies with Brother Nortoi, so then is it your destiny to journey with Wolfsire and myself."

Wolfsire laughed loudly and slapped the table, "She's always telling me stuff like that! I guess this makes it official, Magician, you're one of us now."

Eileen looked at the Norseman, "The Lady also teaches us; 'Some . . . webs of fate have a strong and inevitable pull that cannot be escaped.' Everything occurs just as has been foreordained; just as The Lady has foreseen it. The Magician was destined to join with us, it is for this reason that we were led to Greyhawk." She ended with one firm nod of her head.

I shook my head in amazement; it seemed that my 'future' was being laid out for me, without any regard for my own thoughts on the matter. Like it or not, I was being included in the mysterious quest which had brought Eileen and Wolfsire to Greyhawk after two years of traveling together.

"Well, we can discuss predestination and fore-ordination another time, right now we have other business to conclude," I said in response to Eileen, then turned to Brother Nortoi. "Now, what can be done for Solnia? We four need to move 'light and fast' as they say, so we're really not in any position to take her with us."

"Nor is she suited for such adventure," agreed the cleric. "She has always shown a keen interest in the teachings of The Cudgel, so I shall offer her a position as my acolyte. She will serve The Cudgel."

"Solnia's going to be a cleric?" asked Bubbagump, his eyes wide.

Brother Nortoi smiled and nodded.

"Well, if there's going to be three of you staying here, we'll have to see to better living quarters," I suggested. "And the three of you will need to eat." I counted out ten orbs and passed them to the cleric. "My friends and I will help you to improve the living arrangements; such as a shed and coral for the donkey, with a vegetable garden for the three of you, but not today. First we need to finish this present business and call upon the Green Daggers."

"What next, Magician?" asked Eileen.

Wolfsire and Bubbagump were looking at me as well.

I breathed deeply and exhaled slowly, my first 'solo' adventure – without my Master – and I was expected to take the lead and do the planning; a 'key role' indeed. Of course, my Master had taught me well, still . . . I found myself fervently hoping that I didn't 'lead' any of them to their deaths.

(Needless to say, I was concerned at this sudden and unexpected turn of events, but as my former master, Maldin, so often says; "Even rocks can fly, if you throw them hard enough!")

"Our first move is to return to the Foreign Quarter," I said. "There are two people I need to speak with. One – a friend and mentor, named Mortellan – is currently staying at the Sages' Guildhall, which is next door to the Silver Dragon Inn, on Hardcobble Way. You two might as well pick up your gear and move it over to the Green Dragon while we're in that area."

"Do we have time for that?" asked Wolfsire.

I looked Wolfsire in the eyes. "*One hundred orbs . . .* for a 'plain' copper key?" I let that sink in for a moment. "There is *nothing* 'plain' about this key, my friend. At such a price, there can be no doubt that the Green Daggers were, themselves, *hired* to steal the key . . . by an unknown third party."

"Then we should head straight for their guild-house!" cried Bubbagump.

"Yes," agreed Wolfsire. "Let's go! There's no time to waste!"

They jumped out of their chairs.

"You weren't listening," I said. "Or didn't understand my meaning; the key is no longer in their possession. They've already passed it on to the unknown person who hired them." I rose from my chair. "The chase has just begun, my friends, and time is no longer the most important factor."

"What, then, is of primary 'importance,' Magician?" asked Eileen, as she also stood up.

"Information," I answered her. "As my Master, Maldin, is always telling me; 'Knowledge is power.' And that is simple truth. I see many possible pieces to this puzzle. We need information." I looked at Wolfsire. "And we need it *before* we go charging into someone else's stronghold."

I counted out three *orbs* for each of us. "Also, we need to 'eat' as well." These *orbs* went into our personal purses.

My new companions also insisted that I take another eight *orbs* to replace the funds I had already spent on our adventure; a gesture I truly appreciated. The remainder – some forty-nine *orbs* – went back into the leather belt pouch we had taken from Irontusk, to serve as a 'communal fund' for our group. The *tangle-foot bag* I had slipped into my robe, leaving Irontusk's remaining equipment with Brother Nortoi.

We then returned to our captive and everything was explained to him in detail. In the presence of us all, Brother Nortoi took a ring from his vestments and placed it upon Irontusk's finger.

"This will compel you to speak the truth," Brother Nortoi explained. He then questioned Irontusk for several minutes, had the half-orc swear an oath to Saint Cuthbert and, just like that, Irontusk became the cleric's acolyte.

"Irontusk and I are off to find Solnia," said Brother Nortoi, removing the ring from the half-orc's finger. "After he's properly attired."

"And we have business of our own," said I. "We will return, possibly in a day or two. Until then, stay well."

"And you," Nortoi replied.

"What do you think, Bubbagump, back into the city through the Warfgate?" I asked, as we stepped into what passed for a street in Shack Town. "Or should we use the Cargo Gate instead?"

"The Cargo Gate," he replied and we headed for the river road.

"Any particular reason for the change?" asked Eileen.

"Yep!" Bubbagump replied. "According to the map Irontusk gave us, we'll pass near to the Green Dagger's guildhall by going this way. It's not real far from the Green Dragon Inn."

I concurred. "We can use your move from the Blue Dragon to cover our surveillance of the place."

Wolfsire walked beside me. "And so 'the chase' for the key begins! This may turn out to be more trouble than we bargained for, you know. Considering what 'ole Irontusk got paid, I think our price of twenty *orbs* was a bit too cheap."

I laughed at that. "Wolfsire, my friend, we've already gotten more than twenty *orbs* for our efforts." I patted the belt pouch. "And I don't think our rewards are going to end there."

The giant barbarian gave me a questioning look.

"Trust me," I laughed.

And so we continued our journey to the Cargo Gate along the hustle and bustle of The Dockway.

Oh dear! Would you look at that! The fire is dying down again, just throw another log on, would you? Mmmm, at least the cider is still warm. Would you care for another mug? And I think I'll have another one of Mrs. Hildegard's exquisite muffins! They are simply delicious! What? Oh, dear, I must apologize. I allowed myself to get distracted again, didn't I? Hmm? Oh, no, we had only just begun 'the chase' for . . .

## **That Infamous Key**

### **Chapter Four**

It was just one turn of the hourglass past midday and the river front was alive with a variety of traffic. The hustle and bustle of a multiplicity of diversified workmen – longshoreman, wharf-men, dock workers, sailors and teamsters – were everywhere to be seen and dodged!

An incredible array of odors assaulted our noses, with two more pungent than all the others; the reek of fish entrails and the stink of sweat. We made our way as quickly as we could through all the seemingly choreographed flurry, weaving and dodging in and out of the human maelstrom.

"That was an excellent ploy you used on Irontusk, Magician," Eileen offered. She was presently walking beside me, while Wolfsire was apparently trying to guard Bubbagump against being trampled!

(I remember chuckling at the sight and wondering if it had occurred to Wolfsire that the little halfling had managed to get along quite well long before the big barbarian's arrival in Greyhawk?)

"Thank you," I replied. "But the idea wasn't exactly my own."

Her look indicated that I should enlarge upon my statement.

"There is a group rumored to be operating within the city doing just that very thing," I added. "Snagging the unwary, polymorphing them and selling the body parts to nefarious practitioners of magic."

Her expression showed her disbelief. "Truth?"

"It's true!" Bubbagump exclaimed. "And it's not a rumor either! No one goes out alone at night!"

"Local rumormongers have begun referring to them as the 'Polymorph Squad,'" I continued. "Of course, sensationalism nourishes tittle-tattle, but if rumor and conjecture are true, then its as diabolical a group as you'll ever want to meet."

"Where do these disappearances occur?" asked Wolfsire.

"It's a queer thing actually," I answered. "'Missing people' in the Slum Quarter would go virtually unnoticed and mostly unreported, but most of these unfortunates seem to disappear from the River and Foreign Quarters. In addition, kidnappings seem to be on the rise in the High and Garden Quarters. However, no one yet knows whether or not these mysterious occurrences are related."

"A mystery indeed," said Eileen.

"Someone should look into it," agreed Wolfsire.

"It is being 'looked into,'" I said. "Greyhawk is filled with such 'mysterious' adventures, my friends. Let us therefore concentrate on the 'mystery' at hand, before embarking upon another one."

The Cargo Gate was crammed with people and vehicles of all varieties, all waiting to pass inspection from the City Watch. I signaled to my companions to follow me and we nudged and jostled our way to the front of this mob. Sure enough, my robes and staff attracted the attention of a Watch Commander and he waved me forward.

"And just who might you be, young sir?" the sergeant-at-arms asked.

Magic-users were recognized as 'gentlemen' by the City Watch, a step above commoners and merchants – the fact that two magicians sat on the city's Directing Oligarchy, as did the Patriarch of Boccob, certainly helped matters – and so magicians were accorded a number of small privileges that most others were not.

"I am the apprentice of the Arch-mage, Maldin," I replied.

A man-at-arms was writing the information down as I spoke and both men stood a little straighter at the mention of my Master's name.

"I reside in the Student's Quarters of the Clerkburg," I continued. "These are my associates, Eileen, cleric of Istus, and Wolfsire of the Kingdom of the Cruski. They are presently staying at the Blue Dragon Inn, but today I will be moving them into the Green Dragon Inn."

"Wise choice that, sir," said the sergeant. "The Blue's for suckers and them as don't know no better!" He looked at Bubbagump. "And who have we here?"

"This is Bubbagump Grumblefoot," I replied, placing my hand on the halfling's shoulder. "He is from Narwell and is visiting the city. He's been staying over on High Lane, in the Burrow Heights, but I'll be moving him to the Green as well."

"Very good, sir," said the sergeant. "I thank you for your patience sir and may you and your friends have a very good day."

We passed through the immense portal, but had not proceeded very far when a group of four men moved towards us. All were dressed in leather armor; three carried knives in belt sheaths, while the evident leader wore a short sword and carried a leather bound book. If Wolfsire had not been

standing between myself and these men, I seriously doubt they would have approached us. I heard Bubbagump groan and, looking down, I smiled when I saw him reaching for his small purse.

"Here!" the leader cried. "What is it that you think you're doing?"

"Huh?" Wolfsire grunted.

"We'll have none of that!" the leader continued. "It's illegal to help a halfling across the street in this city! That'll cost you a *lucky* in fines! Now pay up!"

I stepped around Wolfsire and slammed the butt of my staff onto the pavement. There was a loud 'crack' and the ruby atop the staff burst into brilliant red light, bathing all around me with its glow. Anxious murmurings arose from the crowd and frightened astonishment sprang onto the faces of the four men. I leaned forward until my face was only inches from that of the group's leader.

"You should leave . . . now," I whispered harshly.

The light from my staff also attracted the attention of the Watch Commander.

"Here! What's this about?" The sergeant-at-arms strolled up with two of his men. "Are you accosting this gentleman?" He demanded of the leader. "You know better than that! Go on with yourselves!" He shouted, shooing the little group of men away. As the four scurried off, the light from my staff faded.

The sergeant turned to me, "Sorry about that sir. I don't know what came over those clods."

"I don't think they saw me standing behind my large friend here," I replied, hitching my thumb at Wolfsire.

"Ah! Well that would explain it, wouldn't it sir?" returned the sergeant.

"No harm was done, sergeant," I said, surreptitiously slipping him a *noble*. "And I do thank you for your assistance in this matter."

"My pleasure, sir," he replied, furtively pocketing the coin. "Well, I must return to me duties. Once again, I wish you a good day, sir."

"Same to you and your men, sergeant," I replied and they were gone.

"Magician, what in the nine hells just happened?" asked Wolfsire.

"Those men are known as 'People's Constables,'" I pointed to the little knot of men now standing down the street. "I have no doubt that Bubbagump is quite familiar with them." The halfling nodded. "They are empowered by the Directing Oligarchy to enforce minor laws and collect fines for trivial offenses. They prey upon those who they view as 'easy pickings,' such as foreigners and halflings. However, they do not harass the 'upper classes,' of which I am considered to be a

member. Most people who are accosted by them find it more convenient to simply pay the Constable's small fines and continue on about their business."

"They recognized Wolfsire and I as foreigners and so thought we would be 'easy pickings,'" said Eileen, as we started walking.

"Something like that," I said; then added a warning. "But don't dismiss them too quickly. They are very good at finding some rather obscure laws to enforce, using them to harass the poor and disenfranchised. That law he cited is probably real. Greyhawk's legendary Lord Mayor, Zagig Yragerne, enacted many such idiotic laws during the final years of his administration."

At the River Quarter's guild-station of the Nightwatchmen the avenue forked. The road veering off to our right was called 'The Strip,' home to every kind of peccadillo, or vice that could be found in taverns, gambling houses, brothels and worse. Day or night it teemed with all manner of people; well-heeled dandies, beggars, toughs, Rhennee, river-men, drunks, 'ladies of the evening' and the always present thieves. Most foreign visitors to Greyhawk sought this place out. They were usually adventurers; of all kinds and from all places. Food, drink and lodging – for man or beast – was cheap and news of the outside world was abundant.

The road veering left was Cargo Street, 'home' to the Green Dragon Inn and two of the finer establishments of the River Quarter, namely, the Wizard Hat Inn and the Lows Seas Tavern. According to our information and map, the Green Dagger guild-house could be accessed from a little dead-end side street – located between the Green Dragon Inn and the River Quarter City Watch Station – lying in the shadow of the Noble's Wall, near the Garden Gate. Unknowingly, we had actually passed quite close to it earlier this morning.

Strolling down Cargo Street and passing the Green Dragon Inn, we paused at the intersection indicated on the map. The street was a little longer than I had imagined and the rear of the guild-house was just discernible at the opposite end, to our right, against the base of the wall. Its weather beaten exterior blended well with the stone wall, so that only its red tiled roof was plainly visible. The building was run down and appeared derelict.

"That's it," I said, indicating the two story house.

"There seems to be a wide alley leading to the back of it," observed Wolfsire.

"It's the River Quarter," said Bubbagump. "All manner of merchants live here. That alley probably leads to a stables, or pen of some type."

"Shall we move closer?" asked Eileen.

"Not yet," I replied. "Let's head for the Blue Dragon, you can pack-up your things while I have a talk with my friend, Mortellan."

"What of Bubbagump?" asked Eileen, as we started off. "You mentioned moving him to the Green Dragon also."

"Yeah, why am I moving?" asked the halfling.

"We'll all be staying at the Green Dragon," I replied. "There's no telling where our adventure will lead us, or what hours of the day or night we might be keeping. We're dealing with some very dissolute people in this 'key' business. And let us not forget that people have been disappearing from this part of the city. So we all stay together, no one travels alone, we travel in pairs."

"A good idea," agreed Eileen.

We headed east on Cargo Street and soon turned right onto a short side street which connected Cargo with Horseshoe Road.

"Sounds good to me!" said Bubbagump. "Burrow Heights is just a little ways behind the Blue Dragon. I'll cut through the Street of Songs and across Roanwood Road and get my things, then meet you all in front of the Sage's Guildhall."

We turned right onto Horseshoe Road.

"If I may ask, Magician, who is this 'Mortellan' you speak of?" asked Eileen.

"Mortellan is a friend and one time adventuring companion of my Master, Maldin," I replied. "And he has proven himself both a friend and mentor to me. He is a high-elf from Highfolk, a 'free-town' located on the Volverdyva river, just west of the Kingdom of Furyondy. Mortellan is a Guild Mage. He's also a Guild Sage and a Guild Lawyer, which is saying something."

We passed The Strip and rounded the curve which turned the east/west running Horseshoe Road to a southerly direction.

"Being a Guild Lawyer is special?" asked Wolfsire.

"To be a Guild Lawyer you must first be able to speak ancient Suloise," I explained. "Mostly, however, both the Sage's Guild and the Lawyer's Guild number very few non-humans among their members. Guild lawyers are mainly human citizens of Greyhawk's upper classes."

We turned left into Cairn Court.

"And you think he can help us in our search?" asked Eileen.

"He is a high-elf," I repeated. "Irontusk said that one of the people he met with was an elf; another high-elf in all probability. Elves within the city often frequent the same taverns and restaurants for a repast. I'm hoping that Mortellan has run across him at some time."

And then we stopped in front of the Blue Dragon.

"And the second person you must speak with?" asked Eileen.

I smiled at her. "Mortellan hasn't told me . . . yet."

Wolfsire and Eileen went off to take care of the necessary business of moving, while Bubbagump and I proceeded to the Street of Songs. There we split up, I went to the Sage's Guildhall – next to the Silver Dragon Inn on Hardcobble Way – while the halfling headed for the underground warren called the 'Burrow Heights' – the home of gnomes, dwarves and halflings living within the city's walls.

Two groundskeepers were hard at work on the Guildhall's lawn as I proceeded up the walkway and the door was opened by one of the establishment's porters as I stepped upon the porch.

How shall I describe the Sage's Guildhall? It's part library and part gentleman's club. There is a large, high-ceilinged room just beyond the foyer, which takes up most of the ground floor. The room is located in the center of the building, however, so there are no windows in its walls; there is only the double door off the foyer, with a standard door located in the back wall. The room is lined with shelves – stretching from floor to ceiling and accessed with ladders – which are filled with books, scrolls, manuscripts and tomes of all sizes and types, though all are non-magical. Several bookcases are also scattered throughout.

A large, multi-candled, crystal chandelier hangs from the ceiling in the center of the room. This light source is augmented by lanterns which line the walls and by the candles found on every table.

The room is dotted with small cubicles for study and there are several tables, with chairs, scattered about. A couch is placed in front of a rather large fireplace and is flanked by two overly stuffed chairs. Decanters of liqueurs and spirits are generously spread about the room, all to enhance the members' studious relaxation.

I stated my business to the porter and was escorted to a small, well-lit cubicle where I found Mortellan pouring over an ancient, yellowed manuscript. Mortellan looked up and smiled when he saw me. He stood to take my hand.

"Always a pleasure to see you," he said, then turned to the porter, "Thank you, Rupert. Please bring us some of the Furyondian red, if you would be so kind."

And so Mortellan stood before me, all eighty-seven pounds of him. He stood five feet, one inch tall and wore a soft blue shirt, with brown pants and black, calf-high leather boots. His forest green cloak lay on a chair beside him. His apparel was of the finest quality, as always, but a bit unkempt and wrinkled, all testifying to his chosen profession. He had cream colored skin, with a head of straight, blonde hair combed back behind his pointed ears and tied in a ponytail, which reached down past his shoulders. His deep, blue eyes twinkled with elven mischievousness. He was one hundred, thirty years of age – young for an elf.

"Greetings, Master Mortellan. Thank you for seeing me."

"Not at all, not at all," he said. "Take a seat and tell me what brings you back so soon; another missive from Maldin?" He waved me into the cubicle and we sat.

"No, nothing from my Master. I've come to you with a matter of my own. I seem to have become caught up in a little escapade and need some advice."

"Ah, now *this* will be interesting," he smiled. "Start at the beginning and tell me absolutely everything!"

Rupert arrived with two glasses of the Furyondian red and some select cheeses and quickly departed again.

"It's not *fey wine*, of course, but it will have to do," Mortellan sighed, as he lifted his glass.

I started my tale with the disturbance caused by Marek and Flegon earlier that morning. I detailed everything that had happened thus far, leaving nothing out, to omit anything would only hinder Mortellan's ability to advise me.

Mortellan was what elven-kind sometimes called a 'Collector,' an elven archaeologist if you will. He searches out mysterious and dangerous places looking for old books and ancient objects of power. He also collected rumors.

"I had heard there was a hubbub this morning," Mortellan said. "But I thought the matter involved the Great Library. Well, that's quite a little adventure you have going for yourself. Does Maldin know?"

"No. My Master is not . . . 'present,' just now."

"Ah, off on another of his mysterious planar jaunts, eh?" Mortellan asked. "Well, from what you've told me, you have handled yourself admirably thus far. Your actions have been well thought out. The key is certainly not an ordinary one, but I won't speculate on its nature just now. I need to research a few things first. As to your elf, I may have seen him, perhaps even have spoken with him – at the Green Dragon, to be more precise. He was dressed much as you describe, down to the dark cloak and little green pin in the shape of a dagger. As I recall, he names himself Cyrathas."

"Cyrathas," I repeated. "That's good to know. If one of his men is sick, it may be that others are. If so, he may stay 'close to home,' remaining within his guild-house."

"You are no doubt correct," Mortellan agreed. "But knowing that isn't much help in itself and it's not why you came to me. Let's go to my rooms."

We stood and I followed him back out to the foyer where two sets of stairs lead to the second floor. Located to either side of the door, each lead to a landing and then turned at right angles to a large balcony which overlooked the foyer. This upper hallway lead off to the left and right and was, itself, lined with bookshelves. We turned left down this hallway, which quickly turned right again. Following this path, we stopped at the third door on the left. Mortellan had two rooms, a sitting room, for receiving guest, and a bedroom. The Sage's Guildhall maintained such living quarters for their bachelor members.

"Have a seat, I'll be right back," he told me, as he entered the bedroom.

There was a small couch set before a metal wood stove, as well as a table and chairs. I sat at the table. Mortellan joined me a few moments later.

"I have here a couple of things," Mortellan said. "But wait one." He had set parchment, quill and ink pot before him. He scribbled a short note, signed it and handed it over to me. I read it; it directed a fellow named Ricard to assist me in any way he could, saying that Mortellan would be grateful if he should do so.

"Give that note to Ricard Damaris, he is the owner of the Green Dragon Inn," Mortellan explained. "You can't miss him, giant of a fellow. Stands over six feet tall, shoulder length black hair, brown eyes and a triangular scar on the left side of his chin. Oh, and the fourth finger is missing from his left hand. There is little that goes on in the River Quarter that Ricard is unaware of and he owes me a favor."

"You think he'll be able to tell me something more about Cyrahas."

"If anyone knows anything, it'll be Ricard," Mortellan stated. "Now, you mentioned that at least one of these thieves appeared to be sick?"

"That's what we were told."

"I have here, three vials," he pushed them across the table. "Take them. They contain potions which cure disease. I've had them for some time, but have never had cause to use them. We elves are immune to many of the illnesses that befall you humans. I suggest you purchase a few others."

"Do you think we may catch whatever it is that this thief has?"

"Not necessarily," said Mortellan. "But I'm betting that your guess is correct and that the man you were told of is not the only gang member to have fallen ill. Do you remember what Maldin is so fond of saying?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure of your meaning, my Master has so many sayings."

Mortellan slapped the table and laughed loudly. "As old Elenderi always says, that's because he's so fond of the sound of his own voice!" I burst out laughing with him. When our mirth passed, he continued, "This saying involves 'flies.'"

"Flies? Flies . . . oh, yes! I recall, he says; 'You can catch more flies with honey than you can with vinegar!'"

"That's the one!" Mortellan agreed. "I've no doubt that you and your companions – as you describe them anyway – would have no trouble 'kicking in the door,' as they say, but that's the 'vinegar.' You'll get more cooperation out of Cyrahas with 'honey;' these vials here. The Green Daggers are obviously not members of the Guild of Thieves, which means that they are playing a very dangerous game. But it also means that they don't have a lot of people they can turn to for help." He pointed at the vials. "Certainly not help of this kind. And that's your honey."

"I see; go to them with an offer of help and I may get the answers I seek all the more readily."

"Precisely!" said Mortellan. "However, that doesn't mean you can just walk up and knock on the door! You're still going to have to break into the place. And I'd be very cautious about that. It's a thieves hideout, after all. There will be traps and snares aplenty, don't you doubt that." He held up a wand. "And that brings us to this. This wand shoots forth a thin, bluish colored ray. The ray paralyzes any creature it touches."

"Master Mortellan, I could not accept such a gift!"

"Of course you can," he said. "Besides, it's not really a gift, it's a loan. I expect to get it back. Moreover, it's not fully charged, so I'm not being all that generous. Bring it back after you've finished your little adventure."

"Thank you." I took the wand.

"Furthermore, I don't need you getting into trouble, of *any* kind" Mortellan continued. "I know the powers of the staff you carry; that's too much 'weapon' for the city. You'll end up in the Citadel, Maldin's staff would be forfeit and I'd get blamed for not keeping an eye on you!" He started laughing again and I joined in.

"But, still, if I'm to use 'honey' with Cyrathas, why the wand?"

"Honey' works best when backed up by 'vinegar,'" Mortellan smiled. "But not the kind of vinegar that kills people. You won't get any answers that way. Now, go talk to Ricard."

My companions were waiting for me in the street when I emerged.

"So, Magician, was your friend able to offer any help?" asked Eileen.

"Indeed he did," I replied. "Help of a material nature and help with sage advice." The vials of *cure disease* were in my *bag of holding* and the wand was tucked inside the left sleeve of my robe.

"Now we head for the Green Dragon Inn," said Wolfsire. "I want to get all this stuff put away, so we can get on over to the thieves' guild-house and complete our business with them."

"Yes, but we have a stop to make along the way," I replied, as I stated walking. "We head up 'The Strip' to Water Street and thence on to the Temple of Pholtus."

"Those fanatics!?" cried Wolfsire.

Ah, a beautiful star filled sky! I'm glad the clouds have gone. And will you look at the way the moonlight glows upon the snow-capped mountains! Hmm? Digressing? What do you mean '*digressing*'? Child, *you* were the one that needed to go the privy! As for the story, well, it seemed that a part of Wolfsire's past was catching up to us and we would soon be embroiled in more than just a search for . . .

## **That Infamous Key**

### **Chapter Five**

"Those fanatics!" cried Wolfsire. "Why in all the nine hells would we want to go there?"

"Fanatics?" asked Eileen.

"Yes!" Wolfsire declared. "I passed through their country on my journey south. They call it 'The Pale.' Trust me, they're all fanatics! They insist that Pholtus is the only 'true god' and that all others are just 'minor aspects' of Pholtus' 'blinding light!'"

"What?" cried Eileen. "Surely they know better?"

"Apparently not!" cried Wolfsire. "I even had to fight off one of their clerics – a fellow named Issak – and four men-at-arms in the town of Hawkburgh! I barely won free of them. They pursued me all the way to the city of Midmeadow, in Nyron; all the while screaming 'pagan!' I lost them there. Hells, I wouldn't be surprised if that Issak fellow doesn't end up being 'Theocrat' one day!"

"The Lady teaches us; 'Dishonesty about your role in the world leads to ruin and disaster.'" Eileen declared. "Such an untruth must be expunged!"

"We don't have time to start a religious war today," I interjected, as we turned onto Horseshoe Road. "Nor any time for religious debates. I need some things that can only be obtained at a temple, and the Temple of Pholtus is the closest one along our route." I looked up. "I want to get this business done while we still have daylight, so the three of you will wait for me in front of the Nightwatchmen's Guildstation."

"What are you going to get?" asked Bubbagump.

"You'll see soon enough," I replied.

We turned onto 'The Strip' with Eileen and Wolfsire still deploring the teachings of Pholtus. The bedlam along the way slowed us just a bit – a particularly annoying group of mimes kept pressing upon us from the left, while a group of jugglers were pressing upon our right – we still managed to make good progress, but only after I tossed each group a *lucky*.

In addition, two young would be thieves – maybe ten, or eleven summers in age – tried to take advantage of the mayhem and snatch Eileen's belt purse. But Bubbagump was keeping an eye on things and managed to foil their amateur attempts without attracting too much unwanted attention to us.

My friends and I finally separated at the corner of Water Street; my companions continuing on to the Guildstation, while I went on to the Temple of Pholtus.

The Temple was not overly large, but it was very sturdily built and a wonder to look upon, constructed as it is of white marble and possessing a symmetrical contour. The very sight of it gave one an 'unsoiled' sort of feeling. Needless to say, it was quite out of place in that neighborhood.

I stepped in and politely waited just inside the door – knowing as I did that the Pholtan's were not overly fond of magic-users. A cleric, some years older than myself, wearing white and silver vestments, approached me.

"Good day to you. I am Brother Arkandy Benris. How may I help you?"

"Good day to you, Brother Benris," I replied, bowing. "I have need of potions which cure disease. Would you have any that I could purchase?"

"The healing power of Pholtus is not for sale!" Boomed out a powerful voice. I turned and saw a younger man approaching us. He stood about five feet, ten inches tall, was clean shaven, with blonde hair and deep blue eyes. He was dressed in chain mail, overlaid with a white tabard adorned with the symbol of Pholtus. His bearing and stride was that of a military man.

"My apologies if I have offended," I replied, placing my hand on my heart and bowing again.

"The offense is in your being in this Temple!" The younger cleric declared.

"Enough!" cried Arkandy Benris. "This is not The Pale, Brother Issak, exercise tolerance!"

"Tolerance?" the young man demanded. "Does not Pholtus say; 'The One True Way is a strict path,' and again, 'Show no tolerance for those who do not give all for the cause of law?' Is it not enough that we have the northern pagans traipsing through our homeland? Must we also allow the 'consorts of demons' into our holy places!?"

"You misapply sacred scripture, Brother Issak," Brother Benris retorted. "For the sacred writings also teach us 'to bring the word to the unbelievers and brook no argument against this practice!' Here in the Free City we have learned to work with all lawful faiths – even magicians who honor 'law' – to do what is necessary to increase 'the Blinding Light.' Your very mission to this city should have already enlightened you in regards to these matters!"

The younger man scowled at this rebuke from the older man, but bowed his head and turned on his heel, striding away into the inner rooms of the Temple.

"You must forgive Brother Issak," said Benris. "He is an idealistic young Templar of our church and only just arrived from our homeland. He is somewhat overzealous, as are most young people."

"I crave your pardon, Brother Benris," I said. "It is not my wish to offend your god."

"Pholtus takes no offense," Benris assured me. "Nor do I. However, young Issak is correct; our services and remedies are not for sale. Rather, they are freely given, but only to worshipers of 'the Blinding Light.' However, our cures may also be shared with other 'lawful' persons, whenever donatives are offered."

"I would be pleased to offer a donation for such kindly assistance," I replied. "As I, too, honor the law."

"You have someone in need of such cure, then?" Benris asked.

"Regrettably, there are several," I sighed. "First one took sick, then another . . ."

"Wait here." Brother Benris walked away and passed through a door near the back of the Temple. I quickly counted out twenty orbs into a spare coin purse. Benris returned within a few minutes. "Each of these vials contains two doses of cure." He handed me three vials.

"I thank Pholtus for his kind generosity," I replied, bowing my head as I accepted the vials. "Would you be so kind as to accept this donation to Pholtus on the behalves of myself and my sick associates?" I handed the cleric the coin purse.

"I am happy to do so," Benris replied, taking the pouch. "May Pholtus' blessings be upon you and your associates and may he of 'the Blinding Light' guide you onto 'the One True Way,' while speeding the recovery of your friends."

(Arkandy Benris is now High Priest of the Greyhawk Temple and still espousing 'the Law.' I've often wondered what he would say if he ever found out that those potions had been used to cure thieves?)

Thanking the cleric again, I departed and hurried to meet my friends.

"About time," said Wolfsire.

I looked at Wolfsire with a smirk on my face.

"Why do you look at Wolfsire like that, Magician?" asked Eileen. "Is something amiss?"

"Not really," I said. "But I met an 'old friend' of Wolfsire's just now."

"A friend of mine?" asked Wolfsire, puzzled.

"Yes," I answered. "A fellow by the name of 'Issak.' He's staying at the Pholtan Temple."

"By Vatun!" cried Wolfsire, spinning about, looking for the cleric. "You mean the fiend's followed me all the way to Greyhawk? After all this time!?"

I laughed and shook my head. "I doubt he's that good a tracker," I started walking. "I was given to understand that he's here on official church business. But it would be well if we avoided him during his visit to the city."

Wolfsire grumbled something and kept looking back over his shoulder. I slapped him on his arm. His head snapped around.

"Keep your mind focused on the business at hand," I said. He 'humphed,' but kept quiet after that.

The Green Dragon Inn is situated at the junction of Cargo and Blue Boar streets and was relatively tranquil when we entered, but then it was still a little before the end of the workday. We had entered a large public taproom which spanned the entire length of the building and most of its width. There were tables of all kinds – large and small, rectangular, round and square – scattered all about the place. There were stairs leading up to a second floor to our left and what could only be a stage off to our right. To the front of us was the bar, with stools ranged along it, taking up most of the back wall. There was a raised area to the right of the bar, with a long, rectangular, mahogany table and a fireplace. Two doors could be seen in the wall behind the bar.

I spotted Ricard seated upon a stool at the left end of the bar. He was exactly as Mortellan had described him. He noticed us as soon as we walked in and so I headed straight for him. I made arrangements for a room, with meals for four, for ten orbs per seven-day. I didn't want to start off by having him think I was looking for special treatment, so it was only after I paid for our rooms that I handed him Mortellan's note. He read it quickly, then looked at me.

"I see," said Ricard. "Well, let me show you to your rooms then."

The stairs stood in the northeast corner and up these we went. At the top landing, we found that the hallway ran left and right along the outer wall of the building. Candles were set in sconces along the walls, but were unlit. Most of the light was presently being provided by the unshuttered windows. We passed along the hallway running down the front of the building and Ricard ushered us into the last door.

We entered the room and found a table and chairs in the middle of the room, with a lantern hanging above; a box of tinder twigs was on the table itself. A single bed stood along the wall to our right and a bunk bed to the left, with a trunk for storage for each. Just inside the door stood a small wood stove, with a scuttle of coal beside it.

Ricard indicated the table and Wolfsire, Eileen and myself took seats there, with Bubbagump perching himself upon a bunk. Ricard closed the outer door and joined us at the table, first using a tinder twig to light the lantern above.

"So, a friend of Mortellan," he said. "Friends of Mortellan are welcome here. How can I help?"

I explained to him the events of the day, without going into as great a detail, as I had with Mortellan.

"Mortellan named this elf 'Cyrathas,' and thought you might be able to supply us with some additional information," I concluded.

Ricard had listened attentively to my narrative and now scratched his chin, rubbing the scar there.

"Yes, I know this 'Cyrathas' fellow," Ricard began. "Given you've already located the hideout, you don't need that information. There are numerous traps and such guarding the place, but I can't tell you the exact nature of them."

"Cyrathas and his men do their drinking here," Ricard continued. "Don't spend much; mostly, they're just looking for 'marks.' Cyrathas thinks he's setting his gang up to rival the Thieves' Guild, but I don't think that's going to happen. They've only been here a few months, according to my sources. An arson, couple of beatings and some minor robberies have been credited to them."

"And the sickness?" I asked.

"Cyrathas has been asking me for some healing potions these last couple of weeks," Ricard said. "Haven't been able to help there. Getting too close to him and his boys would put me in bad with the Guild; Tomas Retak hasn't learned about their operations yet, or he would have already had them eliminated. He's a brute of a man and folks call him 'the Thug.' Looks the part too. If you folks stay here any length of time, one of Tomas' boys will sidle up to you one night and explain 'the rules' to you. So be prepared for that."

"Anyway," Ricard went on. "Cyrathas' lieutenant – a half-elf named Daylin, fancies a rapier – came in a couple days ago, not looking so good. I told him to leave and to keep his boys away from here, so long as they're sick. Cyrathas was in again only this morning, offering good gold for medicine. I think things are getting worse for them."

"Thanks Ricard," I said. "You've been a big help. Now I think its time my friends and I visited Cyrathas and his people."

"Just be careful," Ricard cautioned. "I don't want Mortellan blaming me for your deaths." He stood. "And if you do help Cyrathus' boys, put in a word for me, huh? It don't hurt to have such people owing you a favor." With that, he left us alone.

We did a quick check of our room; no window, three beds and three trunks, a small table with wash basin and pitcher for water against the back wall. A bucket for fetching water was under the table.

Everyone stowed their gear and made sure the trunks were locked – each trunk had a its own key. As we left our room, Bubbagump set a quick trap upon the door and I cast a warding spell. It wasn't much; the spell would cause anyone getting too close to the door to hear voices within. It would only last a couple of hours, but our adventure had caught me ill prepared for such a necessity; it was the best I could do.

We left the Green Dragon and proceeded east along Cargo Street. Just before reaching the City Watch guild-station, we turned onto the dead-end street. It was little more than an alley and went up a small incline, ending at an "L" shaped building. To the right of this building and across a grassy area, stood the Green Dagger hideout. Bubbagump assured the rest of us that he had some skill at skulking and so Eileen, Wolfsire and I waited at the base of the incline while he went to reconnoiter the guild-house

From our position, we could see much of the place. It was a rambling, two story residence in desperate need of repair – but that was true of several of the buildings situated here. The walls were of wood and plaster and they sagged badly. The windows appeared heavily boarded. From our location we could even perceive some large holes in the roof. Towards the back of the house there was a large overhang and it appeared as though some type of stables had been kept there, as Bubbagump had suggested. A large, second story balcony was situated above this area. The building stood beneath the Noble's Wall and not far from the Garden Gate.

Bubbagump soon returned. "The whole place is boarded up tight," he reported. "I don't think we can force our way in through any window, not quietly anyway."

"Then that's not an option," I said. "Is there a back door?"

"Yes, by the stable area, but it appears to be blocked from the inside," the halfling said. "Not locked, mind you, but blocked somehow. But the front door is like new," he added meaningfully.

"Like new?" asked Eileen.

The halfling nodded. "The fittings and handle don't even show the slightest sign of rust or tarnish."

"Well cared for," I said. "Trapped?"

"Undoubtedly," the halfling nodded. "I need a closer look to see if I can get past it. It's awful quiet in there. It's like nobody's around."

"They've spotted us!" Wolfsire spoke in a harsh whisper. "It's an ambush!"

I shook my head. "I doubt it. Mortellan suggested to me that if one member of the gang were sick, likely more of them were. Ricard confirmed that. Cyrathas is likely the only one we need worry about."

"Why only him?" asked Wolfsire.

"He's an elf," Eileen answered him. "Elves are immune to many of the diseases that affect humans."

"Well, you're the cleric," said Wolfsire, acknowledging Eileen's expertise in all such matters.

"So in all likelihood, no one's watching the front very closely," I said. "Let's go take a look at that door."

It was as Bubbagump had described it. He checked out the porch meticulously and found nothing, so we approached the door. Bubbagump gave the door a good looking over, then he smiled.

"It's not a trap, not really," he informed us. "But if we knock on the door, or try to open it, an alarm will sound somewhere in the building."

"Can it be disarmed?" I asked.

"Yes," said Bubbagump. "Just give me a minute."

So Bubbagump went to work, using his own brand of 'magic' on the door. After a minute or so, he turned to us and smiled, flipped the latch and the door swung open. I gave the halfling a big smile and patted him on the shoulder.

"Not bad, Bubbagump," I whispered. "You're quite the little rogue, aren't you?"

He beamed with pride.

"Why don't you go first," I suggested. "And make sure we three don't accidentally trip any other alarms."

Bubbagump nodded and entered the door. Following behind we saw what had once been an imposing entry hall. It was lit by two sputtering torches located in sconces to our left and right. In the dim light we could see that the walls had once been painted with bright frescoes of the city, but these were now covered with thick dust and grime. In the opposite wall we could see a pair of rotting double doors and above them, a crudely painted green dagger. We had found the right place.

Bubbagump was carefully moving about the trash filled room while the three of us waited just inside the door. Two doors in the side walls, one half open, were the only other things to be seen here.

Bubbagump rejoined us and whispered, "There are two peepholes each in the east and west walls. I couldn't see anything – they're too high – but I could hear somebody snoring through the east wall, the west wall was quiet."

"Well, let's go through that door first," I suggested. "And make sure that whoever's sleeping in there, doesn't cause us any trouble."

We moved in that direction and Bubbagump gave the door a close examination. Nodding, he opened the door and revealed a hallway illuminated by a single, spitting torch. We proceeded to the first door, located on the right, and again Bubbagump checked it thoroughly. He opened the door slightly and peeked in. He then lifted one finger, indicating that there was only one person in the room, then indicated to us that this person was sleeping.

Wolfsire tapped Bubbagump on the shoulder, motioning him to move to the side. The big barbarian then advanced into the room; surprisingly quiet for his size. He was on the thief in a

moment and, as the thief opened his eyes, Wolfsire landed a tremendous right hand on the thief's jaw. The thief slumped down.

Close examination revealed a half-elf with a rapier; this was undoubtedly Daylin. Bubbagump searched him and found a vial containing some sort of liquid on Daylin's person then, producing some leather bindings, he tied the half-elf tightly to his chair. A quick examination showed me that the liquid was a potion which would remove fear from the imbiber.

Eileen bent over and examined the thief. "It appears this is something to which his human blood is susceptible, he's sick, just as Ricard suspected."

"I'm prepared for that," I said. "Mortellan gave me some potions to cure disease and I procured others at the Temple of Pholtus." I handed her a vial.

"This is a double portion," she said.

"They all are," I replied.

"Hold his nose," she instructed Wolfsire, who complied. Then she poured the potion into the half-elf's mouth. With his nose held, he was compelled to swallow. After administering the potion, Daylin was gagged.

"I'm surprised we were able to sneak up on an elf," said Wolfsire. "Even a half-elf."

"His illness no doubt impaired his abilities," said Eileen. "Otherwise, I don't think we would have."

"Probably not," I agreed, thinking of Mortellan. "Let's see who else we can find and what kind of condition they're in."

I suggested that we continue down the hall, ensuring that our 'rear' was clear of any threat. There were a set of double doors on the left, a single door on the right and another at the end of the hall. Bubbagump looked to me and I pointed to the door on the right. After a close examination, he discovered the trap.

It took the halfling a couple of minutes – which seemed like hours – to disarm the device. He wiped his forehead when he finished and looking at me, he pointed up. We each looked up and could just discern a small tap door – something would have fallen on top of anyone opening that door.

We quickly stepped into the room and closed the door behind us. It was an armory, of sorts. There were various weapons – swords, daggers, crossbows and caltrops – some armor, two smoke sticks, a rope with grappling hook and four vials filled with liquid. After close scrutiny, I determined what the vials were; two filled with *acid* and two filled with *alchemist fire*. I pocketed these.

Bubbagump was delighted over finding two complete sets of thieves tools and took a set for himself. Then, even more excitedly, he grabbed a hand crossbow. There was a small belt quiver

for the bolts and he attached it to his own belt. Certainly a better weapon than his sling, especially inside the hideout.

"Take the rope and hook," I told Wolfsire. "And the smoke sticks, they may come in handy."

He put them in his pack and we exited the room.

The door at the end of the hallway wasn't trapped, but a horrendous odor issued forth as soon as the door was opened. A very recently used and stopped-up privy was revealed and the door was instantly closed to prevent further gagging.

The double doors were likewise not trapped and opened onto a large room with a magnificent staircase on the north wall. A great crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling in the middle of the room and was covered in dust and cobwebs. I reached past Bubbagump and quietly closed the door.

"The only way out of that room is up the stairs," I whispered. "And we're not ready to go 'up' just yet. Let's examine the rest of this floor."

My companions nodded agreement and we proceeded back down the hallway. Wolfsire peeked in at our prisoner and indicated that he was still 'out.' We re-entered the entry hall and proceeded to the door in the west wall. After a careful inspection, Bubbagump opened the door and we entered another hallway.

The first door, on the left, was examined and Bubbagump opened it. A human body lay within, its eyes swollen shut. The man wore leather armor and a small crossbow lay on his lap. Eileen moved to examine the corpse.

"This poor man died of dehydration," she said, after a moment. "His illness left him too weak to even call out for help."

Bubbagump removed a pouch from the corpse's belt; it contained eighteen orbs. We continued down the hall.

The next door, on the right, proved to be a mess hall and it stank. A long table dominated the room, surrounded by patch-work chairs and covered with broken and crack plates and bowls, still covered with half-eaten, rotting food. A green dagger was painted in the center of the table. Upon closer investigation of the room itself, Bubbagump found a secret door in the north wall.

I indicated that we would save that for later and we went back out into the hallway. There were two doors remaining, after which the hallway turned left. I pointed to the door on our left. Another check and it was opened . . . sort of. The door would not open all the way. Bubbagump peeked through.

"It's chock full of garbage and broken furniture," he reported.

He closed the door and turned his attention to the door across the hall. As soon as he opened it, we were awash in a fetid stench. It was the kitchen; a work table covered with rotting food and swarming with flies lay along the far wall. A cold fire pit stood in the corner amidst broken pots and clay crockery. We decided not to enter this room and turned the corner of the hall. Piled up furniture blocked a door at the end.

"Let's clear that doorway," I said. "In case we need another way out."

The blockage was soon cleared and the door opened. Everyone stepped outside for a breath of fresh air . . . and that's when we were attacked!

Well, hello there 'Slinky!' I wondered where you had gotten off to! Hmm? 'Missy' did what? Dear girl, why ever did you put 'Slinky' in a cage? That's no way to treat your familiar! Well, of course, he gets into everything, he's a weasel! What did you expect? 'Slinky,' you just curl up on my shoulder while I tell 'Missy' more about . . .

## **That Infamous Key**

### **Chapter Six**

Stirges attacked us as soon as we were outside.

Eileen threw up her shield to ward off one of the attackers, while Bubbagump sought refuge behind her. The halfling was trying to take aim with his new hand crossbow, but the giant insects were too quick.

Wolfsire used the flat of his axe blade to swat one of the creatures, it was crushed by the blow and fell dead at his feet.

I had managed to catch the one attacking me by its proboscis and held onto it with all my strength while trying to bludgeon it with my staff. The insect was stronger than I would have imagined and thrashed about valiantly against my single-handed grip. Between its relentless struggling and its small, pincer-like claws scratching at my arm, I would soon have lost my grip, so dropping my staff I grabbed it with both hands.

The power of its wings knocked me against the wall of the building, while its hind claws scrapped at my chest; fortunately the wards of my robe protected me. Still, even using both hands to fend the creature off, I was on the verge of losing my grip when, at that very moment, a small bolt shot through the stirge's body. Its struggles eased and then ceased altogether; I dropped it. Looking down, I saw Bubbagump reloading his hand crossbow. I nodded my thanks to him.

One of the creatures was still trying to get at Eileen, who was doing her best to keep it at bay with her shield, all the while striking at it with her mace. Wolfsire faced a fourth creature, whirling his great axe before him in a crisscross fashion, but the creature was too nimble, darting about upon its wings.

Wolfsire's attacker momentarily backed off and so he made a backhand swing at the pest assailing Eileen, but missed. Even so, the stirge turned to face its new attacker and that's when Eileen's mace struck home, splattering the insect.

As the last stirge returned to the attack, Wolfsire spun to meet it, bashing it with his shield. The stunned creature fell to the earth, whereupon Wolfsire stomped on its head, a move he immediately regretted: "Damn!"

"Yuck!" Eileen chimed in, as she wiped her mace on some straw.

Wolfsire was doing the same with his boot, while Bubbagump cleaned the bolt he had retrieved from the insect he had killed.

"Ooo!" I looked down at the sound to see that Bubbagump had found a *lucky*. The coin was undoubtedly dropped by someone as they were attacked by the stirges. The halfling looked up at me.

"Keep it," I told him; he was delighted. "Alright, if everyone's ready, we'll go back to that dining room and check out the secret door."

Back into the building we went, straight to the mess hall. Strangely enough, there was still no indication that anyone had yet become aware of our presence, in spite of the sounds of our battle. So Bubbagump opened the hidden door. What lay beyond was a large room and the reason for the lack of resistance to our presence. The smell of sickness hung heavily in the air.

There was a row of double bunk beds set along the north wall and five bodies could be seen lying upon them; the room was their barracks. We cautiously entered and approached the bedridden thieves, ready for anything, but none rose to confront us.

I pointed to a door visible in the east wall and Wolfsire quickly posted himself to guard it. Bubbagump began to examine the room itself and Eileen went to check the condition of the thieves.

"This one is comatose," she said.

She poured her remaining dose of cure into his mouth while holding his nose, forcing him to swallow. I promptly joined her, handing her another vial of the cure. I opened one of my own and began pouring it into the mouth of a second thief. Eileen moved to a third thief and I to a fourth.

Bubbagump came to my side to report. "There's practice dummies and straw targets spread around," he said. "There's some pretty good locks and trap triggers for practicing on too."

The thief squirmed beneath me and murmured something about 'the boss killing us.' I ignored him and poured cure down his throat, he choked but swallowed the potion all the same.

"Anything else?" I asked Bubbagump.

"I found these in one of the chests," he replied.

He handed me two clay vials and one iron flask. Inspection showed that the vials were more *alchemist fire* and the flask was a *potion of invisibility*. I added them to my *bag of holding*. Eileen finished administering cure to the last thief.

"What do you think?" I asked her.

"Soon now," Eileen answered. "The potion works fairly quickly. They will still need time to recuperate and will remain weak for a few days, but they are no longer in immediate danger of dying. All except this one." She pointed to the comatose thief.

Wolfsire had begun walking towards us when the door he had been guarding burst open and two large mastiffs charged into the room! One of the beast leapt at Wolfsire, but the north-man was anything but slow. Spinning on the balls of his feet, he turned to meet the beast and swung his great-axe with all his considerable strength.

His axe met the animal just as its fore paws struck Wolfsire's chest. The dog was severed almost in half by the assault, but the momentum of the attack carried the mastiff forward so that it struck Wolfsire full on, causing the barbarian to stagger backwards.

The second beast leapt at me. With a prayer to Boccob on my lips, I raised my staff and held it in a horizontal position in the hopes of jamming it into the dog's mouth. But just before the animal reached me, there was a blur of movement from the side; it was Eileen. She slammed into the large dog with her shield, knocking it away from me.

As the animal landed on its side, a bolt suddenly appeared in its flank; Bubbagump had scored a hit. But the mastiff regained its feet quickly, even more angry than before. Eileen managed to score a hit with her mace, striking the beast on its shoulder as it charged her, but it was the giant dog's turn to knock Eileen down.

She landed on her back, but with enough presence of mind to insure that her shield was between her and the dog. The mastiff's fore paws were on the shield, its weight bearing down on the cleric, its slavering jaws snapping at her face.

Wolfsire had quickly regained his balance and charged the animal. His axe blade hung down from his hand and he swung it upwards from the floor as he charged. The great blade caught the mastiff in its midsection and sliced upwards. Entrails and blood erupted from the wound, splattering Eileen. The dog was flung from off her and landed against the southern wall; dead.

Daylin staggered into the doorway, rapier in hand. He had managed to get loose of his bonds somehow and was recovered just enough to set the guard dogs upon us. He leaned heavily on the door jamb.

"Who are you?" he demanded in a weak voice. "No one may violate the sanctity of our guild-house!"

I approached him with my free hand raised, palm outward. "We mean no harm. We have administered a cure to all of your sick – all that we have found still alive – yourself included."

"I can feel it," Daylin admitted. "But why would you do this?"

"We need to speak with Cyrathas," I replied. "We thought that the best way to accomplish that was to prove ourselves 'friends' to you."

Daylin began to sag forward. Wolfsire dropped his axe and lunged towards the half-elf, catching and easing him into a sitting position on the floor. I signaled to Bubbagump to search the next room and then knelt beside Daylin.

"Here, drink this," I told him, removing another vial from my pouch. "The first potion we gave you cured the disease you carried, but it did not heal the damage already done to your body. This potion will do that."

After Daylin drank, I stood and went to speak with Eileen. She was busily wiping gore from her armor, but looked up as I approached. "You alright?" I asked.

"Yes." she replied. "I'm fine, if a bit messy."

I smiled and handed her the half-empty vial of healing potion.

"Give the rest of this to the comatose fellow," I said. "Maybe it will improve his chances."

"It will greatly improve his chances," Eileen agreed.

Bubbagump returned with some sort of square object in his hand.

"I didn't find any traps," the halfling reported. "But I found this; a picture frame made of silver!"

It was finely wrought and obviously worth a considerable amount.

"Will it fit into your magic bag?" Bubbagump asked.

"It will," I answered, placing the frame into my *bag of holding*.

I then returned to Wolfsire and Daylin. The half-elf was standing now, still a little shaky, but obviously stronger. Wolfsire had taken a blanket and was following Eileen's example in attempting to clean himself off.

"How are you feeling?" I asked Daylin.

"Better," Daylin replied. "Much better. I still don't understand why you did this, or how you knew."

"Ricard informed us of your illness," I replied. "We went to him, seeking information and he directed us to you."

"That still doesn't tell me why you need to talk to Cyrathas," Daylin said, "But you have done us a great service, so I'll take you to him." He started out the door, moving slowly. I took his arm, to steady him.

"My thanks, Daylin," I said.

He stopped and turned his head to look at me. "You know my name, you did your homework."

"Knowledge is power, my friend."

Daylin guided us out into what was once a lavish reception hall. Light filtered in through a high, boarded up window and it was easy to see that the room was now a complete mess. Broken furniture littered the center of the room, piled atop a once fine carpet. We then passed through what used to be a sitting room and two large statues of a portly merchant stared down at us from alcoves to either side.

We exited through the now open rotted doors back out into the entry hall.

"Down that hallway," I pointed. "There's another one of your men in a room similar to the one in which we found you. He's dead."

Daylin merely nodded his head and lead us into the hallway where his hiding spot had been. Down this hall we went, to the double doors that hid the grand staircase we had seen earlier. Daylin opened the doors and motioned us to wait.

Entering the room, he ascended the stairs to the first landing and called for someone named 'Dalta.' He was soon joined by a human female about as tall as himself, with curly brown hair, leather armor and an assortment of weaponry. They spoke for a few moments and then Daylin waved us forward.

"This is Dalta Gwyn," Daylin introduced her. "She hasn't been feeling well for the last couple of days herself. Can you help her too?"

"Of course," I said, taking another vial of cure from my pouch. "Here, drink half of this." I handed her the vial and she drank.

"You will still need rest in order to recuperate," said Eileen. "But you will no longer be infected with the sickness."

"Are there any others?" I asked.

"Just three," Daylin said. "But only two who need help. The halfling twins, Tisa and Risa Tyran."

"Of course," I said. "Cyrathas is an elf and has no need of our assistance in that regard."

"You know a great deal about us," Dalta said.

I smiled, as I repeated myself. "Knowledge is power."

(I was beginning to mimic my Master, Maldin. I've long since come to realize that I like the sound of my own voice, too!)

We proceeded up the stairs and entered into a short hallway with a blue, threadbare rug lining the floor. Except for two grimy chairs sitting in front of the doors directly across from us, there was nothing note worthy in the hall, save another door to our left; oddly enough that door had cotton wadding stuffed all around its edges. We went to none of these doors however, turning right instead and passing through a set of double doors leading out onto a walkway straddling the rooftop. We crossed this path to yet another set of doors.

"Wait here," said Daylin.

He rapped out some sort of code on the door and passed through into the room beyond, while Dalta remained with us. Daylin re-emerged a few minutes later. "Come in," he said.

We entered a room overflowing with curtains, each hanging about a foot off of the floor. Evenly spaced wooden pillars could just be discerned throughout the room, with pieces of green cloth hung between them. The curtains were billowing in the breeze coming through the doorway.

Two halflings stood before us; the twins. Both appeared relatively pale, with perspiration upon their brows. I did not ask which was which, Eileen and I simply administered potions of cure to each of them. Eileen admonished them to rest, as she had Dalta, and we continued on our way.

Daylin lead us to the north wall and another cleverly concealed door. We entered into a hidden hallway and proceeded along this route to the west, then southward and on into a small room. Daylin had us wait while he approached a door and pulled on a cord hanging to the left of it. He spoke into a brass horn on the wall, then passed through the door. Dalta and the twins remained with us, keeping their eyes on us no doubt. No one spoke.

It was some few minutes before the door finally opened again and Daylin waved us forward. We entered a spacious, luxuriously appointed room with new, richly colored tapestries hung upon the walls and finely woven rugs covered the floor. What could only be a throne, made of fine wood and gilded with gold and silver filigree, adorned the southeast corner.

(I remember that the room looked quite opulent indeed, but when it came to thieves you could never be too sure just what is real and what is fake.)

Of course, the throne was not empty; Cyrathas sat upon it. He was of a size with Mortellan and, as I suspected, another High Elf. He had closely cropped blonde hair and blue eyes – his short hair was unusual for an elf. His clothes were superbly made and of the finest materials; a mixture of blues and greens inlaid with gemstones.

"Daylin tells me that you have been of considerable assistance to us," Cyrathas began. He sounded relieved. "Though you aided us in an admittedly peculiar fashion. I can only express my gratitude to you for your help and to Ricard for sending you to us."

"We were glad to help," I replied. "But in truth, master Cyrathas, we came for our own purposes."

"Yes, so I have been told," Cyrathas acknowledged. "But why aid us? Why not simply come in demanding answers? We were in no real position to resist a group such as yours. In addition, one

of your ilk recently betrayed me, very recently. I find it all very strange. You stand before me only because I, too, require information. You are an enigma, Magician."

I smiled. "To quote my Master, 'You catch more flies with honey, than with vinegar.' To aid you, was to aid myself."

"And who is your master?" Cyrathas asked.

"The Arch-mage Maldin," I replied.

"I see," said Cyrathas. "Him, I've heard of. A wise man, this Maldin. So, what is it that you seek?"

My smile broadened, "A key!"

Cyrathas burst out with mirthless laughter. "I should have known! That key has become my bane! It all revolves around that damnable key, or rather, with the arrival of that damn cleric of Boccob who wanted the key! Now there is a mystery for you Magician and one which I would know the solution to." He looked at me pensively. "Are you here, then, seeking reprisals?"

Cyrathas still sat upon his throne, with Daylin standing beside him, but Dalta and the twins were arrayed behind us. I understood this precaution and was not unduly alarmed by it.

"No, we have no interest in any meaningless retaliation," I replied. "We only seek the key's return."

Cyrathas regarded me thoughtfully, then finally nodded. "For some reason, I believe you."

"It began with a 'cleric of Boccob,'" I repeated. "And so it is that you say 'one of my ilk,' betrayed you."

"That is so," agreed Cyrathas. "Still, you have supplied us with much needed aid, Magician, when none other could be found and so I will tell you all."

And he did.

It was about two weeks ago that his gang members began falling ill. No one knew the cause of the illness, or how the disease was spread among them. No one they had come into contact with outside of their own group had taken ill, or was known to have been ill previously. So the origin of the sickness remained a mystery.

"This tells me that you probably ingested it," interrupted Eileen. "It was no doubt something your people ate, or drank. Throw out all the food you have remaining and buy new food stuffs. And replace your water as well; throw out your old water cask and buy new ones."

"Thank you, cleric," said Cyrathas. "I will have my people do that."

Cyrathas continued his narrative. He had tried getting help for his men, with the assistance of Ricard, but nothing had come of it. His little group was becoming known in the area and help of the kind they needed was hard to find. Two days ago, a Boccobian cleric named Veltargo came to the Green Daggers offering them a cure for the disease afflicting them in exchange for the stealing of Theldrat Meldorp's key.

How the Boccobian had known of their illness, or even how to find them, Cyrathas did not know. The illness had finally reached critical levels among his men, keeping him too busy and too befuddled to ask such obvious questions of the cleric at the time. He simply grasped at the offer of help as a drowning man grasps at a floating piece of drift wood.

But the group, being decimated by the illness, was unable to carry out the theft themselves and so Cyrathas had hired a half-orc named Irontusk – a person he had used before – to do the job. The key had been delivered to Cyrathas this very morning and within the hour, he had in turn delivered it to Veltargo, in exchange for what the cleric claimed was a cure. But the cure hadn't worked.

Cyrathas had cursed Veltargo and sworn vengeance against him in the name of Kurell – 'The Vengeful Knave.' In his desperation Cyrathas had approached Ricard again – just a few hours ago – but, according to Ricard, there was still no help to be found. And that's when we arrived.

"Can you describe this cleric?" I asked.

"He is a thin, balding human, beardless, with brown, almost 'muddy' eyes," said Cyrathas. "The most noteworthy thing about him was his grubbiness. His vestments were extremely sullied for a cleric. His finger nails too, were jet black and crusted with dirt. His teeth were yellowed and unusually crooked. All in all, a very filthy cleric is this 'Veltargo.'"

I spread my arms and turned upon my heels displaying my own fine robes and obvious personal hygiene, for all to see. "You describe a rather unusual costume, for a cleric of Boccob." I observed. "Anything else you can tell me?"

"Yes, there is one other thing," Cyrathas continued. "This morning, he had in his possession a rather large book."

"A book?" I asked.

"Yes," Cyrathas answered. "A large, leather bound book with a locked clasp folded over the cover."

"I thank you, Cyrathas," I said. "You've given me much needed information and set me upon another path for investigation."

"Then you know more than I've told you," Cyrathas said.

I shrugged. "I simply have a piece of this puzzle that you do not, because of information I already hold."

Cyrathas nodded again. "I would very much like to know the answer to this riddle, Magician. Perhaps you can tell me what this was all about, when it's over."

"I don't see any reason why I shouldn't," I replied.

"Before you go, I have something for you." Cyrathas stood and moved to the back of his throne.

I saw Wolfsire tense and gave him a small shake of my head. I heard a latch click and hinges squeak as a chest was opened. Cyrathas bent down and rummaged through the unseen chest. He stood and came back around to the front of his throne. He held out a large sapphire to me.

"Only this morning I offered Ricard one hundred *orbs* for his help," said Cyrathas. "This sapphire is worth that. Take it, in payment for what you have done for us."

"Thank you, Cyrathas." I said. "The gem is appreciated, but I would much prefer the right to seek out the Green Daggers at some future time, should I have need of more information."

Cyrathas nodded. "Granted, for I also wish a favor." He then held out a second sapphire. "Somehow, I doubt I shall act out my own, personal revenge upon Veltargo," said Cyrathas. "You have handled your first meeting with the Green Daggers with considerable skill and well thought out finesse. You have both power and cunning. I do not think Veltargo's going to survive his meeting with you. So I give you this gem and all I ask in return is that you tell Veltargo that 'I' sent you."

I put the gems into our communal purse. "I shall most gladly do so."

"Good," said Cyrathas. "Dalta will show you out. Take care, Magician. I hope to see you again, if only to hear the end of this tale."

I bowed and we departed, Dalta leading us back out into the street. It was nearly sundown when we emerged from the building.

"What now?" asked Wolfsire.

"To the Green Dragon," I said. "You and Eileen undoubtedly want to wash the gore from yourselves and your armor. And I've already paid Ricard for our room and meals. Let's eat!"

"Yes!" cried Bubbagump. "It's about time too! I'm starving! This morning we missed 'second breakfast' and 'brunch' and then we missed 'afternoon tea!' We're only just now going to eat dinner and soon it'll be time for supper! I don't know how you 'too tall's' get so big missing so many meals!"

We three 'too tall's' laughed at that statement as we made our way to the Inn.

(Yawn) My but it is getting on. Perhaps I should finish my tale another time? (Snort) Old age indeed! Older than you I might be girly, but I am not *that* old! You just pour me another goblet of that excellent cider and pass me another one of Mrs. Hildegard's devilishly delicious muffins – you'd like another one too, hey Slinky – and I'll tell you a bit more of my search for . . .

## **That Infamous Key**

### **Chapter Seven**

We found the Green Dragon Inn crowded upon our return, but like any good landlord Ricard saw us the moment we entered. He waved to one of his serving girls and she hurried over to us. She was older than what one might have expected in a serving girl, a beautiful woman, just a couple of inches shorter than I, with straw colored hair and hazel eyes; eyes which spoke of experience beyond her years.

"Good evening Magician, my name is Lindara. Ricard told me to take good care of you and your friends. Would you like to eat?"

I looked to Wolfsire and Eileen.

"Food first," Wolfsire said. "Wash later." Eileen nodded assent.

"Yes," I replied to Lindara. "We would."

She lead us to the table nearest the stage and therefore nearest to the 'Lord's Table,' where Ricard held court over his Inn. We had the table to ourselves and ordered four ales along with our meal.

When Lindara returned she was accompanied by another young woman, slender, perhaps five feet, three inches tall, with auburn hair and brown eyes and who couldn't possibly weigh more than one hundred pounds. This woman introduced herself as Imogen Gellet. Imogen appeared to be in her twenties, but something about her eyes made me think she was older than that.

The two women carried between them four tin plates, four leather jacks of ale, a loaf of bread, a bowl of butter, a large platter of steaming vegetables and another one of cheeses and fruit. They set eating utensils before us and then a girl arrived carrying a large platter laden with succulent variations of meat and fowl. She was introduced to us as Birgit and she appeared friendly and outgoing. Finished serving, the girls departed and we settled down to enjoy our repast.

"Magician, when speaking with Cyrathas you allowed him to give more credit to Ricard than was actually warranted," said Eileen. "Why so?"

"Because Ricard wanted Cyrathas to owe him a favor," I replied around a mouth full of the green and ivory marbled Wickler cheese. "Now Cyrathas thinks he does. In return Ricard owes *us* a favor, as does Cyrathas." I swallowed. "Earlier today you implied that I would be adventuring with you and Wolfsire, yes?"

"This is true," admitted Eileen. "The Lady of Our Fate tells us; 'Everything is connected to each other by invisible strands.' And again she says; 'The perceptive can come to understand these strands and watch them to predict the future.' You must accept your destiny, Magician!"

"Far be it from me to debate religion with you," I replied, holding up my hand in surrender. "But if this is so, then we need to establish our own contacts and resources of information and not continually rely upon those of my Master, or of Mortellan." I continued after sipping some the Furyondy white wine. "We know that Ricard is a good source of information. And you might be surprised by just how much a thief knows, most people would; thieves traffic in information. So, by letting Cyrathas think what he will, we now have two good sources of information, each of them owing us a favor."

"That's smart, Magician," said Wolfsire, wagging a haunch of beef at me. "So, where do we go from here?"

"We relax and enjoy ourselves this evening," I said. "Here try some of the Wickler. It's a cheese we make in the Yeomanry, my homeland. You'll enjoy it, I'm sure." I handed the barbarian a large chunk of it.

"That Imogen girl keeps looking at you," Bubbagump interrupted.

I casually looked her way and caught her glance, but there was nothing flirtatious about it. "Don't read too much into it," I told the halfling. "I think she's trying to decide whether or not we're easy 'marks.'"

"Trouble?" asked Wolfsire. He and Eileen looked Imogen's way.

"Not if we watch ourselves," I answered. "The Thieves' Guild uses serving girls as lookouts in places like this, hunting for dupes, or 'marks.' Just be careful what you say when she's within hearing distance."

I turned the topic back to our original discussion. "In the morning, we go to the Great Library and then on to the Temple of Boccob. I have an acquaintance there who might possibly have some information we can use."

"In fact," I leaned forward and my companions leaned in to hear my words, mindful of Imogen's presence. "He once shared a small secret with me, one that makes me think he's inadvertently involved in this matter." I held up my finger, "Not directly, mind you."

Sitting back again, I continued. "And there was that commotion at the Library just last night. You may recall the Watch's questioning of us?" I shrugged as I reached for one of the roasted squabs.

"Of course, it may be that neither inquiry will provide us with any helpful information, but it just might be that they will. We'll see."

"It never occurred to me to connect the two events," Eileen said as she tore apart a small loaf of bread and began slathering it with butter, adding it to her small collection of cheeses and fruits.

"The secret is to never forget," I replied.

"Never forget what?" Bubbagump managed to mumble around a mouth full of mushrooms.

"Anything," I replied, looking fondly upon my small, hungry friend. "Never forget anything. 'Knowledge is power.' Never forget anything."

\* \* \* \*

The morning dawned clear and fine, not too hot and not too cold. Just what one would expect of the fifteenth day of Patchwall. Last evening I had studied a spell more adequate for the warding of our room and having cast the spell, I joined my friends downstairs where we broke our fast.

We soon left the Inn and headed east down Cargo Street towards The Processional. I decided to make the Great Library our first stop. A suspicion had been growing within my mind and I wanted to verify it.

The traffic was moderately heavy, given the lateness of the hour at which we finally got started, but that didn't overly concern me, for 'haste' was our enemy now. Careful study and preparation was needed if we were to succeed. The Green Dragon was located in a somewhat residential area and many people were headed to the docks and their jobs at this time of the morning, thus the traffic.

We turned right onto The Processional and found that there were relatively few vendors or performers in this particular block. Given that we were passing the large, stately buildings of Grey College most of the pedestrian traffic along this stretch of road was made up of students, many of whom did not have two *nobles* to rub together. Of course, much of the city's commercial traffic regularly passed along The Processional, so it wasn't completely devoid of those looking to snatch a quick *orb*.

There was a bard at the corner of The Processional and Horseshoe Road playing a *Zither* while a trained monkey danced to his tune. Amused passersby would give the animal a coin and the creature would place it in the bard's cap, lying upon the ground. We stopped to observe the show for a few minutes. Eileen was delighted by the little creature and laughingly handed the monkey a *noble*. Enjoying our new found wealth, we each followed her example enriching the bard with four *nobles*.

We proceeded on our way, passing by the Silver Dragon and the Old Mill and finally reaching the Millstream. Along the way we were amused by a juggler, a sword-swallower, a fire-eater, hawkers of all kinds and a troop of acrobats. Bubbagump just had to stop and watch the acrobats. They had erected two platforms – perhaps ten feet off of the ground – and had stretched a rope between

them. One of the acrobats was holding a pole in his hands and was walking across this rope – from platform to platform.

"Wow! A trick like that could come in handy!" exclaimed Bubbagump. I smiled as I recalled his considerable thieving abilities.

We continued across the Millstream and turned left onto The Millway, a street which ran along the bank of the Millstream and which eventually forked into University Street. University forms a giant horseshoe through the Clerkgburg, looping around the Free City Arena.

A short distance from the intersection of The Processional and the Millway we encountered a woman selling meat-pies from the back of a small push-cart. Having broken our fast not long since, Eileen and I were not hungry, but Wolfsire and Bubbagump decided to give her pies a try. After the initial bite, they both praised her product around mouthfuls of food and both chose to purchase another pie! Eileen and I simply looked at one another with mouths agape and shook our heads in wonder. Perhaps this is what Bubbagump had meant by 'second breakfast.'

We continued up the Millway to the point where it intersected with College Road. The Millway passed along the northern side of the pyramid of the University of Magical Arts, while College Road ran southward along the western side of the pyramid and then curved back to the east.

A group of raucous students were standing in the intersection of College Road and Apprentice Walk. We were passing by Gnarleyhouse, the largest and most notorious student fraternity in the Clerkgburg. The yard was covered with weeds and piles of broken furniture and the building itself was in serious disrepair, with windows boarded up and tiles missing from the roof. Not all of these young hoodlums were actually attending school however and those few that did usually attended the lax tutorial schools found in the area.

At first, I thought they would attempt to bar our path, since the 'Gnarleys' – as they call themselves – reveled in harassing small groups of people, but Wolfsire was not unused to such situations and his demeanor clearly showed that he would brook no nonsense from them. His weapons and armor backed-up the look and so the small knot of young men cleared a path and we proceed past them unmolested . . . almost.

One of these young hooligans made a rather ribald remark directed towards Eileen. Quicker than the eye could follow Wolfsire turned and grabbed the young man by his shirt front, hoisting him up over his head and throwing the malefactor into a group of his fellows, knocking them sprawling into the street.

"You had best learn to respect your betters," Wolfsire warned them. "Otherwise I'll have to teach you a harder lesson than this one."

The 'Gnarleys' just lay there, saying nothing. They weren't used to their intended victims responding in such a manner. So, leaving them in the street, we continued on our way, passing by the Avenue of the Fountains where other students were to be seen moving up and down the street – along with a few teachers – which was to be expected since we were passing by the School of Clerkship.

There was another intersection just a little ways ahead of us, this was a three-way junction of College Road, the Street of Temples and Eastwall Street. It was at this spot that we would find both the Great Library and the Temple of Boccob. The Temple of Boccob sat on the corner of the intersection closest to us, with the Great Library being situated on the opposite corner. As we passed the Temple, we could see a group of the City Watch standing outside talking with several members of the clergy.

"What's going on there?" asked Eileen.

"Veltargo," I replied. "The false cleric of Boccob."

"What do you mean?" asked Wolfsire.

"He carried a book on his last visit with Cyrathas," I said.

"What does that mean?" asked Bubbagump.

"There was a theft at the Great Library," I replied. "The City Watch asked us about it. We discussed it last night, remember? What would a thief steal from the Library, except a book? Veltargo was dressed as a cleric of Boccob. The City Watch is looking for the cleric that stole the book."

"Last night, you implied that the two events might be connected," Eileen said.

"So I did," I admitted. "But we still have to verify my conjectures. Let's get to the Library, we'll start there and avoid the Watch for now."

The Library building is an imposing structure of massive granite walls and towering columns adorning the front of the building. Three wide stair-ways lead up to a pair of magnificent bronze doors, which could easily adorn a castle, or fortress.

The Library is opened to the general public during daylight hours, but it appeared that was not the case today. Two men stood in front of the doors, with arms crossed and stern looks upon their faces. One of them was familiar to me, Geraal Wistroan, a fellow with whom I had a 'nodding' acquaintance. My companions and I ascended the steps and approached them.

"The Library is closed until further notice," intoned Wistroan.

"Good morning, Wistroan," I replied.

"The Library is closed until further notice," Wistroan repeated.

"Yes," I replied. "I heard you the first time."

"Well, then, bugger off!" Wistroan exclaimed.

"Why is the Library closed?" I asked.

"That's none of your business!" Wistroan shouted. "Now bugger off!"

"No, I don't think so," I replied.

Wistroan was about to retort when one of the great bronze doors began to open. Gratus Saghast, the head librarian stepped out of the door.

"Geraal, why are you yelling?" he demanded.

"These people won't leave, sir," Wistroan answered.

Gratus looked us over and then concentrated upon me. "Why, this is Master Maldin's apprentice!" He turned to Wistroan. "It is very impolite of you to yell at such a distinguished young gentleman, Geraal." He raised his hand to forestall Wistroan's response. "Never mind, I'll speak to the young magician, myself." He turned back to me.

"Good morning, master Saghast," I said, bowing.

"Good morning, Magician," he replied. "How is your master?"

"He is well, sir."

"I'm sorry to say that we are a bit confounded this morning," Saghast said. "There has been great mischief here recently."

"Actually, that's the reason we are here, master Saghast," I said. "I believe we have come across information concerning a theft that recently occurred here."

"You know about that?" Saghast asked, astounded.

"Indeed, I do," I replied. "My friends and I were questioned by the City Watch early yesterday about a 'theft' that occurred at the Library,"

"Oh, I see," said Saghast, now nonplussed.

"We were engaged to investigate a completely different theft, which occurred in the Foreign Quarter," I continued. "But I have come across information that leads me to believe that the two thefts are connected. During our investigation, we learned that a very odd cleric of Boccob was involved in the Foreign Quarter affair. It seems that this strange cleric was seen with a large, clasped, leather bound book just a short time after the 'commotion' here took place."

Saghast was thunderstruck. "Great Delleb! Such a book *was* stolen from here! And by a cleric of Boccob! It happened just before the Library opened! One of my young scholars – who had been up all night doing research for me – saw a cleric dressed in the vestments of Boccob running through the Library and clutching a book to his chest! The young man cried out and gave pursuit, but the thief dove through an open window and disappeared into the city!"

"I take it the book is valuable?" I asked.

"Unquestionably," admitted Saghast. "All knowledge is sacred to 'The Scholar.' But an exact price could never be placed upon the book, for none know what subject matter the book may speak on. The clasp is magical you see and has defied *all* attempts at opening it, so no one has read the book in recent memory. Some of the most powerful magicians in the city have tried, including your master."

"My Master?" It was my turn to be surprised.

"Yes," Saghast replied. "He has tried to open the book for us as have others, but it has all been to no avail."

"You have been most helpful, master Saghast," I thanked him. "We will take our leave now. I believe that we are on the trail of your stolen book, but we must seek elsewhere for further clues."

"It sounds as though you have uncovered quite a bit already!" Saghast exclaimed. "Certainly more than our exalted Constabulary has. You must continue your search young man, for 'The Scribe' has surely blessed your efforts. And know that the Library is offering a very large reward for the return of the book; one thousand *orbs*!"

My associates gasped at the amount, but thanks to my Master's training, I managed to maintain my composure . . . barely.

"That is most generous, master Saghast," I responded. "Rest assured that we shall do our very best to recover the book." My companions and I took our leave and started across the street.

"So, the two thefts are tied to one another!" exclaimed Wolfsire. "A thousand gold pieces! Magician, you were right! This adventure is netting us far more than the twenty *orbs* Meldorp promised us!"

"How much is that for each of us?" Bubbagump was just as excited.

"Two hundred and fifty gold pieces each," Eileen answered him.

"Calm yourselves, my friends," I admonished them, though I could feel the excitement building inside me as well. "We must stay focused. We still have to recover the key *and* the book. Yes, the two thefts are obviously connected and that bodes ill." The thought was a sobering one. "This is no ordinary book which Veltargo has stolen and I offer the size of the reward as evidence of this. And we now know with certainty that it is no ordinary key for which we search."

"Veltargo is hoping that the stolen key will open this book," observed Eileen. "That means it can only be a magical key of some kind."

"Yes," I agreed. "I suspected as much from the first. Theldrat Meldorp was willing to pay far too much for its return. Twenty *orbs* for the return of a simple copper key? I think not." I stopped and

looked each of them in the eye. "But more troubling is the fact that my Master could not open this book."

"Then it's a powerful magic book!" exclaimed Bubbagump.

"And a powerful key," added Wolfsire.

"You may rest assured that a very powerful *dweomer* has been laid upon that book," I clarified. "And probably for good reason. A magical key and an ensorcelled book. There's something sinister in all of this."

The Temple of Boccob is a stately structure of clean, white marble embossed with simple decorations, the most ostentatious being a faintly glowing eye, enclosed within a pentagram located above the main doors: the All-Seeing Eye of Boccob.

We passed through the throng of City Watchmen without being stopped and approached the doors. A young acolyte was stationed outside and he bowed at our approach.

"How may Boccob serve you, Magician?" he asked.

"I wish to speak with Altamaic the Calm," I replied, giving the young cleric my name. He bowed and ushered us into a waiting room just off the main entrance. Altamaic appeared after a brief period.

"Magician!" he cried. "How very good to see you again."

"Altamaic, my friend." We clasped each other's forearm and I introduced him to my companions.

"I'm sure you're not just here to say hello," said Altamaic. "You wouldn't have brought your friends with you." He waved us into seats.

"True enough," I laughed. "I've come to speak with you about the incident you told me of."

"The mugging," Altamaic flatly stated. "I told the City Watch about the matter, but they dismissed it."

"It is tied in with the theft at the Library," I informed him.

"Blessed Boccob!" Altamaic exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "I suspected as much when I first heard of it! Boccob be praised! No true cleric of the All-Seeing Eye could have ever perpetrated such a crime! You know this Magician! We have told the Watch this!"

"Calmly, my friend, calmly," I exhorted him. "We are on his track." At my urging Altamaic sat again and retold his story for the benefit of my companions.

Altamaic had been on his way home from the High Quarter, where he had delivered a late night message from his masters to Mathilde Dessenter, the High Priestess of the Temple of Istus. He was

lost in his own thoughts as he walked home – ruminating over some things he had heard – when he suddenly became aware that he had walked past the Millway, so he turned left at the Black Dragon Inn onto the Apprentice Walk. It was near the Jewelers' & Gemcutters' Guildhall that he was suddenly accosted by a much larger man who quickly overpowered him. This 'mugger' then did something very strange, he did not take the young cleric's coin purse, but instead robbed him of his vestments, robes and holy symbol. Altamaic ended his tale with a plea; "You must find him!"

(Altamaic had been bestowed with his sobriquet, 'the Calm,' because of his usually stoic nature. But at that particular moment I could tell he was on the verge of having an apoplexy!)

"Of course," I agreed. "As I said, we are on the trail of the imposter now." I then went on to tell him something of our adventure, so far.

"I have something that might aid you," Altamaic told me. He withdrew a small object from his robes. "I tore this from the neck of my assailant during our struggle. He was just such a thin, bald and foul creature as you describe. Take it."

I accepted the pendant and held it up by the string it hung upon, turning it in the light, it was in the shape of a clenched fist, but I did not recognize it. My companions showed no obvious signs of recognition either.

"You must recover the book, Magician!" Altamaic insisted. "You revere Boccob as I do. This disgrace must be excised! The stigma which blemishes the honor of the God we both venerate must be expunged!"

"And so it shall, my friend," I assured him. "The book shall be found, the record set straight, the honor of Boccob restored."

"Then take the medallion and go." Altamaic rose and so did we. "You have already uncovered much, far more than the Watch! Search out the rest of this sordid tale – the All-Seeing Eye shall guide you – and bring the true culprit to justice! Cleanse the name of our beloved God! There is no more time to waste speaking with me. I have told you all I know. Go!"

Bidding my friend farewell, my companions and I departed. Stepping outside the Temple we moved off to a small triangular patch of grass inside the three way intersection to discuss what we had heard.

"This cannot be countenanced, Magician!" cried Eileen.

I was prepared for it. I saw her reaction when Altamaic had mentioned the Temple of Istus.

"This cleric was on a mission to the Temple of the 'Lady of Our Fate,'" Eileen said. "This is why Istus has brought us together! It is our destiny to bring this transgressor to an accounting!"

"So it would seem," I replied. "In the past two days we have had bestowed upon us the blessings of Istus, the blessings of Saint Cuthbert, the blessings of Delleb and now, the blessings of Boccob. We can hardly fail." I was being just a bit facetious.

"This is true," she nodded emphatically, taking me seriously. "But what have you learned here?"

"It is as I came to suspect," I continued. "This Veltargo is obviously a person of some power and is possessed of knowledge. But just who, or what he is, we do not yet know."

I considered my next words. "He accosted my friend, Altamaic, so that he might procure his vestments and pose as a cleric of Boccob. This was designed to throw the Watch off his track. The Watch would no doubt think the guilt of a cleric of Boccob somehow 'logical.' They would assume that only a cleric of Boccob – or possibly a magician – would want to possess a book of magic." I looked thoughtfully at Eileen. "But you and I both know that *arcane* magic is not the *only* magic."

Eileen also grew thoughtful and her eyes widened. "No! There is clerical magic as well." She toyed with her holy symbol. "Could this Veltargo be a cleric?"

"Quite possibly," I confirmed. "Gratius Saghast is a very knowledgeable scholar. He admitted to us that he and several powerful magicians within the city are uncertain as to exactly what information is to be found within the stolen book. All the evidence we've gathered thus far shows us that Veltargo did not steal this particular book at random."

"Veltargo waylaid Altamaic weeks before stealing the book, thus putting enough time between the two events that the City Watch would never think to connect them," I spoke thoughtfully, looking at the pendant Altamaic had given me. "Veltargo also knew the truth of Theldrat Meldorp's key and arranged for the Green Daggers to steal it before he, himself, stole the book. All of this smacks of *Divination* and magicians are not the only ones who practice such arts."

"We must assume, therefore, that Veltargo knows the book's subject matter and that he stole this particular book for a specific purpose," I continued. "This is knowledge that he could only have *divined*, since no magician or cleric within the city has that information. In point of fact, none of them have even been able to *divine* the information themselves, obviously. So Veltargo possesses a source of information not available to any of the magicians in the city. A truly dangerous man indeed. The whole thing was all very well thought out and very well planned and all of it done surreptitiously, under the very noses of all involved with the book."

"But what's the purpose, Magician?" asked Wolfsire. "What does he plan to do?"

I shook my head. "I cannot even begin to guess as to that, not without knowing who and what Veltargo truly is. A magician?" I shrugged. "Possibly and yet we cannot discount the possibility of the use of clerical magic."

"You describe a person of great cunning, Magician," said Eileen. She looked thoughtful again. "Or perhaps more than one person is involved."

I looked at her and smiled broadly. "Eileen, I would not be at all surprised to discover that to be the very case."

"So what do we do now?" asked Bubbagump.

I held up the pendent by its string, so that it dangled in front of them. "We find out exactly what this is. It's our only connection to Veltargo and our only lead. When we know what this is, we will know something more of Veltargo."

"So, where to now?" asked Eileen.

"To my Master's shop," I answered. "I think that he can identify this for us. We'll go and see."

Well, will you look at that, Slinky's finally dozed off! Must be the muffins! Hmm? Trouble? Bah! I was in no trouble! Disappointed are you? Well, have another muffin and mug of cider and you'll feel better. (Laugh) No, I wasn't in any trouble, but it seems that my Master had already learned of my search for . . .

## **That Infamous Key**

### **Chapter Eight**

We traveled down College Road, turning left at Gnarley House and onto the Apprentice Walk. Apprentice Walk and College Road are actually connected by means of a small, road-like alleyway and we turned down this alley, then turned left onto the Apprentice Walk, which ends at Smith Road, where we proceeded to turn right.

Smith Road passes through the Guildhall of Architects and Stone Masons. Originally, these two trades were separate Guilds, situated across the road from one another. So when they merged, they built a walk-way above the roadway to connect the two buildings, so that now the road actually passes through the joined buildings.

Smith Road dead ends into Castle Street, the location of my Master's shop. We turned right onto Castle Street and walked to the fourth establishment upon the right: Maldin and Elenderi's Shop of the Arcane.

The outer doors open into a foyer, the floor of which is decorated with a pentagram. This is nothing less than a powerful *Warding Glyph*, designed to keep powerful extra-planar creatures out and to keep them in, as the need may be.

The public portion of the shop is a large room, with a wrap-around counter. Access to the behind the counter area is to the right. Old Elbrak manages the shop for my Master and his partner and he always has his eye open for thieves.

"Good day, master Elbrak," I said.

"Good day, young one," he replied. "And what are you up to today?"

"I must see my Master," I replied. "May my friends wait here?"

"That will be fine," master Elbrak replied. "As long as they keep their hands where I can see them."

I turned to my friends. "Stay here and don't touch anything. It's not safe to do so."

They nodded agreement and I left them there and headed for the back rooms, where my Master was to be found. I passed through a door behind the counter, then down a passageway. Finally I stood before my Master's door.

"Come in," he bid me through the oak door – before I could knock.

I stepped into his office in time to see a small, humanoid, greenish skinned creature, with bat-like wings, vanish in a puff of smoke.

"You no doubt recognized my little visitor?" Maldin asked. Mortellan was there as well.

My Master stood about five feet, ten inches tall, with dark, shoulder length hair, showing some signs of gray around the temples and he wore a thick, black mustache. He weighed about one hundred, seventy-five pounds and – for all his magical prowess – he eschewed wizardly robes.

He wore black trousers tucked into highly polished black boots, a white silk shirt, opened at the collar, with sleeves that billowed at the cuffs. A red sash circled his waist and it was here that he kept his spell components tucked away, along with an odd wand, or two. He also wore a wide brimmed, soft felt hat when he was out and about.

"Yes, Master," I replied. "It was a homunculus; a magical construct formed from one pint of their creator's blood."

"And what is the purpose of *homunculi*?" he asked, moving to his desk.

"To serve the magician who created them in any capacity their creator might choose," I replied. "Sometimes they serve as . . . messengers."

"Yes, they do," Maldin continued. "I just received two such messages, within minutes of each other. Gratus Saghast is most pleased that I would assign my 'finest apprentice' to investigate the theft at the Library." He looked at me through raised eyebrows. "My 'finest apprentice?' Humph! Where ever did he get *that* notion? The second message came from Patriarch Ravel Dasinder,"

"The Patriarch!?" I exclaimed.

"Yes, the Patriarch," he calmly replied. "Your friend, Altamaic – formerly known as 'the Calm' – was so excited that you were on the case – and had solved so much of it already – that he burst in upon the Patriarch to inform him of it."

I stood stunned for a moment, letting the varied nuances of this information sink in.

"His Beatitude Dasinder was, of course, already aware of the earlier incident involving young Altamaic," my Master continued. "And when he learned that you had already connected the two events and thus pieced together a large part of the puzzle, he was delighted and sent to thank me for both my prompt action and your efforts on behalf of the Boccobian Church. Oh, he also ask that you follow-up your investigations with all haste."

Mortellan chuckled. "It seems you're coming to the attention of some very important people, my young friend." There were two glasses of wine sitting on the desk. Mortellan and my Master, Maldin, had no doubt been talking about things magical and mystical. Or they may have just been talking over old times.

"I apologize if I've caused you any trouble, Master. I . . ."

Maldin attempted to scowl, but then burst out laughing. "Not at all, young one! No trouble at all." He waved me into a chair and I sat next to Mortellan.

"What I find is that I now have two important personages believing they owe *me* a favor," he said, with a pleased expression upon his face. He raised a finger. "And I have no intentions of disabusing them of that thought! You know that Elenderi and I had a spot of trouble opening our shop here in Greyhawk. The Guild of Wizardry and its master, Kieren Jalucian, didn't like the idea of competition, that's why we had to make the arrangements we did." He waved his hand and a goblet of wine appeared before me.

"That's also why it's taken so long for the two of us to be accepted into the local Wizarding community," Maldin continued. "Making nice with Kieren Jalucian, since that time, has helped and now this little adventure you've become involved in is going a long way to helping even more. Why, we'll probably be invited to join the *Society of Magi* after this. Elenderi will be so overjoyed, there's no telling what gifts he may shower you with."

I couldn't help but smile at that. Master Elenderi had many a wondrous item in his collection. My mouth began to water.

"Well, then, tell me about this adventure of yours."

I told Maldin everything, holding nothing back, as my Master, it was his right to know. More importantly to me, as my Master, he would be morally obligated to rescue me, should anything go wrong. For this very important reason, I needed both his blessing *and permission* to continue with my investigation. At last, I showed him the pendant. It was made of red marble and was in the shape of a clenched fist, which appeared to be squeezing something.

"Hmm," my Master took it from me.

"It looks like a fist," I offered. "A fist squeezing something."

"Indeed," Maldin agreed. "It's squeezing a drop of blood. This is a *Cairn Charm*; Each is unique to a specific Star Cairn. This charm is from the *Tomb of Blood Everflowing*." He grew thoughtful, whispering, "*Magic is the key to all things*."

"Master?"

"The tomb originally served as a shrine to Wee Jas, the 'Ruby Sorceress,' but has long since fallen into disuse and disrepair." He snapped out of his reverie. "I had read about the tomb in my youth,

visited it once too, but I haven't been to the Cairn Hills in many a long year. My interests lie elsewhere, these days."

He handed the pendant back to me. "You will need to find a map to the tomb, I can't tell you how to get there. Are you wearing your amulet?" And just like that, I had his permission to continue my investigation.

I placed my hand on my chest, covering the hidden amulet. "Always, Master."

"Then you can summon me if you get into trouble . . . and you just might," he warned. "Given what the thief has stolen. Still, this is your hour to shine. Word is already spreading among those who need know such things and many a distinguished eye is upon you, taking careful note. But you are doing well."

I beamed with pleasure at his obvious pride. Then turned somber.

"Master?"

"Yes?"

"About the book?"

"No one knows what's in it," he said, anticipating my question. "We only know the author."

"And who is the author," I asked, dreading the answer.

His head was bent down and he looked at me through lowered eyebrows. "Zagig Yragerne." He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "And that – quite possibly – tells us something of the key, as well."

"What about the key?" I asked.

"Zagig was rumored to have had a plain looking, but very magical key," Mortellan answered me. "I have been researching the matter. It is said that 'Zagig's key' could open any lock." He looked hard at me. "Any lock."

There was a sudden, urgent knocking at the door. "Enter."

Elbrak shoved his head into the room. "Excuse me, Master Maldin, but Constable Derider Fanshen is out here with some of her men, making all kinds of trouble for the young master's friends. She's demanding to see him."

"Gratius Saghast, no doubt," my Master replied. "Show her in, Elbrak."

Elbrak closed the door and went to fetch the Constable.

Mortellan whistled. "You really *are* coming to the attention of some notable people."

"Trouble, Master?" I asked.

"I shouldn't think so," Maldin replied, waving his hand dismissively. "Saghast probably complained about the lack of progress being made in the Library investigation and then threw your achievements into Fanshen's face." He shook his head. "Saghast needs to take a course in diplomacy at the University."

There was a knock, the door opened and Elbrak ushered Derider Fanshen into the office. Mortellan and I rose when she entered.

Greyhawk's Constable was a striking woman in her late thirties. She was as tall as my Master, weighing about one hundred, twenty-five pounds, with honey colored hair and bright gray eyes. She wore full plate mail, with a sword at her side, but her helmet, shield and famed magical staff were not in evidence. Derider Fanshen was the Constable of Greyhawk and second-in-command of the City's Watch. She was also a high ranking cleric of Pelor.

"Constable Fanshen," my Master greeted her.

"Archmage," she replied with a slight bow of her head. "I wish to speak with your apprentice. I have been informed that he possesses vital information regarding a recent crime." She turned her stern countenance on me.

"Yes, indeed," Maldin replied. "In fact, we were just talking about it. Won't you have a seat?"

I offered her mine and she sat.

"He was offered a commission – just yesterday – to investigate a theft which occurred in the Foreign Quarter," my Master informed her. "His investigations lead him to discover that there was a connection with the theft at the Library. He will be happy to tell you his tale."

I began at the beginning and told her almost everything, though I withheld certain information regarding Cyrathas and his group; I wasn't about to give up *that* valuable source of information.

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"And is that everything?" She asked me, knowing it wasn't.

"Most of it," Maldin interjected, answering for me. "Some of the story is of no use to you." He held up his hand to forestall her objection. "I know what you're thinking Constable, but his revealing the source of his information will prove of no benefit to anyone. Such knowledge will not get you any closer to this 'Veltargo' personage and it will most certainly *not* garner you another informant. Trust me in this matter."

"By withholding that information, my apprentice gains a valuable informant for himself," Maldin continued. "One which would be of no use to you, since they would rather rot in a cell than ever

tell you anything. You may be certain, however, that my apprentice would never think of endangering the city by withholding any vital information from you. Whatever he knows, or learns, that could be of any value to the constabulary – or to the defense of the city – you may rest assured that he will tell you of it."

"I would like to believe this, master Maldin," Derider said. "You and master Elenderi have proven yourselves to be good, law-abiding citizens since your arrival in Greyhawk. You have honored the agreements you made in establishing your business here and have paid your taxes promptly. Also, I am aware of how these things work. But why didn't the young man come to me sooner?" She turned her eyes to me.

"Forgive me, Constable," I placed my hand on my heart and bowed. "But news – whether good or bad – flies from mouth to ear faster than fly the hawks for which our beloved city is named."

She laughed at that. "You are right, there, young man!"

I smiled and continued my account. "I have only just this morning verified my deductions and pieced this convoluted puzzle together. But, I believe that you are familiar with the rules governing our Order? My first duty is to my Master, as he is responsible for my actions. I assure you that your office was to be my next stop."

She looked deep into my eyes – still smiling – and nodded. "I do not know why, but for some reason, I believe you." She rose from her chair. "So, now your 'next stop' becomes the Cairn Hills." It wasn't a question. "You will need to see Melezakan the Mapmaker, his shop is on Brick Lane. He's the best at his trade and he's always paying coin to adventurers for bringing back maps of the Cairn Hills. Check with him. And be sure to keep me posted as to the latest developments." Standing, she nodded her head to my Master and departed.

"Am I really going to be supplying her with information?" I whispered, after the door had closed.

Maldin laughed. "Not unless you want to."

"Can you find Melezakan's place?" asked Mortellan.

"I believe so," I replied. "The name is familiar. An old schoolmate works there, I believe. A girl named Anna."

"Oh! A girl!" Maldin broke into laughter and Mortellan joined him.

I blushed. "It's nothing like that."

"Sure," chided Mortellan. "That's what you say *now*!"

I left him and my Master laughing as I returned to my friends. I had been in the office for almost an hour and found my friends fidgeting when I rejoined them.

"It's about time!" cried Wolfsire.

"Sorry about that," I apologized.

"Constable Fanshen was threatening to lock everyone up!" exclaimed Bubbagump.

"She accused us of withholding information regarding a crime," explained Eileen.

"I'm really sorry about that," I apologized again. "But she has the straight of it now and we won't be bothered anymore. I promise. Let's go."

We stepped out into the street.

"Did you learn anything?" asked Bubbagump.

"Yes, I did." I replied. "Both good and bad."

"Sounds ominous," said Eileen, looking quizzically at me.

I shrugged. "We obtained much needed information. But I also learned that these past events portend something bad and are, perhaps, merely small parts of something bigger."

"Of course," Eileen simply stated. "Else the 'Lady of Our Fate' would not be involved."

"So, where to now?" asked Wolfsire.

"The Cairn Hills," I replied. "Eventually."

"Eventually?" asked Eileen.

"Yes, we need more information first," I answered her. "My Master recognized the pendant. Now, we need a map to a specific tomb located within the Hills. I'm going to see about getting such a map, but I'd also like to keep a promise that we made, since we have a little time now. I'm speaking of our promise to Brother Nicholi Nortoi, the priest of Saint Cuthbert."

"I'd like that," Eileen replied.

"Me too!" Bubbagump chimed in.

"Well, let's go change the items we've collected into coin," I said. "Then we'll have a quick lunch and I'll give the two of you directions to a place where supplies can be purchased for Brother Nortoi and his newest converts; Solnia and Irontusk."

So we headed west on Castle Street until it merged with Craftsman's Way, then turned left onto Batwing Lane and walked right into the Petite Bazaar, known locally as the 'Low Market.' We quickly located a booth where we sold the silver picture frame and the two large sapphires for a total of three hundred gold *orbs*. This gave us a total profit from our adventure of three hundred, thirty-eight *orbs*! And this was after all of our expenditures – thus far.

"Magician, I'll say it again, you were right!" Wolfsire laughed. "This adventure is netting us a tidy sum."

I nodded. "I knew it would. Shall we divide it now?"

"No," answered Eileen. "Let us keep it in a common fund for now, to cover our expenses. But let us take out some for the supplies we promised Brother Nortoi."

Bubbagump and Wolfsire quickly agreed. I counted out fifty *orbs* and gave them to Eileen. "I don't know how much the supplies will cost," I said.

"We will bring back the remainder, to be returned to the common fund," Eileen said.

"And you need to leave a few more *orbs* with Brother Nortoi," said Wolfsire. "Those kids down there looked real hungry."

"Thus speaks the Ice Barbarian with the heart of gold!" I laughed, as did Eileen and Bubbagump. Wolfsire blushed.

"We'll do that," Eileen assured him.

"This way," I said.

We walked back up Batwing Lane and turned right on Craftsman's Way. When this road turned south, we stayed straight and was once again on Castle Street. We passed my Master's shop and turned right onto Brick Lane. The third building on the left was The Fat of the Hog, a local tavern famous for its pork dishes.

"I think you'll like this place," I informed my friends. "Waldo Parstiche is the proprietor and he specializes in pork dishes of all kinds. His Brother Ernest has a manor-house a day's ride to the west, along the Marsh Path, where the family specializes in raising and fattening hogs. Waldo appreciates it when people try samples of his 'Daily Special,' even if you end up not actually ordering it. So be prepared to try it, we don't want to insult him."

"You eat here often?" asked Wolfsire.

"Occasionally," I shrugged. "It's close to my Master's shop and he likes to drop in here for a quick lunch whenever he's pressed for time."

The place was crowded, as was usual, but not unduly so given that the lunch hour was still some few minutes off. So we found a small table for the four of us and sat down. 'Wide Waldo,' as everyone calls him, came over to greet us and we dutifully tried his daily special – pork ribs simmered in a spicy pepper sauce.

Wolfsire thought it was the greatest thing ever and ordered a double portion, but it was a little too peppery for the rest of us and so Eileen and I ordered the pork roast with potatoes and other steamed vegetables, while Bubbagump ordered several types of Waldo's bacon-wrapped

delicacies, accompanied by piles of mushrooms. There was fresh, warm bread with a bowl of butter on the table and we each had a tankard of Waldo's chilled, amber ale.

After lunch, we split up; Wolfsire and I were headed just down the street to Maps by Melezakan. Constable Fanshen had said the establishment was located on Brick Lane and thus the reason for my choice of The Fat of the Hog for lunch.

Eileen and Bubbagump were headed back to Cargo Street and a merchant house named Gerridan's, just across from the Green Dragon Inn, to get the things needed by Brother Nortoi. If Gern Gerridan didn't have what was needed, he would know where we could get it. Wolfsire and I would meet them in Shack Town later.

Wolfsire and I walked to the shop of Melezakan, just a few doors down the street. Pushing open the door we stepped into a small receiving area facing a counter. The rear wall was easily the first thing anyone would notice. The entire wall was a large, birds-eye view map of the City of Greyhawk. An observer could see that it was a nearly complete map, showing almost every building within the city's walls. I had heard Anna speak of it back when we were in school together. Melezakan considered it to be his 'masterpiece.'

We stepped up to the counter and there, on the other side, her head bent over a map, was Anna. She wore a flowered gown which showed her figure nicely. She stood about five feet, six inches tall, and weighed perhaps one hundred pounds – when she was wet, that is. She had long auburn hair that hung past her shoulders, almost to her waist, with the most startling green eyes I'd ever seen. I once thought myself to be in love with her.

I cleared my throat and she looked up.

"Magician!" She ran to the counter and took my hand. "It's been so long! Why haven't you come to visit me before now?"

"Sorry about that," I apologized. "I've just emerged from two years inside the Pyramid."

"Oh!" she blushed. "Of course, I had forgotten about that!"

"Allow me to introduce my friend, Wolfsire, an Ice Barbarian of the far northern Kingdom of the Cruski, located on the Thillonrian peninsula."

"Shush," Anna whispered, casting a look over her shoulder. "Don't let Melezakan hear you! He'll have your friend tied up for weeks, giving him details for maps of the Thillonrian peninsula and the barbarian kingdoms there!" She laughed, a truly delightful sound. "So, are you here to see me? Or Melezakan?" She batted her eyes. She was always a bit flirtatious, but never really seemed to be serious about it.

"As nice as it is to see you again, I'm afraid it's business," I replied.

"Phooey!" She pouted prettily too, then she laughed again. "But I thought as much. Let me get Melezakan for you."

She went to the back of the shop to fetch the master Mapmaker for us. Melezakan stood five feet, eight inches tall, with a bald crown and stringy black hair forming a crescent around the rest of his head. He weighed perhaps one hundred, seventy-five pounds, wore black robes and had a quill stuck behind each ear.

"How can I help you?" he asked, in a weak, reedy voice.

"I need a map of the Cairn Hills," I replied. "I'm hoping you have one showing the location of the Tomb of Blood Everflowing."

"Ahh! It just so happens that I *do* have such a map," Melezakan said. "Regrettably, it only shows the location of the tomb and not the floor plan – such a terrible lack of information!"

"Floor plan?" asked Wolfsire.

"The layout of course," Melezakan supplied. "What the inside of the tomb looks like. Don't you know anything?"

"We understand," I said, holding up my hand and forestalling an outburst from Wolfsire. "Directions to the tomb are really all that we hoped for anyway. How much for the map?"

"Well, now, that depends," said Melezakan, getting a surreptitious look in his eyes. I could sense a certain avarice there, but as Constable Fanshen had alluded, it wasn't any rapacity for gold that I sensed.

"Depends on what?" I asked, prepared to play his game and suspecting what was coming.

"The map I have isn't very precise, as I have said," Melezakan continued. "It lacks certain information, though it will certainly get you to the tomb, have no doubt as to that! But it is insufficient and I want to make it a better map. I'm *always* striving to improve my maps! So I propose an exchange, that is, you bring to me more precise information, so that I might produce a better map."

"Is that all?" I asked.

"No, it is not," he replied. "I want a map-like diagram detailing the layout of the tomb. I want measurements; height, width, length, depth and so on. You must be precise in the details, mind you! I want to make quality maps! If you would agree to do this for me, returning here with the information I need, then I'll give you the map I have. No charge."

"I had heard that you pay adventurers for such information," I replied.

"No gold!" Melezakan quickly interjected. "This map I give you, plus a copy of the improved version – should you wish it – will be your payment! But, be warned! Anna tells me that you are an old school friend of hers. So, then, know that I will hold her responsible for any monetary recompense, should you fail to keep our bargain!"

"I wasn't going to ask for gold, master Melezakan," I informed him. "I was simply going to say that, since we share a common interest in this matter, I believe it will be possible for us to exchange favors."

"Excellent!" cried Melezakan, overjoyed at the prospect.

"And Anna need have no fear of being 'stuck with the bill,' as they say," I continued. "But I'm certain she already knows that."

Melezakan handed over the map and promptly returned to his work, while Anna walked us out. "I was never concerned about you 'skipping out' on me." She lowered her voice. "And you should know that, when you get back from your trip, I won't be here. I'm going to work for Geld's Maps, over behind the Green Dragon Inn!"

"Why the move?" I vaguely remembered my Master once mentioning the name Lazzarin Geld, but couldn't quite recall the context.

"I'll tell you when you get back!" she said, with an impish grin. "Look for me!"

So map in hand, we bade Anna good-bye – giving her assurances that I would return to visit her at Geld's – and set off to see how Eileen and Bubbagump were making out with Brother Nortoi, over in Shack Town.

We headed back up Brick Lane to Castle Street, turned left, merged onto Craftsman's Way and came out in the northern extremity of the Petite Bazaar. We cut across the Bazaar to Nervern Walk and turned right, following it until it ended at Horseshoe Road, in front of the Nyrondeese Trader's Hall.

Wolfsire was eager to learn of the city and took it all in. I answered his questions as best I could for, although familiar with many of the establishments, I hadn't actually visited all of them.

We followed Horseshoe Road for almost a mile passing – as we went – The Silver Garter (a place where one might find 'bawdy' entertainment), the old abandoned Public Bathhouse, The Red Serpent Restaurant (which specializes in pepper and rice dishes), the Translators Guildhall, Roanwood Road (home of the Ahlissan Merchant's Headquarters), the Foreign Quarter's City Watch station and The Barge Inn (a favorite among the city's dwarven population), until we came at last to Cairn Court, where our adventure had begun the day before.

Just past Cairn Court we turned left onto The Strip and made our way to the Cargo Gate, once again dodging pick-pockets, cut-purses and thieves as we passed by The Sea Willow and The River Rat – two low dens of iniquity favored by the Rhennee, when they stayed in Greyhawk.

As we neared the gate itself, Wolfsire began turning his head to and fro, looking all about him.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"Those 'People's Constables' we ran into yesterday," he replied. "I'm not taking any guff off of them today!"

I laughed at this observation and, giving our information to the Watchmen posted there, we passed through the gate without any trouble. We turned right onto The Dockway and headed north to Shack Town. The Dockway was even busier than it had been the day before and our progress was a little slow. Still we made it through the docks and on through Barge End all without any mishaps, finally arriving back in Shack Town.

We soon found ourselves once more standing before Brother Nicholi Nortoi's Shrine to Saint Cuthbert . . . 'the Cudgel.'

What's this? Sunrise! Goodness me! Have we been talking all night? (Chuckles) You're right, dear girl . . . we'll blame it on the cider! And Mrs. Hildegard's exquisite muffins of course! Hmm? Yes, indeed it is! The same Brother Nortoi! Still there. Did I tell you that I helped him out when I was searching for . . .

## **That Infamous Key**

### **Chapter Nine**

There was quite a bit of activity at the shrine. Eileen and Bubbagump had obviously gotten there well before us and with two wagons full of supplies! The fifty *orbs* had purchased more than I anticipated.

One wagon was filled with split rail fencing and lumber, while the other contained shovels, hoes, a plow, a wheel barrel, hammers, nails, rope and other sundries; such as seed for planting. There were gutter materials and a barrel for collecting rain-water as well. There were also about twenty people assisting with the unloading.

Bubbagump ran up to us. "Look Magician! Do you see?" The halfling was almost beside himself with excitement.

"Yes, I see."

Eileen came up. "We purchased everything we could think of, but they will still need more. We have the fencing materials, roofing materials and enough lumber for repairs and a small barn for 'Simon.'"

"Simon?" I asked.

"Yes," Eileen smiled broadly. "Bubbagump has named the donkey."

"Wolfsire!" Bubbagump grabbed the barbarian's hand. "Come help us unload the wagon!" The two hurried off to join the crowd.

"Quite a work party," I said.

"Yes," Eileen replied. "Brother Nortoi is quite popular with the people here."

"Continue helping him with his healing and you'll end up being very popular around here too," I informed her.

"Well, I will continue to do what I can to assist," she answered. "But such work is not the primary calling of the Clerics of Istus. Now, come inside, there's refreshment and you can tell me more of what you've learned."

We entered the little home and adjourned to Brother Nortoi's small kitchen area. There was a pitcher of cool, refreshing fruit juice on the table, along with bread and cheeses. We sat and helped ourselves to some of the golden liquid.

"When do we leave?" asked Eileen.

"Not for a day, or two," I replied. "We still have some shopping to do. The Star Cairn we seek is some 45 miles from here and will take most of two days to reach. We will need horses and camping gear, but you're already familiar with such matters."

"Yes, of course," she agreed. "Wolfsire and I have been on the road for over two years now. However, there is another matter that needs to be tended to."

"What's that?" I asked.

"Brother Nortoi does not possess the deed to this property," she said.

"Well, now, that *could* present a small problem," I agreed. "Has there been trouble over this?"

"There is a shady character hereabouts that wants this piece of property for himself." Brother Nortoi entered the room.

"Well, that's usually how the trouble starts," I said. "And just what is the situation with this property?"

"A member of my congregation – a Hairfoot halfling named Bimbo Towhead – owned this parcel," Brother Nortoi explained. "He made out a Will and left the property to the Church, for the construction of a Shrine. I'm afraid that I've been procrastinating about getting it all properly notarized."

"That's never a good thing, Brother Nortoi," I replied. "What is this other individual's claim?"

"Abandonment," Nortoi answered. "Milt Skyler claims that Bimbo didn't die, but simply disappeared and left the property abandoned."

"Surely the death certificate will disprove that," I replied.

"Of course!" Eileen cried.

"Well, you see," Nortoi cleared his throat. "There is no death certificate."

"What?" I was surprised. "How can there be no death certificate?"

"Because no one reported the death, it seems," Nortoi answered.

"You didn't report the death?" I was incredulous. "How could you expect to inherit the property if no one reported the death?"

"That is not the responsibility of the Church," he replied. "The next of kin is responsible for that. Regrettably, they were somewhat disgruntled by the fact that Bimbo left the property to the Church, rather than themselves. The family does not serve 'The Cudgel,' so it seems that, after the services, they just went straight home – to Dyvers – without filing any reports."

"I can guess the rest," I continued. "This Skyler fellow is attempting to pay the back taxes on this property and thereby gain ownership."

"That is his plan," Nortoi confirmed.

"This was all badly mishandled," I looked at Brother Nortoi. "Given the composition and position of the Nightwatchmen, you, of all people, should know how strictly Greyhawk's laws are enforced." I sighed. "Well, the first thing we have to do is prove that this Bimbo Towhead is actually dead and thus establish that the property is not and was not abandoned," I informed them. "Then we have to show that the property was Willed to the Church of St. Cuthbert, thus establishing that no back taxes are owed, since the Church is tax exempt."

"Praise Istus," said Eileen. "At least you know what to do! Now we can begin setting matters straight!"

I held up my hand. "Knowing where to start is one thing. But getting it done? That is entirely another. Like any other government, the City of Greyhawk likes having money in its coffers. Skyler is offering money, the Church of St. Cuthbert is not."

"Are you saying that they will not honor the Will?" asked Eileen.

"No, not necessarily," I replied. "I'm just saying it's not that simple. You see, in the City of Greyhawk, only a citizen can own property. Now, this Bimbo Towhead was obviously a citizen, or he wouldn't have owned the land to begin with. But, according to Brother Nortoi, Bimbo's immediate family and heirs are from Dyvers, so they would not have been allowed to keep the inheritance. They would have been forced to sell the land to a citizen of Greyhawk, someone just like this Skyler."

I held up my hand again, forestalling another outburst. "Now the Church of St. Cuthbert *can* be deeded the land. Our problem lies in demonstrating that Bimbo *has* died and that he *did* leave the property to the Church."

"I do have the Will," Brother Nortoi intoned.

"And that will prove that he left the property to the Church," I admitted, but held up a finger in admonishment. "Provided that it was properly signed and notarized."

"It was," he assured me.

"Was it?" I asked. "Please tell me that it wasn't you that notarized the Will?"

"I did not," he said. "Although I did sign the document as Witness. The Will was duly notarized by Louis Jerlane, a Cleric of Zilchus."

"A Will is a legal document," I admitted. "The Clerics of Zilchus are known for overseeing business transactions and while a Will might qualify as 'business,' it would have been better for a Guild Lawyer to have notarized the Will. The methods of Zilchus are sometimes questionable, but his Clerics are regularly used for such purposes. Perhaps it will not be so bad. Tell me, is Brother Jerlane still in the city?"

"Yes," Nortoi replied. "He resides at the Temple, on Temple Row, in the Garden Quarter."

"Very good," I was somewhat relieved. "We will have need of him. We'll stop by there and speak with him, after we've gone to the Embalmers' and Grave Diggers' Guildhall." I stood. "Our first task to have Bimbo Towhead declared legally dead."

Eileen agreed to accompany me while Wolfsire and Bubbagump continued assisting in the work at the shrine. I didn't know where the Embalmers' Guild might be found, but I was certain it wouldn't be in the High or Garden Quarters, so we headed for the Cargo Gate. The sergeant at the gate recognized me and waved me forward.

After explaining our need, he directed me to the establishment of Gobayuik's Undertakers on Water Street. It seems that a half-orc by the name of Selczek Gobayuik owned the place and was also the Guildmaster of the Embalmers' and Grave Diggers' Guild. Eileen and I soon found the place, it was a bit run-down and in bad need of painting. Upon entering, we were almost overwhelmed by the reek of embalming fluid.

"Don't get many of your kind in here," a guttural voice said. "What do you want?" We saw the half-orc standing behind a counter.

"We need a death certificate," I answered.

"Who died?" Selczek asked, eyeing us suspiciously.

"A halfling by the name of Bimbo Towhead," I replied.

"I'll need to see the Incident Report, Form I-9a, from the City Watch," he intoned.

"Uh, a form what?" I asked.

"Form I-9a," he repeated. "The Incident Report the Watch filled out when they conducted their investigation of the death."

I looked at Eileen, who shrugged. "I don't think we have one of those," I replied.

"What? You mean to say that the Watch didn't issue you an Incident Report, Form I-9a, when they investigated the death?" he asked.

"I do not believe that there was an investigation," I answered.

"No investigation!?" Selczek was incredulous. "You haven't report the death!?"

"Apparently the family left the city without doing so," I offered.

"What do you mean 'left the city'?" he demanded. "Was they runnin' away? Was there foul play? Murder even?"

"No, no," I assured him. "They were angry that the deceased did not leave them his property, so they returned home to Dyvers, after the burial."

"*What!?*" Selczek roared, slamming his hands down upon the counter top. "*Burial!?* What do you mean '*burial!*'? The body's already been buried!? And who said you could do that!?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "He was dead, so he was buried."

"You can't bury him without the Guild!" the half-orc cried. "You need a *license!* First you tell me that no one reported the death to the Watch and now you say he was buried without the Guild! And just who's been paying the Property Taxes to the Greyhawk Revenue Service then!? This is outrageous! Lawbreakers, that's what you are!" He was shaking his fist at us.

"How do you know he was buried without the Guild?" I asked.

"Because if he had been buried by the Guild, you'd have an I-9a and a Form E71-c!" he cried.

"What's Form E71-c?" I asked.

"A *Death Certificate!*" he roared. "There's been some shady goings on around here! This entire matter is going to be thoroughly investigated, I can promise you that! And don't think I don't know what you're up to! A wizard and a priest!? You're trying to cut in on the Guild's business! Well, we'll just see about that! I'll see you in court!"

With that declaration, Selczek turned and stormed off into the back of his shop. I turned and looked at Eileen.

"Perhaps we should return to the Cargo Gate and find out from that sergeant who we're supposed to report this to," I said.

She nodded in agreement and off we went. Upon arriving there, I explained the situation to the sergeant

"Well, now," he rubbed his chin. "You *do* have yourself a bit of a situation, don't you?"

"I guess so," I replied. "It would seem that someone really messed this up."

"Indeed, they did," he agreed. "This is a very serious matter, Magician. You should take yourselves over to the Foreign Quarter Watch Station, over on Horseshoe Road. You'll find it at the junction of Fortune Street. Gobayuik's probably there already, lodging a complaint. My name's McGuffey, just tell the sergeant on duty there that I sent you."

We thanked him and headed for the Watch Station. As predicted, Selczek Gobayuik was already there and raising the Nine Hells. He pointed at us as we walked in the door, already hurling his accusations.

"There are the lawbreakers!" he thundered.

"See here!" said the sergeant on duty. "What's this business about you burying people without a Watch investigation, or a burial license!?"

"I haven't buried anyone," I replied.

"Here then, how come you told Selczek that you did?" he demanded.

"I believe a misunderstanding has occurred," I said.

"Misunderstanding my arse!" the half-orc bellowed. "I heard you plain as day!"

"Hold on there, Selczek!" the sergeant cried. "I'm doing the questioning here! You!" He pointed at me. "You best have an explanation for all this!"

"First, allow me to introduce myself," I said. "I am the apprentice of the Archmage Maldin." Once again my Master's name seemed to help, as the sergeant calmed considerably, but I doubted anything would calm the half-orc. "Sergeant McGuffey said I should report here. I am merely acting as an envoy for Brother Nicholi Nortoi, Minister of the Shrine of St. Cuthbert in Shacktown. I . . ."

"Damn priest!" Selczek spit. "I knew there'd be a damnable priest involved! Those bastards are always meddling . . ."

"And what is wrong with priests?" Eileen interjected, her temper aroused.

"Wrong!?" cried Selczek. "I'll tell you what's wrong, you friggin' little . . . !"

"Selczek! I'll have none of that!" cried the sergeant, pounding a gavel on his desk. "I'll not have arguments over religious differences in here! Keep to the matter at hand! You, young sir, sit here." He offered me a chair and I sat. "Why don't you start at the beginning and tell me everything."

So, starting at what I knew to be the beginning, I explained the situation to him.

"Well, now, this Skyler fella just might have a claim!" the sergeant informed us.

"But the legal owner 'Willed' the property to St. Cuthbert!" insisted Eileen.

"To the Abyss with that little piss pot!" roared Selczek.

"Selczek!" screamed the sergeant. "Don't make me throw your fat, hoary arse in a cell! Keep your damn mouth shut!"

The two glared at each other for a moment and I could tell that they were not normally friendly with each other and had clashed before now.

"Now then, he might well have done that, Miss," admitted the sergeant, settling back down. "But things weren't handled proper like and that means something to the authorities! An investigation will certainly have to be held and all involved will have to be interviewed and questioned. I'll have to take a patrol down to Shacktown and speak with this Brother Nortoi and his people there. Then we'll have to send for this fellow Towhead's family in Dyvers. Yes, this is going to be one big mess!" He stood and looked at me. "Magician, I will ask you and your lady friend to go to the Temple of Zilchus and ask this cleric, Louis Jerlane, to join us. I'll also ask you to stop by the Temple of Pelor and have one of their clerics join us as well." He looked at the half-orc. "And you might as well come along too, Selczek, just so you can see that everything is done proper . . . but, by the gods, you had best keep quiet!" He slammed his gavel down once more.

"I'm not the one who broke the law here!" the half-orc shouted.

I forestalled another outburst by Eileen, taking her by the arm. "We're on our way, sergeant."

Once outside, I urged her down Horseshoe Road. "We need to head for the Temple of Zilchus," I informed her. "Arguing with that blockhead isn't going to help any."

"True enough," Eileen admitted, as we walked along. So the two of us started off to what many in the city considered the Temple District, located in the Garden Quarter.

"It seems we have inherited a singular problem," Eileen said.

"Well that's putting it mildly," I agreed. "From the sound of things, it's going to take some time to clear this up. It's one hundred, fifty miles to Dyvers. Add to that the fact that the family may have to be coerced into returning to give testimony . . . if they can be. Dyvers and Greyhawk do not enjoy the best of relationships, so the authorities in Dyvers will probably be unwilling to force the family to return here. This could take weeks and I don't know if we can hang around that long."

"Brother Nortoi is a kindly man and cares greatly for his parishioners," Eileen began. "But I do not believe that he is capable of handling this type of situation."

"Probably not," I agreed. "But we have our own mission to complete, remember?"

"But I thought you said time was no longer a factor?" Eileen retorted.

"That's true," I admitted. "But only to a point. We have a couple of days, but not a couple of weeks. We'll see what we can accomplish in that time period."

"Tell me, Magician," Eileen changed the subject, slightly. "I understand the need for Brother Jerlane, but why a priest of Pelor?"

"Probably as a witness," I replied. "You met Constable Derider Fanshen. Well, she happens to be a high ranking cleric of Pelor, as well as Constable of the City Watch. No doubt the Watch calls upon the Temple of Pelor to witness all such legal matters."

We followed Horseshoe Road turning right onto Hardcobbles Way and followed it to the Sage's Guildhall.

"Why do we stop here?" asked Eileen.

"To see my friend, Mortellan," I replied. "He's a Guild Lawyer, remember?"

Eileen beamed. "Of course! He can help us!"

The Porter remembered me and ushered me in to Mortellan.

"Back again so soon?" Mortellan asked.

I introduced him to Eileen and he naturally turned on the charm.

(That damn elf can be smooth when he wants to be, let me tell you! Many a lass has been won over by his charms! What? No, I'm not going to introduce you to him! You damn wannabe nymph! Keep your mind on your studies! Focus! Now, where was I? Oh yes!)

Mortellan called for three glasses of wine and I proceeded to explain our present predicament to him. He whistled.

"Well, Brother Nortoi has certainly 'stepped in it,' as they say," he said. "This matter should have been handled right away and he should have seen to it personally."

"Surely he did nothing illegal?" asked Eileen.

"Oh no," Mortellan assured her. "Nothing illegal, but then, the law isn't the problem here."

"So, what is the problem?" I asked.

Mortellan chuckled. "I should have thought that this morning's incident had showed you that, young one. It's the bureaucrats! Everything must be done 'just so,' or there's the Hells to pay! Do not attempt to do 'step two' without having completed 'step one.' You *will* regret it."

"I see," I acknowledged.

"I'm sure you do," Mortellan said. "And don't underestimate Selczek Gobayuik, he is not simply a disgruntled merchant, he is a Guildmaster. His Guild holds a legitimate monopoly on the disposal of all deceased persons within the City and its immediate environs, which includes Shacktown. His Guild also maintains all Civic cemeteries and burial grounds within Greyhawk as well. A person is not legally dead until his Guild provides a death certificate – Form E71-c – bearing the Embalmers' and Gravediggers' Guild Seal, meaning that, without form E71-c, the person in question – dead or not – and his family are still responsible for paying any City taxes outstanding, as well as any dues owed to any Guild to which the departed may have belong to."

"All of this, just to bury a dead person?" asked Eileen, incredulous.

"Oh, there's more!" Mortellan laughed. "Not only has someone broken the rules of Selczek's Guild, but the rules of the Watch, the rules of the Department of Estate Dispensations, the rules of the Department of Property Registry – both of those are at City Hall, by the way – and the rules of the Greyhawk Revenue Service too!"

"Istus preserve us!" Eileen breathed.

"Well, her help certainly wouldn't hurt us," Mortellan chuckled. "And if you think that Selczek Gobayuik is a pain in the arse, wait until you meet Goldreddi Bakkanin – a three hundred year old dwarf *and* the Inspector of Taxes! Yes, you're in for a real treat there!" Mortellan laughed even harder at that jibe. "His job – *and* his one and only 'love' – is to insure that Greyhawk's coffers stay full. He's quite adroit at doing that."

"So, the Church of St. Cuthbert being tax exempt . . ." I began.

"Is not going to stop Goldreddi Bakkanin from collecting any back taxes owed," Mortellan finished. "Still, the *good news* is that I do not see where any of Greyhawk's *laws* have been broken, so we should be able to get the whole thing worked out . . . eventually."

"Eventually," Eileen repeated. "What exactly does that mean?"

"It means that the four of you need to proceed to the Cairn Hills," Mortellan said. "I'll take care of things here. In fact, I probably won't be finished before you get back!" He laughed loudly. "Now, go and gather the priests you were sent for and I'll meet you in Shacktown."

Eileen and I took our leave of Mortellan and proceeded with our assignment. We turned right out of the door, walking to the Processional, where we turned left, passing through the Garden Gate and continuing on through the High Market and turning right onto High Street. The Temple of Zilchus occupied its own plot of ground with High Street bordering it on the north and Temple Row forming a horseshoe, encircling the Temple itself. The main entrance was to be found on High Street.

The Temple of Zilchus is a squat pyramid of brown stone, deceptively plain and simple beside the other Temples found here, but the interior leaves no doubt that Zilchus is anything but humble and modest. Crystal chandeliers, silver and gold statues and ornaments, platinum candlestick holders and plush furnishings lined the walls and adorned the ceiling of a large, square room with

reflective marble floors, with large black columns arranged in a square at the center of the room. Large doors are to be found in each of the rooms walls.

We were greeted at the door and shown into a small sitting room – as garishly decorated as the rest of the building – where we waited for Brother Jerlane. He proved to be a short, rotund man, as flashily dressed as the Temple, but what else can one expect of a servant of 'the Money Counter?' After the introductions, I explained the situation to him.

"I feared something like this would happen," Jerlane began. "I told them both they should register the Will with the Department of Estate Dispensations, but they were 'too busy.'"

"The Watch would like for you to be present during their interviews in Shacktown," I told him

"Yes. I'm sure they would," he agreed. "We who serve Zilchus are familiar with such things. Of course, I can only attest to the veracity of the Will, I was not witness to the halfling's death."

Traveling west on High Street, we turned left down The Path of the Sun and stopped at the Temple of Pelor. This grand edifice is over a century old and is – outwardly – in some need of minor repairs. The interior, however, is hung with golden drapery, bright and new, symbolizing the goodness of 'the Sun Father.' High Priestess Sarana, herself, spoke with us and was happy to supply us with a young priestess – Shandra by name – to witness the proceedings.

"Derider has spoken to me about you, young man," Mistress Sarana said to me. "She tells me you're one to keep my eyes upon."

I didn't know how to reply to that, nor even whether or not it was a good thing, so we took our leave of her Eminence and continued on our way.

The four of us made our way through the High Market and proceeded up Wharf Road and through Wharf Gate and soon found ourselves back at the Shrine of St. Cuthbert in Shacktown. The place was in a complete uproar and Selczek Gobayuik seemed to be at the center of it. He was there with several of his Guild members. Thankfully, order was quickly restored with the arrival of Mortellan, who brought a companion with him; Derider Fanshen, Constable of Greyhawk.

Selczek headed straight for her. "Constable! It's about time . . . !"

"Silence!" Fanshen bellowed. She waved her hand and the squad of men she had brought with her fanned out to disperse the gathering crowd. "Gobayuik! You and your men will stand over there!" She pointed to a spot. "And if you attempt to interfere with my investigation *in any way*, I'll throw you and your men *under* the Citadel! Is that clear? I will tolerate *no interruptions!*"

The half-orc and his men grumbled under their breaths, but made no further outburst. Fanshen approached me and I placed my hand upon my heart and bowed. "Constable."

"Well, well, well," Fanshen began. "Who do we have here? You seem to have your finger stuck into many pies, young man."

I stood upright and looked her in the eyes. "So it would seem, Constable." I couldn't help myself, I smiled. Derider Fanshen burst out laughing.

"After you left," Mortellan explained. "I remembered that you had met the Constable and that you had made some small impression upon her, so I thought she might be willing to help."

"Your solicitor found me and filled me in on the situation as we walked here," Fanshen explained. "Of course, I do not usually involve myself in such trivial matters, but when master Mortellan told me you were at the center of it, I just had to come down and see for myself."

She smiled at me and I knew that I hadn't gotten myself onto her 'bad side,' as they say.

"You have other affairs you need to attend to," she continued. "Affairs of which I am very much interested, so I will do what I can to facilitate matters here. I seriously doubt that Brother Nortoi has committed 'murder' to gain this tiny parcel – in spite of Selczek's bellowing – so he'll have no trouble with the Watch. As for Selczek's Guild complaint, gold will smooth the way." She leaned forward. "So you'd better get yourselves to the Cairn Hills and acquire some more." She threw back her head and laughed loudly.

"Well, we have some . . ." I began, as I reached for my pouch.

She held up her hand, forestalling me. "My word will be sufficient for him for now, though he will expect payment upon your return. Besides, you need your present funds for horses, gear and supplies. Now get going. Come and see me when you return."

We took our leave of the Constable and Mortellan, gathered up Wolfsire and Bubbagump, then said goodbye to Brother Nortoi, after introducing him to his 'solicitor' – Mortellan. Wolfsire and Bubbagump were hesitant to leave.

"I don't like that half-orc!" Wolfsire declared.

"Yeah," Bubbagump agreed. "He was threatening Brother Nortoi!"

"Brother Nortoi will be fine," I assured them. "He has Irontusk to keep Selczek at bay. And Mortellan is a Guild Lawyer, remember? Mortellan will handle the bureaucrats and Constable Fanshen has promised to help. He'll be alright."

"Yes," Eileen agreed. "We need to return our attention to the problem in the Cairn Hills."

I must admit that I was growing just a little apprehensive. Everyone seemed in a hurry for us to find out what was going on in the Cairn Hills. That Theldrat Meldorp's key was magical was obvious, but a magical key would not cause such keen interest in my adventure. I knew that it all centered around the stolen book . . . Zagig's book.

And what Veltargo might be doing with it.

Well, I never thought the tale would be so long in the telling! Mrs. Hildegard should be in any moment . . . Ooo! Sausages and biscuits! My, but you are a *wonder*, Mrs. Hildegard! And will you smell that milk gravy! It'll be good to break our fast while I continue my tale of . . .

## That Infamous Key

### Chapter Ten

We re-entered the City through the Wharf Gate and passed down Wharf Road and into the High Market. It was necessary for me to herd my friends through this area; as I've mentioned before, the eyes and nose are easily distracted here, especially to those not used to the City's hustle and bustle.

We proceed onto the Processional, heading southward and passing through the Garden Gate, then over the Millstream, finally turning left onto Craftsman's Way, just before the Petite Bazaar. I believe I may have mentioned that Craftsman's Way forks and curves around to the right, well we stayed left and entered onto Castle Street, heading straight for *Eridok's Expeditious Provisions*.

There is an alley next to Eridok's, which leads to his smithy. Anything can be purchased at Eridok's, including tack, though the horses are kept at the *Merchants' and Traders' Guild Livery*, to the south of the city. For bulkier items, master Eridok keeps a large warehouse in the Wharf District, on Forecastle Lane, near the junction of The Dockway and Riverside Road.

As we entered the shop, I could see several of Eridok's assistants helping customers, but not Eridok. As I approached the counter, however, he entered through a rear door. An Oeridian of moderate height, standing about an inch shy of six feet and weighing about two hundred pounds, Eridok had brown hair and blue eyes, a scar upon his right cheek, two fingers missing from his left hand and he walked with a slight limp.

Eridok had been quite the adventurer in his youth. Now of middle age, he had set himself up in this shop, supplying the needs of the next generation of adventurers. He had some excellent connections in both the City Watch and the Mercenaries Guildhall; a word from him could open doors. But he seldom did that sort of thing, as he's a firm believer in the need of young adventurers "pulling themselves up by their own bootstraps!" I've heard him say it more than once.

He waved me over. "Well lad!" he boomed. "Yer Master tells me yer off to adventure! Ah, nothin' like it lad! Nothin' at all! And it's about time too! All that book learnin' ain't going to get it done, lad!" He held up his hands. "Now, I'm not saying that there's anythin' wrong with schoolin'! Not at all! A young man needs to know certain things, 'tis true, but there's nothin' like the *experience*, lad. Nothin' at all!"

"I do not doubt your wisdom, master Eridok," I replied.

"Now Maldin told me something of what yer 'bout," he confided. "And I've already begun puttin' together a package for ya. It'll be ready tomorrow afternoon. Now, I'm supplying everything you and yer friends will be needin', including the horses. Of course, ya can't afford to be buyin' the horses just now, so I'm rentin' 'em to ya. Decent enough animals mind, but not the ver' best . . . just in case I don't get 'em back, ya understand."

"We will not fail to return your horses, master Eridok," Eileen assured him, resolutely.

(Clerics of Istus pride themselves on their honesty and Eileen is not an exception to that rule. She takes affront anytime her honesty is questioned.)

"Now lass, don't ya go making promises ya might not be able to keep," Eridok replied, holding up his hand to forestall a rebuttal. "I don't know ya, but I know something of yer Order and I know the young Magician. What's more, I know his Master. I'm not talking 'bout 'stealing,' I'm talking about them gettin' eaten, or just plain killed. What ya think, lass? That yer goin' on a picnic?"

Eridok went over the list of gear with us and explained one or two items we were unfamiliar with. It was an hour before closing time and his staff wouldn't be finished getting everything together until sometime the next day.

"Shall we return to the Green Dragon?" I asked, as we stepped outside.

"Let's go check on Brother Nortoi!" said Bubbagump.

"Yeah," agreed Wolfsire. "I want to make sure that everything's going okay over there."

Eileen agreed and so, in spite of the waning daylight, we headed for Shacktown. By the time we arrived it had grown dark and there was no one about. So we knocked on the door of the little house and Solnia answered.

"Hey everybody!" she cried. "Come in! Everything's going to be alright! Come in and Brother Nortoi can tell you about it!"

We entered the little dining area and found Brother Nortoi there with Irontusk as they were about to eat. The smell of food reminded me of how hungry I was.

"Will you join us?" asked Brother Nortoi.

I held up my hand. "No, thank you." I didn't want to be walking the streets in the early hours of the morning. "Our meals come with our room, so we won't trouble you. We just stopped by – *briefly* – to see how things went."

"Everything went well," Brother Nortoi informed us. "Constable Fanshen handled matters herself and Mortellan was a lot of help. Solnia knew Bimbo – as did some others – and could testify as to his death. We also had John Materon give testimony. He had heard about the disturbance and came down. John's an herbalist with the *Guild of Apothecaries and Herbalists* and had been supplying Bimbo with his remedies. So Constable Fanshen was convinced that Bimbo is dead and had died

of natural causes. Milt Skyler was informed that the property was not abandoned and therefore he could not present any claim. Needless to say, he was not happy about that, not one little bit."

"That's very good," I said. "What about Selczek Gobayuik?"

"Constable Fanshen set him straight too," Brother Nortoi replied. "She had the sergeant give me the Incident Report -- Form I-9a -- which she also showed to Gobayuik." He handed it to me. "Gobayuik says you can stop by his shop in the morning to pick up the Death Certificate. Mortellan had to sign off on the Will. It seems that the *Lawyers' and Scribes' Guild* must also sign the Will, or else issue a Form EW222-3b stating that there is no Will. Mortellan 'postdated' his signature -- whatever that means -- so that the Will can be registered and the title changed over."

"That means that he's pretending to have witnessed Bimbo Towhead's signing of the Will," I explained, keeping it simple. "That makes everything legal."

"Anyway," Brother Nortoi continued. "Now all you have to do is go and register the Will and Deed in the morning!"

"Brother Nortoi, we have pressing business in the Cairn Hills and need to be moving on." I looked around at my friends, who were returning my look with unhappy faces. "Well, our gear won't be ready until the afternoon," I conceded. "I suppose I can take care of this for you . . . first thing in the morning." My companions were suddenly smiling. "But then we must be off." To which they all nodded affirmation.

With that matter decided, we said our good-nights and headed for the Green Dragon. I couldn't remember the last time I had done so much walking; I was ready for some food and a bed. Fortunately, despite the hour, our passage to the Green Dragon was uneventful.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning -- after breaking our fast -- the four of us returned to Gobayuik's Undertakers to pick-up the Death Certificate.

"There!" said a surly Selczek, tossing a piece of paper onto the counter-top. "Form E71-c. Of course, as Constable Fanshen probably pointed out to you, there's a fine for not having handled this matter in the proper manner!"

"She did mention something about that," I admitted. "Though she never told me how much."

"The standard fee and the fine come to fifty *orbs*," Selczek replied, chin thrust forward, waiting for me to argue the amount.

I disappointed him by counting out the coins onto the counter. Gobayuik let out a satisfied grunt. "There you are," I said. "Fifty gold *orbs*. Now, since you seem to know of such things, can you tell me where we need to go to register the deed?"

"The Courts of Justice, in the Garden Quarter," Gobayuik replied.

Thanking the half-orc, we took our leave of him. We headed north on Water Street, which then curved to the east and turned right onto The Strip, then we turned left onto Horseshoe Road and followed it to the Processional. We headed north on the Processional, through the Garden Gate – the guards were now so familiar with me they just waved us on – through the High Market, then right on High Street to the doors of the Courts of Justice.

There was a guard stationed just outside the door. He stopped us. "State your business."

"We're here to register the change of ownership of a piece of property in Shacktown," I replied. "For the Church of St. Cuthbert."

He pointed to Eileen. "I can see she's a cleric, but she's no Cuthbertine."

"I serve the 'Lady of Our Fate,'" Eileen replied. "And I can speak for myself . . . when I'm spoken to."

"The lady of . . . what?" asked the now perplexed guard.

"Our *Fate!*" Eileen raised her voice.

"She means Istus," I interjected.

"Then why didn't she say so!" demanded the guard.

"I did!" Eileen retorted.

"Look, you . . ." the guard began.

"Excuse me!" I raised my voice. "When I spoke with constable Fanshen yesterday, she assured me that I wouldn't have any problems here. Was she wrong?"

"Constable Fanshen?" he stammered.

"Yes," I replied. "We have stated our business and now we'll be about it."

"My apologies, young sir," he offered. "There was another kidnapping last night and my sergeant has us tightening security around here. But if the Constable sent you, it must be alright. Please, go right in!"

I started forward and then paused to look at him again. "The Polymorph Squad?"

"Looks like it, anyways," he replied.

I nodded thoughtfully as I opened the door.

The guard looked in and pointed. "You'll be wantin' those windows right there, sir. But he ain't here yet, so you'll have to wait."

I nodded my thanks.

Above one of the windows we could see a sign that read, '*Estate Dispensations*' 9:00 – 11:00. The sign above the other one read; '*Property Registry*' 1:00 – 3:00. It was about half an hour before Estate Dispensations opened for business and we decided to wait – as the guard had suggested – to ensure that we were the first in line.

It wasn't long before a bookish looking gnome walked in the building and headed straight for the door that led to the area behind the two windows. Wolfsire stood, but I waved him back into his seat.

"What?" he asked.

"If I learned anything yesterday, it's that bureaucrats are nothing, if not prompt," I said. "And to make matters worse, it's a *gnome* bureaucrat. Trust me, he's not going to open that window for business one minute before he has to. We'll wait."

Sure enough, it was another quarter of an hour before he moved into position and opened his window. I approached him with Forms I-9a, E71-c and the Will in my hands.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied. "We have a Will here, transferring a piece of property in Shacktown from one Bimbo Towhead to the Church of St. Cuthbert. I also have an Incident Report I-9a and . . ."

"I won't need those," he interrupted. "Those are for 'Property Registry' to see. I just need to ascertain that the Will is legal and proper. Let me see it."

He took it from me and read it over carefully. He pulled out a book, from under his counter and I could tell that he was checking Louis Jerlane's seal. He then pulled out a second book which, according the cover, contained the signatures of Guild Lawyers; no doubt checking Mortellan's signature.

"Well, everything seems to be in order," he concluded. "I judge the Will to be a legal and proper instrument and . . ." He stamped it. ". . . Registered. You can take this to 'Property Registry,' along with your Forms I-9a and E71-c when that window opens."

I knew it was a stupid thing to do, but I just couldn't help myself. "Can I ask when that will be?"

"Sign above the window," he curtly replied.

I walked away from the window and indicated that my friends should follow me.

"There's obviously nothing we can do until this afternoon," I said.

"But we have to leave this afternoon," said Eileen.

"I'm growing to hate these bureaucrats," Wolfsire said.

"Join the club," I replied.

"So, what do we do until then?" asked Eileen.

"Let's show them the sights!" Bubbagump cried.

"Well, we do have some hours to wait," I replied. "We'll show them the Garden and High Quarters." And that's what we did.

We started with the Garden Quarter. I pointed out the Wizards' Guildhall and the Lord Mayor's Palace. Eileen had not yet been to the Temple of Istus – only having arrived the day before we met – so we stopped by there. The Temple was located on The Path of the Sun, near to Pelor's Temple. We had passed it the day before, but had not had time to stop.

The Temple of Istus is a relatively large building constructed of gray marble, with silver veins running through it, conjuring up images of the *Web of Fate*. Inside billowing gauze hangs from the ceiling, clouds of incense float about the room and woodwind music fills the air, along with soft, indiscernible voices gently chanting.

We were met at the door and explained our purpose. Being a Cleric of Istus from far off Ekbir, Eileen was granted an audience with Mathilde Dessenter, High Priestess of the Greyhawk Temple. The rest of us were shown into a small side room and given some refreshments while we waited.

Some twenty minutes later, Eileen returned and we were once again on our way. We headed into the High Market to look around. We still had golden *orbs* and a will to spend some of them. Like the Low Market, there were performers of various types that we enjoyed, such as minstrels who wooed and serenaded Eileen – which seemed to annoy me – and the ever present food vendors whose wares Wolfsire and Bubbagump simply could not pass up sampling.

After about an hour of this, Eileen and I decided to partake of some food ourselves, before heading back to deal with the city bureaucracy. Eileen expressed an interest in trying the food at the Gold Dragon Inn.

"I don't think that would work," I said. "You and I might be able to get in, maybe. But Wolfsire and Bubbagump would never get in the door."

"Why not?" asked Wolfsire, indignantly.

"Your dress," I replied. "The Gold Dragon is the most pretentious social club in the Free City. Almost all of the city's 'snobs' can be found there. Also, they charge exorbitant prices for their plain fare and it isn't even the best food to be had. Then there's the dress code I alluded to; Eileen and I are *barely* presentable – as far as that crowd is concerned – but you and Bubbagump aren't anywhere *near* dressed nicely enough to gain entry."

"I suppose that this could be considered 'that part of town,'" Eileen said.

"What do you mean 'considered'?" I laughed. "This *is* 'that part of town!'"

My friends laughed at that as well.

"Let's just look for a vendor," I suggested.

And that's what we did, eating as we continued to shop. Soon though, it was time to for us to return to the Courts. There was a clerk sitting behind the 'Property Registry' window now and – yes – it was the same gnome. I approached the window.

"We're back," I said.

"Back?" the gnome replied. "What do you mean 'back?' Can I help you in some fashion?"

"We're here to get a Deed registered," I said. "Remember?"

"Remember what?" asked the gnome. "How can I remember something that hasn't happened?"

"You notarized a Will for us just this morning," I reminded him.

"Notarization of Wills takes place at the 'Estate Dispensation' window," he replied. "This is the 'Property Registry' window. Do you wish to register a property?"

"Yes, I do," I answered. I was beginning to get a headache.

"Where is this property?" he inquired.

"It's in Shacktown," I replied.

"Do you have an address?" he asked.

"It's written on the Will," I replied, handing him the Will and Forms I-9a and E71-c.

He looked at the Will and shoved the forms back at me. "I did not ask for those." Then walked off to what could only be rows of filing cabinets. I picked the forms back up, grumbling under my breath. Wolfsire swore and Eileen sighed heavily, while Bubbagump was busy trying to see over the counter.

The gnome searched among the filing cabinets, found what he was looking for and opened a draw. After rummaging around for a bit, he pulled out a file and returned to the counter.

"Our records show that the property in question belongs to one 'Bimbo Towhead,' a Halfling citizen," he intoned. "What is your claim to the property?"

"The former owner is deceased and has left the property to the Church of St. Cuthbert," I replied.

"And what is your proof of this?" he arched an eyebrow.

"You are holding the Will," I replied.

"So I am," he replied. "And the Will is duly notarized by the Estate Dispensation Department, but where is the proof of Mr. Towhead's death? I need a Form E71-c bearing the Embalmers' and Gravediggers' Guild seal."

I handed Form E71-c back to him and he looked it over. My headache was growing.

"Very well," he said. "The Embalmers' and Gravediggers' Guild has declared Mr. Towhead legally dead. But how did he die? How do we know you didn't murder Mr. Towhead in order to seize his property? Did the City Watch conduct an investigation? Where is your Form I-9a?"

I handed him Form I-9a, restraining the urge to turn him into a radish. I could hear Wolfsire growling behind me.

He looked over the form. "Well, everything seems to be in order. Mr. Towhead is indeed dead and the property is now available for re-registration. What is the name of the party to whom the property will now be registered?"

"The Church of St. Cuthbert," I repeated.

"Very well," the gnome said. "I just need to see your Form LC207-a."

My headache was now pounding behind my right eye. "Form what?" I asked.

"Form LC207-a," he replied. "Your 'Certificate of Legal Claim' from 'Estate Dispensation,' of course. You do have your Form LC207-a, do you not?"

"You never said anything about that, this morning," I informed him.

"Why would I have said anything about that this morning?" he asked. "You are confused, young man, this is the 'Property Registry' desk, you need to speak with the 'Estate Dispensation' desk clerk about Form LC207-a."

"You *are* the 'Estate Dispensation' clerk!" I insisted. "I spoke with you this morning!"

"Nonsense!" he declared. "From 1:00 until 3:00 I am the 'Property Registry' clerk! And you never spoke to me about Form LC207-a!"

"Apparently, you're *both*!" I cried. "And I spoke to you about this Will! Look, could you kindly just step over to the other window – for a moment – and get me a Form 'whatever'?"

"Form LC207-a," he repeated. "And I certainly cannot 'step over to the other window!' 'Estate Dispensation' is only open from 9:00 until 11:00. You'll have to get your 'Certificate of Legal Claim' tomorrow, between 9:00 and 11:00 and not before!"

"But you are *both* clerks!" I insisted. "Would it kill you to move four feet to get a piece of paper?"

"That would be highly improper!" he was aghast. "We have rules, young man! Everything must be done in its proper order. Do you know what would happen if we bent the rules for everybody? *Chaos!* That's what would happen! Complete and utter chaos! The system functions only because we have *Order!* An orderly, systematic procedure that allows for the smooth flow of legal claims and transactions! And it *is not* a 'piece of paper'! It is Form LC207-a, a 'Certificate of Legal Claim'! Without which you cannot lay claim to the property in question!"

(I had never really contemplated murder before that time, but I was developing a seriously murderous attitude towards that damnable gnome. The fact that Eileen was starting to laugh wasn't helping matters any.)

"So, we need to return tomorrow morning?" I asked, exasperated.

"That is when 'Estate Dispensation' will be open," he replied, nonchalantly. "Obtain your Form LC207-a in the morning and return here with it in the afternoon."

Another day wasted, but there was nothing else to do, so we departed. I was really beginning to hate that gnome and I was growing less fond of Brother Nortoi too and said so.

"What did Brother Nortoi do?" demanded Bubbagump.

"Nothing, little one," Eileen assured him. "The Magician is just venting his frustration with Greyhawk's bureaucrats."

"I'd like to murder that little bastard, myself!" Wolfsire cried. "It wouldn't have taken ten minutes for that little . . . !"

"True," I interjected. "But he wasn't going to do it. Mortellan tried to prepare me for this, but I still wasn't ready for the reality of it. They require everything to be 'just so' and Bimbo Towhead and Nicholi Nortoi messed it up, leaving us to deal with the situation."

"Leaving *you* to deal with the situation," Eileen said. "I'm unfamiliar with Greyhawk and wouldn't have any idea what to do."

"Neither would I and I live here . . . at least, sometimes," Bubbagump shrugged. "So don't go lookin' at me!"

"I have enough trouble trying to keep track of Cruski laws, so don't look at me either," Wolfsire offered.

"The Magician will take care of it." Eileen chuckled, patting my shoulder.

"Yes, I'll take care of it," I breathed. "Don't worry about it. The gnome's lack of cooperation is very aggravating and causing a delay in our own schedule and *that* is what's frustrating me, more than anything."

"So, what now?" asked Wolfsire.

I spread my arms, palms upwards and then allowed them to drop to my sides. "Find something to do, I suppose." I started walking down the Processional. "First, we'll let Eridok know what's up, that way he can hold our gear until tomorrow."

\* \* \* \*

Eridok laughed heartily at the day's events. "Well, lad, be glad that yer not in business for yerself! Ya just described something that I 'sperience at least once a week! Yer Master too, except that he has old Elbrak to handle these matters for him. And never fear, ya gear will be here when yer ready for it."

Thanking Eridok, we took our leave.

"Where to now?" asked Eileen.

"Mortellan," was all I said.

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"Brother Nortoi does appear to be the helpless type, doesn't he?" asked Mortellan.

"He is a kindly old man that does all he can for his parishioners," Eileen offered in the priest's defense.

"I'm sure he does," admitted Mortellan. "What does that have to do with helplessness? And aren't you just a little too, I don't know, compassionate . . . for a cleric of Istus? Mathilde Dessenter always impressed me as being a bit cold; cynical even."

"I would say that the High Priestess is stoic, not cynical," insisted Eileen. "And stoicism is not the same as indifference."

"So, all that talk about 'what will be, will be' . . .?" Mortellan began.

"Excuse me," I interrupted them. "Do we really have to launch into a religious debate at this time?"

Mortellan laughed. "No, I suppose we don't." He sipped from his wine cup. "I'll take care of things in the morning. You four need to get to the Cairn Hills. And now, I'd like a private word with the Magician . . . if you don't mind, dear lady?"

My companions departed, to wait for me outside and I was alone with Mortellan.

"You still have my wand, don't you?" He asked, unnecessarily.

"Of course," I answered.

"Good, that will help with Veltargo and any other living things you mind find," he said.

"Living things?" I asked.

Mortellan looked at me. "You're going into a tomb, boy. What do you think you're going to find in there?"

Images passed through my mind in rapid sequence. "Apparently, more than I first expected."

"Do not underestimate Veltargo," Mortellan warned. "I still do not know who he is, but I sense that he serves Dark Powers. Trust to your staff, its powers are fire based and will prove useful . . . should you run into *Undead*." He looked hard at me. "And you just might."

\* \* \* \*

We sat in the common room of the Green Dragon having a slightly early dinner.

"Finally!" exclaimed Wolfsire. "We're leaving the city behind us! I'm much more comfortable in the open spaces, myself."

"Me too!" agreed Bubbagump. "I like travelling!"

With that declaration, they hoisted their tankards and toasted the journey and talked about the things they would do once on the road.

"You seem distracted, Magician," Eileen said to me. "Is there something wrong?"

"Wrong?" I replied. "No, nothing wrong. Just thinking . . . planning. Giving thought to what spells I should prepare. That sort of thing."

"Ah, yes," she breathed. "Magicians need to do such things, but I did not think it required such serious fore-thought on your part. We clerics prepare also, of course, though not to the same degree. We pray for our spells."

"Yes, I know." I leaned towards her and lowered my voice. "There is something that you and I need to discuss, but not in front of the others. It's not something they need to know . . . yet."

She looked at our companions – boisterously discussing our future travels – then back at me.

"Of course," she agreed. "Whenever you like."

"Now." I stood. Bubbagump and Wolfsire looked up, I held up my hand. "Stay and enjoy yourselves, my friends. It will be sometime before we return to such comforts. Eileen and I merely seek a quieter atmosphere in which we can discuss magical things."

"Of course!" Wolfsire bellowed, raising his tankard to toast us and giving me a large wink.

Shaking my head at his obvious implication, Eileen and I departed.

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"*Undead*?" Eileen breathed. "Are you certain?" In her unease, she reached for my hand.

"Nothing is certain," I replied. "But it is a tomb, after all, and those who know such things are convinced that Veltargo serves a Dark Power, so we should prepare."

"In all my travels I have never faced the *Undead* before," Eileen voiced her concern. "You?"

"Me?" I replied. "Yes . . . yes I have."

(That was a sort of lie, of course. Oh, I had faced the *Undead* before, certainly . . . but at my Master's side, never on my own. Still, Eileen needed to be reassured. Since I couldn't be sure how Wolfsire and Bubbagump would take it, the last thing I need was for Eileen to be visibly uneasy as well. Yes, things were about to get interesting.)