

Voyage TO THE Temple OF Light

E.K. DOBBINS

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Chapter One

Cries of sea birds filled the air. The smell of fish began to clear away in the fresh morning breeze. Strong voices from sailors of all origins filled the void as the day got underway. Their curses and swears barely drowned out by the movement of cargo from one of twelve docked ships. A large amount of extra ships waited in the distance for their turn at the bustling ports. The spray of the sea water was felt away from the docks, its impact was seen upon the pock-marked houses closest to the churning waters, salt and time slowly wearing away their defenses.

Clear sunny skies beckoned both residents and visitors alike to wander the marketplace in search of the elusive bargain. Several streets of this lower port town, Churn, buzzed with the hawking of merchants, welcoming patrons shopping their wares. Bartering alive and well within the busy town. A group of tall, stocky women squawked with laughter, entertaining the gossip of the day as chickens scratched around their feet. Cobblestone streets clicked with the hooves of the horses rode by the city watch.

The large men, ripe with muscle, eyed all with suspicion as they paraded through the crowd. Laughter of children was barely heard above the boisterous voices and large animal sounds of the marketplace. The small gang, consisting of mostly young boys, wove gracefully through the various shoppers with ease and skill in their game of chase. A few surefooted children managed to nab a coin pouch or purse as they enjoyed their game. Everyone in the marketplace took in in the gorgeous late summer day, one of only a few left. Many elders sat on the tavern porch, discussing the weather. Some advised that the season turned from summer to autumn much faster than in recent history.

Caravan after caravan of travelers added to the bustle of the port town. Their joyful sounds added to the rest of the excitement of the marketplace. It is a long dangerous road to Churn by land, especially with the many Wars waging upon the planet, Bri'al. Townsfolk monitored the arrivals with quick glances then continued their business. A woman and her daughter whom walked among the visitors pulled from the rest of the caravan, vying to take a slight left in the street towards the ports. The group of gossiping women stopped talking as the mother and daughter team quickly passed.

The first thing the gossips took note of was the mother's flaming red hair flowing down her back, ending just above her hips. Pleasing to the eyes, her body toned and strong yet very feminine. Currently, she dressed in a set of traveling trousers and matching vest. A long-sleeve shirt protected her arms. Worn boots covered her tired feet as she continued to walk toward the ports. Several of the witnessing locals gawked then spoke in hush tones among each other the name of the woman, Milea Sirius. The Sorceress of Selvast Forest. The girl is Milea's daughter, Sonja. Though not a mage such as her mother, Sonja's abilities excelled in a physical way.

Several townsfolks called to the Sorceress and her daughter in greeting. Milea waved back but did not stop to chat, her current mission urging her along. She had tried to teleport to the Temple of Light in the Boiling Seas earlier in the day. Unfortunately, the results did not land her at the Temple of Light as she expected. Instead, she landed in an area known simply as Wild Territory. Milea found communicating with her twin just as

unsuccessful. It was as if someone or something deliberately prevented her from communicating or even arriving at her desired destination. Milea knows that the only other option she had was to travel by boat. The journey should take only a few days.

They had a ship provided to them, but they needed a Sea Captain. In a city of sailors, Milea hoped to find a Captain that's not already bound to a crew. Milea paused and scanned a merchant's tent with her enchanting brown eyes. The large man beamed a bright smile at the sorceress. He knew she had plenty of coin to spend. He'd seen her purchase some of the most expensive things in the marketplace, in the past, without batting an eyelash.

"Mom," Sonja, the child, addressed quietly, "what's the matter?"

"We must find you something a little warmer, Sonja," Milea explained gently to her child. Her voice seemed naturally seductive.

The merchant's smile brightened even more when he heard her speak. Several men passing by stopped to look at the woman. One unfortunate soul was scolded and smacked on the back of his head by his wife. Milea ignored the activity as she looked up at the clothing merchant.

"How much for the green shirt, my good man?" Milea asked the much taller man before her.

"One hundred coins and you won't find a better deal." The merchant, a pot-bellied man, assured as he patted his stomach. "These fine wares are made from the finest material in the Northwest. Spun from the discarded wool of mountain dragons, they are both warm and comfortable as well as naturally waterproof. King Randolf of Helbavor guarantees it." He smiled brightly.

"I see," Milea stated with some calm in her voice. She then, to the merchant's surprise, turned and walked away from him. "Let us make haste to the Lucky Dragon. I think we will find something of better quality in the next port." Sonja appeared relieved; she didn't think the price was fair for the shirt.

"Hopefully cheaper as well." Sonja added. Milea smiled as they walked.

Horses snorted as they were led down the street pass the mother and daughter team. The beasts grunted in protest of the way their handlers treated them. Their breath and odor added to the slight humidity of the air. Sonja frowned and waved her hand in front of her nose; the horses had yet to have their bath. She sighed. Perhaps they just got off a ship. Milea ignored the grunting animals as she turned a corner and continued down a sloped street toward the destination. Sonja jogged a little to keep up with her mother's stride. It did not take long for the two to locate their destination.

A sign with a dragon sitting on a four leaf clover hung above the door. The dragon itself appeared to have had one too many drinks. His green scales were painted slightly purple in spots, namely the cheeks and stomach, indicating he was in good spirit both inside and out. His middle section was swollen, eyes and mouth wide with a hardy welcoming call. His arms were wide with greeting. The pictured dragon held a tankard of ale in one hand, a large jewel in the other.

A breeze ruffled Milea's and Sonja's hair. The tavern sat proudly upon the ports. A nice two-mast schooner floated on the gentle waves only a few feet away. The boat basked happily in the sun rays as it awaited departure. The tavern door opened, spewing forth several fowl and uninviting orders from the tavern. Both Milea and Sonja took several steps to one side, allowing stumbling patrons to exit. From their stature and mannerism, Milea knew who they were.

"Pirates." Milea frowned. "Well, they are the most foolhardy of sailors."

"We are really going to go in there?" Sonja inquired. "Seriously?" She raised an eyebrow and looked up at her mother.

"To save your aunt, we have no choice." Milea sighed. "Stay close to me. I don't think I want to cause a riot by beheading one of their more prominent members."

"I don't want to break their arm, either." Sonja countered. "I'll be aware." She promised.

"Good." Milea nodded. She turned to the now-closed door and took a deep breath. After a few breaths, she opened the door. The pungent odor that greeted them caused Sonja to squeak and move back several paces. Milea smiled and shook her head before bravely entering the establishment. Sonja sighed and followed.

The sound of a mandolin filled the smoke-laden air. Several drunken cheers answered a proud and boisterous male voice that echoed from the stage. The man then launched into a song, using the thumping of his boot on the stage as a drum. Milea scanned the audience and nodded. The Lucky Dragon bustled with all sorts of activity, much of it illegal. With a purpose in her steps, Milea didn't appear fazed by the reputation. She had to visit the tavern more than once in her lifetime. Especially when seeking a pirate friend. Unfortunately, that friend was not among the audience. A series of life circumstances had kept Milea's pirate friend from the seas for many years now. If she were still sailing, Milea's task would have been that much easier. Several men turned from the stage to take gaze at the women who had appeared in their domain. Milea straightened and met their gaze, unflinching. The men sat back a little before turning to face the stage once more, determined to avoid any conflict with the sorceress.

"This way." Milea stated and walked into the crowd. Sonja kept close to her mother as they made their way toward the only empty table in the establishment.

The smoke thickened as did the stench of alcohol as the two neared the center of the room. Sonja looked about at the patrons. Many were men of various regions, some dark of skin, others were lighter than the pale chowder they ate. All were sailors of one sort or the other. Sonja's eyes fell on the one person she felt seemed out of place. The girl's gaze was met with the curious sea-blue eyes of the elfin stranger. His vest and trousers resembled more of a woodland warrior than the looser clothing of the local sailors. His long, dark hair was tied back at the moment. An expensive, sharpened sword hung at his waist. Its handle was encrusted with gemstones yet no one seemed to want to take it from him. From the wear on the handle itself, Sonja suspected the elf was an expert sword master. Milea met the eyes of the elf causing him to quickly avert his gaze back to his drink. She and Sonja walked past the stranger as they continued to the table. He waited until they were several steps away before he turned and looked at them. Afterward, he stood and walked

toward a door on the left side of the stage.

The tavern patrons, both sober and drunken, watched as mother and daughter continued their way. One patron eyed both the woman and the child before speaking to his cohorts. This group left as soon as the two passed their table. Milea sighed in relief when they finally reached the back table without incident. The small, square table was short and squat, with room for only one person. A single chair accompanied the table, its back against the wall. Milea adjusted the table so two sides were against the corner walls and pulled over an additional chair. Sonja sat down and continued to study the people of the tavern. Many of them openly stared at the new comers. Milea sat in the second chair and nodded.

“This place is not comfortable.” Sonja spoke quietly to her mother.

“It isn’t.” Milea agreed. “However, we will not be here long.” She focused on the stage.

A man and a woman were on the large, raised floor that covered a good part of the left wall. They appeared to be bickering after which the woman tilted back her head and barked loud, boisterous laughter. The patrons also laughed loudly. Sonja focused on the stage as well and saw both actors appeared to be the same as she, L’vane. She leaned forward to try to distinguish them through the smoke. They were adventurers, perhaps sailors as they had similar complexions to those who roamed the waves—the same as that of the majority of the patrons currently occupying the Lucky Dragon.

“So what say you, my fine pirate woman?” The man spoke loud enough for his audience to hear. His low tenor echoed slightly in the large room. “Do you surrender or will you face my blade?” He was the shorter of the two, standing five feet and five inches tall. His hair was the color of wet sand and tied back into a ponytail that reached his shoulders. It only enhanced his handsome features and the auburn color of his eyes. He was currently wearing a black vest with nice, loose-fitting trousers. The top showed off the strong muscle of his arms and chest. Worn black boots completed his ensemble.

“Oh wait, let me give you my response again.” The five foot eight woman countered. She placed her hands upon her hips and threw back her head in a hardy belly laugh. “My, but you are a humorous person.” She looked back at the man with a crooked grin. Her light brown hair was longer, reaching her middle back at least for the time being. A golden band held a portion of her the locks in place to keep it out of her face. Her outfit matched the man costume. The back of her vest, currently turned toward the audience, was graced with the golden embroidery of a dragon holding a rose. Her body was fit and nicely proportioned, gathering the attention of the majority of the room.

“I see.” The man growled and held up his sword. He stepped toward the woman whom had yet to move. His body language indicated that he was upset at his opponent’s lack of concern. “Then, you leave me with no choice than to give you my sword so you may face him.” He pointed behind the woman.

“What?” the woman asked. She quickly turned and cussed, then pulled the offered blade and blocked her opponent. It was the elf swords master. Luckily for her, he only stood an inch taller than she. “Hold up. How in Ublivorin did that happen?” She and her opponent separated, freeing her hands so she could place at least one of them upon her

hip. The other held the sword coyly. “I thought I was supposed to be facing you, brother. Not our traveling buddy.”

“I’ll have you know that Brion here is a top-notch Sword Master of his home country.” The shorter man introduced. “Besides, one of us has to sing the song, sis. I figured since you’re portraying Ra’jil so well, I’ll sing while you fight.”

“Lovely.” The woman rolled her eyes. “Thanks, brother.”

“Hey, that’s what younger siblings are for.” The man jumped up onto a table on the stage. He stomped out a beat and began to sing, his voice clear and crisp. The patrons of the tavern clapped to his beat as his sister and her opponent battled on the stage before him.

The song filled the entire room along with the ringing of metal. Milea sat back and watched the two battle. The woman took several steps back as her opponent pressed forward. She then placed the blade between her teeth, jumped over the elfman, flipped and landed, facing his back. Her sword appeared to jump to her hand quickly. The elf casually held his sword to cover his back, blocking the woman’s swing. She cursed and backed up as he turned toward her again, a crooked grin on his own handsome features. Milea laughed from the antics and Sonja cheered on the woman playing Ra’jil.

A serving wench appeared, sighed, and placed two tankards of ale on the table along with the house special. Some of the slop spilled out of the bowl and splattering across the table. It dripped down the sides of the containers for a moment, creating small piles of the mess. Milea and Sonja both looked at the offerings.

“What is this?” Milea frowned at the bowl.

“It’s free food and ale.” The serving wench snapped. “Ye can eat it or toss it to the floor. No bother to me either way.” She walked away to serve the next table.

Sonja looked at the contents of the bowl and took one whiff. The pungent odor caused her to gag and she pushed the bowl away, frowning.

“Yes, I think we need to get out of here before I cause trouble.” Milea hailed a passing man. “Innkeeper.” He stopped from her voice alone, causing Sonja to snicker. “I seek a captain that is fool-hardy enough to go to the Boiling Seas. Is there such a person here?”

“There be a captain, milady.” The innkeeper assured. “His name is Dresden. But he’s not sailed in years. Not even sure if he has a ship now.”

“Point me to this Dresden. I will worry about the ship.” Milea replied. The Innkeeper nodded and looked toward the stage. She followed his gaze.

The mock battle was over with and the woman is now singing a powerful, high-energy song. Her brother, the one the innkeeper is directing Milea to, was sitting on the table, strumming his mandolin to the song his sister sang. His fingers danced over the stringed instrument just as fast as his sister’s voice ranged up and down the scale as she sang. The elf was now out of sight, but not far from his friends. Milea focused on the man with the mandolin and nodded to herself.

“Thank you.” Milea acknowledged the innkeeper. “Tell him I wish to speak with him.” She handed the man a few coins.

“Of course, milady. Right away.” The innkeeper grinned brightly before quickly walking toward the stage.

The stage vibrated slightly as the woman did a shuffle dance back to her brother. Her hands were behind her back. Many of the men whistled and shouted for more. Her brother stood and, with a flourish, handed the instrument to his sister before he shuffled center stage. The woman sat down and strung the instrument a little. He laughed and led a small “pirate” cheer, which humored his audience.

“Who wants to hear another pirate song?” The male bard’s tenor voice rang out into the room. Many of the men raised their glasses with loud hails. “How about another round of our great Mistress of the Seas? Eh?” Loud agreement thundered the halls. The innkeeper walked over and whispered something to the bard. “I see...” He spoke to the man. “Ah, well, duty calls! As well as my curiosity.” He addressed his audience.

“Can we at least watch the woman dance?” One of the patrons shouted. Agreement echoed among his peers.

“Sorry, boys, I have a headache.” The female bard feigned pain as she held her head. “Perhaps another day.” She and her brother walked off the stage.

The air in the tavern started to clear up as many of the patrons left. Sonja took a slightly larger breath in order to keep from passing out. The serving wench who had brought them their meal quickly retrieved the bowls and ale and cleaned the table. She then replaced them with large cups of fresh water. Milea watched the woman and saw her features were dark with anger. The serving wench finished her chore and quickly left without a single word. Milea picked up the cup and looked at it as the door left of the stage opened up. She saw that the contents were fresh and free of any foreign debris.

“Safe drinking water?” Milea mused. “That’s a first for this place.” She sniffed the contents and nodded. Sonja did the same with her tankard before sipping it. The water was clean and refreshing. With a sigh, the girl downed her drink. Milea nodded and focused upon the stage again when she heard a heavy thump.

Several of the patrons cheered or called to the trio exiting the stage door. Sonja watched their approach and nodded her confirmation to the two bards. They were indeed L’vane, the shape of the ear tips betraying their heritage. They were, like her own, in the shape of a waning crested moon. Milea continued to study the trio as they approached. They did not have the gait of novices. All three of them knew exactly how to use a sword proficiently. The identified captain of the group pulled a chair from a now-empty table and brought it over with him. He sat down directly across from Milea and studied her a little. The sorceress simply sipped upon her tankard of water before she focused her eyes on those of her guest.

“It is rare to find one of such beauty in this rundown place, milady. And here are two.” The seated man spoke gently. His eyes were bright and alert, indicating that he was sober. “I am Neil Dresden.” He nodded to his left. “This is my older sister, Vicki. To my right is Brion Kaiser,” Neil concluded. “I’m told that you want to make a dangerous and

very foolhardy trip.”

“Your information is correct, Neil.” Milea agreed. “I am Milea Sirius and this is my daughter, Sonja.”

“Hello.” Sonja nodded to the group. “You guys were wonderful on stage. I loved your performance.” The girl continued. “Do you have a voice canon?” She tilted her head and focused on Vicki.

“A what?” Vicki raised an eyebrow.

“Sonja.” Milea turned to her child briefly. “Not every songstress or bard we come across will have such a gift. It is a very rare one. The performance on stage was indeed phenomenal. I’m sure Vicki has many talents that make up for the voice canon.”

“Your mother speaks the truth on hidden talents.” Brion assured. His rich, bass voice caused the girl to jump a little. “And there are always surprises.” He smiled at the girl.

“Wow.” Sonja blinked her shock. Vicki chuckled at the girl’s expression.

“Wow is a word for it.” Milea agreed with her child.

“Ok, wait.” Neil shook his head and focused on the red haired woman before him. “You are the Sorceress of Selvast Forest?”

“That’s one of my titles, yes.” Milea nodded. She sat back and focused on the group. “I’m also a guide and one of the forest’s defenders.”

“Really?” Neil’s voice held his disbelief. “And what would such a legendary woman want with me?”

“I need a guide to the Temple of Light in the Boiling Seas,” Milea answered nonchalantly. “Will you assist me?” A small silence followed. Milea glanced at the three before taking up her cup and sipping her water.

“The Boiling Seas.” Vicki frowned, unpleasant memories raced through her mind. “That place is difficult to say the least.”

“Full of monsters, poisonous gas...” Neil recalled. “Big bugs.” He swatted the back of his neck as if recalling a memory. “And the path itself is dangerous. I don’t know...” Neil appeared to be contemplating. The sorceress studied her guests carefully before placing her tankard down.

“Very well, I will just have to find another brave soul.” Milea stood, her chair scooted back slightly. Sonja followed her example.

“Believe me, milady. No one in this port is as temerarious as I...” Neil assured, leaning forward with a challenge in his eyes. “We will guide you, but it will not be cheap. The journey to the Seas is treacherous let alone the destination.”

“As long as we get to the Temple of Light quickly.” Milea focused her gaze upon Neil’s eyes. “I’m willing to pay you whatever I must.” She narrowed her eyes. “Within reason.” Sonja shifted a little as the tension rose in the room. Brion simply leaned back, focused on the client and his friend. Vicki finally cleared her throat.

“Um, Neil. We need a ship,” Vicki stated the obvious, catching her sibling’s attention.

“The last one we had was taken by a storm, dear brother.” She placed one hand upon her hip, the other on her brother’s shoulder.

“That was some time ago.” Neil frowned, sitting back. His eyes went back and forth a little as he mentally calculated his options. “Well, the *Sea Dragon* is docked outside. And I’m sure her captain is not going to let me borrow her cheaply...” He placed his hands together and leaned on the table a little, fingers on his chin. “I might simply have to take the ship.”

“Don’t worry about the ship.” Milea caught the attention of the sibling bards. “I was gifted with one. I simply need a guide.” She sat back down and casually crossed her legs. “The ship is called *Lady of the Night*. I’m sure it will attract some attention when it sails.” Sonja cautiously retook her seat. “You will be well compensated upon our safe arrival at the Temple.”

“If you have a ship,” Brion frowned “then all you need is a crew, right?” He looked at his friends.

“The Boiling Seas was difficult to encounter.” Vicki shook her head. “It took Neil several attempts to find it the first time. Then he ran into it while avoiding a rival pirate.”

“It smelled so bad that I’ll always remember the way.” Neil assured. “Alright, Milea, you have yourself a crew. Meet us at Dagger’s Point.” He stood, pushing the chair back. “With a ship.” He turned to walk toward the door, his companions in step.

“Mom, do you want me to beat him up?” Sonja inquired innocently. “I’m not sure I like him.” She watched the trio depart.

“No, he’s the only one brave enough to take this risk.” Milea stood, signaling her daughter to do the same. “We should concern ourselves with the journey.”

“And Aunt Maya.” Sonja nodded.

“Yes and your aunt.” Milea agreed. She placed a small bag of coins upon the table and started for the front of the tavern. Several men stood and quietly followed after the woman and her child. Milea stopped and turned to face the oncoming men. “Are you missing something? Perhaps late for an engagement? If not, you will be very sorry.” She focused on the group.

“No, no, nothing at all, milady.” The leader of the group assured. He, unlike many in the tavern, was sober. “Good day, miss.” He nodded to the two and quickly exited. His entourage did the same.

“We’re not coming back here, right?” Sonja inquired as she and her mother exited the tavern.

“Not as long as can be helped,” Milea replied with confidence. “I would have gone to L’ybrinthia Bay, but my instinct told me that we would meet the one we needed here.”

“I just hope he’s not a jerk.” Sonja scowled.

“Give him some time, Sonja.” Milea offered. “He and I will have our disagreements, but I’m sure all will be well. I did not see ill intentions in his eyes when we spoke.”

“Speaking of that. Did you hear Brion’s voice?” Sonja looked up at her mother as

they started down the street toward the marketplace. “Is he really an elf or is he a Car’laden like Justin?”

“I’m almost certain that Brion’s voice is deeper than Justin’s.” Milea mused. “One day we might have to look Brion up again when we have Justin around, just to make sure.”

“I think cousin Kelsi would like to meet him.” Sonja appeared thoughtful. “Maybe her mum too.”

“Yes, Kelsi does like a deep-voiced man,” Milea acknowledged with a kind smile.

“Why?” Sonja tilted her head.

Milea laughed. “Let’s discuss the whys a little later in your development, Sonja.” Milea placed a hand upon her child’s shoulder. Sonja pouted a little but kept quiet.

Several chickens flapped out of the way as they continued down the street and a few traveling vendors called to them. Apparently, Milea knew what she was looking for and they weren’t selling it. Neil, Vicki, and Brion watched as Milea traveled with her daughter. Sonja paused and took a quickly look around, sensing she was being watched. Milea paused as well and glanced about. She saw the trio she hired a few steps from the tavern and toward the docks. Milea grinned. They would be meeting them at Dagger’s Point in a few minutes. Along the way, they would pick up supplies for the trip. Neil studied the woman before turning his attention toward the docks. The *Sea Dragon* swayed gently in the breeze.

“What are you thinking?” Vicki inquired.

“I’m thinking I should take the *Sea Dragon* in case she’s lying.” Neil answered. “I’m not convinced she’s Milea Sirius of Selvast Forest.”

“Always the seadog.” Vicki shook her head with a little chuckle. “It would be a stroke of good luck if she were.” She placed a hand upon her hip. “I would have the opportunity to study her a little bit. So we can have a little fun with her stories and poems as well as Ra’jil’s.”

“Oh, come on, Vicki.” Neil rolled his eyes. “She’s not even acting like what those same poems and stories say.”

“Exactly,” Vicki agreed.

“Hm.” Brion folded his arms and grinned. “I think I believe her.” He looked at his friend. “Not many claim to be Milea Sirius without bursting into a fit of maddened laughter.” He looked after the woman, noting she had disappeared into the crowd. “There was no madness about her. She was very serious and appeared anxious to get on with her journey. One, I’m sure I’ll not enjoy.”

“Yea, that’s right. You don’t like boats.” Vicki patted his shoulder. “Well, you could stay here.”

“And miss an opportunity to travel with a legend?” Neil asked, dramatically. “He would never forgive himself.”

“You’re right. I wouldn’t.” Brion agreed.

“I’m going to see if I can keep an eye on her.” Vicki offered. “I want to make sure she doesn’t spontaneously burst into flames before we set sail let alone provide us our payment.” She left her brother and friend to follow Milea into the marketplace.

“Let’s go to the docks. I want to check on something.” Neil walked toward the Sea Dragon. “I’ve never heard of her ship before.”

“The *Lady of the Night*.” Brion nodded. “It’s catchy. She’s right about it bringing attention to itself. I wonder if the figurehead is A’drianis.” He appeared thoughtful.

“Shadow Eltis, eh?” Neil rubbed his chin. “I’m sure that, just like A’drianis, this ship is nothing but a shadow.” He continued his way. Brion walked with him and studied his surroundings.

Clouds floated lazily about in an otherwise perfectly blue sky. Sailors, some legitimate, others pirates, stomped around, cursing up a storm as they prepared their boats to set sail. Seagulls squawked and cried as they circled about, looking for an easy meal. A large barrel of fish broke open on the docks, causing the fisherman that dropped it to cry out as his catch either escaped back into the sea or was taken by the waiting gulls, cats, and beggars. Neil dodged a few swift children easily while studying each vessel in port. A beautiful two-mast ship caught his attention. He’d never seen it before. As they walked, Brion sighed. He hated ships. Every time he sailed, he got sick. He grumbled, remembering he would have to take one back home as it was the only method available to him at this moment. Brion sidestepped a beggar before taking note of the ship they were heading toward.

“Neil, do you honestly believe she is Milea Sirius?” Brion inquired. He carefully dodged a man as they approached the ship. The sailor grunted a word of thanks.

“Milea was an enchantress.” Neil pointed out. “I’ve seen a lot of enchantresses, and this redhead is one of the most beautiful I’ve laid eyes on, but, I highly doubt if she is the legendary sorceress.” He shook his head. “What about you?”

“My gut tells me that she is.” Brion stepped over a moving rope. “I’ve seen paintings of her back home, though the artist did not do her justice. If I recall, the painting was of a partially nude woman standing in front of a stream. Small, winged children were flying around her for some reason. Mother never liked the painting, but left it up anyway unless Eryn took it down. Milea was painted as an elf, naturally.”

“In Cathalian, it doesn’t surprise me,” Neil remarked. They paused at their destination and Neil looked up. “Ahoy! I’ve come to ask the name of this beautiful ship.”

“Ahoy!” a man shouted back and looked down. He is human. His bald head captured the light of the sun and bounced it right back out. “Her name is *Duchess*! Finest craft on the twelve seas to date.” He studied the two men. “Do ye wish for passage? We are sailing to Cathalian in a few minutes!”

“Nay, I was just curious,” Neil called up. “I have not visited the port in a while and your ship was new to me. Tell me, who is her captain?”

“Don’t know his real name,” The man answered. “We call him Cap’n Red.” He glanced behind. “Ere he comes now.”

The docks shook as several large and smelly cows were herded by. The beasts moored in protest of their backsides being smacked by a whip to keep them moving. Seabirds circled above as Brion and Neil waited until they saw another man glare down at them. The first man quickly departed to continue his work. The captain wore a flamboyant black and red coat with matching hat where they could see salt-and-pepper hair flowing from beneath. The edges of his hat were lined with red feathers. Coarse, black hair covered half the man's face and neck. The captain snorted and spat to the side before once again focusing on the men.

"Who are ye' to be interruptin' my men?" the captain demanded, his voice gruff.

"I am the bard from the Lucky Dragon Tavern," Neil answered. He shielded his eyes from the sun as he studied the man. "With me is my bodyguard. I can't be too careful." Neil nodded his head at Brion with a slight smirk. Brion folded his arms and made a scoffing sound. It went unheard by the man on the ship. Neil regarded the captain once again. "Cap'n Red, can you tell me if you've heard of a ship called the *Lady of the Night*?"

"I ain't heard no such ship." Red snorted. "And I've been sailing these seas since I was old enough to be a cabin boy. The *Lady of the Night* does not exist." He leaned forward to get a better look at the two. "That's the truth, else me soul belongs to the ocean below." He snorted

"I see. Thank you." Neil nodded. He turned along with Brion and started walking away. Cap'n Red grumbled before going to finish up his own chores.

"So the conclusion?" Brion inquired. He sidestepped a mess left by the cows. Several sailors, however, were not keen enough to do the same.

"What the man said. No such ship." Neil shrugged. "This Lady Milea may be pulling our legs. I'm not surprised. Most who claim to be that Legendary Woman are either wanting attention or insane." They made way for several horses being disembarked from a vessel.

"So we are going to Dagger's Point to tell her she's insane?" Brion asked. "To tell a sorceress she's insane. Even if she is not the Legend, she is still a magic user. You are one brave man."

"I've been in worst situations." Neil grinned with confidence. "Besides, didn't she say I was impulsive?"

"I was hoping you wouldn't live up to the denotation," Brion remarked.

More large beasts and freight were moved off the ships and toward their final destination. Brion and Neil exited the ports, they decided to take the closest exit since neither wanted to enter the marketplace and risk running into Milea. If she were pretending, it was best to confront her outside the village where she could not harm many people. Several women called for the attention of Neil and Brion as they continued to the exit, passing by a brothel. A few of the ample breasted women revealed their cleavage and shook vibrantly to catch the attention of anyone who showed interest in their antics. Brion ignored the women with practiced ease, continuing his quick pace towards the gates. Neil hesitated slightly, causing one of the women to smile at him. The bard grinned back then noticed that his friend was leaving him behind. Neil grumbled slightly, catching up with

Brion.

“I’m sorry, my friend, but I will have to go with my gut,” Brion stated as they walked past the walls. “I would even wager a bet that she is truly Milea Sirius.” He continued nodding to the watchful guards when they walked pass them.

“Hmmm... well. Alright,” Neil acknowledged. “A wager then. If she is Milea Sirius, I’ll cut off my ponytail.” He nodded.

“If she’s not, I’ll cut mine.” Brion agreed. They paused and shook hands. “I’m sure that Vicki has a nice, sharp dagger to help with the haircut.”

“She’s my sister,” Neil boasted and continued to walk. “I’d not expect anything less.” Brion kept an easy pace as they made their way toward Dagger Point, following the path close to the sea cliff.

* * *

The marketplace is alive with vibrant colors. Several gypsy women danced, twirling their colorful dresses around as they stamped out a beat with their feet. Milea and Sonja paused to watch the fast-paced antics of the traveling people. An old man with the group caught the sorceress’s eye. He met her gaze before nodding respectfully. Milea returned the nod with a gentle smile before she and Sonja quietly moved on. Healthy voices of merchants and customers blasted the ears of many passersby. Vicki watched from a safe distance as Milea and her child picked up a few barrels of supplies that would be needed for the journey. The bard straightened slightly when the items Milea purchased disappeared in a rain of golden dust.

“I hope that’s a good thing,” Vicki mused to herself. She grinned when Sonja sneezed a few times, a little of the dust invading her sinuses.

A pair of shaggy horses snorted as they pulled a heavy cart down the street. The beasts’ gigantic hooves crushed anything in their path. Milea gently pulled her curious child back from the road to allow the animals to pass. A large man sitting on the top of the cart tilted his hat to the lady as a means of saying “thank you” or “good day.” Milea returned the gesture in kind then watched as several gypsy children laughed and ran after the cart. They jumped onto the back in order to hitch a ride. Sonja bounced, a little excited, before she heard Milea clear her throat. The girl looked up and pouted a little. She was not to join the other children, at least not this time. Vicki watched as mother and daughter returned to their shopping before she turned to the cart the children rode. Several of the larger kids opened up the crates that were on the cart and handed items to their smaller siblings. After a quick steal, they hopped off and hurried back toward their elders.

“And he’s none the wiser,” Vicki remarked, watching the cart continue its journey. She looked up, noticing several large men quietly gauging Milea and Sonja. “Uh-oh.”

Vicki focused her attention on a large group of scruffy men seated at an outside bar. The albino men’s complexions did not burn in the sun’s light. They had not tanned either; their ancestors were either blessed or cursed with the abilities long ago. Called Devorians, they were once hailed as heroes of a forgotten war. Now the entire people were branded as evil and wicked due to the many dark deeds the majority of their kin divulge in, including slavery and kidnapping. Vicki noticed the men study Milea and Sonja intensely. It did not

take any stretch of the imagination to know their intentions. Vicki turned her attention to Milea. The sorceress paused by a weapon smith to examine the fine blades being offered for purchase. Milea's eyes quickly scanned her surroundings. She saw Vicki standing close to a clothing vendor. Milea wondered why she was there. Vicki met the Sorceress' gaze once before focusing elsewhere. The sorceress followed the gaze towards the bar. Several Devorians quietly turned when they witnessed their prey focused upon them. A few of the men stood and left the ranks, blending into the waning crowd. Milea followed their movement briefly then focused upon her daughter.

Sonja studied a few of the well-crafted daggers and smiled. A silver one with the head of a wolf carved onto the handle caught her attention. Milea watched as her daughter picked up the dagger and practiced with it. Her movement was quick, nearly blinding speed. The clerk, a woman, smiled at the young warrior as Sonja performed several jabs and a few blocks. Milea simply held out her hand with a gentle look. Sonja handed the dagger to her mother.

"In combat, there are a few ways to hold this weapon," Milea explained in short. "Hold it this way if you are in a close-quarter fight with an opponent who has the same weapon. Or if it is long as a sword..." She held the dagger in her right hand with the point up. She then switched hands. "Holding it this way will allow you to use your fist as well as the blade of the dagger. Punch first then drag it across to slice through your opponent." She was holding the blade down with the sharpest edge out, demonstrating her short lesson in slow motion so Sonja could understand. "Sharp on both ends means you can come back and finish them off with a second stroke." She pointed to the two edges of the blade with her free hand.

"Ok." Sonja nodded in understanding. She accepted the weapon from her mother and began to practice with it again. Her movements were very slow as she imitated what she was just shown. Milea nodded and paid the merchant for the dagger.

"I will get Zaria to show you how to properly throw a dagger," Milea remarked as they continued their way. "She's also a good source for learning how to defend yourself with it."

"Thanks, Mom." Sonja hugged her briefly as they walked. "Where did Cousin Zaria go? She left before we did. Does she know aunt Maya is in trouble?" she said as she admired her new dagger.

"I doubt it." Milea sighed, looking about the marketplace. Several of the Devorians trailed them, surrounding the two slowly. Milea did not like the situation, the displeasure showed upon her features briefly. "Zaria can be anywhere there are shadows." She continued as she returned her attention to her child. "We simply have to wait until she decides she wants to be found." She casually stepped to avoid a mud hole in the street. "Thus is the way of the Shiado."

A group of women gossiped as Milea and Sonja walked past them. Many customers buzzed through the marketplace with their purchases. Few trickled out of the main street towards their homes as the sun continued marching through the sky. Milea paused by several merchants and studied their wares, carefully keeping an eye on the group that apparently hunted them. Their leader was not pleased with the sorceress' constant

wondering down the main street. He had tried to cut the mother and child off and heard them into the alleyway, avoiding the detection of the City Watch. Yet that plan had also failed. Large riders atop strong mounts continued to wonder the marketplace, moseying toward the Lucky Dragon. The head watchman glanced at the Devorians then their prey before he ordered his men to leave the marketplace. Milea's features reflected the slight concern as she lollygagged toward the middle of the street this time. Sonja continued to walk next to her mother, practicing what she had been shown. Milea smiled, happy to have found something to occupy her child and prevent a wild run through the marketplace. Sonja tended to get excited when visiting such places, no matter how many they went to. The girl was always searching for a good deal at a great price. In the shadows, the leader of the Devorians nodded to several of his men. They returned the quick gesture before swiftly moving forward to block off the street near the exit.

"This is going to get sticky," Vicki mused. She watched the activity before frowning. "Legendary sorceress or not, I'm going to help get them out of this." She decided before walking toward the sorceress and child. "Milea, wait up."

"Vicki," Milea acknowledged, "where are Neil and Brion?"

"Knowing my brother, he's either at the docks or already headed toward Dagger's Point. Brion's with him." Vicki answered and arrived before the sorceress. "*You're being followed.*" She spoke quietly.

"I saw." Milea acknowledged the warning and looked around. Sonja frowned and looked about. The marketplace was emptying out a little; it was the middle of the day. Several Devorians, however, have taken the space over. "Sonja, ignore them and continue to walk." She started down the street again. "*They will learn a painful lesson today.*"

"Yes, *Màthair.*" Sonja agreed. She placed her dagger in her belt, tying the hilt of it to the leather strap. Vicki blinked, stunned, before she nodded and kept pace with mother and child.

Several women held their children close when they saw the population of Devorians increase. The towns' women then quickened their pace away from the area. The Devorian leader let them all go, focused upon his prize. He smiled, watching as Milea quickened her step as well. The third woman with his quarry would be a bonus that he would enjoy before he gave her away. Vicki scanned her left; there was a man with a whip watching her intensely. She gave a cocky smile before looking right. A large man with a rope scanned the trio, judging the strength of the women. Milea saw the two men on either side before focusing on the exit. Two larger Devorians stood on either side, pretending to be interested in the junk merchants that squatted at the start of the marketplace. Sonja glanced behind to see several men causally walking after them as if herding the three to their destination.

"My, such lovely beauties," the leader of the Devorian trappers said with humor as he stepped onto the path. He blocked the exit with several of his companions. "And look, the little one has a silver dagger." He laughed. "Children shouldn't play with such things. They could hurt themselves."

"Grown men can hurt themselves if they do not know with whom they are toying with," Milea retorted calmly.

The Trapper and his companions barked laughter.

“Well at least they are in good humor.” Vicki retrieved a leather glove from her belt. “So what say you, Trapper? Will you allow us to pass?” She casually pulled the toughened leather glove upon her left hand.

“I recognize you from the stage.” The obvious leader of the group laughed. “You still think you’re Ra’jil? I’ll have you know you look nothing like her.” He looked around. “You know, I feel like giving these good folks a show.” The leader turned to his men and barked out an order. “Tie them up and let’s have a little fun with them.”

“Now hold still. I don’t want to bruise any of your pretty, pretty skin.” The largest of the Trappers, standing over eight feet tall, spoke with obvious humor. He tightened his rope between his two hands and started forward.

Milea quickly stayed Vicki’s hand as a breeze flew past her. The next instant, the large man was on the ground, holding a broken arm and howling in pain. Sonja narrowed her eyes as she shifted her battle stance, her left leg slightly forward and her right in a bent position, slightly behind. Her hands were up in what appeared to be a boxer’s stance. The lack of blood caused Milea to sigh in relief. At least the girl put her new weapon away before she started. Vicki blinked, unsure if she even saw the preteen move. The woman rubbed her eyes and shook her head before noting the surprised look on the men’s faces. Milea folded her arms.

“Whoa...” Vicki whispered to herself.

“As you were saying?” Milea inquired and raised an eyebrow.

“I see. So you have a little warrior demon for a child,” the leader said, his humor gone. “That was my strongest man.”

“Strongest babe now.” Milea pointed out. True, the downed man was weeping loudly.

“Why not finish him off? She has a weapon to do so.”

“I did not teach her to kill a downed opponent.” Milea smirked at the pompous man. “Maybe in a couple of years.”

“Arrogant wench.” The man sneered, bearing his teeth. “Get them!”

The air hissed, catching Vicki’s attention. She rapidly turned to her left and caught the end of the whip with her gloved hand. Quickly, she spun around, grabbed her dagger, and let it fly in the direction the whip came from. At the same time, she pulled on the whip. The man who held the weapon fell, Vicki’s dagger planted right between his eyes. The whip he held was now in Vicki’s possession. She took the handle quickly and cracked it twice; two more Trappers fell, holding their eyes.

At the same time, Milea caused her staff to appear in hand and planted her feet. Three men charged forward and one fell quickly as Sonja attacked. The other two hit the ground immediately after, their legs broken. Milea twirled her weapon and held it behind her back with one arm. Her free hand out front.

“Is that all you have?” Milea inquired with a confident smile. Sonja stood on one side of her mother, ready for more. Vicki casually folded her arms as she stood on the right side

of the sorceress. The whip was coiled but ready to use at her command. The rest of the Devorian trappers hesitated.

“What matter of sorcery...?” The Leader growled. He saw several of his men down. At least three were dead, the others were wounded. The rest of his living crew began moving away from the trio before them.

“Looks like we spooked them a little.” Vicki chuckled.

“Perhaps they mistook the strength of their prey.” Milea agreed.

“I see....” The Lead Trapper snorted and spat upon the ground next to him. “I guess it is up to me to teach this lesson in manners. And I will enjoy every minute of your humiliation.” His eyes began to glow slightly as he activated his magical powers. Milea raised an eyebrow while witnesses quickly retreated.

“Well, I had hoped, he had some sort of intelligence.” Milea sighed. “Sonja, stay behind me.”

“Right.” Sonja nodded and moved back two steps.

“Hold still. I won’t feel a thing.” The man smirked before he held up his left hand and cast his lightning spell.

The air crackled and sizzled as light-blue bolts raced toward the sorceress. Milea straightened and her staff to disappear. Vicki took a step back, and Milea lifted her hand as if she were holding something. The spell sent toward the sorceress slowed down and started to condense into a ball. It levitated gently into the woman’s hand. Her opponent stepped back in surprise. His battle and anger became lost to him, causing his spell to fade.

Vicki placed a hand on her hip and nodded to herself. Not many magic users could do such a thing without activating their own gifts. Apparently, the legends of Milea Sirius were true. Vicki’s mind raced. If this woman was still alive, then perhaps her twin also existed. Vicki frowned a little. It was said the legendary Maya Sirius was in command of the most malicious of magic in the realm. Many called it black magic.

“One Legend at a time, girl,” Vicki quietly scolded herself. She turned her attention back to the battle when Milea sighed. A confident smile graced her features as she focused on the man. Milea casually tossed the ball up in the air and caught it a few times.

“Who in all Ublivorin are you?” The man demanded to know.

“Just your run-of-the-mill sorceress,” Milea answered simply. Sonja rolled her eyes. Vicki snickered.

“That was my most powerful spell!”

“Oh? Well you can have it back then.”

Milea tossed the ball up one final time, and as it came back down, she slapped it back toward the man. The spell exploded into its original form before slamming into its owner. The man bellowed as he sailed back toward one of the vendor’s booths. The merchant cursed and moved. Milea sighed and cast another spell causing her opponent to hit a wall of air before crumbling onto the ground, unconscious. Sonja let out a big sigh of relief when the man did not get up again. His crew scattered and the large man with the broken

arm cowered in a corner, cradling the appendage.

“I don’t think he’ll be challenging any more red-haired women for a while.” Vicki hinged a guess. “If he even remembers what happened.”

“Sadly, Devorians are hard-headed and it takes more than one lesson,” Milea remarked. “And you actually do have a flare of Ra’jil about you. Perhaps you are channeling some of her energies.”

“You really think so?” Vicki beamed. “She was my idol as a kid. I often dreamt of sailing the Bri’al seas with her. Sadly, that will never happen. Unless I want to sail with ghosts.” She chuckled.

“You never know, Vicki.” Milea smiled as they started walking toward the exit again. None of the Devorians hindered their departure. “Ra’jil is very stubborn. She might still be around.”

“Well, I’ve met the Legendary Milea Sirius.” Vicki shrugged. “I’ll simply have to believe that Ra’jil may still be sailing the seas somewhere. Bri’al is a pretty big place.”

“That it is.” Milea placed a hand upon Vicki’s shoulder. “Good work, Sonja.” She removed the hand from Vicki and placed it on Sonja’s head.

“Thanks, Mom. You too!” Sonja beamed. “They were Devorian. Why did they act so strangely?”

“Sadly, that behavior is normal for them,” Milea explained. “Our friend, Luke, would be the exception.”

Sonja seemed slightly confused but decided to think it over.

“Talk about exception.” Vicki looked at the girl. “I hardly saw you move or nor could I count the strikes. How many times did you hit that big one? Seven?”

“Um...” Sonja mentally counted and went through a few slow motioned moves as she walked. “Twelve... I think. Then I broke his arm.”

“Wow. I’d rather like being a witness rather than the receiver of those blows,” Vicki admitted. Milea chuckled as her daughter beamed with pride. “And Milea, you are powerful. There is no doubt in my mind you are who you say you are.”

“Was there ever?” Milea raised an eyebrow and watched the L’vane woman’s thoughtful expression.

“No. Not really,” Vicki admitted. “I have to give it to Brion. He said we’d have surprises.”

“Is he an elf or a car’laden?” Sonja asked, tilting her head to one side.

“Oh, he’s an elf alright,” Vicki assured. “All nearly six feet of him. He’s a traveling swords master.” They walked past the gates of the village. There were no guards. “Hmm, must be lunchtime.”

“Or they were paid not to interfere,” Milea said. “Out here we don’t need to worry about the trappers. They won’t venture far from their ship.”

“This way.” Vicki turned toward the sea cliffs. “Before my brother gets impatient and steals the *Sea Dragon*.” She quickened her pace and followed the path leading to their destination. Milea and Sonja kept pace with her.

The blue skies brightened the day of those underneath it. Small clouds floated aimlessly by. The sounds and smells of the ocean wafted up the cliff known as Dagger’s Point. It was a craggily, triangular edge a mile outside of town. Two of its three sides were sheer cliffs leading down to the ocean. Short grasses grew on top of the cliff, the blades waving in the constant winds. Large, round boulders decorated the landscape fifty yards from the edge. Several hundred yards behind the boulders stood a very thick forest with tall trees. Several miles to the left and following the cliff was the path to Churn. The waves crashed harshly on the rocks on one side of the point as if angered for being blocked by the obstacle. The smooth stone of the wall was indicative of the many centuries the Point had withstood the elements. On the other side was a gentle harbor. Sea birds nested on the walls; many crags and small caves made nice homes for them. Neil, sitting on top of a giant boulder, gently tuned his mandolin.

Brion sat at the base of the rock, cleaning and sharpening his sword. He looked up and out at the ocean beyond the cliff and scowled at it. Out of all the forces he’s faced in his life, the ocean was always his worst enemy. Yet, unless he wanted to stay on one continent and never venture forth, he had to travel by boat. The waves splashed slightly against the cliff face, as the gulls laughed mockingly. Voices brought Brion’s attention back toward the cliff. He looked up before standing. Neil heard the voices on the wind and stood up as well.

“Well, Sonja, I’ve never actually stopped to talk to a sea dragon,” Vicki admitted. “They usually stay in the deep ocean.” She paused when they crested the hill. “Brion, Neil, good to see you made it.”

“Ladies.” Neil nodded to the trio. “I see you have not changed your mind, Lady Milea.” He shouldered his instrument.

“I know of the dangers that the Boiling Seas may hold for us.” Milea folded her arms. “However, I will let you know this. There are far more frightening things in this realm than what the Boiling Seas will ever produce.” Milea met Neil’s gaze, unflinching.

“Since this is going to be a long journey, I think we need to relax and become a little friendlier,” Vicki suggested, seeing her brother’s jaw line harden. She walked to him “Neil. *She is truly, Milea.*” The word caused her brother’s eyes to widen then relax.

“I see,” Neil spoke solemnly. He looked up. “*You sure? How do you know?*”

“Do you remember the poem about Milea verses the Ajahn?” Vicki inquired. Her brother appeared thoughtful before he blinked. “Yea, she reenacted it herself, brother.”

“No way...” Neil spoke in slight awe. “And I missed that?” He frowned.

“We both did.” Brion nodded. He crossed his arms as he leaned against the boulder to observe the group.

“Ajahn was a bit more powerful than the Devorian trappers, Vicki,” Milea assured. “I’ve got a little scar from that encounter.” She nodded and approached the two, pausing a

few feet away “However, you are right. For this journey, we will need to get along and trust one another. You have my word that Sonja and I will be on our best behavior.” Milea flashed a quick grin at the group.

“As will I.” Neil bowed. “Milady.” He straightened with a confident smile.

“Just Milea.” The woman insisted. “Unless you want me to call you ‘Sir’ all the time.”

“That would be annoying.” Neil mused with a little frown. He turned toward his silent friend. “Brion, are you alright?”

“Just taking it all in stride,” Brion answered and leaned on the boulder. “Where is your ship?” He focused on the sorceress.

“Ah yes.” Milea nodded as if just remembering. “Neil, how long is the journey to the Boiling Seas?” She asked as she walked toward the cliff. Sonja ran to the edge and bounced excitedly at the view.

“A week at best,” Neil answered as he followed the woman. “I checked the ports for your ship. It was not there.”

“That’s because I told it to meet us here.” Milea folded her arms and looked down. Stunned, Neil followed her line of sight.

“Whoa...” Vicki looking towards the harbor below.

“Well played.” Brion expressed with a nod of his head. He folded his arms, smiling cockily. The wager that Brion had with Neil was all but complete.

An ocean hawk cried out in joy from high above. The ship in the once-empty harbor took Neil completely by surprise. A two-mast vessel, its sails were neatly tied with bright white ropes. The small waves rocked her gently to and fro. An anchor held it in place with exception of a little swaying from the gentle waves. The ship’s wood was a grey color, unlike any type of wood ever seen before. The white ropes appeared to be stronger than usual, even from the distance that the group saw them. The back of the ship, elevating slightly more than the front, was home to the helm. The sleeping quarters were just below; a door with the symbol of a large tree marked the entranceway to the quarters. Windows on the cabin allowed light inside.

“Are they alive?” Sonja inquired, waving a hand in front of Neil’s eyes. He only blinked.

“I think we just brought out the old pirate in them.” Milea chuckled. “Remember, they were doing a small play about Ra’jil.”

“Yep, yep. I remember.” Sonja agreed.

“It’s a good-looking ship.” Brion acknowledged. “A little familiar though. I think I’ve seen a painting or read about it somewhere before.”

“It should be.” Milea smiled. “It’s an exact replica of Ra’jil’s ship. The *Dragon Rose*.” She turned towards Vicki when the woman took a deep breath in.

“I think we need to get aboard before at least Vicki faints.” Brion chuckled. “How do

we get down?”

“Stay close to me.” Milea smiled and activated her gifts. A small red ember swirled about her form before spreading to those with her.

A soft red glow surrounded Milea and her companions. Sonja took her mother’s hand gently and closed her eyes. Milea smiled at her daughter reassuringly. Brion assured his companions were within the range of the sorceress’ spell before he felt himself lifted up by a gentle force. The same force acted on Neil and Vicki. Milea closed her eyes, using her mind to push out from the cliff. She slowly levitated her companions and herself down to the deck of the ship. The sorceress and her crew landed gently, the boat barely noticing their arrival. The soft glow ceased with Milea opening her eyes. She stretched and focused upon those with her.

Vicki blinked and shook herself awake. She crouched down and touched the wood of the deck. The smooth grain was similar to a finished wood floor. Whatever splinters were in the wood were no longer a danger. Vicki then stood to examine the ropes. They were made of a fine material, perhaps silk. Yet as tough as any fiber that faced the storms of the Bri’al Seas. Vicki wrapped her hand around the thick rope and tugged. It continued to hold its form despite her efforts. The L’vane woman’s mind began to race with the possibilities of the various origins of the ship. The wind stirred Neil’s hair as he approached the closest mast. He eyed the close grain of the wood before reaching out to touch the item. The warmth of the wood did not surprise him as much as the feel. It was as if he were touching something living, not a wooden post.

“This is gorgeous.” Neil spoke with awe. “Forgive my curiosity, but what experience do you have with ships, milady?” Neil turned to Milea with his inquiry.

“I have many experiences from my lifetime within Bri’al. I, however, have never sailed to the Boiling Seas. I do not know the way.” Milea admitted, leaning on the wall that led to the sleeping quarters. “I do know of only one other who does, but she is recovering. Thus, I am offering you to be captain of this vessel.”

“Hmm...“Well the only people I have with me are my sister and unfortunate travel companion, Brion. And he’s not good with ships.” Neil appeared thoughtful at the offer. He scanned the woman, carefully. Although beautiful there was something mysterious if not deadly, an aura of enormous powers, about her. His instincts told him not to take her lightly.

“Can’t stand them. But I am here. Considering the debt I owe.” Brion offered. A large head peeped from the ocean a distance away before going back under. It was unnoticed by those on the ship.

“The ship requires a minimum crew.” Milea assured. The wind blew into her hair, playing with it. “It was built from the woods of my home, Selvast Forest. If you steer, it will do the rest.” She brushed her long locks back from her face.

“I like it already.” Vicki grinned. The ocean crashed gently creating a little bit of spray onto the ship. “So, I guess that Neil is going to do most of the steering.” She looked at Brion. “Did you want to do lookout duty?”

“Lookout duty?” Brion looked at her strangely. Vicki only pointed up. Brion

followed her motion and gawked at the crow's nest. "What?! Are you out of your mind?!" He scowled at the woman.

"I can do that." Sonja volunteered.

"I can't make you part of my crew, kiddo." Neil shook his head. "Unless your mom does not mind me borrowing you."

"Hm..." Milea studied her child a little, bending slightly to meet her eye to eye. "Sonja. Crow's Nest duties are to be a look out for obstacles, and other ships. You have to be vigilant and call down anything you see that could pose as a problem." She straightened, placing a hand upon her hip and continued to focus on her daughter. "You also must use your agility to help tie and untie ropes as told to you by the captain. It should not be a problem with the *Lady of the Night*. This ship will do most of it."

"Got it." Sonja nodded. She then hurried over to the main mast and climbed up in record speed.

"You know, I could have used that girl on many of my journeys." Neil mused. He shook his head, focusing on the present day. "Milea. Thank you for the assistance."

"None more thankful than I." Vicki held up her hand. "I would have done it, but I would need breaks." She smiled wickedly. "The ship moves left and right." She swayed a little as if she were a ship. "The top of it looks like it would kiss the ocean any moment. Even the smallest movement...."

"Stop it." Brion interrupted with a growl. Vicki laughed a little.

"Glad to give her something to do while we sail." Milea nodded.

"Fair enough." Neil agreed. "We wait until nightfall." He informed. "Then we follow the blue star. Not as simple as it sounds."

"I believe you, Neil." Milea smiled. "Get familiar with the helm, you will need to be." She walked away. The trio studied her departure, contemplatively.

"She seems a little detached." Neil mused. He walked to the helm and studied the wheel. It was typical of ships, round with spokes centered in a hub. Each spoke had a spindle attached to it on the outer part of a wooden circle. The center of the hub held a carved tree.

"Think about it." Vicki tested the wheel. It spun at her command easily. "She is going to the Boiling Seas, something or someone there has her preoccupied."

"Only thing I know in that part of the world is the Temple of Light." Brion recognized. "But why would she be going to the Temple?" He looked out at the ocean with a frown. The breeze toyed with his mane.

"Who knows?" Neil shrugged. He placed his instrument next to the wheel. "The business of mages, sorcerers and enchantresses is not for me to question. I only carry out my mission so that I can receive my payment and move on."

"Worked with a lot of mages, sorcerers and enchantresses have you?" Brion inquired of his friend.

“No enchantresses. She’s the first.” Neil assured. “We will see what happens.” He rubbed his hand over the wood gently. It was extremely smooth, no splinters.

“I’m going to check below deck.” Vicki volunteered. She started to walk away but paused when Brion gently took hold of her arm. “What’s wrong?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Nothing. I just need to borrow one of your daggers.” Brion stated, a wicket grin to his features. Neil grumbled and sighed.

“Why?” Vicki narrowed the opposite eye to the raised eyebrow.

“Neil and I made a wager, and it is time for him to pay up.” Brion informed. He held out his hand. “He gets a nice haircut.”

“It was a wager against Lady Milea.” Neil clarified to his curious sister. “I wagered she was not the original. Brion went with his gut feeling that she was. He won.”

“Oh, good gut.” Vicki patted the elf’s stomach. She pulled her second dagger and handed it to him, hilt first. “Have fun, boys.” She left to explore the ship.

“Give it here.” Neil grumbled and took the weapon from Brion. He reached up to grab the base of his ponytail. With a quick flick of his wrist, he severed the hair and presented it. “Happy now?”

“I am.” Brion nodded before walking away. He whistled a happy tune much to Neil discontent. With a sigh, the bard walked to the edge to toss the hair overboard. He threw the locks over. They floated down to the water as seagulls called out in mock joy.

The afternoon sun beamed down upon the harbor, the rays reflecting off the water in the distance. Milea sighed and focused on the horizon. Her thoughts were on her sister and the Temple of Light. The sun continued to warm the ship causing Milea to stretch in its light. She decided to occupy herself with a little exercise while she waited for the ship to depart. Sonja watched from her bird’s eye view. Milea was going through slow motions of different battle styles while breathing rhythmically. The girl nodded, knowing to disturb her mother now would not be a good thing to do. Unless it were necessary. Sonja then turned and tilted her head to one side when she saw Vicki explore the ship.

“Let’s see... Brion’s a sword master. I see that.” Sonja agreed with her thoughts and folded her arms. “But Neil and Vicki only sailors or maybe pirates? Something tells me that there is more to them.” She nodded. “I’ll go ask.” She grabbed hold of the edge of the crow’s nest and hopped out onto a rope. After steadying herself, she made her way down.

Several small sea birds landed next to the *Lady of the Night* and fished in its shadow. The ship was a decent size, large enough to hold twelve large men and keep them from tripping over each other. Vicki looked about and nodded to the various ropes and trim the ship hosted. The front of the ship held a small figure head of a woman holding her gown close to her bosom. Vicki leaned over to study the object in detail. The woman looked to be either elf or L’vane, her eyes focused in front as if she were concentrating on whatever destination she was going.

“Well, hello there.” Vicki spoke to the statue. “We are going to spend a lot of time together in the coming week. Just want to let you know, my brother is one of the best captains on the twelve seas. You’re in good hands.” She straightened and looked around.

“Now where is that bloody trapdoor?” She walked away. The figure head smiled a little.

Vicki placed her hands upon her hips and looked about a little. A level change to the deck caught her attention. She walked over towards it and bent down. A small handle was carved into one of the boards of the deck. She smiled and let out a triumphant sound when she finally opened the trap door. Vicki nodded at a set of stairs provided easy decent into the lower level. She carefully descended them, keeping as quiet as possible. A sweet and musty smell greeted the woman’s senses, at least the ship did not smell too bad. Vicki’s eyes adjusted to the half-light of the interior quickly. A studious look around the hull yielded that it was partially new, no signs of use anywhere. It was clean and the wood extremely light. Looking around, her eyes adjusted to the half-light of the hull revealing very clean and light wood. Towards the back of the room Vicki occupied were two barrows and a door leading to another room on the ship.

“This is a maiden ship.” Vicki spoke to herself. “Who would give anyone a brand new ship?” She paused and touched a wall. “I’d have to say that Milea is either extremely loved or exceedingly wealthy.” She thought about it. “Then again, she is Legendary so...” She shrugged.

Vicki opened the door and peeped into the room. It was filled with extra ropes and sails for the trip. Charts lined the wall of the room, illustrating the known seas of Bri’al and warning of unknown parts of the oceans. Sonja quietly descended the stairs as Vicki backed out of the room she explored. The girl’s eyes wide with curiosity, she’s never been in this part of the ship before. Sonja watched as Vicki touched the wall again.

The L’vane woman studied the wood in great detail, noting that the entire ship could have been carved from a single tree. The grain did not change, there were no boards indicating separation. The continent of Bri’Mor had plenty of trees large enough for the task. Vicki let out a curious sound. Perhaps the only extra pieces were the masts on the deck. Then again, the branches of those same trees were large and long enough to be masts on a ship; especially if they were positioned correctly on the living tree. There were never any containers or cages in the ship, the floor clean, solid and level.

A few medium sized barrels caught her eye. Sonja saw them as well. Vicki approached the barrels carefully, footsteps echoed slightly causing her to frown and pause. Behind her, Sonja also paused to make sure all was safe. Vicki scowled and continued to walk Sonja followed. Once again footsteps echoed. Vicki knew that she usually would be much quieter than this. She sighed while reaching for one of the barrels, perhaps she was simply out of practice.

“What are you doing?” Sonja inquired causing Vicki to spin around. “I saw you open a door I never knew existed so I was curious. What’s that?” She nodded to the barrels.

“Girl!” Vicki scolded and placed the whip back on her hip. “Don’t sneak up on me like that. You almost got your head taken off.”

“Sorry.” Sonja pouted. “I thought you heard me behind you.”

“Ah, so you’re the one making noise, eh?” Vicki smiled. “Alright. It’s forgiven since I ignored it. I thought I was making the noise.” She turned back to the containers. “These are supplies I hope.” She opened up the barrels and noted they were filled with potatoes.

“Ok, this is bad. No water?” She frowned.

“The ocean is full of water.” Sonja remarked, tilting her head curiously. “Why do we need to carry any?”

“Ocean water is bad for you.” Vicki explained a little. “It causes lots of problems with your body and health if you consume it. A fever that causes madness is most common.”

“Ok, that’s bad.” Sonja frowned. “I’ll tell mom. She might want to go to the next port to pick some water up.” She looked up at the L’vane woman.

“That’s a good idea. I’ll let Neil know.” Vicki agreed. She closed the barrel. “I think there is one not too far from here. It’s a safe bet that going back to Churn is out of the question.”

“Yea. I don’t think they like getting beat up like that.” Sonja mused. She quickly jogged towards the stairs and barely touched them as she ran up, skipping three at a time. Vicki shook her head and followed the younger L’vane.

The bright light of the day temporarily blinded Sonja when she exited the hull. She shook her head quickly before hurrying over towards her mother. Vicki let her own eyes adjust and went to talk to her brother. Milea exhaled and was about to switch her position when she heard her child approach. She relaxed and turned just in time for Sonja to slide to a stop. The girl quickly scanned her mother to make sure she was not disturbing her. Milea smiled at her child then listened as Sonja explained about the barrels and lack of water. The sorceress nodded in understanding, she had forgotten about the supplies. She leaned back and recalled a memory, in another life she would have been scolded for such absentmindedness.

“Milea.” Neil called to the woman as he approached. She turned to face him. “It’s been brought to my attention that we need supplies.” He stated then nodded towards the north. “L’ybrinthia Bay is only a couple of hours sail around the coast. I think we should stop there first.”

“I was thinking the same.” Milea agreed. “The small skirmish in Churn’s marketplace distracted me from collecting them earlier. To return after that action is not a good idea.”

“I can imagine.” Neil rubbed his chin. He made a note to ask his sister for the details of the battle. “How does this ship work?”

“You are the captain. Give it a command.” Milea offered. “It is truly that simple.” She smiled.

“Hmm...” Neil mused, his body language spoke of his disbelief. Milea simply leaned back against the rail of the ship and folded her arms. Her eyes, filled with humor, met those of the newly installed captain.

“I’m going up to the crow’s nest. The views are beautiful up there.” Sonja offered. She hurried to the mast and climbed up the pole swiftly.

“That girl is too swift to be just a L’vane.” Brion mused to himself.

“Well, take a look at her mom.” Vicki offered. “Milea’s not just an elf, human, or

whatever else you see in her.”

“Well, Cathalian Legends speak of her being some sort of Goddess.” Brion offered and rubbed the back of his neck. “Who knows?” He shrugged. “I don’t see Goddess, but I do see an extraordinary woman.” Vicki nodded slightly in agreement.

“Alright.” Neil spoke up, quieting his sister and friend. “Hoist anchor and bring up the sails. We head out to the ocean a bit but follow the coast northeast to L’ybrinthia Bay.” He announced, loud enough for a crew to hear. Nothing happened. “I…” Milea looked just beyond the disillusioned captain to see the sails starting to rise, silently. Vicki gawked.

“Neil, Look!” Vicki shouted causing her brother to whip around.

The gulls cried out in surprise as the ship moved slightly. The birds quickly ascended to the sky, afraid of the now animated object. Neil gawked as the sails upon the masts unrolled themselves and tied between the two posts. Ropes slithered around, going taut to keep them in place. The anchor lifted from the bottom with a clank sound as it locked in place upon the back side of the ship. Sonja whooped with joy as the ship raised its flag. It was dark blue with the twin moons, one waxing the other full, and three stars. The flag fluttered in the breeze, proudly. The wheel turned until the ship faced the ocean.

Vicki and Brion stepped back and watched the item move fluently, clicking every once in a while. A strong breeze from the waves filled the cloth of the sails, pushing the ship into the sea. Vicki hurried to the side to see the small wake created by the ship’s bow. Brion was just thankful that the push off was smooth, hardly any movement that would make him ill. At least right now. After a minute, the ship turned course to Northeast. The sails adjusted to catch the most wind. The large white sheets billowed out to full capacity propelling the boat to her destination. Neil turned slowly in place, watching the ship work as if several men were handling the entire rig. His face alit with joy and wonder.

“You might want to go to the helm and hold the wheel, Neil. She is very new upon the ocean and will go off course to test you.” Milea suggested, the strong breeze blowing against her. It fluttered her hair and clothing.

“I...yea...ok.” Neil hurried to the helm. Milea chuckled before facing the horizon once more. Several dolphins jumped out of the water, providing a show for those upon the ship. Sonja cheered the efforts of the distant creatures.

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