

"Do you know who I am?" Allys pulled herself up to her full height. Her flaming, auburn curls brushed the shop's ceiling.

The shopkeeper did not look impressed. "You are Allys the Bold, Swordswoman of the Mystic East, daughter of Ferra, daughter of Ganelle d'Rainier, or so you said. But I am Drethwain, Shopkeeper of the First Order and in the name of my family honor, I will not sell you a magic item for less than thrice what I paid for it!"

Allys sighed. She could, of course, kill him and take the rusty hauberk in the corner, but she was wearing her business clothes. When people hired a Genuine Barbarian Swordswoman, Deeply Versed in Secrets-of-the-Mystic-East, they wanted brass and jewels, jingly gold chains, flowing purple cloaks, gleaming headbands holding back flaming tresses, a sword that would split an elephant, and daggers tucked into all manner of exotic locales. This town was crowded, and as her personal business was concluded, she would almost certainly need to find work again. Allys saw no point in letting the paying customers, or even the potential customers, down.

"This world is all illusion anyway," Chi Xe, her surprisingly young Wise-Old-Master had told her. "Work with it."

The problem was, the outfit was an absolute bitch to try to fight in.

Allys sighed and gave the hauberk on its crooked stand an appraising look. It was almost solid rust. Cobwebs tickled off its short sleeves.

If that oracle was pulling a fast one, I'm going to drop her into that sacred well head first. She had paid the skinning doe-eyed woman for three answers to three questions; Can I regain my ancestral castle? What aid do I need to accomplish this? Where do I find it? The answers: yes, wear the magic armor of the D'Rainiers, and the northwest corner of Drethwain's Shoppe of Ancient Mysteries, had led her here to confront this greasy man with definite feelings about his standing in the world.

She held up her hand. "Far be it from me, Sir, to seek to undo any man's honor." She planted her shiny, black boot on a creaking chair, and pulled out one of her daggers. With a grunt, she twisted the biggest scarlet "jewel" out of its position and tossed it to Drethwain.

"That is the ruby Tharyx, taken from the dagger that killed the dragon Quaraeth the Most Fell. Whosoever carries it cannot be deceived by any lie or illusion of man, monster or god."

"Is that true?" Drethwain squinted at the stone.

"As far as you know."

He gave her a gap-toothed smile. "The shirt's yours. As is."

She did manage to get him to wrap it up first. She had no intention of getting rust and cobwebs smeared all over her glittery work clothes. She slung the bundle across the rump of Grandiere, her huge, white (naturally), gelding (symbolism is important) and swung herself into the saddle. She cantered out of town, waving her sword and singing fierce-sounding nonsense she'd picked up from Chi Xe. You never knew who was watching.

Her camp was three leagues from town in a wooded dingle. She dismounted Grandiere, removed his tack, let him drink, wiped him down and tethered him where he could graze.

Her horse attended to, she took care of herself. She stripped off the gold-and-emerald headband, and the auburn wig underneath it, rolled the huge sword in the flashy cloak and disengaged the uncomfortably located daggers. In a few moments, she was her wilderness self; short black hair, leather travelling clothes, hunting dagger at waist and short sword

easy reach near the campfire.

Feeling relaxed and ready for real business, Allys unwrapped her purchase. She picked it up by the shoulders and shook it. The mail links rattled like a dry cough. Flakes of rust and dust showered down. It looked battered, decrepit, and decidedly unmagical. It also looked too damn small for her.

Gritting her teeth, Allys slid the hauberk over her head. To her surprise, it fit perfectly. She brushed the links down. They rattled.

*Take it off.*

Allys froze.

*Take it off, now!*

Allys laid her hand on her sword. The voice wasn't coming from any direction. It was just there.

*Take this damn shirt off and go away, hear me? I don't need any cheapskate barbarian wannabe getting blood on me!*

Allys's heart beat hard at the base of her throat.

*No, I am not the shirt. Flaming fig-trees, you've got an untidy mind up here. Where'd you get all these... zenny?... ideas? Oh, the Mystic East. Foreign Parts, I should have known. No, I said that already. I am not the shirt. I am the woman stuck in the shirt. Damn family curse. Blessing Aunt Didi said, but she liked waving swords around. Every woman of the d'Rainier line who died in battle takes a turn in the shirt, giving her skills to the current wearer. Well, I was battling the mentha veridis in the kitchen garden when the lights went out, and now there are no more women in the D'Rainier line and I'm stuck in here!*

As quickly as she could, Allys yanked the hauberk off. She dropped the shirt onto the ground. It rattled for a moment, then lay still on the dirt and dead leaves.

Not good. Not good at all.

The prophecy said she needed to be wearing the D'Rainier armor to retake the castle. Maybe that cranky soul in there knew a secret entrance, or some special weakness that belonged to the Evil Wizard who occupied the place. Probably. Cranky obviously did not like being stuck in the hauberk and needed the death of another D'Rainier woman to get her out. There was one, too. Whoever that was in there obviously didn't know that Ganelle D'Rainier had escaped and fled the country when the castle was taken over. Ganelle wandered with the horse nomads of the Mystic East and had a daughter who had a daughter, who had come back and bought the armor from Drethwain. What if the spirit in the rusty chain mail decided to get Allys into a battle so Allys could die and take her place?

This was very, very not good. Especially since Cranky in there could obviously read Allys's mind.

Allys did not believe in trying to outwit prophecies. Wizards, daemons, Evil-Gods-from-the-Foulest-Regions-of-the-Seven-Hells, yes, but, prophecies, no. They always came back to bite you on your more intimate leathers. She was told she needed to be wearing the D'Rainier armor, so wear it she would. But how could she keep Cranky from rummaging around in her head and getting... ideas?

Allys sat down cross-legged and regarded the hauberk.

She turned over every thing Cranky had "said" to her, trying to work out its implications.

*Untidy mind you've got . . .* Cranky'd complained. Did she have a tough time reading more than one thought a time? Could be. Could Allys bury her identity and true purpose behind one of Chi Xe's interminable Mystic Philosophic Verses about falling blossoms and the sound of silence? No, too complicated. She didn't know what else she'd have to do while Cranky was rummaging. Something simpler. An image. Flying monkeys, or green polar bears, something like that.

Allys closed her eyes. "D'Rainier," she said, and visualized flocks of monkeys with eagles wings swooping and swarming all over a noonday sky.

"Who are you?" Polar bears. Bright emerald ones sitting on ice floes.

She practiced calling up the crowded images with every variation of her ancestry she could think of until well after dark. At last, she rolled the hauberk in its cloth wrappings and herself in her woolen traveling cloak.

It took forever to get the damn monkeys out of her head so she could sleep.

Allys woke up as soon as dawn's light squeezed through the trees. She breakfasted, and repacked her gear onto Grandiere's back. She picked up the roll she'd made of the hauberk and weighed it in her hands.

Put it on now? Or wait until I get closer to the castle? Allys chewed her lower lip. She had technically already begun her quest for the castle, so the prophecy was ticking. Besides, if Cranky knew anything, it'd be better to find out about it now and away so she could formulate her plans.

She slipped the hauberk over her leather jerkin.

*You again? I thought I'd had the last of you. Go away. Leave me alone.*

"No," said Allys through clenched teeth. "I need your help."

*Then you're sore out of luck you fool girl... What is your name anyway? Hi! Where'd all these monkeys come from?*

Allys smiled softly.

*Ragwort and jasmine, get these things away from me! I have never felt anybody with such a bizarre set of thoughts! Are you sure you're sane?*

Allys shrugged.

*You don't even know. Huh. Figures. The sane ones give the damn shirt back after the first night. Great. Stuck in the mind of a crazy woman with a monkey fetish. And a thing for a tall man with a funny name.*

Allys started. "How'd you know about Chi Xe?"

*He's all over the place in here. You're fighting him, you're learning bad poetry from him, and there's some dreams over here, Missy, that I bet you'd never tell your mother about.*

Allys felt her face begin to burn. She knew exactly which dreams Cranky had found. She'd had one just last night where...

*Shame on you!*

Allys clenched her teeth and concentrated.

*Hi, there! Hey! Down! Watch it! What the hell are all these green things!*

"Listen, I need your help..."

*What now? Home? What are you doing going to my home? And where do you get off calling me Cranky am Lady Genevive D'Rainier!*

"All right, Lady Genevive, I am going to take Castle D'Rainier from the Evil Wizard who's occupying it."

For a moment nothing but silence occupied Allys's head. *You are mad. That wizard killed my entire family while they were sleeping. I was the only one awake. I had a new formula I wanted to try out . . .* For the first time Allys felt something other than resentment flow from the presence of Lady Genevive, and that was fear.

"This is nothing," Allys told her mental passenger. "I've fought Evil-Gods-from-the-Foulest-Regions-of-the-Seven-Hells..."

*Yuch! You fought those ugly... Green gods of morning, they do make a loud splat when they fall don't they!*

"I can handle one wizard."

*But why . . . GET THESE MONKEYS AWAY FROM ME!*

Allys concentrated on monkeys in quiet groups of ones and twos, listening to what she was saying.

"Evil Wizard's encircled the castle with a forty foot tall wall of thorny hedges to keep back attack." She concentrated on her memory of the place. No guards, either human or monstrous, just these iron-colored branches twisted around each other as if a blacksmith had beaten them into shape. The wind that had ruffled Allys's hair and Grandiere's mane did not touch the branches at all, instead it whistled between the sword-sharp, foot-long thorns.

Datura Stamonium Grandiose. The thought sent a breath of awe through Allys's mind. They aren't native to this world. What is it doing here?

"Standing between us and the castle." Allys had already broken two swords and an axe trying to get through the thorns. She could have sworn the wind's whistling had turned to laughter as the axe handle splintered in her hands.

*Are you out of your mind? An axe for a Stamonium Grandiose? Why didn't you just gnaw on it?*

Allys raised her eyebrows. "So, what would you suggest?"

*Salt. Lye. Dig down and seed the soil with it. If you want to kill the plant, kill the roots. You're just like Aunt Didi. The world begins and ends on the point of a sword. No idea what's important or beautiful.*

Salt? Lye? "I was hoping there was a secret tunnel used by some lord to sneak out to his paramour or other exploitable weakness."

*What kind of books did your mother raise you on? You think you need something other than salt to break*

*a fairy charm? That there's a demon weed that can stand up to the rendered fat of an unbaptized baby cow?*

"Well, when you put it that way..." Maybe she should have tipped the oracle a little better.

*Prophecy? You went to an oracle to find me? Why... Oh, god, what are these green things you're so fond of? Can't you control them? They stink!*

Her strategy was working well enough to rattle Cra... Lady Genevive, but, Ally's still needed her help. Probably a partial answer as a friendly gesture wouldn't hurt. Probably.

"I want to settle down and see if Chi Xe wants to get married..."

*I should hope so after some of what you've...*

Monkeys, monkeys, monkeys...

*Back off you chattering ninnies ...*

"Good castles are expensive and hard to come by. I want to raise little barbarianettes without having to be pregnant on horseback. I want a home to come back to after a long, hard fight."

Ally's waited for the snide commentary, but none came. *Someplace you can be yourself*, was all she heard.

"Yes," a sigh of relief at being understood escaped Ally's.

*My garden was a place like that.* The yearning in the thought was so strong, Ally's felt tears sting her eyes. Her mind filled with a picture of a serene place: beds of fragrant flowers separated by grassy paths and lovingly trimmed hedges, brilliantly colored rose trees, a carefully tended area for utilitarian vegetables and herbs. Ally's had never longed for such a place before, but now a wave of need washed over her, a palpable desire to feel earth on her hands and smell green scents all around her.

Ally's had been seeing the wizard as an impersonal adversary, merely in the way. Now, she felt stirrings of very personal dislike inside her. How could anybody take all that from Lady Genevive? It wasn't as if she didn't have Aunt Dora hounding her all the time to put down that hoe and pick up a sword...

Ally's sucked in a breath. "Lady Genevive, what are you doing to me?"

*Not a thing. If my feelings are leaking over into yours, it's not my fault. You're the one who insisted on wearing the fool shirt.*

Ally's pulled the hauberk off, and held it tight in both hands for a moment. Having somebody separate sitting in her head and sniping at her was one thing, but feeling their feelings, that was something else again. That could get dangerous. What if this gardener's emotions effected her judgement in battle? What if she got sidetracked watching the daisies grow instead of battling the Evil Wizard who was unfairly holding onto her inheritance? What if she stopped being herself and Lady Genevive got her killed? Ally's shuddered. She stowed the hauberk with the rest of her gear, embarrassed to see her hands shake. Maybe it was already enough. Maybe she'd already gotten what she needed...

No, that was dangerous thinking. She'd probably get through the thorns and be strangled by some flesh-eating vine that Genevive knew how to dismember. No. She'd put the chain mail back on when she got closer to the castle.

*Maybe I don't have to do this*, whispered a treacherous voice from her heart. Unfortunately, it was entirely her own.

own. *Maybe I can just turn around and go home.*

No. Her hands curled into fists. I promised. What Allys had told Genevive was true, as far as it went. She'd left how she'd sworn to her grandmother on her deathbed that she'd take the castle back and return their family to their native land. She couldn't go back on that. Not ever. No matter what.

I just have to trust the polar bears and monkeys to do their job. She mounted Grandiere. After all, I was never stupid enough to think this was going to be easy.

Was I?

By mid-afternoon, Allys and Grandiere trotted through the abandoned grasslands at the foot of the Twilight Mountains. A fat bag of salt and a clay jar of lye now hung beside Grandiere's saddle bags. Once, these meadows had been tilled fields, but now the forest and bracken stretched out to reclaim them. If Allys squinted hard, she could see the remains of burned out cottages being overtaken by the weedy onslaught of nature. The only sounds were the wind through the grass and the thump and jingle of Grandiere's passage.

I'm going to have to advertise for some Humble-but-Hardy-and-Picturesque-Rustics to come resettle this place. I'm done.

The mountains loomed closer and Castle D'Ranier's spires separated from their shadows, but the castles walls could not. Twisted, needle-tipped fingers of darkness wound around them, obscuring them from sight.

The castles appearance changed very little as she drew closer. The leafless, serpentine branches took on a glint from the fading sunlight and the background silence deepened, throwing the whistle of the wind around the foot-long thorns into a new relief. Allys hated the fact that there were no guards. It smacked of overwhelming arrogance. Some swordswomen preferred their opponents that way, but not Allys. She liked them scared of the world. The scared ones didn't think as much.

Allys reined Grandiere to a halt and unloaded the salt, lye, spade and hauberk. She tethered the horse loosely to a thorn branch.

Allys picked up the hauberk and with a deep breath, slid it back on.

*Oh, you're back. I thought you'd changed your mind.*

"Not yet." She took up the spade, looked around for a likely spot at the base of the thorn hedge and shoved the blade into the ground.

*Gods, you've got no idea how to dig, have you?*

Allys's hands jerked. Her eyes bulged as she watched her hands take a fresh grip on the spade. Her leg raised and she stepped her foot down on the blade, causing it to bite deep into the earth.

"What are you doing?" She demanded as her arms heaved the earth aside and bent to dig another spadeful free.

*Getting this done before New Year's. Stop squirming.*

"You can't just..." Allys clamped her jaw shut. Her hands and back worked the spade. The hole deepened as if by magic. Apparently Lady Genevive could, and was, and was doing a very good job. The earth melted from around roots and were even thicker and more twisted than the branches.

"So, there you are, you little daemons," Ally's heard her voice say. "But not for long." Her body turned around and she picked up the lye jar.

"You could at least leave me my voice," muttered Ally's as her hands pried the lid open and dumped a healthy portion of the stinking, grey-white substance onto the exposed roots, following it up with a healthy shower of salt.

*Fuss, fuss, fuss.* Ally's boot stamped the mixture down into the soil around the roots. *But, have it your way. I felt her withdraw to the back of her mind. Now, this is going to take a week or three before results...*

A crackling noise drifted down overhead. Ally's, in control of herself, jerked her head up. A sickly pallor spread over the iron colored thorns. One by one, they crumbled into fine ash and dissipated on the wind.

*Or not.*

The pallor spread to the tangled branches. Ally's jumped backward just in time. A whole section of hedge crashed to the ground, revealing the ivy covered walls of Castle D'Ranier.

Ally's grinned.

*Home? What do you mean home?*

Uh-oh.

*What promise? Your grandmother? What is going on?!* Ally's swirled a flock of monkeys around the memory of her grandmother. But this time it did no good. Lady Genevive swore and swatted in the back of her mind, but she plowed straight through the fantastic animals.

*Ganelle's granddaughter!* she shrieked. *Why didn't you... You thought I'd... How COULD you!*

Genevive's shock was so cold and so bitter, Ally's shivered.

"I'm sorry. I was afraid you'd..."

*I know what you were afraid of! I'm sitting up here with it. If you think that little of me, you can just take your shirt off right now and send me back to my junk shop.*

Ally's laid her hand on her sword and concentrated on the way in front of her. She stepped through the hedge's ragged gap. "After I've taken the castle, I'll be glad to, Lady Cranky."

*Ungrateful ...*

Ally's called up the green polar bears and sent them after Genevive. Lady Genevive cursed and punched at them. *Ill-mannered, snippy, distrustful...*

Ally's made the bears hold their ground so she could keep most of her concentration on the way in front of her. She was still quiet. The castle walls had been well maintained, leaving no chinks in the mortar, and all the windows were on the second storey. The ivy stems were only as thick as her index finger, no good for climbing. She'd have to find a door.

"Oh, do allow me to welcome you in." A man's voice spoke from thin air.

The ivy tendrils pulled away from the wall with a noise like someone tearing lettuce. They swooped down around

Allys gripped her sword hilt but the vines yanked her hand away.

"Genevive!" she cried as the branches snaked around her neck and shoulders.

*What am I? Your servant? You dragged me out here so you could use me and stick me in a closet somewhere and didn't even want to tell me what happened to my sister!*

"I'm sorry!" The ivy spun Allys around, passing her from tendril to tendril. She dug her boot heels into the ground but it did no good. The ivy just held her tighter and heaved her from one branch to the next.

*Yes, I can tell.*

Ahead of her, a mass of ivy thrust itself between the hinges of a side door and heaved it open. It hoisted Allys into the air and tossed her inside. She sprawled belly down on cold flagstones. The door slammed shut behind her.

Gasping, Allys hauled herself to her feet. She stood in a narrow hallway. Torches flickered in sconces on the walls, revealing bright tapestries and clean floors. The Evil Wizard obviously liked his comfort.

And if Lady Genevive was a crouching, sulky presence in the back of her mind...

*Sulky! How dare you!*

... At least she still had her sword. She drew her weapon smoothly.

"Now, now, we can't have any of that in here." Allys's limbs froze.

"Oh, not again."

Genevive's touch had been natural, like being a well-worn pair of gloves. This was a grip of iron squeezing each of her muscles in turn and forcing her to move. Her arm sheathed her sword and her legs walked, carrying her through the arched spaces of the great hall, up the sweeping staircase and into one of the tower rooms.

Wizardly chambers were pretty much all of a kind. Books, braziers of bright coals, glassware, unidentifiable luncheon items, vegetable, animal, and mineral all giving off smells that made you realize you didn't want to know what they were. The Evil Wizard stood in the center of the room where Allys couldn't help but get a good look at him. His black velvet robes were inscribed with silver Mystic and Mysterious symbols that gleamed in the sunlight streaming through the broad windows. He wore a matching black skull cap and his pointy beard reached almost to his waist.

Allys scanned the symbols and groaned. She'd thought he was just one of the Evil Wizards. His robe showed him to be one of the Truly-Mercilessly-Evil-Bretheren. She wished he'd give her back control of her body so she could kick his ass.

"Ah-ha!" His eyes widened as he looked her up and down. "Allys the Bold! I am so glad you have come. Let me introduce myself. I am Ligera, Master of Wizardry and Master of Life Itself."

Her tongue, at least, seemed to be working. "Catchy title."

He ignored her. "And how nice of you to have brought your great-aunt."

"Lady Genevive. I am delighted to make your acquaintance." He bowed deeply. "It distressed me greatly to find your D'Rainier armor and your unfortunate soul had vanished from my castle. But now that Allys has so graciously returned you to me, it is my earnest wish that you be set free."

*Free? He'll set me free?*

"Lady Genevive, no, he's a liar..."

"Tush. Do not talk back to your elders." He flicked his long fingers. Allys's hand smacked her own cheek. "I shall set you free. Your niece shall die battling me and take your place in the hauberk. After which, I shall have her melted down and reformed into a shape more useful to me."

*But...*

"Raise your sword, Allys," the wizard's cold blue eyes glittered. "You shall fall on it before we're done."

"No!" Allys bent all her will to keeping her hands at her sides. "I am Allys the Bold! You cannot control me!"

"Nothing living escapes my control! Behold!" He swept his arm out. Allys had no choice but to look.

*NO!* screamed Lady Genevive.

Outside the window lay a nightmare. Glowing fungi like pustules or corpse's hair covered the ground, overshadowed by mounds and masses of sick, waxy creepers. Shrubs with black stems and flapping red leaves writhed and squirmed in what had once been flower beds. Closest to the castle grew thick plants like corn, but under the leaves, Allys saw the snapping jaws of Great Danes and leopards.

"These are my creations! I control all life! All life!"

"But not the dead!" A wave of warmth surged through Allys's blood. Allys's sword was in her hand. Her legs moved, carrying her toward Ligera. Her mind was filled with Chi Xe's teachings. Never go straight for the wizard, go for his apparatus. Allys's foot kicked at the nearest table. It toppled over. Glass and paraphernalia smashed to the floor.

"No!" screamed Ligera. "You will halt! You will obey me!" A green-black aura of power glowed around his hands. A bolt shot out and caught Allys in the chest, slamming her against the wall. It hurt, but didn't bother her in the least. She pushed herself forward and caught the edge of a brazier filled with coals. She tipped it over onto the alchemical wreckage.

*Any suggestions, niece?* Fresh flames arose, green, purple, blue and black.

*Oh, do continue on. You're doing just fine.*

*Thank you.*

Ligera howled as if the flames licked at his flesh. His hands waved. A gigantic serpent, spitting fire and venom rose from the flames. Genevive gave the body a grin and Allys concurred. This was familiar territory. The serpent slithered forward.

*Now, this looks particularly instructive.* Genevive pointed to a particular set of memories and put the Bounding-Doe-of-Morning technique into play.

*Oh yes, that's a good one.* Allys landed behind the snake. The sword buried itself in the back of the snake's head with a satisfying, meaty thunk.

Genevive swung the body around and raised the gory sword high. *Does this really work?* She asked as Allys's

mouth sang out the words to the Ancient Song of Self-Defense, which, Chi Xe said mainly translated into "Got'cha, got'cha, got'cha!"

Ligera fell back. He was beginning to blister and pant a little.

Probably had his life force stowed in a box somewhere among all that junk. Very common conceit among evil wizards.

*Really? What interesting things you do learn in the Mystic East.*

"Lady Genevive! Why do you attack me? I offer you freedom!"

Fury burned through Allys's blood. "You killed my garden! That was my freedom!"

Ligera laughed out loud. "Oh, is that all? I am Master of All Life! I will give you another garden! A better garden! Any garden in the world!"

"Really?" breathed Genevive. "You could do that?"

*Genevive! No!*

He waved his blistered hand "Any garden in the world! Indeed..."

He looked down at where Allys's sword had plunged into his chest up to its hilt, up along her arm and into her e

Genevive smiled. "Any garden in the world needs fertilizer."