

KEOLAND BLUES

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In a forest lay a castle, near the castle lay a village, and all lay deserted under a dim autumnal sun. Swallows had made nests along the castle walls, the empty mud pots overlooking a swampy moat well filled with frogs. The broken castle had been left to molder, while the village it once served lay cold and silent as the grave.

In the aftermath of the luz wars, the Flanaess had no shortage of ruins and wilderness. Overgrown with weeds, the castle leaned tiredly over its moat as though contemplating imminent collapse.

A huge man dressed in armor made of black dragon scales stood in the courtyard. A shimmering black hell hound pelt hung down his back, the canine's head sitting atop the man's helmet and grinning madly with bright white fangs. The man's hand rested upon a huge sword that jutted through his belt. Heavy hiking boots, a backpack, a coil of enchanted rope, and armor made of black dragon scales—it was the equipment of a man who marched fast and slept rough. Shaven-headed, square, and suspicious, the Justicar carefully examined the mud upon the cobblestones. His eyes then coldly searched the battlement for the slightest stir of life.

Behind him, a strange little man came tottering over from a wagon parked outside the gates. With a physique like badly knotted string and sporting a great icebreaker prow of a nose, the little man marched grandly over and gave the warrior a boisterous slap upon the back.

"Y'see, boy? A ruin! Deserted! Wiped! This is luz's work. The relentless march of evil! It's started all over again." Tucking his thumbs beneath his suspenders and ignoring a dire glance from the warrior, the little man lectured happily on. "New wars. I knew it! I knew it! I guess I'll offer my services to the local kings as an advisor. No general's rank for me, son—not my style! Just quiet and unassuming, that's the way I am. Walk softly down the corridor of power. Speak when spoken to. Lead by example." The man walked grandly about the big warrior and his grinning hell-hound skin. "You know, son, we have twice as many ears as we do mouths. That's why a wise man listens more than he talks. Took that lesson to heart when I was a child. Stuck with me ever since. Heart and soul of rectitude, that's me! As a child I almost starved to death! Wouldn't tell my Pappy I was hungry."

Trying to put the noise behind him, the warrior knelt above a skull that lay yellowing in the mud. He touched the moss growing in cracks along the jawbone and then thoughtfully rubbed his fingers clean.

"Skeletons. This isn't luz's work."

luz's minions seized the fallen to swell the ranks of the undead. The castle had been a ruin for at least a hundred years, and the luz wars were only five or six years gone.

The castle seemed a place of little promise. The moat was deep, and something big, nasty, and spider-shaped seemed to be moving underneath the surface. The castle itself was a total wreck. Any treasures would have been taken long ago, leaving only traps. No one but a fool would believe otherwise.

All in all, it seemed a poor place to be asking for directions. Having trudged north for three days from a deserted piece of shore, the Justicar eyed his companion with a sigh.

"Polk, you're sure Hommlet is in Keoland?"

"Of course, boy! Common knowledge! Hommlet, Keoland. Go together like a hand in a glove. A sock in a shoe. A sword in a sheath!" Polk, travel consultant to adventurers, noisily consumed a pickled onion. "The ship dropped us off right where we want to be! We're almost there! Can't be more than a day's walk, maybe two. All we have to do now is ask directions!"

WITH PIERCING EYES THAT MISSED NOTHING, THE JUSTICAR LOOKED ABOUT THE ROOM.

"Where's the map, Polk?"

"Lost it." Polk said through a mouthful of onions. "Don't worry. Keoland! It was marked right there on the map. Memory's perfect, boy! That's where I get my efficiency. Brains, boy. Gotta have brains, or else you're just a mouth!"

Jus felt a headache coming on. The huge ranger slowly stood, rubbing at his temples.

"Polk, shut up. Where are the others?"

"Others?" Still regarding the ruined castle in satisfaction, Polk the Teamster shrugged. "Flew ahead, boy. Scouting! That's the way to do it: proper organization. Wits against brawn, light against dark, good against evil!"

The warrior turned his searching gaze upon the castle keep. Dark, obviously trap laden, and dangerous, it was clearly a place to avoid.

"Let me guess. They went into the keep?"

"Of course, boy! That's what adventures are all about." Polk slapped his companion on the back. "Don't worry, son. These are ruin-exploration professionals! What could possibly go wrong?"

Inside the keep, an old library had become a happy hive of activity. Dust flew and books tumbled as a little winged figure

whirred busily from shelf to shelf. Happy as a clam, she piled her loot and bawled over her shoulder toward the courtyard far below.

"Hey Jus! Jus, this is hoopy! I think these are spellbooks and stuff!"

Hovering gaily in mid air, wearing an outfit to make a mother scream and a father reach for weapons, Escalla the faerie happily threw scrolls all over the top of a decaying table. The crumbling old keep still had good ceilings; decades of wind and rain had kept out of the abandoned halls. Two feet tall and with her long blonde hair hanging straight and free, the little faerie sat herself down to start sifting through her find. She shouted raucously through a window as she opened the first scroll.

"Hey, Jus? Jus! There's not even any guard on these things! See? I told you this place would be great!"

A flash came from the scroll. A mighty pulse of force throbbed through the air. Escalla blinked, then looked in puzzlement at the door.

"Hey, anyone else feel that?"

A figure appeared at the door, a female face well dusted with freckles and with bobbed brown hair tied up into a hundred little braids. Big paws padded on the stone flags as her huge winged lion's body made its way into the library.

Enid the sphinx sat, curled her tail about her hind feet, and blinked.

"It felt like a spell."

"Huh? Well I can't see anything." Escalla gave an expressive shrug of her wings. "Any explosions or anything?"

"None so far." The sphinx peered about the room with big brown eyes. "I'm not sure I like it."

"Eh, it was probably nothing." The faerie flipped back her streaming hair. "Don't fret all the time! Hey, if anything happened, Jus and Polk would tell us. Right?" The girl dusted at her meager cleavage. "No traps are going to go off. Hey, remember? No one touches the faerie!"

A vast stone fist came pounding down from the ceiling, missing Escalla by a gnat's breadth as she walked across the floor. Enid the sphinx stared in amazement as a huge stone figure simply grew out of the castle wall. Silently, the stone golem opened hands the size of bedsteads and reached out to crush the two girls.

Escalla stood gaping. Enid snatched the faerie girl's skirt in her mouth and scrabbled backward through a door. The stone monster reached clean through the walls, simply growing out of the masonry and lumbering in pursuit. Dangling, undignified, and extremely annoyed, Escalla gave a hoot of joy and opened fire with a tried-and-trusted spell.

"Oh yeah? Well take *this*, you rock monster, you! Fireball!"

Spell energy flashed, hit the monster, and exploded with ferocious force. Wooden doors flew apart in a holocaust of flame. The wooden floor blasted apart, beams cracking and floorboards flying madly through the air. Enid blinked as the surface dropped away under her feet. She opened her big, feathered wings and landed in a room twenty feet below. Her huge feet thudded calmly down while half the castle collapsed above them. Escalla pulled free of Enid's mouth and did a wild little victory dance in the air.

"Yee-haw! Yeah! See that? No one touches the faerie!"

The walls shuddered as a vast mass of stone thundered into the room. The rock pile shifted, turned, then stood,

glowering down at the faerie and the sphinx. It now appeared annoyed. Red hot, it hissed smoke from the wooden floors. Enid watched the monster and made a little frown.

"Was a fireball really quite the thing? I don't think stone burns all that well."

"I know that!" Escalla dodged a blow from the golem that would have smashed her like an ant. "I'm on the problem! There's a faerie at work here!"

Unperturbed, Enid walked back out of range of the clumsy rock monster. "I still have a stun scroll. Maybe we should just use that?"

"Wait, wait. Here we go!" Escalla hovered, messing about with her frost wand. "All right, see? This was all part of a larger plan!"

The frost blast from Escalla's wand hit the golem right in the bread basket. Red hot stone met freezing ice. With a sound like splintering glass, great cracks shot all through the automaton's body. The golem stopped, looked at itself in annoyance, then reared high to the ceiling, ready to pound both fists down onto Escalla. Enid walked up and swatted the monster with one huge paw, and the golem shattered like toffee. Bits and splinters of stone thundered to the ground. The sound dwindled to a clatter, then a heavy silence.

"Escalla! Enid?" The Justicar's voice bellowed from out in the castle courtyard. "Escalla! Where the hell are you?"

Enid and Escalla looked at one another, then frantically began shoving pieces of broken golem out of sight. A door behind them wrenched open, and the Justicar thrust himself into the room. Grinning away from his helmet, Cinders the hell hound wagged his long black tail.

Hi!

"Hey pooch! Hey Jus!" Escalla gave a wave as innocent as a spring dawn. Behind her, Enid promptly sat down atop a chunk of the dead golem's face. "Look," said Escalla. "We found an old castle. Isn't it hoopy?"

With piercing eyes that missed nothing, the Justicar looked about the room with its suspiciously shaped chunks of stone. The floor above was still aflame, and bits of burning floorboard crashed into the rubble.

"All right, what have you done?"

"Done?" Escalla planted hands against her hips, looking the soul of innocent outrage. "What are you implying?"

Raising one eyebrow at her, the Justicar turned to Enid.

"She triggered a trap, didn't she?"

Enid tapped her great big claws, trying to be diplomatic. "Um, well, perhaps not a trap per se ..."

"Trap? Trap!" Escalla fluttered about the room in a high state of moral injury. "I'll have you know that I'm a ruin-exploration professional! I do not trigger traps!"

Jus turned to Enid.

"Enid?"

"Hey, she said there was no trap. Didn't you hear her say there was no trap?" The faerie draped herself over Enid's shoulders. "Hey, look at this sphinx! See that? That's the heart and soul of honesty! And why? Because she's got freckles! Freckles are the eyes of the gods. The goddess of truth and beauty watches everything this gal does, and all through those freckles. She's like a deluxe character witness supreme!"

Going cross-eyed trying to see her own freckles, Enid seemed pleased.

"Are freckles really a gift from the beauty goddess?"

A thump-thump-thumping came as Cinders wagged his tail.

Cinders likes freckles.

"There, see?" Escalla sat on the Justicar's shoulder. "You can trust me. I'm a faerie."

Tired from a long day of travel, and with the girl's chatter already giving him a headache, the Justicar settled Escalla in the crook of his arm.

"I told you not to go haring off on your own."

"We were not haring. We were covering the flanks." The faerie sniffed. "You just don't think I can look after myself!"

Annoyed, the Justicar gave a heavy sigh.

"I'm just saying that you'd need less looking after if you just took good advice once in a while."

"Good advice?" The faerie quirked her eyes ironically upward. "Like yours?"

"Yes."

"Ha ha! Well, I like that!" Escalla put a superior little expression on her face. "I'll have you know I am now a dungeon veteran. I'm a vampire-staking, Keraptis-kicking adventuress."

The Justicar gave another sigh.

"One dungeon doesn't make you smart enough to go running off on your own."

"What? Oh yeah?" Escalla flapped her hands. "All right, mister 'shaven-headed, I'm-so-good-with-a-sword!' Here's a bet. Whoever has the most shining evidence of 'adventure savvy' by the end of the day, they get dinner cooked for them tonight!"

"Escalla, I always cook dinner." The Justicar glowered. "What would make this time so special?"

"Yeah? Well this time in an apron, with a flower behind one ear!"

SPELL ENERGY FLASHED, HIT THE MONSTER, AND EXPLODED WITH FEROCIOUS FORCE.

The Justicar set the faerie down upon a severed golem hand.

"Fine. It's a bet. Hope there's an apron in your size." The big man moved away with his customary deadly grace, silent, dark, and poised for instant action. "There's a well in the courtyard. Let's fill water bottles and get moving. We still have to cover another five miles before dark."

He turned to go. Behind him, Cinders' voice drifted in empty air.

Apron on Justicar. Funny!

Left behind among chunks of shattered golem, Escalla sat on Enid and folded her arms. She went into a magnificent sulk.

"Hmmp! He thinks I cause accidents! And it's not true. I never cause accidents! None of us do!"

"Oh." Enid pulled her pretty freckles into a frown. "What about the voyage here? What about that ship we set on fire?"

Escalla waved her hands in protest.

"Hey, that was the hell hound's fault, and we now have that behavioral quirk relatively under control!"

"He set fire to the hold."

"He was rat catching!" The faerie flew off in search of interesting loot. "Hey, it got rid of the rats, didn't it? They ate my faerie cakes. They got what they deserved!" The girl lead the way upstairs toward an interesting set of doors. "Oh, hey, there's death runes all over these doors! Maybe there's something hoopy over here?"

Following close behind her, Enid anxiously bit her lip.

"Um, maybe we shouldn't?"

"Hey! Castles are designed to be lived in, right? No one would have actual death traps inside their *home*! Can you imagine walking off at night to take a leak if every second door could blow your giblets off?" The girl used all her puny strength to turn a door handle. "I mean, there's no magic aura here. What's going to happen? Like a dragon's going to teleport into the corridor and take revenge?"

Escalla opened the door, and there was a flash of magic. The faerie bit her lip, looked at Enid, and carefully let go of the door handle.

"Hey, I've got a better idea. Wanna check the cellar?"

The wall beside Escalla exploded inward with a roar.

Huge chunks of masonry thundered across the floor as a vast reptilian head snarled into the room. Enid and Escalla recoiled into the rubble as huge fangs gaped. The dragon's head lunged straight for Escalla, who instantly shot aside, twisting from its path as the monster smashed the desk between its jaws.

Sunlight streamed in through the broken wall. A sword rang against hard scales, and a big man's voice bellowed in rage.

"Escalla! Get off your ass and help!"

Enid squawked and ducked as the dragon's head missed her by an inch, biting a chunk from the wooden door. The lizard roared, arching its head and filling the air with a hateful scream. Escalla took shelter behind Enid as an angry voice from outside deadened even the dragon's roar.

"Escalla! Now would be a good time!"

"Help? Ha! Fine!" The little faerie swung her frost wand down from its straps across her shoulder. "Hey iguana boy! Eat this!"

A blast of cold shot from the wand and smashed straight into the monster's open mouth, driving the creature back. The reptilian head rose, struck the ceiling, and shattered like a vase. Shards of frozen lizard skull skittered across the floor, one chunk striking Enid's flanks and sending her pedaling backward in disgust.

With its head missing, the neck flopped and pounded itself madly against the walls and floor. Emerging slowly from cover, Escalla and Enid blinked, then beamed in surprise. The faerie blew a trailing wisp of frost from her wand and then posed silkily in mid air.

"Ha! I'm a dragon slayer!" Crowing in victory, Escalla flipped out the long, brilliant strands of her hair, then draped herself happily atop the nervous sphinx. "Ooooooh, maybe I should just set up a booth at the fair. Touch the hero's foot, one gold Royal. Kiss her butt for fifty!"

Enid nervously cleared her throat.

"Are you sure it's actually dead?"

"Sure I'm sure! Did you see that? *Bam!*" Escalla smacked one fist into the palm of her other hand. "These critters

aren't so tough! All you need is the looks, the brains, and the talent! Hon, we had it outclassed!"

The wall behind them instantly exploded. Roaring dragons' heads blasted inward through the door, the walls, the roof, the floor. Escalla blinked, bemused, as the entire room collapsed, leaving her and Enid hovering in mid air.

The Justicar stood fighting a swarm of serpents. Wild with anger, he flashed a long black bastard sword up into a parry, deflecting jaws that lunged straight at his throat. Moving in a blur almost too fast to see, the big man pivoted, his black blade flashing back to send a lizard head bouncing to the floor.

Four more reptile heads were already lunging in to the attack. They came from behind, from below, over the walls, and through the weeds. As he slammed two more heads aside, a third exploded upward through the cobbles and lunged straight toward his spine.

Escalla saw the fangs lunging for her friend's back and gave a little scream of fright.

"Jus!"

The big man turned. Atop his helmet, the hell hound's face poised, its big grin gleaming—and then blasted a storm of flames right into the monster's maw. The reptile's head charred, its snake-neck whipping high and beating its burning skull to fragments against the castle walls.

More heads lunged up out of the rubble. Escalla hovered, smoothed her long leather opera gloves, and made an appropriately martial frown.

"Snakes! I hate snakes!"

She spread her hands, trilled a syllable, and then shot a sizzling lightning bolt straight toward empty space between three serpent's necks. The long necks wove aside, reared to attack the human below them, then all jerked in surprise as the lightning bolt split three ways and scythed three heads clean from their necks.

Below Escalla, Jus stood shielding Polk as he fought. A lizard skull split as the Justicar's black sword hacked downward. As a second head lunged in from one side, Jus roared, punched it with one fist, pinned it with his boot as it sagged, and clove the creature's neck in two.

"Cinders!"

Flame blasted from the canine head atop the big man's helm. A blazing lizard head arched in agony above, and the hell hound skin grinned maniacally in glee.

Burn! Burn burn burn!

Escalla shot sideways through the air and leveled her finger. A spell detonated amid a nest of dragon's heads, blasting necks apart and scattering chunks of meat and skull across the ground. All the snakes were dead, only their bodies kept thrashing in an appalling unwillingness to die.

Relative silence fell. Giving a sigh of relief, the faerie swooped down to land atop the smoking hell hound pelt and patted the creature's lustrous black fur.

"Hey, pooch! Well done!"

Done! Cinders wagged his tail. *Well done. Smells good!*

"Um, yeah ... whatever." Escalla cleared her throat, then hung her head upside down to peer past the Justicar's helmet brim and into the man's face. "Hi, Jus! Hoopy fight, huh? Snakes! Who'd have guessed!"

The Justicar—more than two hundred pounds of shaven-headed ill humor—glared daggers at the faerie.

"What did you do?"

"Me?" Escalla spread her hands in innocent protest. "Why do you think it was me?"

"Inspired guess work."

The Justicar slowly and carefully wiped down the blade of his wolf-skull pommeled sword. Enid the sphinx crept quietly out of the rubble, then scratched her ear with one hind paw. She sat beside the only really busy member of the party, Polk.

Escalla spread her wings and whirred over to the little man, who sat hurriedly scribbling notes into a gigantic book.

"Hey Polk. Whatcha doing?"

"Chronicling!" Loud, energetic, and forever on top of his world, Polk the Teamster took a quick count of the swaying serpent necks about the courtyard. "I make it twelve! Not bad."

"Twelve snakes." Jus shot a sharp glance at the faerie as she hovered innocently nearby. "I told you not to touch anything!"

"Hey, man, looting is one of the basic pleasures of the adventurer's life! It's natural! You wouldn't want me to do anything unnatural, would you?"

"Ask me that when you put a longer hemline on that dress!"

"Hey, skimpy fashions are all part of my endearingly roguish image." The faerie made a haughty little sashay. "Anyway, we have a real adventuring mission. We have property to occupy." Escalla waved a set of deeds in the air. "Village of Hommet, one keep, and one abandoned temple with underground monster storage facility!"

"Underground monster storage facility!" The Justicar irritably sheathed his blade. "More snakes!"

Polk hovered over a severed serpent's head, taking notes upon a scroll.

"Now now, son, don't be too hasty! A fight isn't over until we've cataloged the kill."

Wiping his bald head, Jus speared the little man with a glower.

"Polk, the fight's over. The beasts are dead."

"Not yet, son! Not yet!" Polk flipped through a bestiary, looking thoughtfully at the remains. "Proper identification is always necessary for decent chronicle. Can't write up your adventures unless we get the facts straight!" Polk measured the bite span of a severed reptilian head, then stuck his axe-beak nose back into his books. "They might not be snakes!"

From her position just above, Escalla dodged as a snake neck thrashed and slammed itself against the castle stones.

"Hey guys? All these things were heads. Where are their tails?"

Puzzled, Escalla whirred a little closer to a thrashing neck.

"Hey ... hey, guys? I don't think these things are really snakes!"

With a deafening scream of rage, a serpent head smashed through the cobbles and almost engulfed Escalla from below. Escalla shrieked and sped aside, crashing against a wall and landing next to the stump of a severed serpent neck.

The neck stump bulged, split, and suddenly erupted into life. Splitting through the severed neck came two fresh serpent heads—two fresh necks, with two sets of screaming, maddened fangs.

From out in the courtyard, Polk's voice rose in triumph.

"Jus! Here it is, boy! It's a regenerating hydra! That's a type of dragon-snake! Sez here it might have more than one head!"

A DOZEN HYDRA HEADS SCREAMED FOR BLOOD. ENID SWATTED, DOVE, AND FOUGHT, SPREADING HER WINGS TO FLY.

"Really?" Up to his armpits in snake heads, The Justicar hacked furiously with his blade. "No kidding!"

Squealing, Escalla leapt skyward to escape a set of lunging jaws. A serpent head tried to engulf Escalla whole. Enid roared and slashed out with her claws, ripping the head clean from its neck an inch before it ate the faerie. The severed neck stump instantly began to writhe, two more heads already starting to emerge from the wound.

The Justicar was surrounded by a weaving forest of seven heads. They dove and sliced toward him, and now the big man could only parry, twist, and dodge. He had already sliced one serpent head away, and a pair of replacement heads gleamed wet with mucous as they hissed for blood. Behind the Justicar, Polk sat and blinked, realizing that he was in danger of becoming a lizard's lunch. Cinders burned two more heads from the hydra's necks. Snakes screamed, charred, swerved, and died ... and then Cinders's flames sputtered out and ran dry.

A dozen hydra heads screamed for blood. Enid swatted, dove, and fought, spreading her wings to fly. The panniers of scrolls, riddles, and spells slung across her back swayed as hydra heads raked at her hide. Escalla detonated another fireball, saw the burned heads were unable to regenerate, and then bit her lip and ran her hand frantically through her list of spells.

Inspiration came, as it usually did, with a rush of supreme smugness.

"Enid? Enid, come on! Get inside!"

Enid pounced upon a hydra neck, tore through its spine with her teeth, then leaped away. Escalla hovered in a doorway, apparently abandoning Jus to his solitary fight out on the cobbles. The man somehow fought half a dozen hydra heads to a standstill, blocking, dodging, slamming his fists viciously into lizard jaws, and not daring to cut into hydra necks. He protected Polk and managed to flick a glance toward Escalla.

"It has to have a body! Kill the body, and the heads will die!"

"It's all right!" Escalla waved as Enid passed beneath her. "Just a second! Just hold still!"

Enid was already unshipping her panniers and opening an ivory case. Hovering just inside the doorway, the little faerie spread her hands, drew in a deep breath, then molded an illusion. A fake thicket of raspberry bushes sprang into life, hiding Polk and Jus from the hydra's view. Escalla posed in the castle door, wagging her wings and waving toward half a dozen enraged hydra snouts.

"Coo-eee! Hey boys!"

Hydra heads whipped about, fangs gaping, spittle dripping from them. Escalla bent down to present them with her taut little rear, slapping herself on one cheek.

"Yoo hoo! Hey, lizard lips! Come and get it. Faerie butt! Primo condition! One chance only! Get it while it's sizzling hot!"

The serpent heads shot toward her, roaring in anger. As the first one sped beneath the door into the castle halls, it passed beneath a papyrus seal planted on the lintel by Enid's busy paws. A sheet of force crashed downward, running a jolt of power down the creature's neck and into the body somewhere far beyond.

The Justicar was already out of cover, plodding stolidly across the courtyard and following the necks to their source. All around him, hydra heads lay stunned, their eyes glazed and open. Polk emerged from behind his backpack, blinking owlishly as he stared about himself in shock.

"It's dead! Well, that's fine, son. About time. You're still learning, so I'll forgive you." Polk struggled to his feet and

HYDRA HEADS WHIPPED ABOUT, FANGS GAPING, SPITTLE DRIPPING FROM THEM.

tottered after the Justicar. "So, how'd you do it in? Was it from a blow of your mighty blade? Was it righteous steel? Purity of heart? Son, what brought the monster down?"

"The girls lured it onto a stun symbol." Jus tossed a burning brand to Polk. "Here, I'll cut the heads off, and you burn the stumps." The big ranger hacked down into a hydra's neck. "Come on. We don't have much time."

Sitting atop Enid's shoulders, Escalla watched the men at work and gave a satisfied sigh. "Well, we got that all cleaned up! Trust a man to let a girl do the bulk of the job!"

Enid picked unhappily at her claws.

"Yesss ..." The sphinx bit her lip. "Though it was really sort of our fault that there was a monster in the first place."

"Jus doesn't mind! He loves that kind of stuff!" Escalla happily slapped Enid on the back. "See, if he was mad, he'd say something!"

Jus had heard her. In the courtyard, he shot a dire glance up toward Escalla.

"Stay there. Touch nothing!"

"Nothing!" Escalla froze with a grin, already eying the cellars below the castle. "Not a stone! Not a nail, not a blade of grass!" The faerie held up her hands "See?"

Jus growled and went back to work. Atop his helm, Cinders grinned his manic grin and happily breathed the fumes of roasting hydra neck.

Yum!

"You actually like this smell?"

Homey!

Enid turned to contemplate the remnants of her papyrus stun-seal with a sigh.

"Oh dear. It takes me an entire week to make one of those stun symbols."

"Worse still, it takes cash! A thousand-gold-piece gem!" Escalla grumbled. "Oh well—we're still ahead in the treasure department! There must be a ton of valuable stuff in that library ..."

Enid and Escalla heard a crash of falling rubble. The library where Escalla had found her scrolls lay buried beneath flaming wreckage. Here and there, flames showed where the edges of a fireball had engulfed scraps of floorboard, rafters, and parchment. Enid and Escalla looked glumly at the ruins. Trying to see a bright side to it all, Escalla cleared her throat.

"Eh, well, we have a castle! That has to be a plus!"

In erupting upward from the cellars underneath, the hydra had undermined the entire foundations. One of the castle walls fell slowly over even as they watched, splashing down into the overgrown moat and scattering a horde of panicked frogs.

Escalla tapped the points of her index fingers together.

"Look, there'll be something hoopy around the next corner.

Don't worry! We'll find some treasure, have some fun—even find the way to Hommlet! We just have to have faith!"

Looking over the castle, Enid gave a sigh. The big sphinx rummaged about in a backpack as the Justicar and Polk came limping over across the rubble.

Enid dragged dirty white cloth out into the light.

"Well, we can probably stay here for the night. You'll never get a proper dinner started otherwise." She presented Jus and Escalla with tattered lengths of cloth. "There are two old sheets here. That should do you both as aprons."

The Justicar could only stare in dazed amazement.

"What?"

"Well Polk showed the most pertinent knowledge. So I suppose the two of you will just have to cook him dinner with flowers behind your ears." The sphinx looked thoughtfully up at the rubble of the castle. "Are the primroses in bloom? I think amber would really set off the color of the Justicar's eyes."

"That or bright red. Ha!" Escalla heaved a sigh, then held up an old handkerchief that might possibly tear into a decent apron. "You got me! We'll do something from my recipe book. Hey, Jus? Come on, bright eyes. Let's do what the lady says. After all, she's the one with the freckles." The girl flitted gaily past. "Come on! If we get it done quick enough, we can play The Baron and the Scullery Maid. I'll even let you wear the maid outfit first!"

Too tired to argue, the Justicar tied Cinders firmly into place over his helmet and followed the faerie girl.

"Escalla, do we even have ingredients for any of the food in your recipe book?"

"We can substitute with fresh foods from the wild! We'll do beef ragout."

"Beef?"

"Beef, tree frog. Same difference. It'll be a blast!" Escalla slapped the big man on the shoulder and lead the way into the undergrowth. "Hey trust me! I'm a faerie!"