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QUEST™ BOOK

#2



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Talisman of Valdegarde

BY MADELEINE
SIMON



PICK A PATH TO ROMANCE AND ADVENTURE™



Crying tears of joy, you stand within the ruins of Valdegarde, reunited with your mother, who you believed died many years ago.

But your joy is short-lived when your companion Neil, the dashing young bard, lashes out. "Evil liar! Don't trust her, Gwynne. She is really Lytir, the summoner of evil, in disguise!"

You long so desperately to believe that this lovely woman is the mother you've been denied since childhood. But that would mean that Neil is a figment of Lytir's deception—Neil with the enchanting emerald eyes and the quick mind that knows so much.

Perhaps too much, you think, remembering how anxious he is to find your father the Archdruid and the talisman with the power to defeat Lytir.

You must decide whom to trust, but keep in mind that trusting the wrong one could mean death.

*If you believe this woman is your mother,
and Neil is really Lytir in disguise,
turn to page 44.*

*If you believe Neil is the gentle bard he seems to be,
and this woman is Lytir's instrument of deception,
turn to page 122.*

Whichever path you pick, you are sure to find romance and adventure as you search for the
TALISMAN OF VALDEGARDE

Have you read these
HEARTQUEST™ adventure-romance books?

#1 RING OF THE RUBY DRAGON

#2 TALISMAN OF VALDEGARDE

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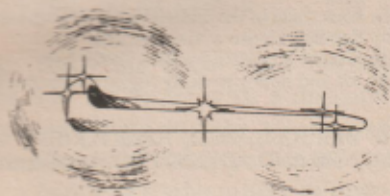
#4 ISLE OF ILLUSION

**HEART
QUEST™ BOOK**

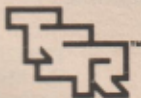
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BY MADELEINE SIMON



Cover art by Elmore
Interior art by Jim Holloway



TSR, Inc.
PRODUCTS OF YOUR IMAGINATION™

To Mary, Shelley, and Kelly

TALISMAN OF VALDEGARDE

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You are about to set off on a romantic adventure in which you will face many decisions. Some choices you will determine with your head—others with your heart. Each choice takes you on a different path to a separate ending. So be careful . . . you must choose wisely!

Do not read this book from beginning to end. Instead, as you are faced with a decision, follow the instructions and keep turning to the pages to which your choices lead you until you come to an end. You may meet a handsome adventurer or chance upon self discovery. Success or disaster—the choice that leads you there is yours!



ome on, Gwynne!" Thea calls insistently from the crest of the hill, her blue robe blowing in the summer breeze. "Let's go talk to the deer at the stream."

Your sister, three years younger than you, is anxious to use her new Druid skills, especially the art of speaking with forest animals. "She'll outgrow it, just as you did," your Aunt Beryl told you one day.

"You go on ahead, Thea," you reply lazily. "I'll be there in a few minutes." Her shimmering golden hair tosses around her shoulders as she runs down the hill toward the noisy little brook. You lie back in the soft grass, enjoying relaxing with the warm afternoon sun on your face.

By next spring, you will be fifteen and will know all the secret arts of a Druid initiate. Beryl has been teaching you special forest skills every day so that you will be ready for initiation at the Beltane Festival. You already know most of the plants and animals in the Erdragh Forest by name, and you can move through briar patches with no difficulty.

Your father's sister has also taught you how to use your magical torque necklace to make friends with any animal in the forest. Of course, powerful Druids like Beryl possess more complex skills—even the ability to change themselves into animals whenever they like—but those are secrets that you will learn later.

You hear the sound of Thea's bright voice as she chatters playfully with some squirrels by the stream. Because you and your sister are orphans, you feel very close to Beryl. She has been a mother to you since you were three and a half years old. You know very little about your real parents, except that your father was a

powerful Archdruid and that your mother had dark hair and blue eyes, like yours.

The warm grass feels wonderful under your feet as you rise and run after your sister. You see Thea standing in the sparkling brook with her arm around the neck of a spotted fawn. "Please don't be afraid of me," she is telling the baby deer. The red stones of her new torque necklace glow in the shadows of the oak trees.

"See, Gwynne?" she calls brightly as you approach. "I can talk to them almost as well as you can."

You smile, then call softly to the doe watching Thea stroke her newborn fawn. "Come to Gwynne, gentle mother, and let me dry your fur."

The doe bounds from the water and nuzzles your arm. She licks your face as you dry her fur with your light blue robe. For a long while, you and Thea play with the deer in the shady brookside grove.

The late afternoon shadows have grown longer when Thea begins to get bored practicing her new skill.

"Let's go to the ruins and get some flowers for Beryl," she begs. "She likes those red lilies that grow in the old garden by the well."

You start to protest because it is getting late, but instead you smile and follow Thea toward the ruins of Valdegarde, your father's deserted home. Soon you see the stone wall, with its broken gate, and the ivy-covered walls of the large cottage. Beryl has warned you never to go inside the old house because its roof has collapsed in several places, but you come here to day-dream about the father whom you scarcely remember.

While Thea runs through the tall weeds toward the

rear of Valdegarde, where the lilies grow, you walk slowly around the large cottage, imagining what it would be like if your father were still alive. Beryl has told you that Donel, the Archdruid of all of the Erdragh Forest, was a brave protector of all wild creatures. Forest folk from far and wide—elves, gnomes, halflings, humans, dwarves—came to Valdegarde to visit your father and your lovely mother, Mavas. In those days, the halls of Valdegarde were bright with laughter and song. Erdragh was a peaceful, natural wilderness and an ideal place for all its creatures.

Then, just before you were born, evil forces began to mar the beauty of Erdragh and to threaten its creatures. An evil horde of assassins—orcs, gnolls, trolls, and kobolds—began to attack Erdragh's peaceful citizens. Your father, the Archdruid, called the mightiest warriors of Erdragh to Valdegarde and led them against the evil horde. The battle raged for many years, until Valdegarde was destroyed and your father was killed. Donel's body was never found, but his brave death saved all of Erdragh. Your mother fled with you and Thea to the home of Donel's sister, Beryl, but died from wounds she received in the last days of Valdegarde. These ruins are all you have left of your parents.

Your hand strokes the rough stones of the wall as you think of happier days at Valdegarde. Suddenly, however, your peaceful reverie is interrupted.

"Gwynne! Help! Help me!" Thea's shrill cry comes from the rear of the ruins. Racing around the corner of the cottage, you see your sister being dragged toward the old moss-covered well by a horrible creature with a mottled green hide. A troll! Thea's golden hair and sky blue robe bounce against the monster's

giant body as she struggles to escape.

"Stop! Let her go!" you scream, running toward the ugly troll. The evil creature turns and stares at you stupidly with dull, beady eyes. Its long, pointed nose twitches in the air, trying to identify your scent. Its black, wiry hair coils high on the horrible head, and you can see the dark claws digging into Thea's robe.

You are so concerned for your sister's safety that you do not have time to be concerned for your own. You pound the monster's body with both fists, feeling the cold clammy skin with your knuckles. The troll lashes out with its free arm. It catches you in the stomach and propels you through the air. You hit the ground hard and lose consciousness momentarily.

You recover just in time to see the troll's wiry curls disappearing into the old well. Thea is nowhere in sight! Shaking the dizziness from your head, you rush to the well. Peering cautiously over the mossy rim, you spot a line of rusty iron rungs set into the stones, leading to a cavelike opening just above the dark water.

You know that the troll must have taken Thea into the hole in the side of the well. You must decide the best thing to do. *Should I follow the monster and try to rescue Thea, you ask silently, or should I run to Beryl's cottage for help?*

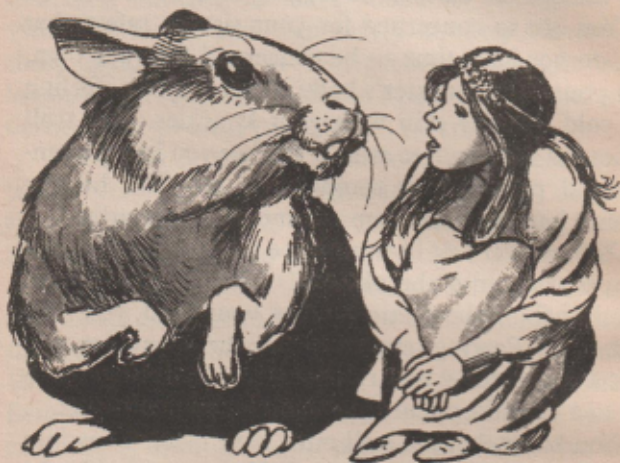
*If you decide to climb into the well
and follow the troll, turn to page 47.*

*If you think it would be better to run for help,
turn to page 124.*

"Is it really you, Aunt Beryl?" you ask haltingly.

"Of course it's me!" your aunt's voice replies.

"Lytir's creatures aren't very likely to question a mouse they see wandering the halls of Valdegarde, are they?"



You have heard that powerful Druids are able to change themselves into animals, but this is the first time you have ever encountered such magic.

"What are you doing here, Gwynne?" Beryl asks.

"I thought I told you to seek help from Kerm."

You quickly tell Beryl of your adventures, especially your encounter with the mysterious bard. Beryl sits on her haunches, twitching her whiskers in a rodent grin.

"So old Bors's son is back in Erdragh," she muses.

"I lost touch with Neil when he left the gnomes."

"He told me that he has just returned from some place called Fochlucan," you say.

"Fochlucan!" Beryl exclaims. "If Neil has been to Fochlucan, we may have a valuable ally against Lytir," she adds. "Only the bravest fighters and the most cunning of thieves may study at Fochlucan."

"But Neil speaks Druid," you reply, puzzled.

"Bards are trained in Druid lore and learn to cast Druid spells with magical music and poetry," Beryl explains. "As for Neil, he speaks Druid naturally because both his parents were Druids."

"But how can he be a Druid and a fighter at the same time? I thought that only elves could be both."

"Why, his father was a half-elf, dear," Beryl explains, "and a handsome one, at that. But his mother was human," she adds quickly, noting your surprised look. "I suppose that makes Neil a quarter-elf, and certainly more difficult to spot."

You remember the bard's piercing emerald eyes, their exotic almond shape, his graceful figure, the slightly pointed ears—all of the little things that made you suspicious about Neil. Beryl's explanation has suddenly removed many of your doubts.

"Hmmm," says Beryl, interrupting your beautiful daydream. "By that smile and faraway look, I can tell that young Neil has cast some of his magic upon you, too. Well, there'll be plenty of time to talk about Neil after we get your father and Thea out of this place."

"My father! Have you seen him?"

"I have not only seen him but also talked to him, Gwynne. Your father is chained to a wall in a cell near Lytir's chambers. He is weak, but he is still alive."

"How could such a loathsome creature gain control over my father—a powerful Archdruid?" you cry.

"Only by Donel's own design, Gwynne," Beryl answers soothingly. "Lytir used his evil powers to summon dark, unnatural forces into our beautiful wilderness. We fought them for years, but much of Erdragh was destroyed in the battles. Your courageous father—my dear brother—sacrificed himself to save the forest and its creatures. He placed himself under Lytir's control in return for the assassin's pledge to remain in these dark caverns without threatening Erdragh. Only Lytir's fear of the talisman forces the half-orc to honor that pledge."

"Does Father remember me?" you ask tearfully.

"Oh, yes, dear child," Beryl answers warmly. "The memory of you and Thea has kept him alive all these years. When I told him of your courage, I could see some of his old strength returning."

"Is Thea all right?"

"She has come to no harm. Lytir's bodyguard, a cat-faced flind named Agnar, watches her closely in a cell near Donel's."

"What can we do, Aunt Beryl?"

"We must find the Talisman of Valdegarde and use it to destroy Lytir," Beryl says urgently. "If the evil assassin finds it first, all Erdragh is doomed."

"But where is the talisman?"

"I asked Donel that very question just this morning, Gwynne. 'You must go to my library,' he managed to say, just before Lytir saw me perched on your father's shoulder and chased me away."

"Where is the library," you ask anxiously.

"Down this corridor, at the top of some stone

steps," says Beryl. "You must hurry, before the effects of the wand wear off. If you regain your normal size again while you are in this room, you will be trapped. Now go, before you become trapped in this room!"

You hug Beryl's soft, furry neck. "Be careful," you whisper in her large, pink ear, "and tell my father that I'll find the talisman." Jumping over Beryl's long, thin tail, you squeeze out through the crack and run down the corridor to the stone steps.

As you stand there wondering how you will climb the clifflike stairs, your five-inch body suddenly begins to expand in all directions at once. When your dizziness clears, you see that the effects of the wand have worn off, and you're full size again. With a quick glance around, you dart up the stone steps to search for the Talisman of Valdegarde.

At the top of the stairs, you see a short corridor that seems to lead nowhere. You find yourself standing before a heavy wooden panel with an iron ring at its center. Just then, you see a dark crack appearing in the stone wall at the end of the short passage and hear a confused jumble of grunts and snarls.

You grasp the iron ring and pull hard. To your surprise, the panel opens easily, revealing a set of bookshelves on its other side. With a hurried glance at the widening crack at the end of the corridor, you step into the room and close the panel.

You have barely passed through the secret doorway when a powerful arm encircles your waist and a strong hand clamps tightly over your mouth, stifling your startled scream.

Please turn to page 127.

Neil's green eyes are gentle, moist with concern. The news that your father might still be alive has filled you with such hope that you feel very close to this handsome stranger. Something about his manner draws you to him. You press your face against his soft leather tunic and feel his muscular arms wrap around your trembling shoulders.

"Relax, Gwynne," Neil whispers. "No one will harm you. I won't let anything happen to you."

Looking up, you see Neil's warm, confident smile. You have never been held by a man before, and the comfortable strength of his arms gives you a strange, pleasant sensation. You want to trust him completely.

"Neil, I want to tell you something," you begin. Once the words start to flow, you feel relieved to share your troubled thoughts with someone. You give the bard all the details, omitting nothing. When you have finished, Neil hugs you tightly and strokes your hair. You caress his gentle hand as it brushes your cheek.

"Everything will turn out fine, Gwynne. I'm sure that Lytir is behind all of this. Maybe he wants to try to use Thea and Beryl to force your father to give him the talisman. I think it proves that Donel is still alive," the bard whispers in your ear.

You gaze into Neil's green eyes. He is looking at you with a serious expression—one that you have never seen before. His manly features are so beautiful, so close to you, that you almost cry with joy to hear him speak of your father in this way. "If only you're right, Neil! If only it's true!" you exclaim.

The bard's serious look softens, and he grins broadly. "Come, now! Believe me! Your father's alive, and that's all there is to it. We just have to find him,"

Neil says lightly. He pushes you away from his chest playfully. For a brief moment, you feel a sudden loss of his comforting strength, but his enchanting smile reassures you.

"We're going to Valdegarde," he says decisively. "But first I want to have a look at those presents from your father. We may need a little magic on our side."

"You can see the necklace for yourself," you tell him. "This is it around my neck."

"I don't know why you should be lying," he says, "but those little acorns don't look like golden balls to me!" You glance down in confusion and see his slim fingers holding one of the perfect golden globes.

"I don't understand," you say, confused. "The acorns turned to gold the moment I put the necklace on, and they still appear that way to me. Here, see for yourself." You slip the necklace over your head and hand it to the bard. "Now they're acorns again!" you cry.

Neil examines the crudely carved beads and then drapes the chain around his own neck. You see no difference, but the bard's eyes widen with surprise. Without a word, he carefully removes the necklace and places it over your head.

"I apologize," he says sheepishly. His gentle hands pull your hair through the gold chain. You feel a tingle when his fingers brush your neck; you look up to see a strange expression on his face. Neil reddens and looks away. "Now, where's that wand?" he asks.

"Here," you say, handing it to him. "There's something written on it. It's in a language I can't read."

"Let me try," says Neil. He turns the wand around very slowly. "Hey! This is something I do know

about!" he exclaims. "I've read about these things at Fochlucan, but I've never seen one before. It's a Wand of Wonder!"

"What does it do? How do you use it?" you ask.

"You never really know what it might do," Neil replies. "It might shoot lightning bolts or fireballs wherever it's aimed, or it might turn back on the user. You just never know until you use it. That's what makes it so dangerous," he adds.

"In other words, you don't know what it does."

"Gwynne, I'm not joking! Once you say the command word, this wand will start doing something completely unpredictable. You must never treat it lightly, and you should use it only as a last resort." Neil studies your face, then shakes his head. "On second thought, perhaps it would be better if I kept it."

"Oh, no, you don't! That wand was my father's, and I'll use it to fight Lytir and find the talisman," you declare. "And stop treating me as if I were some kind of silly child! I'm nearly fifteen, and I know some things about magic, too!"

"Like what?" asks Neil, with honest curiosity.

"You'll see when the time comes," you reply coolly.

"Well, now, maybe I've underestimated the daughter of an Archdruid," Neil says with a smile.

"Let's not waste any more time, Neil," you demand with a new sense of self-confidence. "We have to go to Valdegarde and find Thea and Beryl—and my father!"

"And Lytir," Neil reminds you, with his hand on the glowing hilt of Orcslicer. "By the way," he adds with a grin, "the word is '*Lumin*.' Whenever you want the wand to do its stuff, just point it at something or someone and say, '*Lumin!*' "

You file that information in your mind for future reference, tuck the wand in your belt, and set out with Neil down the westward path to Valdegarde.

The ruins seem more threatening today, and the surrounding woods are unnaturally quiet. Neil motions for you to stop outside the stone fence and pulls your head close to his to whisper in your ear.

"It might be better if we go around through the old garden door on the side. It used to open into the kitchen, and I doubt if that entrance will be watched."

"I think we should go down the well, where the troll took Thea," you protest.

Neil shakes his head. "I'll bet anything you'd just run into the same monster," he warns.

"I wish we knew what happened to Beryl," you respond. "That would help us know what to do."

"Oh, that's easy. She went up to the front door."

"How do you know that?" you ask with a trace of suspicion in your voice.

"I was a ranger guide for the Mistletoe gnomes, and I can see her tracks as plain as day," he explains. "I'll leave it up to you, Gwynne," the bard says. "Which entrance shall we try, the front or the side?"

*If you wish to use the front entrance,
where Neil says Beryl has gone, turn to page 54.*

*If you decide to follow Neil's advice
and go in by the side door, turn to page 22.*

*If you want to ignore Neil's warning
and sneak down the well as soon as you can,
turn to page 141.*

The horrible spider blocking the corridor behind you waves its two sharp-clawed front legs toward you. In the dying torchlight, you see its black furry skin and its pincers dripping with poison. At any moment it will spring unless you do something quickly.

You grab the Wand of Wonder and point it steadily at the giant monster. "*Lumin!*" you command.

The ivory wand begins to glow and vibrate. Suddenly a stream of bright-colored, sparkling gems spews from the jeweled tip of the wand. The spider is driven backward as it attempts to dodge the volley of magical gems. The jewels seem to be hurting the monster, but it recovers and springs forward in anger.

You hear a fluttering sound behind you just before there is a sharp sting on your back. You feel the weight of a heavy body descend upon you from above. In the dying light of Kerm's fallen torch, you are conscious of a multitude of feathery black legs covering your face, but with a start, you realize that you can no longer feel them. . . .

THE END

You realize that your kitchen knife cannot stop such a monster. Pulling the wand from your belt, you point its ivory shaft toward the menacing troll.

"Lumin!" you cry.

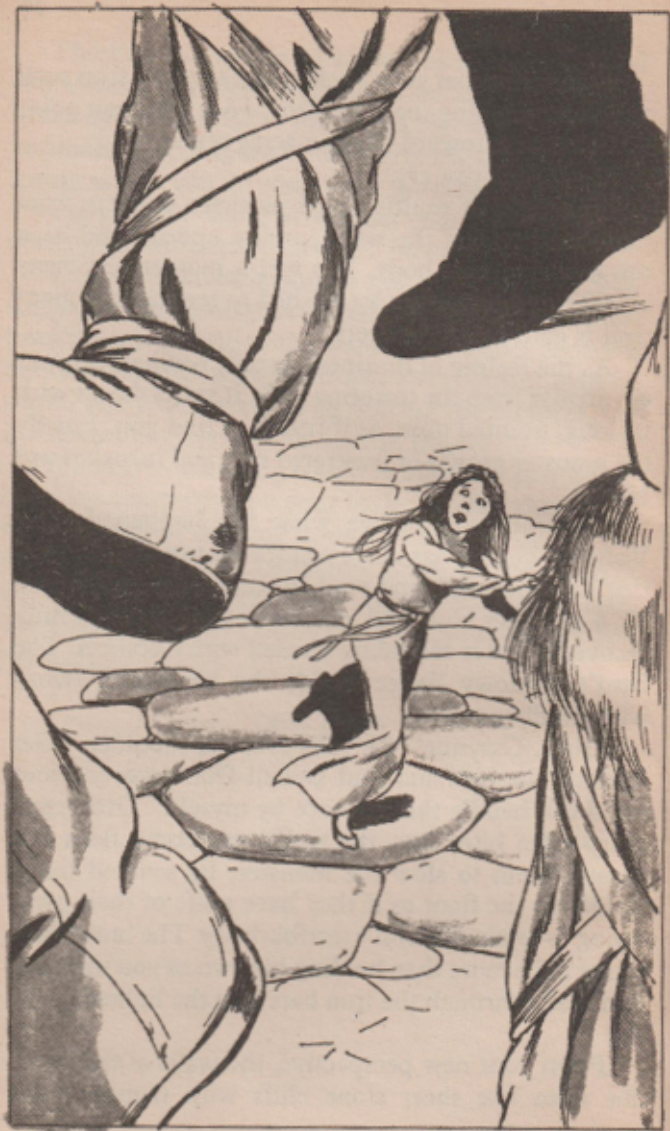
A shower of multicolored particles streams from the jeweled tip of the wand, arcing upward and back toward your own body. You feel a momentary dizzy sensation, and you are astonished to see that the giant troll is getting even larger!

As the feeling of dizziness passes, you hear a grunt of surprise from the towering troll. It sniffs the air with its long, pointed nose, as if trying to find you. Finally the monster growls in frustrated rage and turns toward Neil.

Suddenly you realize what has happened. The Wand of Wonder has made you shrink to a size so small that the troll can't find you! In the semidarkness, you see a greenish blur, and you know that Neil has fully recovered and is defending himself with Orcslicer. The bard's shadowy figure wields the enchanted sword with deadly accuracy.

"Run, Gwynne!" he yells over his shoulder. "Get through the bars and find Donel! Don't worry about me. I can handle this creature by myself!" Orcslicer's sharp edge bites into the troll's gruesome flesh but doesn't seem to slow the monster. Its severed limbs writhe on the floor as if they have a life of their own, trying to rejoin the troll's terrible body. The brave bard seems to be more than holding his own as you turn and dart easily through the iron bars into the lighted corridor.

From your new perspective, the walls of the corridor seem like sheer stone cliffs with flaming trees



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growing from their sides. Rounding a sharp turn, you hear a thundering sound coming toward you. Pressing against the cavern wall, you watch as several pairs of giant boots crash past you. You can barely see the dark gray snouts of the hyenalike gnolls as they hurry by your hiding place.

When you are sure the gnolls are gone, you continue to creep cautiously along the wall. Just ahead of you, the surface of the stone wall is broken by the dark wood of a door. Inching closer, you see that the door is cracked in several places, as if someone or something had tried to chop through it with an ax. A large splinter is missing from its corner, leaving a dark, jagged hole next to the stone floor.

While you are examining the door, you hear a growling voice and the thumping of many feet down the corridor. The gnolls are returning, and you must hide quickly. You squeeze through the hole into the darkness beyond the door.

Peering through the jagged hole, you see heavy boots as they thunder past your hiding place. You wait until the snarling voices are only echoes in the empty corridor before you ponder your choices.

If you decide to explore the dark room where you are hiding, turn to page 143.

If you think you should follow the gnolls, turn to page 45.

If you choose to explore the corridor in the opposite direction, turn to page 131.

Neil's sureness persuades you to try the kitchen door at the side of the cottage. You follow him quickly through the gate, noticing that the bard's movements are so graceful that he leaves practically no trail in the tall grass. Along the north side of your father's house, you see a large garden, overgrown with weeds, briars, and even a few young oak trees.

You edge closer to Neil as he moves lithely to a closed door at the side of the house. He motions for you to be quiet and spends several minutes examining the door before trying the rusted handle.

"No traps," he murmurs softly, "but it's either locked or barred from the inside—maybe both."

The bard squats and takes a little cloth parcel from a pocket in his leather tunic. He first removes a small bottle with a tiny brush in the top. He dabs a clear, shiny fluid inside the large keyhole and on the hinges. "Oil," he mutters in explanation.

Next Neil selects a thin, stiff wire with a bent end to pick the old lock. A solid click brings a grin to his face, and he grasps the handle firmly. The thick door pushes open with only a slight scraping sound.

You follow Neil into the large kitchen, lit dimly by sunlight streaming through partly boarded windows. A large fireplace with old iron cooking utensils fills most of the wall to your right. A closed door stands next to it. The wall directly in front of you is lined with empty shelves, and the floor is littered with broken crockery and discarded kitchen implements.

Dust and cobwebs cover everything in the room. Neil is nearly invisible as he moves from shadow to shadow, examining each each piece of rubble in the room. He pauses to listen at the door by the fireplace.

The silent bard motions for you to join him by the door, and you move quietly to his side.

"I hear something moving beyond this door," he whispers. "Be ready to run if I give the word." You nod, and Neil begins to examine the large fireplace. His graceful body disappears into the shadows of the chimney. The bard is in the fireplace for a long time, and you begin to feel anxious. Just as you decide to start looking for him, a grinning Neil pops out from behind the stones.

"Come and see what I've found!" he whispers, with a boyish sparkle in his green eyes. You step silently to the hearth and peer into the shadows. The bard is squatting in the left corner of the massive fireplace. While you watch, he pushes on the stones, which swing silently aside, revealing some kind of lighted space. The bard beckons for you to follow, then steps through the secret opening.

You enter a short, well-lighted corridor, which immediately turns sharply to the left. Neil closes the secret entry and moves soundlessly to the end of the corridor, where he stands next to a large wooden panel with a heavy iron ring in its center. You move to his side and look down a flight of stone steps.

"I know where we are," says Neil. "I liked to play in this secret passage when I was a boy. These steps lead to the caverns below Valdegarde, including the Cave of Spiders, which is a shortcut to Kerm's gnome village in the Misthlip Hills. The panel behind us is a secret entrance to your father's library."

You do not have time to consider what Neil has said. You hear the sound of many feet on the stone steps.

"Into the library! Quick!" you say to Neil, who is already pulling on the iron ring. The thick oak panel opens easily, revealing several rows of bookshelves on its other side. Neil dashes into the library, pulling you behind him, and closes the secret panel. From this side, it blends invisibly into a full wall of bookshelves.

Neil's strong arms encircle your shoulders and pull you snugly to his leather-clad chest. His closeness erases your fear while heavy footsteps in the corridor run past the door. They have faded in the distance when Neil's tense muscles relax, and he stares at you, grinning with relief. He taps your chin lightly with his finger, tilting your head upward toward his.

You realize suddenly that Neil wants to kiss you. The thrill of danger mixes with the excitement of having those wonderful lips so close to yours. Neil's face draws near, and you can feel the warmth of his tanned skin and soft breath. Just then, a soft thud from the corridor interrupts the magic of your first kiss. Neil stiffens and cautions you to remain silent. No other sound reaches your ears.

Neil reaches out and gently strokes your cheek. "There'll be a better time, Gwynne—without the fears," he whispers softly. As he turns to search your father's library for the talisman, you hope with all your heart that he is right.

Please turn to page 88.

Looking around the dining hall into the friendly faces of the Misthlip gnomes, you decide to stay among them until Kerm returns from Valdegarde. Only then will you be able to plan a way to enter the old ruins and seek the talisman. You know that Kerm will help you find your father, Beryl, and Thea. The brave gnome will know how to drive the evil assassin and his henchmen from Valdegarde and from the Erdragh Forest forever.

"Lord Methrad," you say, "I wish to remain with your people until the brave Kerm returns from his quest. I would then hope to find the talisman and restore my father as master of Valdegarde and Archdruid of Erdragh."

The dining hall explodes with cheers as the joyful gnomes salute your brave decision. Methrad hugs you warmly and orders that a special burrow with higher ceilings be dug for you immediately.

The long days pass slowly, and each day there is still no word of Kerm. Other warriors follow their champion's path into the caverns, only to disappear without a trace. Posted guards on the outskirts of the Misthlip Hills begin to report growing numbers of evil monsters converging upon Valdegarde. Methrad calls his senior warriors together for a war conference, and they decide to invade the ruins before Lytir's horde outnumber them.

Thrigga comes to your quarters after the conference to tell you of the decision. "We still believe that the Archdruid lives, along with Beryl, Thea, Kerm, and Neil," says the ancient priest. "We must hope that Lytir will not kill them as soon as our warriors approach Valdegarde. It is a slim hope, but it is our

only one. The battle will be costly for both sides, but we will win in the end. The forces of good will balance those of darkness, and the natural peace and beauty of Erdragh will be restored."

Thrigga's words remind you of the choice you made many days ago in the dining hall. Perhaps if you had chosen differently, this grim battle would not have been necessary. Perhaps Beryl, Thea, and your father would be with you today. Things might have been very different, if only you had chosen to help Kerm and the strange bard with the enchanting lute and emerald eyes in their search for the Talisman of Valdegarde.

THE END

"Shut the doors, Gwynne!" Neil whispers urgently. You close the large closet doors, and a soft darkness envelops you. The thrill of Neil's nearness turns to alarm when you hear a faint hum and experience a sense of smooth movement. You seem to be descending slowly.

A gentle bump ends your descent. Total silence surrounds you, except for the sound of Neil's breath in your ear. You clutch each other tightly, not daring even to whisper in the black stillness. You can feel your heart beating wildly, blending with Neil's in the cramped compartment.

The dangers of the library are forgotten in the warmth of Neil's embrace. You seem suspended in a time and place where only his strong arms are real. If only this precious moment could last forever, so that these strange new feelings might never end!

The bard's body stirs against yours as he reaches for the door. Yet more blackness greets you as Neil wriggles past and steps out of the closet, leaving you with a sudden feeling of loneliness and fear.

A flash of light pierces the darkness once, then twice. A bright patch of yellow flame illuminates Neil's smiling face. He is holding a small brass lamp that flickers and glows against his golden hair. You step out of the mysterious cabinet into a small chamber, perhaps half the size of the library above.

"Where are we? And how did we get here?" you whisper.

In the dim lamplight, Neil studies the closet before responding. "Unless I'm badly mistaken, the wardrobe in the library looks exactly as it did before we entered it. The mechanism works when the doors are closed

and there's a weight on the floor of the closet. By now, our friends up there must think that we are sorcerers and that we vanished magically into thin air."

"Well, that's how we got here," you say. "Now, just where are we?"

Neil turns the flame on the lamp higher, and its yellow light spreads over the small room. A massive desk, with drawers on both sides, takes one entire wall opposite the wardrobe. A heavy wooden chair with wide arms sits at an angle in front of the desk. The walls are lined with shelves of books, scrolls, and objects of Druid lore. The only items on top of the desk are a tiny golden container, shaped like a casket, and a delicately sculptured head of a woman. A thin layer of dust covers everything in the room except, oddly, the heavy chair.

"Look at that initial on the center desk drawer, Gwynne," Neil whispers. You see a graceful letter *D* above a design of crossed oak branches tied with mistletoe. "This is Donel's secret study, Gwynne—your father's private workroom. And it looks as if Lytir hasn't found it yet. If the talisman is really at Valdegarde, this is where we'll find it!"

Neil's words stun you. The thought of being so near to your father after almost ten years of believing him dead is overwhelming. You trace a line with your fingertip in the dust on the desk and run your hand over the Archdruid's initial. The glistening wood of your father's chair is the only surface in the room that seems to have been used recently.

"Neil, look at the chair!" you exclaim. "Not a speck of dust, and it's highly polished! Do you think that my father has been here recently? Has he sat in



this chair?" Without waiting for the bard's answer, you turn and sit in the thronelike chair.

"Don't, Gwynne!" Neil cries. But it is too late for you to heed his warning. Everywhere your body has touched the chair you are stuck fast, as if by some powerful glue. You twist and turn, trying to break free, but your frantic movements only make things worse.

Suddenly the hard wood seems to lose its firmness, and you feel yourself sinking into a cold, fleshy mass. Dark gray tentacles seem to grow right out of the chair, encircling your arms, your legs, your neck. The tentacles begin to tighten, so that you cannot breathe. A slithering, high-pitched voice seems to be all around you in the semidarkness, whining, "Kill! Must kill!"

Please turn to page 106.

Thrigga's description of the dangers you may encounter at Valdegarde sounds too threatening. You want desperately to find Beryl and Thea and your father. You would like to battle the evil assassin with the powerful talisman and restore Valdegarde to the people of Erdragh. And more than anything else, you want to have an opportunity to know again your father's love, after so many years of separation when you thought he was dead.

The power of Lytir, however, seems to be too great for you to handle alone, and you think that you might just be in the way if you joined Kerm in the Cave of Spiders. It seems too late to find the strange young bard and ask him to help.

"My lord Methrad," you say, "I have decided to return to my cottage and wait for Neil and Kerm to finish their quests. I could do little to help them at Valdegarde, and I might even make their mission more difficult."

The gnome chieftain nods his head. "What you say is probably true; daughter of Donel. I shall order Bakin to escort you to your aunt's cottage and to see that you are protected until the Archdruid is released."

Thrigga squints at you silently for a moment, then touches your hand with his gnarled fingers. "Perhaps your decision is the right one," he says. "Kerm and Neil are brave and experienced fighters, and they will do their best to find the talisman and stop Lytir. We will be ready to help them battle the assassin's horde and restore your father as master of Valdegarde."

You thank Methrad and Thrigga for their help and return to Beryl's cottage with Bakin and Seela. The long days turn into weeks, then months,

without word from the gnomes or from the handsome bard. Each day, you see increasing numbers of birds, deer, rabbits, and squirrels fleeing from the Misthlip Hills. They tell you frightening tales of evil monsters returning to Valdegarde.

In your troubled dreams, alone in Beryl's cottage, you see your father, Beryl, Thea, and Kerm being attacked by vicious trolls, gnolls, and spiders. The nightmares always end outside the cottage with a scene of a dark, shadowy figure with a dagger. Beautiful music seems to be preventing the assassin's attack. In your dreams, the handsome bard plays the enchanted lute tirelessly. Neil's emerald eyes and fair elven face grow more distant each night, and gradually his song becomes weaker.

In the lonely mornings, you reflect on your decision to return home. If you had another opportunity to face the evils of Valdegarde, you feel sure that you would choose to seek the talisman and find your father. Only a faint hope still lingers that you will be able to help Neil and Kerm in their quest for the Talisman of Valdegarde.

THE END

Your confused thoughts race through your mind and overwhelm you. You want to kiss the handsome bard, but all of the uncertainties you are feeling crowd into your excited mind. With trembling hands, you hold Neil's smooth face and gaze deeply into his emerald eyes.

"Please try to understand, Neil," you whisper. "I want to let myself believe in you and trust you. But right now, I'm just too worried and confused." His perfect lips smile softly. His hand slips to your shoulder and squeezes it gently.

"Of course I understand, Gwynne," he answers softly. "You don't have to say another word. We'll have all the time in the world after we find your father and deal with Lytir. But I warn you," he adds with a broad grin, "when this is over, get ready to run as fast as you can. There's no way I'm going to let you get away."

Before you can respond, a huge black shadow looms over the bard's honey-colored hair.

"Look out!" you yell. Neil ducks, just avoiding the outstretched claws of the giant troll that captured Thea. The bard dodges the monster's clutching hands and pushes you out of the way against the bars leading to the lighted corridor. Neil moves between you and the troll, with Orcslicer gleaming and humming in the darkness. The monster's massive jaws gape in rage as its beady eyes stare dumbly at Neil's brave figure.

Orcslicer's glowing blade descends in a wide arc, severing one of the troll's long arms at the elbow. The troll grunts in surprise and clubs Neil with the back of its other hand. The bard's slender body hurtles through the air and smashes against the stone wall of the cavern. The enchanted sword falls from Neil's

limp hand and clatters to the stone floor, losing its magical glow. The monster lumbers toward the groggy bard.

You must do something to save Neil from the loathsome troll. The only weapons you have are the knife and the mysterious Wand of Wonder, which the bard said was to be used only as a last resort. But you've got to decide quickly!

*If you decide to attack the troll with the knife,
turn to page 75.*

*If you decide to risk using the Wand of Wonder,
turn to page 19.*

"Let's try the window," you yell, just as two sharp ax blades crash through the door. You grab the largest book you can find and fling it against the window. The intricate designs of Druid symbols shatter into colored fragments. Through the jagged hole, you see something frightening—a row of heavy iron bars!

The door gives way, and two seven-foot creatures with hyenalike snouts and ugly yellow hair rush into the library with axes raised. At the same time, the secret panel crashes open, and three more of the leather-armored gnolls charge into the room. They are armed with iron-spiked morning stars and swords.

Brandishing Orcslicer, Neil stops the closest gnoll with a vicious slash. Before he is able to strike again, however, the bard disappears under a writhing mass of dirty black fur capes and raised weapons. His silver torque rolls off to one side, and his magic lute splinters on the stone floor.

You turn away from the vile brutes and leap toward the window. You feel powerful arms pin you helplessly against hard leather armor. A mottled yellow muzzle presses against your cheek, and the stench of sweaty gnoll fur fills your nostrils.

The horrible creature begins to choke you. You try to scream, but you can't make a sound. Your last fading thoughts are of the father whom you have never known and the beautiful stranger who tried so bravely to help you find the Talisman of Valdegarde. The memory of his wonderful eyes and strong arms is growing dimmer, and you hope that somehow you will feel the warmth of his touch again, before . . .

THE END

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Thrigga's words ring in your ears as the gnomes await your decision. If the legend is true, it means that only you might use the talisman against the evil half-orc. The dangers must be faced if Lytir is to be stopped. You must go to the Cave of Spiders and, with Kerm, confront the assassin.

"Lord Methrad," you announce boldly, "I must choose to go to Valdegarde immediately to seek the talisman. Every second we delay will give Lytir more time to strengthen his forces against the people of Erdragh."

Loud cheers reverberate throughout the large hall. The ancient cleric's faded eyes brighten with tears of joy. "You are truly the Archdruid's child!" he exclaims, his voice cracking. Methrad embraces you warmly, pulling you against his plated armor, then draws his short sword and hands it to you.

"This noble blade will serve you better than the kitchen knife at your belt," he offers.

"No, my lord. I can't accept your sword. I've never learned to use such a weapon and could not handle it properly. I shall rely upon the magic of Garl Glittergold in the necklace from my father." You do not go on to explain about your father's other gift, the Wand of Wonder, because you still fail to understand its power.

Methrad orders Bakin to escort you to the Cave of Spiders and help locate Kerm's trail. Within minutes, you are following the gnome guard and Seela, the weasel, along a faint path. The trail winds upward into the hills, then leads gradually downhill to a shallow brook. Bakin studies the ground carefully and points across the stream toward a steep cliff.

"Kerm has passed this way, Mistress Gwynne. His tracks lead to the caverns." Bakin and Seela splash across the sparkling brook, with you just behind. The icy water feels wonderful on your bare legs. On the opposite side, the gnome guard leads you through a maze of rock passages toward the side of a cliff.

A sudden gruff voice from behind you startles you. "Good Garl! It's Beryl's little Druid!"

You gasp in shock and whirl around, your hand on the butcher knife. A squatty gnome with a long, yellow beard stands on a large boulder you have just passed. He brandishes a shining battle-ax and wears a forest green cloak over a full-length suit of heavy chain mail.

"Kerm!" you cry.

"Don't you folks ever look around 'fore you go off down a trail?" Kerm scolds. "If I'd been a bandit, you both'd be buzzard bait by now!"

Bakin's face flushes with embarrassment as he tells Seela to relax. Kerm scampers down to the trail and hugs you roughly. "Now, just what do you think you're doin' in these wild 'n' woolly rocks, Gwynnie? Don't you know better than to be runnin' around the countryside when trolls are on the loose?"

In a flurry of words, you tell Kerm all that has happened, including your conversations with Neil and Thrigga. Your mention of the handsome bard makes the salty gnome warrior snort with amusement.

"You know, Gwynnie, the blood of Bors the Bold runs in both our veins. Ol' Neil and me mingled our red stuff in a sacred pact when you was only a baby crawlin' on your mama's knees. Why, that boy is one of the bravest fighters I ever knew! His daddy taught him how to use any kind of weapon made by elves and

gnomes alike. I'd rather have Neil back to back with me in a fight than anybody else."

"But he doesn't look like a fighter, Kerm."

"By Glittergold, little Druid! You need to stop tryin' to figure a man by his clothes—especially if you aim to take on a slippery rascal like Lytir! Ol' Hogface can blend right into the wall and let his shadow stab you in the back if he wants to. As for Neil, he hung up his fancy plate mail and shield when he set out to be a thief."

"But why would a brave fighter choose to become a thief?" you ask the rough little gnome champion.

"Well . . . let's just say he wanted to fight fire with fire, as they say. He figured Lytir'd be ready for anybody except another thief. I guess it was around then, too, that he decided to go off to that Druid school at Fochlucan. Both his half-elf daddy and his human mama wore those fancy necklaces, you know."

"Druid torques? Do you mean they were both Druids?"

"You got it, Gwynnie! So now that boy mixes a fighter's skills with a thief's cunning, and he tops it off with Druid magic. Lytir'd better watch out, 'cause Neil Borsson won't quit till one of 'em is dead. That ugly half-orc killed both of Neil's parents, you know."

The warrior's explanation helps you to understand the bard's bitterness. Neil's voice still lingers in your mind, and you can still hear his hypnotic music.

"Hey!" Kerm says sharply. "Snap out of it! We need to get started if you still want to find that talisman before Lytir does. You can daydream later on," he chides gently. "Now, that's where we need to go." He points to a dark crack in the cliff. "Get that big broad-

sword out, and let's get on with it," he commands.

Kerm orders Bakin to guard the entrance to the Cave of Spiders while you and he try to penetrate Lytir's defenses. He then leads you to the narrow opening and disappears through it. You pull out the sharp knife and squeeze into the cave right behind him.

The narrow entrance widens into a corridor after a few steps. Gradually daylight in the twisting corridor fades; now you are in total darkness.

"I can't see a thing," you whisper.

"Of course you can't," Kerm responds gruffly. "You're not a gnome or an elf, so you can't see in the dark. Stay where you are, and I'll have a look around."

You remain perfectly still while Kerm's feet scrape and shuffle against the rocks. A sudden spark flashes in the darkness, then flames into torchlight. You see Kerm standing in the center of a large cavern chamber.

Stalactites of all sizes hang from the ceiling, with drops of water one by one splashing from them into smooth, dark pools on the floor. Occasionally stalagmite fingers reach to meet their hanging cousins. Kerm hands you the torch so that both his hands are free to wield the heavy battle-ax. Torchlight, shining on wet rocks, picks out glittering bits of green and red gemstones twinkling in the soft yellow glare, transforming the chamber into an enchanted grotto.

You make your way carefully, dodging stalagmites on the floor. Suddenly a strange hissing sound from above startles you. Over your head, a small, sharp stalactite breaks loose and plummets straight at you.

A powerful blow knocks you to the floor, and as you rise tentatively to your feet again, you see that it was Kerm who pushed you.



"Come here with that light," Kerm calls. "I want to show you something." You pick up the torch from the floor and go to the gnome. In the torchlight, you see that the "stalactite" was actually some kind of living creature. Its shell has been crushed in the fall.

"Meet your first piercer," says Kerm. "A friendly little relative of the snail, who masquerades as a stalactite. They cling to the ceilings of caves and drop on any living creature that passes below them."

Kerm's lesson makes you more alert as you move on. "The floor is sloping upward," says the gnome, "and I think I hear a spider!" You shiver as you strain to listen. Somewhere in the darkness ahead, you hear a feathery, scuttling sound. The chamber narrows into a corridor with many twists and turns.

"Wait!" whispers Kerm, stopping abruptly with his ax raised. "See that web?" In the torchlight, you

see something pale in the middle of the corridor. "Don't touch it," warns the gnome, "or you'll be stuck fast. Then you'll be spider food in an instant."

As you approach the web, you are dismayed to see that the corridor is filled with layer after layer of the sticky fibers. "How are we going to get through all that to Valdegarde?" you ask desperately.

"Only one way," says Kerm. "We'll have to burn our way through it. Give me that torch."

The brave gnome raises the torch to the first layer of webs. A bright flash almost blinds you as the web explodes in fire. You see a giant black form leap from the shadows to the next web, and then you see other shadowy figures in the distance.

Kerm steps carefully through the smoking remnants of the web, holding the torch before him. Suddenly, behind you, a gigantic black spider with burning red eyes drops to the cavern floor. Up ahead, you see Kerm jerk around and get caught in one of the webs. The torch crashes to the floor beside him, burning feebly. In the semidarkness, you now see that you are surrounded by hundreds of tiny red eyes.

With Kerm caught in the web, it is up to you to take action.

*If you want to fight the spiders
with your magic necklace, turn to page 72.*

*If you decide to try speaking to the spiders,
turn to page 89.*

*If you wish to use the Wand of Wonder,
turn to page 18.*

The sound of weeping startles you as the door begins to open. You recognize it as coming from your sister, Thea! The sinister figure enters the torchlit room, leaving the door open behind him. In an instant, you cross the corridor and dart through the door at the soft, leather heels of the cloaked man.

Thea is huddled in shadows against some iron bars at the opposite end of the room. She sits on a thick, dirty, bearskin rug. The torchlight flickers on her shining torque necklace and on the cruel iron shackles on her ankles. Your sister's face is hidden by her tangled golden hair. You hear her sob softly in the darkness.

"Agnar! Wake up!" shouts the thin figure. A mass of dirty yellow fur and sweat-darkened leather armor stirs among the blankets of a cot just inside the door. "On your feet, you lazy flind! Your gnoll dogs are acting up again."

You hide in the shadows under a row of shelves, watching the guard stretch and yawn with a low, rumbling roar. The flind is a fierce catlike creature, with the head and claws of a lion on a giant gnoll's body. Its yellow eyes wrinkle and close as its mouth opens wide. Vicious ivory fangs gleam in the light.

"What is it now, Master?" growls the lion-man.

"Those dim-witted, hyena-faced henchmen of yours have let that sneaky elven bard and the Archdruid's older daughter into Valdegarde!" replies Lytir. "I'm holding you responsible for this, Agnar. Flinds should be able to handle a few gnolls, but you can't seem to stay awake long enough to do your duty!"

"But, Master," pleads the flind, "you told me to keep a close watch on the girl because her aunt is still free."

"Quiet, fool! Or do you want to feel my wrath?"

The flind's ferocious head slumps to its armored chest. "No, Master. I am your devoted servant and will do whatever is necessary to protect you," it mutters sullenly.

"Then prove it! Go and find those meddling upstarts before they stumble upon the Archdruid's talisman. I'm sure I don't need to tell you what that would mean. As long as that cursed stone remains hidden, Donel is too weak to stop us. We've already failed to capture the Archdruid's sister, and she's too powerful to be running loose in Valdegarde," Lytir adds with a sneer.

"What about the prisoners, Master?" Agnar asks, gesturing toward Thea.

"Leave her," answers the assassin, "and lock the door behind you. I'll be in my quarters across the corridor. No one will dare approach the Archdruid's cell." The evil half-orc turns abruptly, stalks out the door, and enters the room across the hall. The flind mumbles a gruff complaint as he begins to gather his weapons. His long cat's whiskers twitch in the flickering light.

Your thoughts are so jumbled by what you have seen and heard that you have forgotten about Thea. You notice that she has stopped crying and is watching the lion-man's every movement. She sits on the bear-skin rug with her back pressed against the iron bars, her eyes wide with fright as she watches the flind buckle a large sword around its armored waist. The lion-man's massive paw grabs a strange device from a table by the cot. A short length of chain connecting two iron bars, it appears to be a weapon of some kind. There is a low moan from the cell in front of which

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Thea huddles, and she gasps suddenly.

"Father!" she screams, turning to stare into the darkness beyond the iron bars.

"Ha!" exclaims the flind. "The powerful Archdruid calls for his baby daughter to help him. Rattle your chains, little Druid! Make your father feel better."

"If my father were free, he'd put a stop to you and your evil master," Thea says defiantly. "Open the gate and let me go to him, Agnar. We'll show you how powerful the Archdruid is!"

The flind snorts and turns away from your sister. You realize that you are about to be locked into the room with Thea. You must decide quickly what is the best way to help your father and sister to escape. You want to take advantage of your tiny size and rush through the iron bars to see the father you thought was dead, but there is no way to tell when you will regain your full size. You could be trapped with them. You also want to remain free to find Neil and the Talisman of Valdegarde so that you might destroy Lytir. You think about Beryl and wonder if you could find her if you follow Agnar.

The flind is headed through the door, and you must make your decision now.

*If you wish to stay behind with Thea
and your father, turn to page 90.*

If you choose to follow Agnar, turn to page 142.

Something in the woman's voice is so convincing that you trust her completely. Suddenly you feel you know why the bard has seemed so mysterious. *I was a fool to trust him, you think. He lied to me about everything. His pretty words, his stories about my father, his kiss—they were all tricks to get the talisman. And now he's going to kill my mother!*

You whip the Wand of Wonder from your belt and point it straight at Neil. Mixed tears of anger and disappointment sting your eyes. "*Lumin!*" you sob in a trembling voice.

A blinding bolt of lightning flashes from the jeweled tip, striking the bard's chest. His young, muscular body jerks violently and crashes to the floor at your mother's feet. His emerald eyes stare at you in disbelief as he tries to say something. "Gwynne . . ." is all he can manage to whisper before his enchanting elven eyes close and his fair head slumps to the floor, unmoving.

In a flash of sadness, you know the awful truth and fumble in your pouch for the talisman. You barely feel the prick of Lytir's poisoned dagger. You cannot speak to use the talisman or the wand before they both slip from your paralyzed fingers.

"The Master of Valdegarde appreciates your assistance, little Druid," says the shape with your mother's face. As Lytir bends to pick up the talisman, you see the thick makeup of the assassin's disguise begin to crack around the sneering lips, and you know this is . . .

THE END

You squeeze cautiously back into the lighted corridor. There are no gnolls in sight, but you hear their growling voices faintly in the passageway ahead. Pressing against the stone wall, you begin to creep toward the snarls of the hyena creatures.

The corridor straightens and inclines slightly. Just ahead, it ends abruptly at the bottom of a steep flight of stone steps that curve upward. Six gnolls, gigantic from your five-inch point of view, stand on a landing at the foot of the stairs. A small wooden door to the left of the gnolls is slightly ajar. You hide in the shadows and watch the gnolls.

Suddenly the door opens wide, and a thin figure in bloodred leather clothing and a dark brown cloak emerges. The stranger's face is pale and flat, with narrow eyes set deep beneath bushy black eyebrows. He pulls the dark cloak tightly around his wiry frame.

"No one has passed through the Cave of Spiders," the thin stranger tells the gnolls in a deep, commanding growl. His eyes glare in fury at the squad of gnolls. "They must be in the ruins, you blundering dogs! Search there at once, and when you find that elven thief and his Druid playmate, bring them to Agnar immediately!"

The gnolls' dark gray snouts sneer at the gruff commands of the cloaked man. The largest of them growls angrily and steps forward with a raised battle-ax.

"Fool! Do you dare to challenge Lytir, Master of Valdegarde?" demands the evil assassin.

Lytir! Your mind races. So this thin, malevolent creature is my father's archenemy!

The assassin points a long, bony finger at the angry giant gnoll. "By the powers of darkness, I command

thee, gnoll! Know me as thy master! Do as I say, or I shall curse thee forever." The gnoll's dull black eyes widen with fear, and the ax falls loosely to the monster's side. The giant drops to its knees, making frightened growling noises.

"Quiet, you brutish lout! Stay here and guard the passage to Misthlip, in case those meddlers try to get past the webs of our dark friends. Upstairs with the rest of you! Find the bard and the girl! Mind the elf's magic lute, though. Destroy it if you can."

Five of the gnolls rush up the stone steps. Lytir watches them disappear around the curving staircase. Without another word, Lytir strides toward you. You crouch in the shadows and hold your breath as the evil assassin passes you and continues down the corridor.

Your thoughts churn wildly. Lytir knows you are here, but he thinks that you and Neil are together. Any doubts you had about the handsome elven bard now seem foolish. And Lytir spoke of the door into the Cave of Spiders as a way to the Misthlip Hills. But where has Lytir gone? Where is Thea? Beryl? Your father?

These questions swirl in your brain. You know you must decide what to do before someone discovers you.

*If you choose to try to reach Kerm
by sneaking past the guard into the Cave of Spiders,
turn to page 56.*

*If you want to try to find Neil in the ruins above,
turn to page 78.*

*If you decide to follow Lytir
and explore the caverns further, turn to page 101.*

You fear that it would take too long to get help. By the time you returned, the troll might have harmed Thea. Searching for some kind of weapon, you find a large oak branch to use as a club. Clutching the heavy stick, you climb over the edge of the well and begin to descend into the dark cistern. You cling to the last of the iron rungs and feel your toes brush the ledge of the opening.

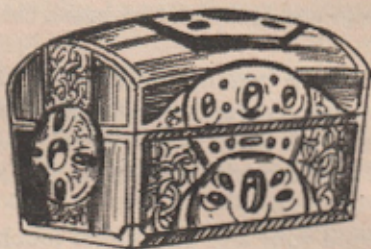
Taking a deep breath, you let go of the rung and drop to the ledge. As you land, the oak branch becomes entangled in your legs, and you feel yourself falling backward. You land with a splash in the cold water of the well.

You stretch your legs but cannot touch the bottom of the pool. You must tread water to keep from drowning. You reach for the ledge of the opening in the side, but it is too high for you to grasp. Damp moss and algae growing on the walls make them too slippery for you to climb. You probe the ledge above with the oak branch, trying to catch it on something so that you can pull yourself up.

Suddenly you feel the branch being wrenched from your grasp by an unseen force. A horrible face with beady, dull eyes appears and stares at you from the ledge. The troll's long, clawlike fingers reach down for your hair. You sink quickly and swim to the far side of the pool. As you surface, you see the giant troll patiently squatting on its haunches, waiting for you to become tired of treading water.

THE END

The small golden casket glitters in the soft lamp-light. *What better place for an enchanted gem than a tiny jewel box, you think to yourself.* You grab the little box and shake it gently. As you do, you hear a muffled rattling sound.



"I've found it!" you whisper excitedly. "Now, how do you open this thing?"

"Gwynne, don't!" Neil exclaims, looking up from the desk drawers. "It might be a trap."

"Oh, don't be so cautious," you chide the bard. "It's only a little jewel box." You are feeling around the edges for a clasp when Neil grabs your wrist with surprising strength.

"Ouch!" you murmur and drop the box onto the desk.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you, but tiny boxes can be very dangerous," the bard apologizes.

"You didn't hurt me—it did," you explain. A small red pearl of blood wells on your thumb in the yellow glow. "There was something sharp. . ."

"Let me see that!" Neil demands, grabbing your hand.

"It's only a little pinprick," you say calmly. "Nothing to get so . . ." Your tongue thickens and your vision begins to blur. Neil's worried face starts to grow dim. His voice seems miles away.

"Gwynne, can you hear me? Can you see me?"

You want to answer, but you can't seem to move your lips. The light is fading quickly, and you realize that the little golden chest was fitted with some kind of poisoned needle. Your father meant the trap for Lytir, but it caught you instead.

The flickering lamplight glistens on the teardrops beginning to well in Neil's worried eyes. "Gwynne! Look at me! Say something! Please, darling, try!" His enchanting, manly face is blurring even more. His warm, moist cheek presses against your face, and his soft, perfect lips cover yours in a gentle, desperate kiss. "I love you, Gwynne. Please don't leave me so soon after we've found each other!" he cries.

The bard's wonderful green eyes fade from your sight as you think your last thoughts of hope—hope that Neil can find the Talisman of Valdegarde and rescue your father, hope that somehow you will recover from the poisoned needle and be able to return the love of the beautiful elven bard you have just begun to know.

THE END

If I can find my father, you think, he can tell me where to look for the talisman. Lytir wouldn't be likely to keep him in the ruins, so he must be somewhere down the corridor. You move past the steps and slip silently along the cool rock wall of the passage, following its gentle turn to the left. Straight ahead, you see a sharp corner off to the right. In the wall at the corner, there is an old battered door, secured by an ancient rusty padlock.

You inch your way carefully along the wall to the corner, pressing your back against the old door. You are just about to peer around the corner when the sound of a soft footstep behind you makes you turn in alarm.

In the middle of the corridor you have been following, a human figure stands, silently watching you. His tall shape is draped in a long dark-brown cloak, so that only his head is uncovered in the torchlight. The man's face is unpleasantly flat, almost piglike, with narrow black eyes peering from bushy steel-gray eyebrows. A wisp of faded tan hair forms a widow's peak in the middle of his high forehead.

"Welcome to Valdegarde, Mistress Gwynne," the figure addresses you. "I apologize if I have frightened you. I am Lytir, the caretaker of this property for your father, the Archdruid. He has not been well for some time now, and I have agreed to protect his interests until he is able to manage things himself. It will do him good to see how you've grown. He thinks of you constantly, you know."

The voice is almost comforting. Its hypnotic appeal is difficult to resist, but you force yourself to think of what you have learned about the half-orc.

"I know who you are, Lytir, and why you are in my

father's house. I demand that you release my father, as well as my sister and aunt."

"You are in no position to demand anything, little Druid," the assassin replies with a crooked smile. "Your lovely aunt has already discovered that her forest magic doesn't work so well in the caverns of Valdegarde. Come, let me take you to your father."

Lytir reaches for your arm. One of your hands rests upon the slender ivory shaft of the Wand of Wonder. The other moves almost unconsciously to one of the golden globes on the Necklace of Missiles. You have time to use only one of the magical weapons against the evil assassin.

If you choose to use the wand, turn to page 123.

If you choose to use the necklace, turn to page 62.

Neil's nearness is both pleasant and frightening. The strange beauty of his emerald eyes, his exotic elven ears, his fair skin, his enchanting music, the gentleness of his hand on your shoulder—everything about the bard excites you. But he seems to know far too much about your family and Valdegarde—and Lytir!

You cannot bring yourself to believe that your father is alive after all these years. It would be a wonderful thing, but you dare not hope for so great a miracle. And you remember Beryl's strict warning about not trusting anyone but Kerm, the gnome warrior.

The reassuring warmth and gentle firmness of Neil's hand on your shoulder somehow confuse your feelings about the bard. You pull away and look at him, with a defiant toss of your hair.

"I'm all right," you lie. "It's just that I'm worried about my aunt and my sister. They journeyed to the Misthlip Hills and haven't returned. And your story about my father was cruel. He's dead, and I miss him too much to believe fairy tales from strangers."

Neil's enchanting eyes look sad. "I didn't mean to upset you, Gwynne. I just really do believe that Donel is still alive, and I wanted to give you some hope. I'm on my way to Valdegarde right now. I intend to destroy Lytir, with or without the talisman, and I shall restore the Archdruid to his people—and your father to you!"

The bard's words sound sincere. You want to trust him, but you cannot. You are feeling a strange new sensation, and your shoulder still tingles where Neil's hand held you. Your mind is so confused by what has happened and by what Neil has said that you are afraid to trust anyone except Kerm.

You look away from the bard so that he cannot see

the tears in your eyes. "I'm on my way to the Misthlip Hills. I can't talk anymore. Good-bye, Neil."

"Wait, Gwynne!" Neil exclaims, grabbing your arm. "That wand in your belt—do you know what it is?"

"Leave me alone!" you demand angrily.

"No, Gwynne! Please listen!" Neil urges. "I know about such things. It's a very dangerous magical weapon, and you must never use it unless it's a last resort—a case of life or death!"

Neil's warning makes you curious, and you pause.

"I learned about wands like that at Fochlucan," he says. "It's called a Wand of Wonder, and you can never be sure what it will do when you say the command word. Please be careful with it."

The bard turns quickly, walks a few steps toward Valdegarde, then looks back at you. "Its command word is '*Lumin.*' Remember the word well, but don't say it until you must." He looks into your confused eyes a last time, then walks briskly away.

As you watch the bard disappear into the morning haze, you feel suddenly lonely. You want to call to him, to rush to his side and ask him to help you, but your suspicions are too great. *Perhaps I could follow him to Valdegarde, you think. He might lead me to Beryl and Thea.* Then you recall Beryl's instructions to go to the Misthlip gnomes and find Kerm.

*If you want to follow Neil to Valdegarde,
turn to page 121.*

*If you choose to go to the Misthlip Hills
and find the gnome warrior Kerm, turn to page 85.*

"If Beryl entered Valdegarde by the front door, that's where I'm going, too," you declare, staring into Neil's bright emerald eyes.

A curious half-smile flashes over the bard's face, and he shrugs his shoulders. "Well, it won't hurt to try—I hope. Let's go, but remember how tricky Lytir can be. Don't trust everything you see or hear."

Neil slips through the stone gate so silently and softly that he leaves no tracks whatsoever. Beryl has taught you to move silently, too, but you can't do it as well as this graceful bard. You follow him quickly to the massive log and stone walls of your father's house.

The early hour and the surrounding forest combine to keep the front of Valdegarde in deep dusk. Neil vanishes into the shadows at the side of the door. When you follow, you see him pressing close against the rough logs, motioning for you to stand beside him.

"There's something moving just inside the door," he whispers quietly. "Get your knife ready, but don't use that wand unless there's no other choice." A thrill of excitement gives you gooseflesh as you follow Neil through the dusty doorway.

Please turn to page 76.

I'll never outrun this swift creature, you think, and it certainly doesn't appear to be in a talking mood. You draw your knife and turn to meet the charging weasel just as it springs for your throat. The monster, almost as large as you but much stronger, bowls you to the ground. You grab its pelt with your left hand and begin stabbing wildly with the knife. The weasel's powerful muscles feel like steel.

The wounds from your knife seem only to enrage the snarling animal. Its terrible jaws snap mere inches from your face. Your strength is failing, flowing out of your body, as you thrash in panic beneath the giant monster.

As you feel your aching muscles refusing to move, you wish that the stranger with emerald eyes were here to help you. "Please, help!" you cry weakly, but no one comes before . . .

THE END

You look at the dark opening behind the small door. If you can reach the Misthlip Hills, perhaps you can find Kerm and return to rescue your father. You wait in the shadows until the giant gnoll rubs its eyes, then scramble past it into the Cave of Spiders.

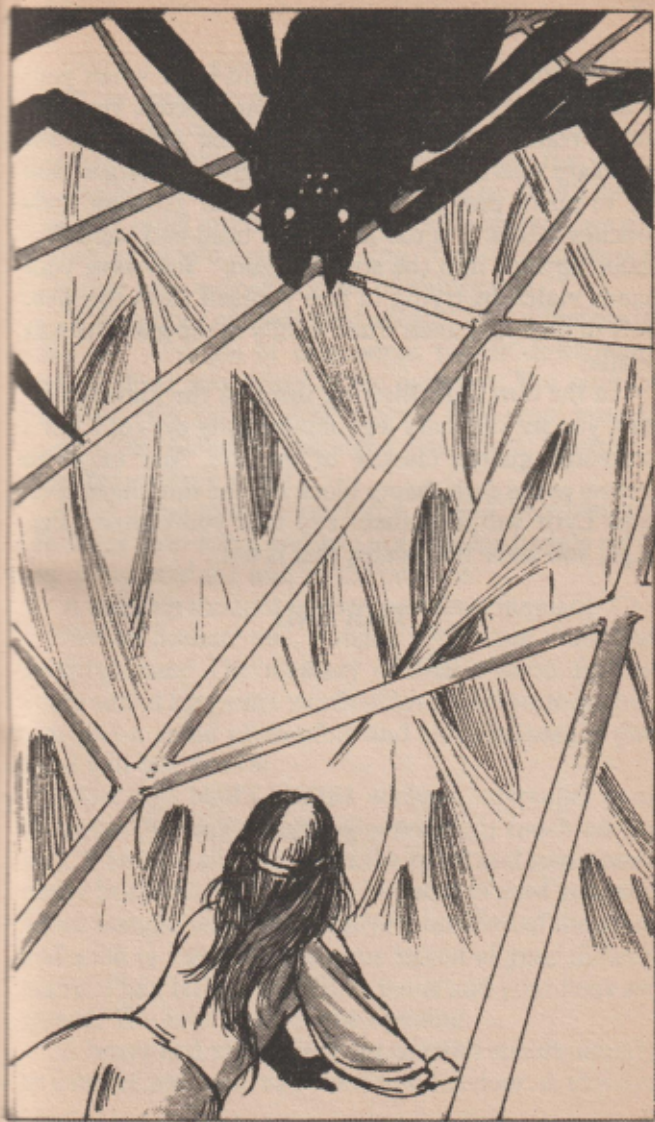
You are in a narrow passage carved from solid rock. Light from the open door casts a ghostly glimmer on the damp walls of the cave. A few feet inside the dark cavern, you see a network of filmy white threads blocking the entire passageway. A sinister black shape moves at the top of the gauzy curtain, and you see hundreds of tiny red dots shining in the darkness.

A giant spider is mending the web that guards this back entrance into Valdegarde. It does not see your tiny shape as you hide in the deep shadows of the cave. You inch toward the web, knowing that the slightest contact with it will tell the spider you are here.

The web is attached to the wall of the passage several inches above your head. A normal-sized person could never pass through the corridor without being detected, but you can do it easily. You crawl under the web, being careful not to touch it.

As soon as you are clear, you turn and see more thin filaments. The webs are everywhere—layer after layer of silken traps guard the caverns of Valdegarde!

You fight your fear and creep quietly toward the next web. You hear the soft, slithering sounds of the giant spiders' legs as they move restlessly in the webs above your head. Their tiny red eyes sparkle in the darkness like thousands of fireflies. You make it past the second layer of webs, and you begin to feel confident that you will manage to slip through the horrible passage with little difficulty.



You are nearly through the third layer when your head begins to spin dizzily. To your horror, you suddenly realize what is happening—the effects of the wand are wearing off, and you are growing larger! You try to hurry past the web before your growing body touches it, but it is too late! Your head and shoulders shoot upward into the sticky strands. You wave your hands violently, trying to free yourself from the web, only to find your arms stuck solidly to the giant strands of silk.

In the dim light filtering through the ghostly curtain, you see the hairy legs and burning eyes of Lytir's gruesome guards closing in on you. You begin to scream as the dark shapes block out the torchlight. Perhaps Lytir will stop them and take you captive. Perhaps, you hope frantically, this is not . . .

THE END

Neil's firm grip on your hand feels warm and secure as you emerge from the space under the desk and he leads you into a narrow passage. The darkness envelops you like a soft black curtain when the secret panel closes noiselessly behind you. The bard's nearness and quiet strength seem to surround you with a protective shield, guarding you from the unknown evils that have gained control of Valdegarde.

"I see a door of some kind ahead," Neil whispers in your ear. A tingle of excitement rushes down your back, making you shiver in the darkness. You remember that elves can see heat waves. *Neil must possess some of his father's elvensight, you think, because I can't see a single thing.*

"I'm going to try to open this panel," he whispers. He drops your hand, and you can hear his fingers moving deftly over the wall of the passage.

A nagging thought bothers you for a moment. *Can a thief be honest?* you wonder. *Do I dare trust this exciting man?* The memory of Neil's warm lips on yours and of his gentle words of love erase your doubts. You feel a sense of comfort and companionship you hope will last forever.

"Got it!" Neil's excited whisper interrupts your thoughts. A crack of light appears at his touch on the wall. The bard silently opens the panel and steps into a dimly lit room. He holds out his hand toward you, and for an instant, you feel completely terrified of the room and wish to return to the quiet haven of your father's study. Then Neil's hand finds yours and your fears are erased. You step through the opening.

A heavy bed with a thick fur coverlet stands directly in front of you, next to a stout wooden door. A massive

bookshelf and desk are against the wall on the other side of the bed, and a closed trunk is at its foot. A small flame from an oil lamp on the desk casts eerie, dancing shadows over everything in the room.

"We're in someone's bedroom!" you whisper to Neil.

"Yes, but whose?" he replies. "Stay by the door while I have a look at that desk. Be ready to act quickly."

As Neil bends over the desk, the small lute strapped to the bard's back reminds you of his strangely enchanting melodies, with their magical effects. Moving with the grace of a practiced thief; he quickly opens the drawers and searches through their contents. The lamplight glows through his tawny blond hair and gleams on his silver Druid's torque. Neil's expression changes suddenly, and he turns to tell you something.

At that moment, a sound from the door startles you both. Neil motions for you to hide. The bard's body seems to blend with the shadows of the bed until he is nearly invisible. You quickly hide behind the door as it starts to open.

The figure of a delicate woman enters the room. She wears a dark brown cloak; a thin black veil covers her head and face. The ghostly figure does not seem to notice either of you. She moves to the foot of the bed and removes the veil.

In the soft, amber light, her fine black hair, held in place by a jeweled tiara, and her exquisitely sculpted features are unmistakable. It is the face of the woman carved in wood on your father's desk! It is your mother's face!

"Mother!" you whisper hoarsely, unable to move.

A warm smile spreads over the woman's lovely face. "Gwynne?" she cries. "Can it really be you?" She holds both arms out to you. "Come to me, my daughter, and let me hold you."

Your senses are completely shaken. You cannot seem to look away from her wonderful face, the face of the mother you thought was dead. You want to rush to her, to feel her arms around you, but somehow you are confused and frightened.

*If you trust this woman and want to go to her,
turn to page 100.*

*If you decide that you cannot trust your senses
and refuse to approach this woman,
turn to page 128.*

Your fingers tighten on the smooth gold ball and pull it from the chain. With all your strength, you hurl the magic globe into the assassin's face. An explosion of fire fills the corridor in a blinding flash of flames.

When the glare of the fireball dies, you see Lytir's cloaked figure standing unscathed in the middle of the raging fireball. An eerie blue haze surrounds the assassin, protecting his body from the licking flames.

In desperation, you pull the Necklace of Missiles from your neck and fling it at your father's enemy. There is a deafening explosion, followed by a blast of fire that knocks you to your knees and shakes the rock walls of the corridor.

A dark shape, still surrounded by the blue halo, is moving through the wall of fire straight toward you. The flames seem to be dying as the somber figure slowly advances. You stare in horror as the pale, skull-like head of the half-orc grins maliciously at you from the flickering flames. His evil laughter echoes through the corridor, sending chills down your spine.

"Did you think that the master of Valdegarde burns as easily as his spider allies?" Lytir sneers.

Before your frightened senses can react, the sound of running feet from the corridor behind you fills you with dread. The sinister Lytir seems to have captured all of the Archdruid's family. Only the bravery of Kerm and his handsome friend, the mysterious bard, has a chance of saving Erdragh from the assassin's evil horde. But for you, this is . . .

THE END

You decide to return to the well and try to find Thea. You move silently through the tall grass and briars to the moss-covered logs and stones of the house. You see no sign of Neil as you creep along the side of Valdegarde toward the back of the ruins.

In the bright morning light, the old ruins seem less frightening than they did the night before. The well where the troll grabbed Thea looks harmless enough. A red and yellow bird perches on the rim.

A sudden clatter from somewhere in the ruins startles the bird, and it flits away to the surrounding forest. You crouch low and run to the side of the well. Leaning cautiously against the moss-covered stones, you peer into the dark opening. The still water below is a polished black mirror reflecting your face.

You see the rusty iron rungs on the inside of the well, ending at the opening just above the dark water. *That's where the troll took Thea!* you think to yourself. A mixture of fear and excitement makes your scalp tingle. *Perhaps I should find Neil and ask him to come with me,* you consider, only to recall the bard's somber warnings. *He'd probably scold me for coming here without him,* you conclude.

Without a second thought, you swing your legs over the rim of the well and grasp the first rung. As you descend, the air becomes dank and cool. A faint unpleasant odor grows stronger as you near the dark opening.

Hanging from the last iron rung with your hands, you can barely reach the ledge of the cavelike opening with your toes. You let go of the rung and try to land on your feet, but the rock is too slick. You slip over the edge and fall into the dark, cold water!

You try to stand but cannot touch bottom, and it is difficult to keep your head above the inky water. Treading desperately, you move along the smooth rock sides toward the ledge. The lip of the dark opening is several feet above your head, and you cannot reach it with your hands. Your heart begins to pound with fear. You are trapped in the well! Just then, a dark shadow blots out the bright sunshine from above. You look up and see a large shape leaning over the edge of the well!

"If you wanted to go for a swim, why didn't you stay at the creek?" asks a familiar voice. "Hang on! I'm coming down," Neil adds before you can respond to his sarcasm. He scrambles gracefully and soundlessly over the edge of the well and climbs down the iron rungs. When he reaches the last one, he swings easily into the opening and drops like a cat to the floor.

Neil squats on the ledge, grinning in the semidarkness. "You look like a drowned kitten," he jokes.

"Stop the humor and help me!" you demand angrily.

"Only if you promise to stay with me from now on," he answers in a mocking, scolding tone. "Valdegarde isn't a safe place for a young girl all alone these days." Neil reaches down and clasps your hand tightly. You are surprised at the ease with which he pulls you effortlessly up onto the ledge.

"Why didn't you stay with me?" he demands. "We'll have a much better chance of finding your father if we stick together." He sees you shivering in the darkness and wraps your trembling body in his cloak, pulling you snugly against him. Neil's warmth and quiet strength seem to shelter you from the cold and your fears, melting your anger. You begin to sob

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softly, with your face nestled against the bard's leather-clad chest.

"I'm sorry I spoke so harshly to you, Gwynne," he apologizes. "I should have known you were upset after what has happened. I saw your aunt's tracks at the front of Valdegarde and your sister's tracks by the well," he explains. "I know you want to find them, and we shall! Just trust me and let me help you." His hand strokes your wet hair gently, easing your sobs.

You begin to relax, and you look up to see Neil staring into the darkness of a tunnel sloping downward beneath the ruins of Valdegarde. Footprints of a large humanoid creature lead into the blackness. You can imagine Thea being carried along the passage in the powerful grasp of the troll. Neil takes your hand and squeezes it gently.

"Are you all right?" he asks tenderly. His solid grip gives you a feeling of support and safety.

"Just a little damp," you answer, trying to smile bravely. Neil grins, his laughing eyes, looking at your soaked hair and gown. You blush suddenly and try to fluff your hair so that it will dry more quickly. "Do I look that funny?" you demand.

"Oh, no. In fact, you ought to wear your hair like that all the time," he adds with an impish smile.

"Come on," he urges. "It'll dry while we explore this tunnel. I'll bet it leads to the old caverns beneath Valdegarde. It's dark, but I can see all right, thanks to my half-elf father. Stay close and be ready for anything." The bard draws Orcslicer and moves forward stealthily into the darkness. A greenish glow outlines the sword. You clutch Neil's free hand and follow him along the damp corridor.

The light from the well soon becomes too faint to see by. You stumble in total darkness, hanging on to the bard's hand. The tunnel wall curves sharply to the left, and you see a dim light ahead.

The bard stops suddenly and stoops to examine the rock floor. Over his back, you see three rough steps leading down into a small cavern. The entrance to the chamber is partly closed by a rusty gate with bent iron bars. Huge, muddy footprints pass through the broken gate from both directions. The small cavern appears to be a cell of some sort, with another barred entryway at its opposite end. Torchlight spills into the little cell from a well-lit passage beyond the far entrance.

"The caverns must be beyond those bars," Neil whispers. "That's where we should find your father!" His words make you want to batter the far gate open with your bare fists. "Let's see if I can open that gate," Neil continues, as if reading your thoughts.

The bard slips cautiously through the bent bars and into the dimly lighted room. You follow quickly, guided in the semidarkness by the magical glow of Orcslicer. Suddenly your foot kicks something hard, and there is a loud clatter. An object rolls across the stone floor. As it wobbles to a stop in a patch of light, you stare in horror at a grinning human skull!

Neil whirls around just in time to stifle your scream with his hand. You begin to tremble uncontrollably, and the bard pulls you tightly against him.

"It's all right," he whispers. "It's only some old bones, and they can't hurt us." The tensions of the past few hours have made it difficult for you to control your fear. Tears stream down your cheeks as you bury your head in the hollow of Neil's shoulder.

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"You're doing just fine," he continues to reassure you. "Not many people could go through the things you have lately and stay on an even keel." Neil's words and firm embrace begin to fill you with the strength you need to control your emotions. You raise your head and gaze up at the handsome bard. In the yellow torchlight, Neil's golden hair falls softly over his smooth, tan cheeks. His gleaming silver headband and Druid's torque accent his green eyes and perfectly sculpted lips. He is the most enchanting man!

Your fears and the dangers of Valdegarde are forgotten in this magical moment. Feelings you have never known before seem to race through your mind and heart. Nothing matters except Neil's graceful, manly beauty. His exotic almond-shaped eyes are bright and moist as he returns your gaze.

"You're so lovely," he whispers softly, caressing your cheek with his hand. "I've never seen a woman as exciting as you are right now." His lips part slightly, and you know that he wants to kiss you. A sudden feeling of uncertainty crosses your thoughts. You have never kissed anyone before. You're not sure that you know what to do. You also can't seem to forget your lingering doubts about the strange bard. The closeness of his lips warms your skin. His hand is caressing your cheek very tenderly and lovingly. He is not forcing you or demanding anything at all of you. He is letting you decide what to do.

*If you decide to pull away from Neil,
turn to page 32.*

If you want to kiss Neil, turn to page 87.

Glancing down at the heavy sculpture in your hands, you try to control your aroused emotions. Suddenly the dancing shadows of the flickering light reveal an inscription on its underside.

"There's some kind of verse engraved on the bottom of this sculpture," you tell Neil. "It's in Druid! Listen!"

" 'What Mavas guards with opened eyes
Forces of darkness quest as prize;
The stone of good a balance be
For evil powers over thee.' "

"Let me see that bust!" says Neil. The bard takes the sculpture and minutely carefully examines every detail of the face, especially the eyes. "Look! The eyelids move!" he exclaims. He carefully sets the sculpture on the desk. With the thumbs of both hands, Neil slides the tightly fitting lids over the eyes so that the lovely Mavas seems to be asleep.

As soon as the eyes are closed, a thin line begins to appear between them, spreading down the center of the nose, lips, and chin. It also travels upward, dividing the entire head into perfect halves. When the crack reaches the base, the sculpture divides, falling into twin halves.

Between the two shells of wood, you see a gleaming golden chalice lying on the desk. Neil's elven eyes are wide with excitement as he lifts the precious goblet to read the inscription on its side.

" 'Stone of power, talisman of light,
End this reign of darkness and night.' "

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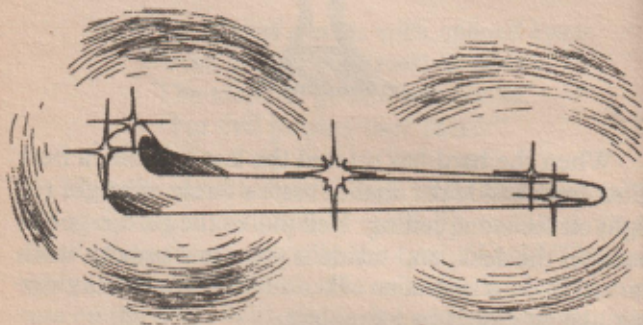
When the bard has uttered the last syllable, a fiery glow from inside the chalice casts a circle of bright red light on the stone ceiling. Neil places the golden goblet back on the desk, and inside it you see a smooth stone carved in the shape of an oaken staff. The stone is glowing like an ember in a fireplace.

"This is it, Gwynne!" Neil cries. "This is the Talisman of Valdegarde!" The bard reaches into the chalice to get the talisman, then jerks his hand away in pain. "I barely touched it with my finger," he says, "and a searing pain spread clear to my shoulder!"

You look at the glowing stone and say quickly, "Well, someone has to use it. Without it, Thea and my father, perhaps all of Erdragh, are doomed." Shutting your eyes in anticipation of pain, you reach into the chalice and close your fingers around the Talisman of Valdegarde.

Instead of the fiery burning you expect, the stone feels cool to your touch. As you hold it in your hand, the glow diminishes until the miniature staff is just a dull gray in color.

Neil places his hand on your arm gently. "Listen carefully, Gwynne. I know a little about these things. For some reason, only you can handle the talisman without being harmed. Put it into your pouch and guard it well. When the time comes, you must hold it tightly in your hand and speak the words engraved on the golden chalice."



You nod and study the inscription, then place the talisman inside your belt pouch. Just as you close the flap of the pouch, you hear a slight click from beneath the desk. Four dark tentacles emerge from the knee space and pull the rest of the mimic's strange body into the light.

Guthlic seems excited. "The gnolls are very angry," he reports. "The caverns ring with their snarling cries. A curious little creature with a long nose is chasing them around the corridors, yelling, 'Garl Glittergold!' as loud as he can."

Neil laughs at the mimic's description of his old friend, the gnome warrior. "That'll be Kerm, I'll wager! Not a subtle bone in his head! It's time to join the fun, Gwynne. Are you ready?"

You tingle with excitement, noticing the bard's

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flashing eyes and his hand on the hilt of Orcslicer. "Where are Lytir and the flind?" you ask Guthlic.

"The lion-man Agnar still guards the Archdruid and your sister," replies the mimic, "but I could not find the half-orc."

"I'm sure it would be the Archdruid's wish for you to remain here as before and guard this room," you command the mimic.

"As you desire, Mistress of Valdegarde," Guthlic replies.

"Well, come on, 'Mistress of Valdegarde,' " says Neil with a trace of sarcasm. The bard dives beneath the desk. As you follow him, you have a glimpse of Guthlic transforming himself into a very sticky chair.

Please turn to page 59.

The giant spider in the corridor behind you is waving its two front claws right before your face! You must do something before it springs at you! You suddenly remember the golden fireballs of your magic necklace. Grabbing one of the six remaining globes, you hurl it as hard as you can into the spider's evil face.

The magical bead explodes instantly, enveloping the monster in a ball of fire that blocks the entire corridor. Hearing a cry of pain behind you, you turn and see two of the deadly creatures crouched over the immobile form of Kerm. You grab the torch from the floor and charge the two spiders, waving the flame in front of you.

Your attack startles the dim-witted creatures, and they move away from Kerm's web-shrouded body. While the frightened spiders cower above, you grab the gnome and try to pull him free from the web. No matter how hard you strain, you cannot separate his body from the unyielding strands of silk.

In desperation, you light the web with your torch. A flash of fire engulfs the corridor in a chain reaction of burning webs that stretches as far as you can see. Through the flashing light, you watch as one dark hulk after another drops to the floor, until the passage is entirely blocked by gigantic bodies.

Detaching two more of the magical fireballs, you fling them both into the middle of the cluster of spiders. You cover your face against the searing heat of the double explosion. When the initial force of the blast has died, you drop your arm and see the corridor filled with flaming bodies. Just beyond the burning spiders, a heavy wooden door blocks the corridor.

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ure at your feet. "Kerm!" you exclaim. "Can you hear me?"

The gnome's voice is weak but audible. "The torch! Use the torch!"

"But you'll burn!"

"Hurry I'm suffocating!"

You barely touch the sticky cocoon with the torch before flames engulf the web-wrapped fighter. The flash fire lasts only a few seconds, leaving a blackened but otherwise apparently unharmed little gnome with singed beard and eyebrows. You hastily brush the remaining sparks from his clothes and face.

"Hey! Whoa! It's out!" Kerm growls. "Where are they? Let me at those oversized bugs!" he mutters.

"Settle down, Kerm. They're dead," you tell the gnome, pressing his shoulders to the floor and propping his head against his small knapsack. "I stopped them with the Necklace of Missiles." Kerm raises his head weakly and sees the smoldering bodies.

"Well, I'll be a bugbear! You're quite a fighter!"

"I—I was afraid you were dead," you say, ignoring the warrior's compliment.

"Nope. Takes more than spider poison to kill this old warhorse! Just a little sleepy," he adds. "And I don't have any feeling in my legs."

"Listen to me, Kerm," you say, bending close to his ear. "There's a door straight ahead. Do you know where it leads?"

"Valdegarde," the gnome mutters. "Caverns . . . Lytir . . . Must stop Lytir . . . Find Talis . . ." Kerm's words drift off in an unintelligible whisper as he sinks into a deep slumber. You realize that the brave gnome will not be able to help you until he recovers from the

spider bites. You cover Kerm with his leather cloak and lay his battle-ax by his side. You don't like to leave him alone, but at least the spiders are gone. Every second seems important if you are to find the talisman and rescue your father and the rest of your family.

Stepping around the smoldering bodies of the spiders, you run lightly to the thick wooden door and pull hard on the handle. The rusted hinges creak and groan, and slowly the heavy door begins to crack open, spilling light into the cave from a wide corridor. Taking a deep breath, you squeeze through the narrow opening and enter the lower caverns of Valdegarde.

You find yourself on a small landing at the foot of some stone steps that curve upward to the right. A wide, well-lit corridor carved from stone bends off to your left. You close the heavy door to the Cave of Spiders while you try to choose a direction. The stairs seem to lead to the surface level of the ruins, and the corridor must be part of the caverns.

*If you decide to take the stone steps
into the ruins of Valdegarde, turn to page 144.*

*If you choose to explore the corridor
into the caverns of Valdegarde, turn to page 50.*

Neil's warning about the Wand of Wonder and its possible dangers convinces you of the risk in using it. Desperate, you draw the razor-sharp butcher knife from your belt and charge the seven-foot monster. Just as you slash with the knife, the troll's clawed hand closes around your wrist, pulling you toward its terrible jaws.

"Neil! Help!" you scream as loudly as you can. The troll pays no attention to your cries for help, which echo against the stone walls of the cavern.

"The wand, Gwynne! Use the wand!" Neil yells. He has regained consciousness and is crawling toward his sword. With a vicious twist of your arm, you pull free from the monster's powerful grasp and stand with your back against the iron gate to the lighted corridor.

Please turn to page 19.

You find yourself inside a large hall of some kind, with only a few rays of light filtering through some small holes in the raftered ceiling. In the dim light, you can barely make out a fireplace massive enough to walk inside. Huge windows on the front and north walls have been boarded over carelessly, admitting scattered rays of light through the cracks.

The floor is littered with broken furniture and crockery, all covered by a thick layer of dust. You have to fight to keep from sneezing as you move through the dark room. Suddenly a strong hand grabs your shoulder and pulls you closer.

"Easy . . . it's me!" a familiar voice whispers.

You breathe a sign of relief as you realize it's Neil. "I almost sliced you to ribbons!" you scold.

"Shh! There are others besides us in here—two by the fireplace and another in the corner," he whispers softly in your ear. You strain your eyes and peer into the dusty darkness, but you can't see anything more than a shadowy hulk by the fireplace. "I can't see a thing!" you whisper anxiously.

Neil pushes you away from his side and startles you by calling loudly in the language of Druids:

"Fire of Faeries, mark these foes.
Give us targets for swords and bows."

Instantly a blue glow outlines two large creatures standing before you in the dim light. One of the figures is at least nine feet tall, with its head looming nearly to the rafters. The other shape is shorter, but bulkier and more animal-like. You hear surprised grunts behind you and whirl around to see a large shadow in a corner.

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"They're trolls!" Neil shouts. "Watch the ones I marked with Faerie Fire, and I'll handle the one in the corner." Orcslicer is already in the bard's hand, glowing with a greenish outline as he rushes toward the dark shape.

You hear the smaller figure—which you now recognize as an evil gnoll—snarl a command of some kind. The large troll begins to shuffle toward you. Behind you, grunts and scuffling noises make it clear that Neil is too busy to help you. You know that it is time to act, and you realize that you have only two choices.

*If you wish to use the Wand of Wonder,
turn to page 102.*

*If you want to try fighting the troll
with your knife, turn to page 84.*

As the giant gnoll peers into the cavern beyond the small door, you dart across the corridor into the shadows at the bottom of the stairs. The first step seems to be several feet above you. You jump as high as you can and manage to pull yourself onto it.

You are surprised to find that the next step seems to be less of an obstacle, and the third one is almost even with your eyes. The effects of the wand are wearing off! Soon you will be full-sized, and the gnoll is sure to see you. You hop up the stairs, hoping to get out of sight quickly.

By the time you reach the top step, your legs are normal-sized. An empty corridor ends at a stone wall only a few yards to your right. You are standing in front of a heavy wooden panel with an iron ring attached to its center.

You are examining the panel when you hear a scraping sound at the end of the short corridor. A long crack begins to appear in the blank wall, and you hear the growls of gnolls. Your only chance is to hide behind the strange panel. You pull the ring, and much to your relief, the panel opens easily and soundlessly.

The opposite side of the panel is disguised as a row of bookshelves. Beyond, you see a stone floor cluttered with torn scrolls, books, and pieces of furniture. The scraping sound gets louder, and you rush into the ransacked room, closing the secret panel behind you.

You have barely shut the hidden door when a powerful arm encircles your waist. A hand clamps tightly over your mouth, stifling your startled scream.

Please turn to page 127.

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You awaken to the sound of birds squabbling in the trees above the cottage. The soft light of dawn is beginning to brighten the room. You rub your eyes and see the leather pouch on the hearth, reminding you of Beryl's words about your father's quest. You realize suddenly that Beryl has not returned from Valdegarde!

You lift the bar from the door and open it a crack. There is no sign of Beryl or Thea. The only footprints you see are yours and Beryl's. You must heed her warning and go to the Misthlip Hills to find your father's trusted friend Kerm.

Your thoughts immediately turn to the strange gifts from your father. Beryl told you to keep them with you. Even the idea of handling something from your father brings tears to your eyes as you slip the necklace of crude acorns over your head. You gasp in surprise as it touches your neck. Instead of the rough texture of carved wood, you feel the cool smoothness of metal! A glance at the necklace reveals that the crudely carved acorns have taken the form of seven perfect golden spheres!

When you recover from the surprise, you examine the strange wand very carefully. You turn it slowly in your hand, but nothing unusual happens. *Oh, well*, you think. *if acorns can become golden globes, who knows what magic can come of an ivory wand?*

You stuff some bread and cheese into a leather belt pouch and strap it to your waist. You spot a butcher knife and stick it through the belt. *At least I'll have some kind of weapon*, you think to yourself. Then you thrust the wand into the other side of the belt.

With a parting look at the cozy room, you rush out into the ghostly, gray light. The path forks to the north

and west only a few hundred steps from the door. The trail to the north leads into the dense, dark Erdragh Forest, which you must enter to reach the Misthlip Hills. The westward branch leads to the ruins of Valdegarde. You can see the prints of Beryl's slippers heading for the ruins.

Just then you hear a twig snap to your left, and you jerk your head around in time to see a dark figure dodge behind a large tree. You pull the knife from your belt and stalk toward the tree.

Suddenly the sound of beautiful music floats through the forest. Strangely, you feel completely relaxed and unafraid. A handsome young man with long, honey-colored hair steps from behind the tree into a patch of sunlight. He is dressed in leather clothes of forest greens and browns, and wears a Druid's torque. He is strumming a lute with long, slender fingers. The morning mists seem to envelop the youthful figure in a transparent veil as he calls to you.

"Good morning, Mistress Gwynne," he says, his laughing green eyes dancing. "I am Neil Borsson, a gentle bard who hopes you will not use that knife."

Overwhelmed by this stranger's appearance and song, you have forgotten about the knife in your hand. You return it to your belt, feeling embarrassed.

"That's better," says the bard, with a broad smile. As he approaches, you see the jeweled hilt of a sturdy sword at his side and a pack that looks as if it might contain tools of some sort in his tunic. His golden-blond hair is held in place by a silver band. The bard's hairless face is fairer than any you have seen before. His almond-shaped eyes shine like emeralds in the dawn light, and his pointed ears peek through his hair.



When he reaches your side, he sits gracefully on the grass and lays the lute across his lap. The final notes of the melody still hum in your ears, making you feel relaxed and comfortable with the strange bard.

"How did you know my name?" you ask calmly.

"You wouldn't remember, Gwynne, but I played with you in your father's house many years ago."

"At Valdegarde?" you cry.

"I spent the first ten years of my life at Valdegarde," Neil explains. "My sire was Bors the Bold, the Arch-druid's personal bodyguard. For three years, I fought at my father's side against the evil horde of Lytir, the half-orc. When I was about your age, my sire fell before Lytir's evil magic. I fled to the Misthlip Hills with my friend Kerm, the noble gnome warrior."

Something in Neil's eyes seems to change as he relates the story. You sense an intense hatred or anger, which frightens you for a moment.

"I have sworn to destroy Lytir by the power of my sword, Orcslicer." The bard's hand slips to the hilt of his sword. It begins to hum as soon as his fingers touch it, and it emits a faint greenish glow.

"Who is this Lytir?" you ask.

The bard's exotic green eyes study your face for a moment. "Lytir is a vicious monster, an evil half-orc assassin who led the hordes of murderous creatures into Erdragh. Only your father's power prevented Lytir from destroying all of the forest and its people."

"But my father's dead!" you exclaim, confused.

The handsome bard looks at you with a serious expression. "I have just returned from Fochlucan College, where I learned of a certain enchanted stone called the Talisman of Valdegarde. Your father, Donel,

invested his powers in the talisman to protect Erdragh from evil assassin-priests like Lytir. Just before the fall of Valdegarde, Donel hid the talisman. That means your father is still alive!”

Neil’s words hit you like a lightning bolt. “Still alive? I don’t understand!” you exclaim.

“It’s simple logic. If Donel were dead, he would have taken the secret of the talisman to his grave. Lytir would not fear its power and would move against Erdragh. But, since Donel is still alive, Lytir is afraid of the talisman. With it, we could destroy him.”

You ponder Neil’s words carefully. Suddenly you know why Beryl acted so strangely. Your father may still be alive somewhere in the ruins of Valdegarde! Tears of joy stream down your cheeks. You are confused, frightened, and excited, all at the same time.

Neil gets swiftly to his feet. His soft voice soothes your confused emotions. “Easy, Gwynne. Just relax and tell me what’s the matter. Let me help.”

The young bard’s face is close to yours, and his expression of concern seems genuine. You want to tell him everything that has happened and ask for his help. In your troubled thoughts, you remember Beryl’s warning. *Is this one of Lytir’s tricks?* you ask yourself. *Or can I trust this handsome stranger?*

*If you decide to trust the bard,
turn to page 14.*

*If you think that the bard’s friendliness
is a trick and wish to go on alone,
turn to page 52.*

Remembering Neil's warning about the Wand of Wonder, you pull the butcher knife from your belt and prepare to fight the towering troll. You cannot see its horrible face, but you remember what the creature that captured Thea looked like.

With a flash of the magical blue fire, the troll's arm slashes at you in the darkness. You step back and hack quickly with the knife. Its razor-sharp edge strikes something soft, and the troll grunts loudly. You hear a soft object hit the floor at your feet, and you look down. You stare in horror at a hand, outlined in blue and still alive, crawling toward you.

A powerful arm encircles your waist and lifts you from the floor, knocking your knife from your hands.

"Neil! Help me!" you cry in terror, but the bard is still struggling with the other troll and cannot come to your aid. The shorter figure snarls an order to the troll who has you under its arm. The giant monster lumbers toward the fireplace and hands your kicking and screaming body to its companion. A strong cord of some kind is wrapped painfully around your wrists and ankles, and a gag is tied over your mouth.

"I'll find you, Gwynne!" you hear Neil yell from the corner. "Don't give up! I'll—" The bard's words end abruptly, and you hear a dull thud, followed by the sound of his lute crashing to the stone floor.

You feel rough hands drag you into the fireplace, and you hope that Neil will recover to help you before it is too late. You also hope that you will be able to use the Wand of Wonder, which may still be stuck in your belt. If it isn't, this is surely . . .

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The thought of disobeying Beryl, who has always been wise in her advice, helps you form your decision. You must enter the forest and seek Kerm in the Mithlip Hills. *He will know what to do*, you say to yourself.

Turning away from the path that leads to Valdegarde, you hope you have made the right choice. Despite your suspicions of the mysterious bard, you find yourself remembering the warmth of his smile, the gentleness of his song, and the exotic, laughing emerald eyes against his fair skin. As you take the trail leading north into the dark Erdragh Forest, you feel certain that Neil is destined to play some important role in your life.

Beryl's parting words, "Find Kerm," echo in your head. You remember the battle-scarred gnome warrior and his tales of adventure told by the fireplace in Beryl's cottage. His long nose would grow as red as the raspberry wine your aunt poured for him while they talked of happier times at Valdegarde. Kerm spoke often of the great gnome clan living in the Mithlip Hills to the north and of their friendship with your father, but you have never traveled that far north in the forest.

You wonder why Kerm or Beryl never mentioned the strange bard, since he seems to know so much about your family. *Perhaps I was too hasty in choosing to leave him*, you think, *but at least I can be certain of Kerm's friendship*. With a glance backward at the cottage trail, you turn and enter the deep Erdragh wilderness.

Giant oak trees shade the ground so well that very little undergrowth blocks the seldom used path to the

gnome village. You have not yet mastered the Druid skills of a First Circle initiate, although Beryl has given you daily woodcraft instruction. You have a little trouble recognizing certain plants and animals of Erdragh, but you feel confident that you will be ready for your initiation at the spring festival of Beltane.

You have traveled deeper into the great forest than ever before, lost in thoughts of your father, the handsome but strange young bard, and your initiation. Suddenly a snorting sound startles you. Looking up, you see that the trees have thinned somewhat, and the edges of the path are lined with thick bushes and briars. You glimpse a large, shadowy figure moving behind some dense bushes to your right, perhaps fifty paces from the trail.

"Who is it?" you call nervously, with only stillness for an answer. You grip the handle of the sharp knife and walk ahead slowly, keeping your eyes on the bushes.

Suddenly the underbrush seems to explode, and an enormous weasel leaps toward you, its shiny pelt glistening in the soft forest light. Its bared fangs drip saliva. If it bites you, it will not let go until either you or it is dead. You must do something quickly!

*If you decide to run from the weasel,
turn to page 98.*

*If you want to fight the weasel with the knife,
turn to page 55.*

*If you wish to try speaking to the weasel,
turn to page 129.*

Neil's manly beauty and the excitement of your adventures together draw you closer to him. You reach for Neil's soft hair and pull his head closer to yours.

You close your eyes, and in a breathless moment of wonderful excitement, everything is blotted from your thoughts except his tender kiss. Your eyes flutter open a split second before a dark shadow looms over the bard's golden head.

Neil's body is suddenly ripped from your arms and tossed hard against the stone wall. His unconscious form slips to the floor of the cavern, and the enchanted sword falls from his hand.

In the flickering torchlight, you see the giant figure of the troll that captured Thea. Its terrible claws glisten in the dim light, and its dull, beady eyes stare stupidly at Neil's limp body.

You back away as the monster turns from Neil and advances toward you. After only a few steps, your back presses against the bars of the gate. You are too large to slip through the gate, and the troll could grab you easily if you try to run for the well opening.

You must do something. The smell of the troll's filthy, mottled hide is all around you, and its sharp claws grope the air in front of you. The only weapons you have are the knife and the mysterious Wand of Wonder that Neil warned you about.

*If you decide to attack the troll with your knife,
turn to page 75.*

*If you want to risk using the Wand of Wonder,
turn to page 19.*

The Archdruid's library is well lighted by a large stained-glass window on the east wall. Across the room from the secret entrance is a closed door. A tall wardrobe closet, its double doors open, stands against the wall opposite the window. Hundreds of torn books and scrolls are scattered around the large room.

"I might have known that Lytir would have already been here," says Neil.

"Oh, well," you sigh, "at least he saved us the trouble of going through everything."

You try the handle of the door, but it won't turn. "Here, let me see if I can open it," suggests the bard. "I have a way with locks, you know."

At that moment, you hear growling and the sound of heavy feet outside the door. "Gnolls! Quick, to the caverns!" Neil whispers, already moving to the secret panel. "Wait!" he suddenly warns, listening at the panel. "They're out there, too! We're trapped! We've got to fight them or try to escape out the window."

"Or we can hide in that wardrobe," you add desperately.

"Well, let's do something, and right now," urges Neil, his hand on Orcslicer.

*If you want to make a stand
and fight the gnolls in the library,
turn to page 119.*

*If you think you should try to escape
through the window, turn to page 34.*

*If you decide to hide in the large wardrobe,
turn to page 139.*

Remembering your Druid training, you decide to try to speak to the giant spiders. The one behind you is moving closer, and you offer your hand in a friendly gesture.

"Hear me, ruler of these webs! We wish only to pass through these caverns with no harm to you."

The giant spider doesn't seem to understand. Your Druid's torque doesn't feel warm as it usually does when you speak with animals. The ugly monster continues to crawl toward you in the dim torchlight.

At your back, you hear a cry of pain from Kerm and the sound of softly slithering legs. You realize you must face this danger alone. Your small knife can do nothing against these giant monsters with their poisonous bites. Your only chances lie with the wand and the necklace.

Go back to page 40 and make another choice.

From the shadows under the shelves, you can see Thea's brave expression as she watches Agnar turn toward the door. In that moment, you know what you must do. You remain hidden while the flind slams and locks the massive door. As soon as the heavy footsteps of the lion-man fade down the corridor, Thea twists her small body around and grasps the stout iron bars.

"Father!" she cries hoarsely. "Please don't give up! Beryl will come back for us. I know she will." A low moan from the darkened cell answers your sister's desperate plea. Leaving your hiding place, you run to Thea's side and whisper softly to her.

"Thea, don't be afraid. Don't say anything. It's me, Gwynne!"

Startled, your young sister whirls around with a clank of her leg shackles. She stares at your tiny figure in amazement. Tears of joy and confusion flood her eyes.

"Gwynne!" she whispers. "Can it be you? Why are you so small? How did you get here? Where's Beryl? What—"

"Shhh!" You interrupt Thea's barrage of excited questions. "We must get Father out of here. Just stay quiet while I go to him."

"Oh, Gwynne, please hurry. They've been doing terrible things to him!"

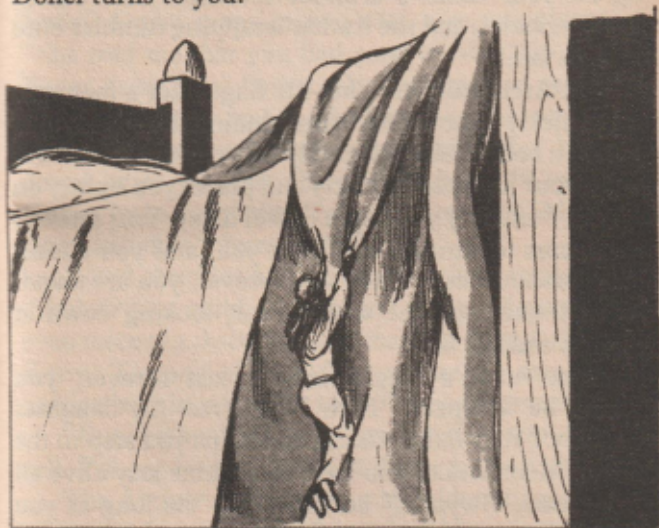
You crawl through the bars of the cell without difficulty and enter a large room with a crude wooden cot against the back wall. A man in white sits on the cot. In the dim light, you see that his mouth and hands are bound tightly with broad leather straps. Shackles chain his ankles to the stone wall behind the cot. His eyes stare at you and fill with tears as he recognizes you.

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Your father motions to you to come to him. He points with his leather-bound arms toward the strap across his mouth. You grab the cloth of his Druid's robe and pull yourself up beside him. Donel lays his head at your feet, turning so that you can reach the heavy brass buckle behind his head. The silver threads in your father's beard glisten in the flickering torch-light as you pull hard on the stiff strap. Finally you feel the buckle loosen. The leather gag falls away, and Donel turns to you.



"Gwynne! There's no time to talk. We must stop Lytir. See if you can get these straps off my hands," he whispers hoarsely. Tears of happiness stream from his bright blue eyes into the long black and silver beard. You want to hug him tightly, but your tiny arms are much too small.

The leather bindings on your father's hands are buckled even tighter than the gag. Your miniature fingers cannot budge the stiff leather. "I can't unbuckle the straps, Father," you cry anxiously.

"Keep trying, Gwynne. You can do it!" Donel urges quietly. Then you remember the butcher's knife in your belt and begin to use its long blade to pry with. The thick leather begins to break loose. Finally the strap pulls free, and you grab it with both hands, standing on your father's arm for leverage. The buckle slowly releases, and the leather wrapping tumbles onto Donel's lap.

The Archdruid stretches his fingers for a moment, then quickly removes the other binding. He reaches for you with both hands and gently lifts you to his face. He kisses your forehead tenderly and places you lightly on the cot. Suddenly you begin to feel dizzy. Your father's face seems to shrink away from you, and you almost lose consciousness. When you recover, you are standing, full-sized, on the wooden cot, looking down at Donel's smiling face.

"The wand's magic doesn't last forever, you know," he whispers. "Now I can greet my daughter properly." Your father stands and helps you step to the floor. "Memories of you have helped me stay alive all these years, Gwynne," he whispers. "As long as you and Thea were in my thoughts, Lytir couldn't win. I have grown weak, my daughter, because the assassin has kept me bound and gagged for many years. He plans to violate our agreement and become master of all Erdragh. He thinks I have become too weak to stop him, but he is wrong."

"Father!" Thea whispers. "Is that your voice?"

"Yes, my child. Gwynne has freed me, and we shall soon escape from these foul cells."

"But what about Beryl?" your sister asks. "I heard her voice in my ear last night, telling me not to worry, but I couldn't see her."

"She was here, Thea," Donel explains. "You just didn't recognize her. Do you remember the bat that Agnar chased into the corridor? That was your Aunt Beryl. Sometimes she visits me as a small mouse, too. Beryl is waiting for the right moment to move against Lytir." Donel turns to you with a questioning look. "She told me that you had gone to Misthlip to fetch Kerm. Is he here? Is that why Lytir was so nervous?"

You suddenly realize why Beryl wanted you to find Kerm. You tell your father everything that has happened since you met the strange bard. "I've failed, Father," you conclude. "I chose to come to Valdegarde alone and didn't bring help!"

Donel chuckles and strokes your hair tenderly. "Failed? No, child, you haven't failed. Young Neil is even more of a threat to Lytir than our friend, the brave Kerm. The son of Bors! No wonder the assassin has barricaded himself in his room!" he adds mysteriously.

"But, Father," you cry, "we're still trapped in this cell. I'm too large now to get through the bars!"

The Archdruid grabs your shoulders firmly. "Stop worrying, Gwynne. You have already made me strong by freeing my hands and mouth—and Beryl has brought something very special." Donel reaches into his sleeve and pulls out a small leather pouch. "This is powerful Greater Mistletoe that I collected on my last Midsummer's Eve in Erdragh. I cut it myself with a golden sickle and caught it in an oaken bowl before it

touched the ground. With this sacred mistletoe, we shall regain Valdegarde and put an end to Lytir's reign of terror."

"How, Father? How can we—"

"I need your help again, Gwynne," Donel interrupts. "Stand guard by the bars near Thea while I summon a friend to assist us."

"But, Father, what can I do if someone comes?" you ask.

"You already know of the wand's strange magic, or you may choose to use the necklace," Donel replies quickly. He sees your blank expression and realizes that you do not understand. "I see that Beryl told you nothing of the necklace. Pull one of the beads from its magic chain," he orders.

You clutch one of the smooth golden globes and pull gently. The ball separates from the chain and glows in your fingers.

"Be ready to throw it if necessary," he says, "but don't drop it, whatever happens!" You stare at the golden orb, realizing that it must be a dangerous, magical weapon of some kind. You pull the Wand of Wonder from your belt and take your place by the bars to keep watch.

The Archdruid turns to the stone wall by the cot and begins to rub the sacred mistletoe over the rough surface. Working quickly, he soon has drawn an outline of a bulky figure on the stone wall. Then, his hands pressed against the stone wall, Donel starts to chant the same phrase over and over:

"Hear thy servant, Elements of Earth!
I conjure these stones and order thy birth."

As your father continues to chant, you hear a metallic click in the lock, and the door begins to open. You raise the golden bead, and a slender, leather-clad figure leaps into the room. Your heart pounds with joy as you recognize the honey-colored hair and flashing green eyes.

"Neil!" you cry. "Over here, in the cell!"

The bard rushes to the iron bars and reaches toward you through them. He pulls your trembling body toward him, sliding his gentle hands to your cheeks. Without a word, his firm lips meet yours through the space between the cold metal bars. You reach out and caress his broad shoulders, losing yourself in the magic of his embrace.

"Hey!" calls Thea. "Will somebody tell me what's going on? Who's this, Gwynne?"

You lower your arms and break the tender kiss very slowly. As your lips separate from Neil's, you gaze lovingly into his enchanting elven eyes. For a long moment, you look at each other, knowing that you have begun to share something too beautiful to explain to your younger sister.

You glance down at Thea's confused face. "This is Neil, Thea. He's here to help us rescue Father."

The bard smiles brightly at your sister. "Let's see if we can get those chains off your legs, Thea." He bends to examine Thea's shackles and is starting to reach for his thief's tools when a shadow fills the open doorway.

You turn to see Agnar's bright, yellow, cat's eyes widen in surprise at what is happening. The flind yells, "He's free! The Archdruid's free!"

Neil jumps to his feet, brandishing Orcslicer. The flind's paw snaps forward in a blur of movement, pull-

ing the strange chained weapon, a flindbar, from its belt. With Orcslicer humming in his hand, the bard stalks toward the lion-man. Agnar swings the flindbar in a slow, circular motion as Neil tries to circle around to the door. You point the Wand of Wonder at the flind, clutching the magical gold bead in your other hand.

Suddenly Orcslicer slices the air in front of Agnar, barely missing the lion-man. The flindbar swings outward and wraps itself around Neil's wrist and hand. The flind jerks hard on the handle of the cruel weapon, tightening the chain painfully around Neil's wrist and hand. Orcslicer falls from Neil's injured fist, but the bard quickly grabs the hilt with his other hand. Neil swings the enchanted blade with fury, and Agnar drops the flindbar and rushes for the corridor.

"Stop it, Gwynne! It's trying to get away!" Neil cries.

You have only an instant to try to stop the flind before it escapes to find help.

*If you wish to use the Wand of Wonder,
turn to page 149.*

*If you decide to throw the golden bead
at the flind, turn to page 134.*

The menacing flind is closer than its evil master. The flindbar Neil warned you about with his dying words is whistling in the air above Agnar's head. Quickly you point the Wand of Wonder at the snarling lion-man. "*Lumin!*" you command.

Instantly the room becomes totally dark. It feels somehow thick and heavy around you. Evil laughter somewhere off to your right and the whistling of Agnar's flindbar are the only sounds to penetrate the void.

"I'm sure that our guest was not expecting her toy to make it easier for us, Agnar," Lytir's mocking voice says. "We can see you, my dear, but you cannot see us. You humans are so powerless in the dark."

You feel something hard and cold wrap around your wrist and tighten painfully. The talisman falls with a clatter from your hand to the floor. A massive paw knocks the Wand of Wonder from your other hand, and the flind begins to squeeze your breath away. The darkness of the room slowly becomes indistinguishable from your failing consciousness as you drift toward . . .

THE END

When you see that the giant weasel is almost as large as you are, you realize that you cannot stop its charge with your kitchen knife. You decide to run for the nearest tree, hoping to reach it before the weasel overtakes you. Catching sight of a large oak tree with a low-hanging limb only ten steps away, you head straight for it.

With a powerful leap, you wrap your arms around the thick limb and pull your legs up just as the weasel's muzzle brushes your left foot. Wrapping both legs over the branch, you hang on tightly as the snarling monster leaps repeatedly, narrowly missing you with its slashing teeth. The tree bark is moss-covered and slippery, and your arms are beginning to tire. To your horror, you feel your grip slipping, and you start to fall. As you drop to the soft earth, you see the giant weasel's sharp teeth before your face. You close your eyes, expecting to feel them sink into your throat any second.

A shrill whistle pierces the forest air somewhere behind the weasel. You open your eyes and stare into the horrible jaws of the vicious creature, but it has stopped its attack and stands alert, ears perked. You hear the sound of feet running over the forest floor toward you, but you are afraid to move your head because of the weasel.

"Yee, yee, mzuh Seela!" You hear a series of strange sounds and are relieved to see the monster turn away from your face. Daring to raise your head, you find yourself looking straight into the eyes of a curious little creature.

It is a small, well-proportioned man, about three and a half feet tall, dressed in a suit of green and brown armor made of pieces of overlapping leather. He carries

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a little rawhide shield. Bright blue eyes shine against the dark brown skin of an enormous nose. Beneath a leather helmet, a shock of ivory-colored hair hangs to the creature's armored shoulders. He holds a long, sharp spear, pointed steadily at your face. You have found the Misthlip gnomes.

"Who are you, and why have you come to the Misthlip Hills?" the gnome demands. The giant attack weasel sits alertly at his side, watching your every movement.

"I am Gwynne of Valdegarde," you say as confidently as you can from your prone position. "I am the daughter of Donel, the Archdruid, and niece of Beryl. I have come to the Misthlip Hills to find the brave Kerm."

The guard studies your face carefully for a long moment, then lowers the spear. He helps you to your feet and introduces himself. "I am Bakin, of the Misthlip clan, and this is Seela, my guard weasel. We will accompany you to the camp of Kerm."

Please turn to page 112.

You cannot stop staring into the woman's lovely eyes. Your only thought is to be held closely by the mother you believed dead. Tears of joy cloud your eyes as you take a hesitant step toward the woman.

"No!" Neil shouts, leaping from the shadows. "Get back, Gwynne!" he warns. "Your mother is dead. This is Lytir!"

The woman looks at you with pleading eyes. "Help me, Gwynne," she begs. "Lytir has kept your father and me in these caverns for many years. And now he has disguised himself as this elven bard to deceive you and capture you, too."

"Evil liar!" yells Neil, raising Orcslicer to strike the woman. "Know the fury of Neil Borsson!"

If you think the bard is really Lytir in disguise and want to save your mother, turn to page 44.

If you think the woman is really Lytir and want to help Neil, turn to page 122.

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As you stare at the assassin's retreating figure, you suddenly realize that Lytir might lead you to your father. You scurry as fast as your tiny legs can carry you, following the evil half-orc. He leads you along a twisting passageway, past several closed doors. Occasionally you hear muffled snarls in the groll language.

You are nearly exhausted when Lytir finally turns into a straight section of corridor that ends abruptly at a stone wall. Two identical wooden doors face each other across the passageway. The evil priest stops at the one on the right. You hide yourself in the shadows of the door opposite.

Lytir's pale, bony hand grasps the iron handle of the massive portal. You glimpse a bloodred leather-clad arm beneath the heavy cloak as the assassin pushes the door open to reveal a lighted room.

Please turn to page 41.

As the giant troll lumbers toward you, you realize that you cannot stop the huge monster with your knife. In desperation, you decide to use the Wand of Wonder. Pulling the ivory wand from your belt, you point it at the troll and shout, "*Lumin!*"

A shining red haze streams from the tip of the wand and hangs over you momentarily before it disappears. Nothing else seems to happen. You replace the wand, whip out your knife, and wait for the troll to come.

Suddenly you realize that the troll is confused. It cannot seem to find you. As it rushes by you, you slash at its legs with your knife. The monster howls in rage and pain but still can't seem to see you.

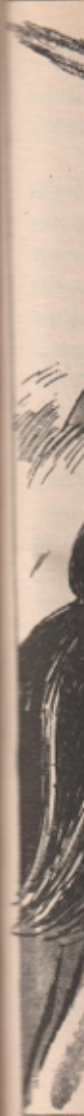
"Gwynne!" Neil calls in Druid. "Where are you?"

His words sink in immediately. The wand has made you invisible! You dance around the giant troll, hacking at it with your knife and dodging its grasping claws. In the corner, you see a green blur as Orcslicer finds its mark. Neil rushes to your aid against the troll. Orcslicer's green blade flashes against the blue Faerie Fire in a series of rapid blows. Bits and pieces of the monster are scattered about the floor, trying to move together to become whole again. You know that the only way to kill a troll is by fire, but Neil's sword is rendering it momentarily helpless.

You hear a snarl by the fireplace and turn just in time to see a small patch of light open among the chimney stones. A bulky silhouette partially blocks the light, and then there is darkness once more.

Neil bellows a battle cry and severs both legs of the troll with one blow. While the mutilated creature tries to reconnect itself, Neil looks around quickly.

"Where's the gnoll, Gwynne? Where are you?"



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You reach out and grab Neil's free hand. "I saw it go through a panel of some kind in the fireplace. Come on!" You lead Neil to the spot where you saw the patch of light, and he deftly examines the stones.

"Ah! Here it is!" he whispers. A rectangle of light appears among the stones as Neil opens the secret panel. "Let's go," he says, "before those trolls manage to find all of their pieces and come after us." His agile body dives through the opening, and you follow quickly. "Are you here?" he asks, unable to see you.

"Yes, right here," you respond, touching his shoulder lightly. Neil nods and closes the secret panel.

You are in a short, lighted corridor that ends at some stone steps. Across from the steps is a heavy wooden panel with a large iron ring in its center.

"I think I know where we are," Neil says, walking to the end of the corridor and looking down the steps. "I remember playing in this corridor as a child. These steps lead to the caverns below Valdegarde, and this panel is a secret entrance to Donel's library."

"Which way should we go, Neil?" you ask.

"Since we don't know where the talisman is, it probably doesn't matter," answers the bard.

You hear the fireplace panel begin to slide back.

"Let's go, Gwynnel!" says Neil. "There's no time to waste! The caverns or the library—which will it be?"

*If you choose to go down the steps
into the caverns, turn to page 148.*

*If you wish to search the library
for the talisman, turn to page 137.*

Quickly you whip the Wand of Wonder from your belt and point it directly at the beady red eyes of the mouse.

"*Lumin!*" you command.

"No, don't!" says a familiar voice—Beryl's voice!

But your aunt's warning has come too late. Instantly a torrent of water rains down and begins to flood the tiny storeroom. The water is already up to your waist and rising rapidly. Soon it will be over your head.

Before your eyes, the mouse begins to change its shape. It grows larger by the second until it has turned into a full-grown woman dressed in a Druid's robe. Beryl! A sudden dizziness causes your head to spin as you struggle to stay afloat in the rising water. When you recover, you find that you, too, have grown back to your normal size.

"Beryl!" you exclaim, hugging her tightly.

You hear a sharp blow on the thick wooden door, and Beryl says, "I'm afraid there's no time for a proper reunion, Gwynne." The magical rain continues to flood the storeroom as the first battle-ax crashes through the door. The heavy oaken planks are quickly reduced to splinters, and you see the sneering hyena-like snouts of Lytir's gnolls waiting to take both of you to their evil master.

THE END

You are nearly unconscious when you hear the sound of beautiful, hypnotic music seeming to come from far away, like part of a lovely dream. Your panic vanishes, and every muscle in your body relaxes.

In your dream, Neil's emerald eyes gaze softly into yours. He is saying something wonderful to you in the soothing tones and phrases of the secret Druid dialect. *Gwynne, give me your hand. . . .*

"Your hand, Gwynne! Give me your hand!" Your eyes snap open, and you see the bard standing in the lamplight of Donel's study with an outstretched arm. In a daze, you reach for his hand, suddenly aware that you are no longer stuck to the strange creature.

Neil pulls you gently toward him, and you rise, still feeling somewhat dazed and confused. With a sigh, you hug the bard's strong shoulders, pressing your cheek against his shining leather armor. He strokes your hair and whispers softly, "Everything's fine. Guthlic likes my music so much that he's decided to be our friend."

You turn and see a formless gray mass where your father's chair had been.

"Meet Guthlic," says Neil. "He's a mimic who has served the Archdruid for more than twenty years. Mimics make wonderful spies and guards, and Guthlic is a master at both jobs. His current mission is to guard your father's desk—to the death, if need be."

The mimic's mass begins to change, assuming roughly humanoid shape. The "head" begins to speak, in the very precise form of the secret Druid dialect.

"Oh, Master Neil, I do hope the Archdruid's daughter is unharmed. If I've injured the girl, I can never face the Archdruid again."

The bard plays a simple but haunting melody on

his lute as he reassures the mimic. "My friend, you did exactly the right thing. It was impossible for you to know that Gwynne is the Archdruid's daughter."

The featureless shape undulates as if it were a giant cobra, charmed by the chords of the bard's lute. The "face," on a long, flexible stalk, extends slowly toward you, moving with the languid rhythm of the magical sound. You stand perfectly still as it weaves and bobs about you, examining you from all sides.

"You are the very image of your mother," Guthlic says finally. "Same hair, same nose, lips, chin. You must be the older girl—uhhh . . ."

"Gwynne," you finish for it.

"That's it! And the light-haired youngster—the one who came to Valdegarde last night—she's . . ."

"Thea!" you exclaim. "Where is my sister?"

"Why, she's with the Archdruid," Guthlic answers.

"My father? You've seen him? Is he—"

"Alive?" Neil interrupts, still strumming the lute softly. "Of course he's alive. I told you we would find him, and we shall. What our friend is saying is that Lytir captured your aunt and Thea and is keeping them with Donel in the caverns. Isn't that true, Guthlic?"

"Almost, Master Neil. The Archdruid's sister managed to evade the half-orc through her Druid magic. Sometimes I see her as a bat or a mouse. She scurries or flies about the caverns, keeping an eye on Thea and Donel. Lytir's henchman, a cat-faced flind named Agnar, keeps watch over both in a dungeon below us."

"So there is a way to reach the dungeon from here without returning to the library?" you ask excitedly.

"Certainly," the mimic answers.

"I'm sure good Guthlic will show us the way after we've found what we seek," Neil says calmly. "But first we should learn the extent of the danger awaiting us below. How many guards does Lytir have, friend Guthlic, and how may we avoid them?"

The featureless heads stalk retracts into the gray blob until only a slight bump remains. "He's thinking," Neil explains. The music from the bard's lute still swirls in your brain, although his fingers no longer strum the magical instrument.

In a few moments, the bump atop the blob begins to stretch upward and forms into the same stalk and head. The creature weaves rhythmically, as if it still hears the lute's melody. "Most of the half-orc's band of thieves and assassins are gone," Guthlic reports. "Over the years, they tired of waiting for Lytir to deliver Erdragh to them, as he had promised. The Archdruid somehow used himself as a hostage for the Erdragh Forest, and Lytir's fear of Donel's power has confined the assassin to Valdegarde."

"How many of his henchmen remain?" Neil asks.

"Only a few hyena-faced gnolls and their slimy troll playmates," answers the mimic. "The flind, Agnar, tries to control them for Lytir, but its influence is dwindling. Agnar hates the trolls and keeps them locked in cages until it needs them. The gnolls are becoming restless and demand to raid Erdragh, but Lytir refuses to allow it, for reasons we can only guess at."

"Listen to me carefully, Guthlic," Neil says in a low, clear tone, "and hark to the melody." The bard begins to play a series of chords. "We need you to be our eyes, just as you spied for the Archdruid. We must

free your master and drive Lytir from Valdegarde. Go to the caverns and learn the assassin's plans. Then return to us and tell us what you have seen and heard."

Neil er.ds his instructions with a flourish on the lute. The mimic remains perfectly still for an instant before it seems to grow legs. When the transformation is over, you see a strange creature with ten tentacles supporting the stalk and head portion.

Silently, the ten-legged spy disappears beneath the desk. A muffled click from the small knee space is all that you hear of Guthlic's departure.

"Now we know the way out of here," says Neil with a smile. "I don't think Guthlic knows anything about the talisman. Mimics are not particularly bright, as a rule, but they do have a sense of duty and cooperation if you talk to them properly. Your father probably told him to guard this desk years ago, and that's exactly what he's been doing ever since."

"But how does he live? What does he eat?" you ask.

"Our friend Guthlic is very likely one of the main reasons why Lytir's horde of gnolls and trolls has shrunk so much over the past ten years," Neil explains with a fiendish chuckle.

"Ugh!" you respond, remembering the mimic's sticky skin. "How did you persuade him to let me go?"

"It was easy as soon as I told him who you were. The daughter of Donel is a very important person at Valdegarde, no matter whose side you're on," Neil says lightly. "He also liked my music."

Something in the bard's words disturbs you. "Whose side *are* you on, Neil?" you ask suddenly. His emerald eyes narrow a bit in the lamplight, and his elven ears flatten slightly against the silver headband.

A smile grows at the corners of Neil's finely sculpted lips. He pulls you close and holds you tightly.

"Ours, Gwynne—ours," he whispers softly. "I'll always be on your side, no matter what happens."

Neil's words confuse you at first. No one has ever made you feel so warm and comfortable. Your heart is pounding in your chest as the wonderful words of this beautiful man echo in your head.

"I hope so, Neil. I want to be close to you—but I'm not sure why," you add honestly.

The bard's warm smile broadens into a grin. "Don't worry, Gwynne," he says softly. "I feel the same way about being with you. I've never had time to be this close to a woman before, maybe because no one has ever affected me the way you do."

You feel a thrill of pleasure as you realize that this handsome bard is thinking of you as a woman. You blush suddenly and turn your face away from his gaze.

"Hey, what's this?" he asks, turning your head back toward his face. His smooth hands seem cool against your flaming cheeks. "Why, you're shy!" he exclaims.

"Well, what do you expect?" you cry. "The only 'men' I've ever talked to are the Druid boys at our festivals. I've never even thought of them as men. And now you come here from some strange city and talk to me about being a woman! Don't you see that I'm confused right now? My father's still alive, my aunt and sister are missing, and you want me to be romantic! I'm not one of those experienced women in your big college city, or—"

"Stop it!" Neil's forceful command breaks through your rising anger, and you can't control the tears that

begin to stream down your cheeks. He takes the hem of your sleeve and carefully dries your eyes and face. "I do understand, Gwynne," he says gently. "As for other women, I really haven't had much time for that sort of thing. I'm almost too embarrassed to admit it, but I probably know about as much along those lines as the boys at your festivals." His eyes are shining, and his smile warms and comforts you.

"I wanted you to know that you make me feel wonderful, and that I want to stay with you, Gwynne. And I didn't mean to put any pressure on you," he adds. Before you realize what he is doing, Neil bends over and kisses you lightly on your forehead. "Now," he says quickly, "let's take advantage of Guthlic's absence and find that talisman." He already has the packet of thieves' tools open as he squats beside the desk.

His sincere explanation has confused you even more. The spot on your forehead where his lips brushed your skin seems to be burning and glowing pleasantly. You want to say something else or to feel his arms around you again, but you realize that you must help him find the talisman that might save your father.

Above Neil's head, you see the finely carved wooden sculpture and the tiny golden casket gleaming through the dust. Neil is absorbed in his task, and he does not see you reach toward the desk top. You hesitate as you try to decide which object to examine first.

*If you wish to look at the sculpture,
turn to page 132.*

*If you wish to examine the golden casket,
turn to page 48.*

As you round a bend in the path, you smell smoke from cooking fires and see a mound nestled secretively among the hills and trees. Thin streams of smoke rise from holes in the center of the grassy hillock.

Bakin stops near a large, moss-draped oak. He parts a hanging moss curtain, revealing a narrow cleft that slants downward into the tree's dark interior. He motions for you to enter.

You nod and squeeze through the opening, with Bakin close behind. Seela stays outside the hidden entrance to guard it from intruders. The corridor widens as it levels off into a four-foot shaft, well lit by smokeless torches. You walk in a stooped position, while Bakin scurries past you and leads the way.

You are beginning to feel very cramped when Bakin finally turns into a side corridor to the right. You hear the muffled sound of many voices through a closed door at the end of the tunnel. Bakin opens the door and ushers you into a brightly lighted room bustling with activity and smelling of delicious food. The great dining hall is filled with hundreds of gnomes, eating at several dozen long, low tables.

You see gnome men, women, and children, all with different shades of brown skin and light hair, ranging from yellow to silver. Huge platters of steaming meat and vegetables are being shuttled among the tables from the large cooking hearths at the rear of the great hall. Heavy crocks of dark ale are scattered on each table, with dippers hanging on their sides to fill the mugs of thirsty gnomes.

For a moment, no one notices that you have entered the hall. Then a sudden quiet falls upon the entire room, except for an occasional nervous whisper. Bakin



leads you through the maze of silent tables to a raised platform near the fireplaces. There is a smaller eating table on the platform, with three places set.

At the center, seated in a large carved chair, is the most impressive gnome you have ever seen. Unlike other warriors, he wears shining plate armor and a necklace of gleaming gold nuggets. His long, silver-white beard and hair shine against his battle-scarred chocolate skin. The intense blue eyes and huge nose of his race squint and twitch as Bakin escorts you to the platform.

"Methrad, my lord, this human entered Mithlip from the south, seeking Kerm, she says. 'Gwynne of Valdegarde' and claims to be the child of Donel."

A low rumble of astonished whispers and murmurs vibrates through the dining hall. The gnome chieftain

glances to his left at an ancient cleric. The old cleric's skin is dry and wrinkled, and his faded, watery blue eyes study you without expression.

"The noble Kerm is not with us today, child," says the chieftain, motioning to the empty plate on his right. "A quest has taken him from our company." The aged but powerful-looking Methrad looks at you and scowls. "If you have come from Valdegarde, as you say, then you will know that Donel's pact with Lytir has been broken. Evil is loose again in Erdragh."

Methrad's words confuse you. You recall the words of Neil, the strange bard, about some kind of "deal" between Lytir and your father. "Lord Methrad," you say earnestly, "I only learned of the evils that infest my father's house yesterday. I know nothing about the one you call Lytir, or any pacts." You then tell the story of Thea's capture, Beryl's disappearance, and her instructions to find Kerm. For some reason, you do not mention your conversation with the curious bard.

When you have finished your tale, the old cleric rises from the table, leaning on a heavy oaken staff capped with a roughly hammered gold nugget the size of a hen's egg. Hunched with age and pain, he stumbles around the table and stares for a long time at your face. The ancient priest studies your Druid's torque and then looks directly into your eyes. The hall is completely silent as you return the stare as steadily as possible.

The faded blue eyes drop to your neck, and the aged gnome priest extends a trembling finger. You see what may be a smile stretch his dry, cracked lips.

"Give me one of your acorns, child," he commands in a voice brittle with age. "Go on, pull it from the

chain," he urges, noticing your hesitation. "A small one will do."

Glancing at the ring of golden orbs, you select the smallest and pull gently. The ball detaches itself from the chain with no effort. You see no hole or attachment that might have held the globe on the chain.

"Give it to me, child," prompts the old cleric. You hesitate only a few seconds and then hand the golden ball to him. As soon as the gnarled brown fingers take the orb from you, it changes its shape, appearing once more as a crude wooden acorn. The priest's watery blue eyes brighten with tears as he examines the mysterious carving.

"Behold the power of Garl Glittergold!" The ancient voice echoes through the dining hall as the old cleric raises the small acorn above the throng of gnomes. Then suddenly the old man turns and tosses the acorn into the large fireplace behind him.

With a blinding flash, the tiny acorn explodes into a ball of fire, causing the gnome children to scream in fright and several warriors to leap to their feet. You stare at the necklace in amazement, realizing that your father has given you another powerful weapon against the evil Lytir.

"Come with me, daughter of Donel," urges the old priest with open arms. "Approach the side of Methrad, lord of the Misthlip gnomes." He leads you to the empty plate at the chieftain's right hand.

"Tell us more of your father, Gwynne of Valdegarde," says Methrad. "We have waited many seasons for a sign from him to move against Lytir's horde."

While you eat the delicious steaming fruit puddings and vegetables offered to you, you tell the chief and the

old priest everything you can remember of your father. The hospitality of the gnomes is so sincere that you decide to tell the story of the strange bard and to trust them with Neil's description of the talisman.

"So Neil has returned from Fochlucan and hungers for adventure!" the chieftain exclaims. "Kerm will have an ally in his quest, Thrigga," Methrad says to the old cleric. "You have learned many things in the past few hours, Gwynne. The details are uncertain, but Neil's story was true. Lytir has grown impatient and is allowing his evil companions to violate the bargain he made years ago with your Archdruid father. It may mean that Donel has become weakened and that Lytir no longer fears the Talisman of Valdegarde."

"My lord, I only want to find my aunt and my sister, and to rescue my father, if he still lives."

"Be at ease, Gwynne of Valdegarde," interjects the ancient priest. "Lytir fears your father's talisman too much to have harmed the Archdruid. He may try to use Beryl and Thea to force Donel to give him the stone, but he will never succeed. Your father is much stronger than even Lytir can imagine."

"You came to us seeking Kerm, but he has already left Misthlip for Valdegarde," Methrad says. "Two days ago, one of Lytir's trolls attacked a guard near the brook. His weasel gave its life for the guard, who escaped to tell us of the monster. Thrigga advised me that Lytir seems to have broken his pact with Donel, or perhaps he has lost control of his henchmen. We sent Kerm to the caverns below Valdegarde to scout the area. He left yesterday and has not returned."

"Is there a way into Valdegarde through the Misthlip caverns?" you ask excitedly.

Methrad frowns. "Yes, but only by way of the Cave of Spiders. It is a very dangerous path, especially for a young girl armed only with a butcher knife."

"And a magical necklace!" you protest. "As for my age, I am nearly fifteen! I have already received my Druid's torque, and I shall be initiated into the First Circle at the spring festival of Beltane!"

The old cleric holds up one wrinkled hand. "No offense was intended, Gwynne," he says soothingly. "The path through the Cave of Spiders is a peril that can be overcome. Once you have entered Valdegarde, you must seek the talisman. Lytir will do everything in his power to prevent you from finding it or to steal it from you if you do. The half-orc is a deadly assassin who uses his great skills of stealth and deception to suit his evil purposes. Lytir is a master of disguises and can mimic any person, living or dead, until he's close enough to scratch his target with a poisoned dagger."

Thrigga leans across the table and continues in a low voice. "It is also said that Lytir possesses evil magic skills that cannot be stopped by normal weapons. That is why you must find the talisman before you confront your father's enemy."

"Well, I have this necklace," you say. "How did you know about it, old priest?"

"Ah!" says the cleric with satisfaction. "When you find your father, tell him that old Thrigga's gift helped to save him. I knew of the Necklace of Missiles because I gave it to the Archdruid myself to celebrate the completion of Valdegarde years before you were born."

"Necklace of Missiles?"

"Indeed, Gwynne! The magic of Garl Glittergold, lord of all brave gnomes, is locked in those globes of

gold. Only the wearer may see them as they are. Only the wearer can remove them from their magic chain. Each globe is a powerful fireball. The largest stone can destroy a house!"

"If you wish to follow Kerm into the caverns, I shall send Bakin to guide you," says Methrad. "But my advice is to stay here with us or to go home and wait for Kerm and Neil to restore Valdegarde to your father."

"Pardon, my lord," Thrigga interjects, "but as Mistress of Valdegarde, Gwynne may be needed in the quest for the talisman. One legend holds that only the purest of persons may touch the enchanted stone. With all due respect, our noble Kerm and his friend, Neil Borsson, may not be able to claim that distinction."

Scattered chuckles among the gnome warriors and their women indicate their agreement with Thrigga's questioning of Kerm's and Neil's purity. Methrad looks at your excited face and nods his head slowly. "I shall leave it to the daughter of the great Donel, Archdruid of Erdragh," he says. Every eye in the dining hall is on you. You must make a decision that may affect not only you but all the inhabitants of Edragh as well.

*If you decide to follow Kerm
into the Cave of Spiders, turn to page 35.*

*If you want to stay in the gnome village
until Kerm returns from his quest, turn to page 25.*

*If you decide to return to Beryl's cottage
and wait for Neil and Kerm to fight Lytir
and rescue your father, turn to page 30.*

While you try to decide what to do, the sharp edges of battle-axes pierce the heavy door. "We'll have to fight them!" you call to Neil. He draws Orcslicer from its scabbard as two huge gnolls crash into the library. They look like humans with hyena faces, with greenish gray snouts and dull yellow manes. They wear filthy, ragged capes of black fur over their sweaty leather armor. The gnolls raise their battle-axes and stalk toward you and Neil.

The bard utters a strange word, and Orcslicer begins to hum and gleam. Neil's smooth features harden, and his green eyes glint with fury.

Suddenly the secret panel opens, and three more of the fierce gnolls crowd into the room. One waves a two-handed sword in one hand as if it were a toy. The other two are swinging heavy, spiked iron balls chained to short handles, which you recognize as morning stars.

The five gnolls fan out across the library, forcing you and Neil slowly into the corner by the old wardrobe.

"The wand, Gwynne! There are too many of them!" yells Neil.

You grab the ivory Wand of Wonder and wave it toward the advancing gnolls. "*Lumin!*" you hurriedly command.

The slender wand begins to vibrate, and a thick stream of yellow smoke sprays into the grinning snouts of the oncoming monsters. An odor like that of rotten eggs fills the library.

Within seconds, a noxious, stinking cloud envelops the gnolls, causing them to gag uncontrollably. Three of the hyenalike creatures drop their weapons and fall to the floor, clutching their throats. The other two,

blinded by the yellow cloud, swing their weapons wildly.

The cloud is beginning to burn your eyes, too, and you start to feel nauseated. You notice Neil rubbing his eyes and gagging. You must help the bard before the magical cloud overcomes both of you.

The dark interior of the tall wardrobe is your only chance for escape. Grabbing Neil's hand and putting your arm around his slender waist, you lead him to the heavy wooden cabinet. "Step up, Neil!" you whisper in his delicately pointed ear. You assist him into the massive oaken closet, then quickly crowd into the narrow space beside him.

Please turn to page 27.

The thought of disobeying Beryl troubles you, but you realize that she couldn't have known about your strange conversation with the bard. If your father is still alive, and if there is such a thing as the Talisman of Valdegarde, any delays might allow Lytir more time to put his evil plans into play.

If Neil is what he claims to be, you think, then he will help me. If he is part of Lytir's plan—perhaps even Lytir himself—then he may lead me to my father.

You glance toward the path through the Erdragh Forest to Kerm's village, then turn and follow the bard toward Valdegarde.

The front of the ruins is frightening, with long shadows hiding the entrance. There is a deathly silence in the surrounding trees. You can see neither the bard's tracks nor Beryl's. You must decide how to enter Valdegarde.

*If you want to return to the well,
where the troll grabbed Thea, turn to page 63.*

*If you want to try the front entrance,
turn to page 138.*

Neil's furious attack upon the delicate figure distracts you from the wicked hypnotic gaze of the woman with your mother's face. You cannot believe the bard's gentle words have all been lies or that his warm kiss was meant to deceive you.

"You're not my mother!" you shout to the woman. "You're Lytir, my father's sworn enemy!"

The ghostly shape nimbly backs away from Neil. Lines of a sneer begin to crack the thick makeup around the woman's lips.

"I want the Archdruid's talisman, girl," Lytir demands gruffly, "or you and your elven friend will never leave this room alive." The brown cloak parts to reveal a man's body clad in bloodred leather. A needle-pointed dagger with a jeweled hilt appears in one of his dark, thin hands.

Please turn to page 145.

Pulling the Wand of Wonder from your belt, you point it directly at Lytir and command loudly, "*Lumin!*"

Thousands of multicolored, shining particles stream from the tip of the wand, then curve upward to drift back over your body. Lytir seems to grow into a menacing giant, his eyes wide in amazement. You feel dizzy for a moment, and when you recover, you find yourself staring at the assassin's boots.

Lytir's evil laughter booms far above your head. "So Donel's firstborn is an amateur sorceress! A pity she hasn't prepared her lessons well." The half-orc squats to stare at your five-inch body. "I have a birdcage that should be just your size," he sneers, reaching out a large hand toward you.

Whipping your now tiny knife from your belt, you slash in fury at the giant hand. "Ouch!" howls Lytir, jerking back his hand and examining a small gash in his thumb.

In a flash, you turn and race around the corner of the passage, flattening yourself against the wall. As Lytir's heavy boots thunder past you, you dart back the way you came. You pass the battered door with the old lock and see that a large splinter has been chipped out of the planks near its base. A dark crack near the hinges seems big enough for you to squeeze through. Just then, you hear the sound of Lytir's boots returning, along with the clank of armor and other hurrying footsteps.

Without a second thought, you squeeze your miniature body through the jagged hole into the darkness beyond the door.

Please turn to page 143.

Remembering the powerful blow of the monster, you realize you must get help. You run frantically through the briars, stumbling past the gate. By the time you arrive at Beryl's cottage, it is almost dark.

Your aunt is standing outside the stone house nestled among the ancient oaks, and she has an angry look. But her anger turns to concern when she notices that Thea is not with you and she sees your torn robe.

"What is it, Gwynne? Where's Thea?" she cries.

Her golden hair, like your sister's, hangs in soft curls over her gentle face. You sob as you clutch her spotless white Druid's gown.

"Now," she says firmly, "tell me what happened."

You gaze into her flashing black eyes and tell her everything, that happened. When you have finished, Beryl closes her eyes and clutches her powerful torque necklace, with its large, carved figure of a tree. The magic stone oak glows brightly in the failing light as Beryl concentrates deeply. The glow begins to dim, and your aunt opens her eyes and looks very serious.

"What I have feared for many years has begun, my child," Beryl says gravely. "Your father's quest must be finished. The assassin's horde has returned to Erdragh!" Beryl leaves her mysterious mention of your father's quest unexplained and takes your arm gently.

"Come inside, Gwynne. It is time for me to give you something from your father."

"But what about Thea?" you ask anxiously.

"There is nothing that can be done for the time being. She is safe from harm because she is more valuable alive than dead," Beryl says mysteriously.

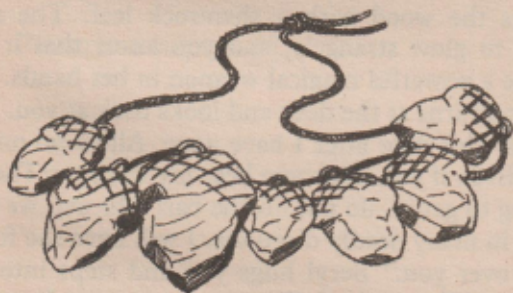
Inside the cozy front room of the stone cottage, the dangers of Valdegarde seem remote. Your senses take in

the small cooking fire, the smell of the simmering vegetable stew, the comfortable furniture. The only thing missing is Thea's musical laughter.

Beryl hands you a fresh robe. "Put this robe on and wait for me," she says solemnly. You remove your torn clothing and wash in the heated water by the fire. You have just slipped the fresh blue gown over your head when Beryl returns with a curious parcel in her hands.

"My brother, the Archdruid and your father, gave me these when he sent his lovely wife here over ten years ago. They were to be your initiation gifts, Gwynne, but I am giving them to you now." Beryl hands you a soft deerskin package, tied with a faded ribbon.

You take the parcel and untie the ribbon with trembling fingers. The first thing you see is a simple golden necklace, with seven crudely carved, wooden acorns of



different sizes on the shining chain. The only other item in the package is a thin white wand made of ivory. It has a tiny green jewel in its tip, and finely engraved words, in a language you don't understand, appear on the slender, polished shaft.

"What are these things, Aunt Beryl?" you ask.

"There is no time for explanations, my child. I must go to Valdegarde and find Thea. Keep these gifts with you. They are powerful magical devices to protect you from the evil forces that threaten Erdragh."

"What can we do against the giant troll?" you ask.

"I do not fear the troll as much as his master," Beryl answers mysteriously. "Anyway, I must go alone to the ruins. Remain here until morning. If I have not returned by dawn, flee to the Misthlip Hills and seek the warrior Kerm. He will know what to do. You will be safe among the Misthlip gnomes.

In your mind, you picture the squatty, yellow-bearded Kerm. Although you have met him several times, you have never been to his native hills.

Beryl goes to the mantel and removes a stout oaken staff. She takes a sprig of sacred mistletoe and rubs it over the staff, whispering a Druid prayer. Then she brushes the wood with a shamrock leaf. The staff begins to glow strangely, and you know that it has become a powerful magical weapon in her hands.

Beryl turns at the door and looks back at you.

"Bar this door after I have gone. Allow no one to enter. Even if you think you hear my voice, or Thea's, begging to get in, do not lift the bar! The evil we face comes in many deadly disguises. I will have the forest watch over you." Beryl hugs you and steps into the darkness. "Remember! Trust no one except Kerm!"

You run to the window and see Beryl talking to the large oak trees lining the cottage path. Their great limbs sway as if they were giant animals, and your aunt vanishes into the shadows. The guards are posted.

Please turn to page 79.

"Easy, Gwynne," a voice whispers in your ear. "It's me, Neil!"

You feel his grip slowly relax, and you turn to face your attacker. In the soft colors of the stained-glass window, the bard's smooth face is flushed with excitement. His warm, boyish grin and the twinkle in his sparkling green eyes soothe your jangled nerves. You wrap your arms around his leather-clad shoulders and hug the bard tightly.

"I'm so glad to see you, Neil," you whisper. "I—I was afraid that you—"

"Hush! There's no time for that now," he interrupts. "I've just had a little problem with some of Lytir's friends, and they may start looking for me any minute. I was searching for the talisman when you came through the secret panel. Help me look for it," he suggests.

Please turn to page 88.

It takes all your willpower to resist the temptation to rush into the woman's open arms. Her eyes seem to have a hypnotic effect upon you, and you force yourself to look away from them. *My mother would be older, you think, and I know that Beryl told me that Mother died when Thea was young.*

You form your fingers into tight fists and look defiantly at the figure with your mother's youthful face. "You're not my mother! I don't know who or what you are, but you can't be my mother!"

The ghostly shape stiffens and seems to grow larger. A slight sneer begins to mar the lovely smooth face. In the dim lamplight, you see fine cracks appear in the thick makeup.

"How very clever of you," the figure says in a mocking male voice. "Your father will be happy indeed to see you after all these years. But where is your aunt, the Archdruid's sister? And that sneaky elven thief with his magic lute? Surely you haven't stumbled into my bedroom by accident." The figure throws back the brown cloak to reveal a wiry man's body clad in dark red leather. His bony hands rest on the jewel-encrusted hilts of two needle-pointed daggers in his wide belt.

"Speak, girl! I am the master of Valdegarde, and you have entered my house uninvited. Where are your companions?" He draws one of the daggers and steps toward you. There is a blur of movement in the shadows by the bed, and Neil appears between you and the assassin. The bard's leather armor glistens in the soft light, and Orcslicer hums in his hand.

Please turn to page 145.

Summoning all the willpower you possess, you control your panic, realizing that this is simply another natural creature of the forest.

You touch your Druid's torque and call to the weasel in a calm voice, "Wait! I am not your enemy, noble creature. If you are hungry, I shall share my food with you." The charging animal stops abruptly and stares at you in surprise, sniffing the air to identify this strange creature who speaks its language. Relaxing, you extend your open hands to the weasel and say, "Come to me and let me know your name."

The giant weasel's beady black eyes blink slowly, and its ears perk in recognition of your words. It slinks gracefully to you and sits at your feet. At first, its whistling snarls are difficult for you to comprehend, but you quickly learn to understand.

"Seela not know blue thing. Must chase," it explains.

"Blue thing is Gwynne, friend to Seela. Gwynne has food for Seela," you add, offering the weasel a few bits of cheese from your pouch.

"Seela not hungry. Seela watch path for Bakin."

"Seela take Gwynne to Bakin?" you suggest.

"Bakin come to Gwynne now," the weasel replies, turning its head at the sound of twigs cracking behind it.

A little figure in brown and green leather armor carrying a small shield and a pointed spear, steps through the thick underbrush. His bright blue eyes open wide in astonishment at the sight of his vicious guard weasel sitting calmly at your feet. The gnome's dark brown face is dominated by an enormous nose, and his ivory-white hair hangs loose beneath a leather helmet.

A whistle from the gnome calls the weasel to his side, and he addresses you carefully. "What manner of magic, evil or good, is it that you speak?"

"Neither, good Bakin. Only words of friendship between two creatures of the forest," you respond loudly. The gnome raises his spear threateningly.

"Are you a sorceress?" he demands. "Or a witch? How did you know my name?"

"Seela told me of his brave master," you say calmly. "I am Gwynne, daughter of the Archdruid Donel and niece of Beryl of Valdegarde. I journey to Misthlip to speak with the warrior Kerm."

The gnome guard is visibly shaken by your confident manner and the revelation of your identity. He studies you carefully for a moment, then relaxes his spear arm.

"I shall take you to Kerm," he agrees. "It is not far."

Please turn to page 112.

You peer carefully into the corridor from your hiding place. It appears to be empty, and you hear the snarling voices of the gnolls faintly in the distance. You squeeze through the hole and start down the corridor, away from the giant hyena creatures. You creep along the cool stone walls, keeping to the shadows along the floor.

It seems to take forever to reach the end of the passage. When you do reach it, you discover two closed doors, one on each side of the corridor. You listen at the door on the left, then hear soft footsteps behind you. Someone or something is approaching rapidly! You crouch in the shadows against the rough wooden door frame.

A tall, dark figure strides purposefully toward your hiding place in the dead-end passageway. The shape is shrouded in a dark brown cloak, so that only its evil-looking head is visible, seeming to float past the torches set in the stone walls. The face is ghostly and pale, with gleaming black eyes peering through dark, bushy eyebrows. The flat nose and mouth are piglike, and a thin widow's peak is prominent in the center of a high forehead.

The figure does not seem to notice you crouched in the doorway. Your heart pounds wildly as the somber shape stops at the door across from you. A pale, bony hand grasps the iron handle of the massive portal. You glimpse a bloodred leather-clad arm beneath the cloak as the door is pushed open into a lighted room.

Please turn to page 41.

The eyes of the beautiful woman sculpted in ancient oak seem to be alive in the flickering light. You take the heavy bust in your hands and wipe the dust from its smooth surface with the hem of your gown. Neil is too intent upon his task to notice as you move to the lamp to study the sculpture more closely.

The woman's face and shoulders are carved delicately from the hard wood. Her exquisite features follow the natural grain of the oak. The flickering light of the lamp forms dancing shadows against the realistic facial lines, seeming to bring life and warmth to the lovely subject.

"I wonder who modeled for this sculpture," you ask softly. Neil stops searching the drawers and looks up. His eyes brighten as he glances first at you and then at the bust.

"Don't you know?" he asks gently, his face softened by emotion. "This will be you in a few years," he says mysteriously. The bard's words confuse you. This beautiful woman, with her delicate bones, perfect lips, graceful neck and shoulders . . . Then you understand.

"My mother?" you whisper breathlessly.

"Your mother, Mavas. Wasn't she lovely?" Neil answers, nodding.

You taste salty tears as you caress the smooth replica of the mother you can hardly remember. Neil wraps his arms around your trembling shoulders and hugs you gently.

"Haven't you ever looked in a mirror, Gwynne? Don't you know how beautiful you are? Those features are yours—all of them. You heard what Guthlic said." He tilts your chin so that you are staring into his exotic elven eyes. His strong arms pull you closer to his chest,

and his honey-colored hair falls softly against your flushed cheeks.

The nearness of Neil's enchanting lips makes you forget doubts and suspicions about the strange bard. His warm lips touch yours lightly. Your heart pounds furiously, and you close your eyes, pressing your lips against his. For a beautiful moment, all the dangers of Valdegarde are forgotten.

You feel Neil's strong hands push you away with gentle firmness. Opening your eyes, you see the bard's warm smile and tender expression. "We have so many things to say and learn about each other, Gwynne," he whispers, "but you must know by now that I'm falling in love with you. I think you've started to feel the same way toward me. I promise you that we'll have all the time we need for our love to grow into something very beautiful. But first, we must finish what we have begun. We must destroy Lytir and restore Valdegarde to your father. We must find the talisman before it falls into the assassin's hands."

No one has ever made you feel more comfortable and beautiful. Neil's romantic words, the magic of his kiss, the soft light, the quiet father's secret study, your thrilling adventures together—everything seems exciting and new and wonderful. But Neil's reminder of the task to be finished is true. With all your heart, you hope that you and the bard will have much more time together, and in more pleasant circumstances. But for now, you must find the Talisman of Valdegarde.

Please turn to page 68.

Just as the lion-man slams the door, you fling the golden bead straight at him. A searing blast of fire engulfs the massive wooden door. The glare of the fireball brightens the entire room and cell, and you see Thea's frightened face and Donel's look of concentration as he continues his chant. The Archdruid does not seem to have noticed the fiery explosion. Neil rushes to the bar and begins to pick the lock on the door.

"Hang on, Gwynne!" he cries. "I'll have you and Donel out of there before the flind can find help."

The flames are so hot that the door starts to disintegrate. Suddenly a strange figure appears in the burning doorframe. It is the cloaked figure of Lytir, surrounded by an eerie blue haze. The evil assassin walks through the wall of flames without seeming to feel the heat. You see the leering grin on his face as he steps through the fire.

"Neil! Look behind you!" you scream. The bard whirls around to face Lytir.

"My father's murderer!" he sneers, with hatred in his voice. "Prepare to die, fiend!" In blind fury, Neil takes a mighty swing at the evil figure with Orcslicer. As the blade descends upon Lytir, the blue haze glows and changes to a red hue. Sparks fly as the enchanted sword strikes the magical barrier. Again and again the blade falls, but the bard's sword cannot break through the protective shield of sorcery.

"I must insist that you cease this foolish assault, elf!" Lytir demands coolly, pulling a small, gleaming object from his sleeve. It appears to be a sliver of polished metal, no larger than a heavy nail. He holds the object up and chants:



“By the power of this burnished steel,
Bind the body of the elf called Neil!”

Neil's raised sword halts in midair the instant Lytir finishes the spell. The bard's young body seems to be frozen into a statue, completely rigid and lifeless. Lytir turns away from Neil and faces you with an evil grin.

“Welcome to Valdegarde, Gwynne,” the sinister half-orc says menacingly. “I see that you have already found suitable accommodations. I shall have Agnar install another cot in the cell so that you can always be near your dear father.”

In panic, you grab two more of the beads and fling them into the assassin's grinning face. The blue haze flares suddenly and seems to smother the twin balls of fire as they explode. Lytir's slender form is untouched, and his evil laughter fills the room.

Please turn to page 153.

"Let's look in the library for the talisman," you suggest quickly. "I'm sure my father must have spent a lot of time there."

Neil nods in agreement and pulls on the heavy iron ring. The thick oak panel swings open easily. You notice that its opposite side is disguised as a wall of empty shelves.

"Quick! Get inside!" says Neil. "I hear someone coming!"

You dart into the library, with the bard close behind. He closes the panel noiselessly.

One question has been troubling you. You decide to ask it now. "How long will I be invisible?" you ask.

He turns and looks directly at you. "About three more seconds," he says with a grin, putting his finger on your nose. "And it sure is nice to see you again."

The bard's boyish smile makes you blush crimson. The memory of his strong arms holding you, his lips near yours, erases the sense of danger. You want to rush to him and stay close to him forever. As you turn to search your father's library, your eyes are bright with a strange excitement you have never felt before.

Please turn to page 88.

You remember how dangerous the old well looked and decide to try Valdegarde's front entrance. You steal through the broken gate and step silently through the weeds and briars without leaving a trace. There is no sign at all of the bard. The shadows of the crumbling roof shroud the front of your father's house in mystery. As soon as you reach the stone and log walls, you flatten yourself against them in the dark shadows. You inch closer to the front door and see that it is standing open. The darkness of the front room seems to merge with the shadows outside.

You take a deep breath to relax your pounding heart and step across the threshold into the house where you were born. You have returned at last to Valdegarde.

Please turn to page 76.

"If we hide in the wardrobe, they might not find us," you suggest. Neil hesitates, but the sound of axes on the door forces his decision.

"Come on, then," he whispers, pulling you toward the massive oaken closet.

The bard's agile body disappears into the shadowy interior of the cabinet, and he jerks you into the narrow space next to him. His face is pressed against your ear, and you feel a tingle of excitement mixed with fear. Neil's closeness helps to fight the fear, even as you hear the door to the library begin to splinter.

Please turn to page 27.

As you watch the mouse sniff the air, you realize that it is, after all, only another creature of Erdragh, like the ones Thea talks to every day.

You stroke your jeweled Druid's torque and begin to speak softly to the mouse. "Friend mouse, if this is your den, please let me hide here for a while. I can share my rolls and cheese with you, and I can help you open these sacks of—"

"Shush, child!" whispers a familiar voice. "Those gnolls are just outside the door. Do you want them to catch us both? Besides, you don't need your torque to talk to me."

With a shock, you realize that it is Beryl's voice coming from the twitching, whiskered snout of the mouse! You are so startled that you can only stare dazedly into the bright red eyes.

Please turn to page 10.

Neil's reluctance to investigate the well where the troll grabbed Thea makes you suspicious of the strange bard. It seems to you that the well would be a good place to start looking.

"Let's just get inside," you whisper to Neil. "I don't care which way we go."

Neil looks at you strangely, then shrugs his shoulders. "Come on, then," he says, "but be careful."

The bard slips silently through the front gate, leaving no tracks in the tall grass. You hesitate as your suspicions about Neil clash with your attraction to him. Your suspicions finally win out, and you hang back, letting Neil move ahead and then disappear in the high grass.

Please turn to page 63.

You are torn between staying with Thea and your father or following Agnar, but your only chance of finding the talisman depends upon your remaining free. Just as the flind steps into the corridor, you run from the shadows and dart through the door.

Once you are out, you glance back at Thea. Her eyes are staring in surprise directly into yours. You barely have time to signal her to be quiet before the heavy door closes. The flind locks the door and stalks quickly down the corridor. You scurry behind the lion-man, staying close to the stone wall.

Agnar enters a stretch of corridor ending at the bottom of a large staircase. A giant gnoll sits on the first stone step, watching a small open door at end of the passage.

"Why do you guard the Cave of Spiders?" Agnar calls. "Do you expect the intruders to come from Mithlip through the webs of our guardian allies?"

"Nay, Agnar," growls the guard. "It is Lytir's command that I remain here." The flind grunts and rushes up the steps past the hulking gnoll.

You start to slip past, too, but remember that Mithlip is the home of Kerm, the gnome warrior Beryl told you to seek. You must decide whether to follow Agnar and look for the talisman alone or to try to reach Kerm through the Cave of Spiders.

*If you choose to search the ruins for the talisman,
turn to page 78.*

*If you want to enter the Cave of Spiders
and search for Kerm, turn to page 56.*

You find yourself inside a small musty storeroom, lit dimly by light coming through the large cracks in the door. You hear the growling voices of more gnolls as they pass by the room and continue down the corridor.

In the semidarkness, you note that the door is locked from the inside with a heavy wooden bar. You see the outlines of large wooden kegs and cloth sacks. The smell of moldy grain is thick in the cramped room, and dust covers the floor. A strand of rough rope brushes against your knee as you grope in the darkness, trying to hide behind one of the sacks.

Just as you reach a grain sack, a shadow fills the crack in the door. You whirl around and find yourself looking into two shining red eyes.

A large, furry creature wriggles through the opening and stands framed by the light. Although you see it is only a mouse, it is as large as you. Its sharp teeth glint like rows of daggers. Its fiery eyes glare at you as the mouse sniffs the air in your direction.

I must do something quickly, you think, or this 'harmless' little mouse may attack like a giant rat!

*If you want to draw your knife and rush the mouse,
turn to page 147.*

*If you want to try talking to the mouse,
turn to page 140.*

*If you decide to use the Wand of Wonder,
turn to page 105.*

I'm sure Lytir would keep my father in the caverns, you think quickly, glancing down the corridor. *But the talisman may be hidden in the ruins, and I'll need it to fight the assassin.* Deciding quickly, you rush up the stone steps two at a time.

At the top of the stairs, you see a short corridor that seems to lead nowhere. You are standing before a heavy wooden panel with an iron ring in its center. Suddenly you see a crack begin to appear in the stone wall at the end of the short passage. From beyond the crack, you hear a confused jumble of grunts and snarls.

You grab the iron ring in front of you and pull as hard as you can. To your surprise, the panel swings open easily, revealing a set of bookshelves on its other side. Through the secret opening, you see patches of colored light softly illuminating more empty shelves and a littered stone floor. With a hurried glance at the widening crack at the end of the corridor, you step into the room and close the panel.

You have barely cleared the secret doorway when a powerful arm encircles your waist and a strong hand clamps tightly over your mouth, stifling your startled scream.

Please turn to page 127.

"Stop, Lytir, and know the vengeance of Neil, son of Bors the Bold!" You see the gleam of Orcslicer in the dim light, glowing brightly above Neil's head.

The assassin's hands make a strange gesture, and a shimmering red light envelops his whole body. An evil laugh fills the room.

"Foolish elf! The same power that conquered your father now protects me from the sting of your childish weapon."

Neil shouts a battle cry, and Orcslicer descends in a wide arc toward Lytir's head. As the gleaming blade strikes the red outline surrounding the half-orc, a shower of sparks covers the two adversaries. The assassin watches the bard closely as Neil slowly circles around him, away from the bed.

The talisman is in your hand, and the wand is at your side, but you fear to use either of the magical weapons. Neil is so near the assassin that he might be harmed, too. You realize that the bard must be trying to draw Lytir away from the door so you can escape.

"Now, Gwynne! Run and find Donel!" yells Neil. Orcslicer descends once more and bounces off the assassin's magical shield. Lytir thrusts with the dagger, but the agile bard deflects the parry.

You race for the door, only to collide with a large creature with the head of a lion on a humanoid body. It is Agnar, the flind who serves as Lytir's personal bodyguard. The creature tries to grab you, but you leap onto the bed and bounce to the other side.

The flind pulls a strange weapon, like two iron bars connected by a chain, from his belt. He starts toward the bed, swinging the chain slowly.

"Watch out, Gwynne!" Neil screams. "He's got a



flindbar! It's—" The bard's warning ends abruptly as the assassin's poisoned dagger grazes his arm. Slowly he crumples to the floor at Lytir's feet.

The assassin whirls around to face you, another dagger in his hand. "I'll take the talisman now," he demands confidently. "Get it, Agnar!" The flind's yellow cat's eyes follow your every movement. It swings the flind-bar in a circle, slowly, hypnotically.

You have time to use only one of your magical weapons. You must decide immediately.

*If you decide to attack the flind
with the Wand of Wonder, turn to page 97.*

*If you choose to risk the flind's attack
and use the talisman against Lytir,
turn to page 150.*

Perhaps I can frighten the mouse if I rush it before it figures out what I am, you think. Grabbing the butcher knife from your belt, you raise it high and rush toward the red-eyed creature.

"Yah! Get away!" you yell.

"Shush, child!" whispers a familiar voice. "Do you want those hyenas to catch us both?"

It is Beryl's voice coming from the twitching, whiskered snout of the mouse! You are so startled that you can only stare dazedly into the bright red eyes.

Please turn to page 10.

"My father is more likely to be held prisoner in the caverns," you say. "Let's try there first."

Neil moves cautiously toward the stone stairs. "It curves to the left," he says as you follow him down the steep flight of steps. About halfway down, Neil stops and listens intently. Over his shoulder, you can see the landing at the bottom, where a wide corridor continues to the left. A heavy wooden door is just across the landing from the steps.

"That leads to the Cave of Spiders," Neil whispers, pointing to the door. "You can get to the Misthlip Hills that way. Kerm and I used it as a shortcut once."

He continues downward, then jerks his head toward you. "Something's coming! Get back up the steps!"

You run up the steps to the wooden panel and pull hard on the iron ring. To your surprise, the heavy panel swings open noiselessly. Neil pushes you through and shuts the secret panel behind him. You see that the library side of the panel is concealed within a full wall of empty bookshelves. The bard rests his back against the shelves and grins at you.

"What are you smiling about?" you ask.

"It's just nice to see you again," he replies. "I've missed looking at your lovely face." The joking compliment causes the same warm flush you felt on the path to spread over you. Neil's laughing eyes make you want to feel his arms around you again. You want to press your face once more against his chest and let him brush your hair with his fingers.

With a blushing smile, you turn to search the library for the talisman you hope will save your father.

Please turn to page 88.

Deciding swiftly, you aim the Wand of Wonder carefully at the flind and shout, "*Lumin!*" The tip of the wand seems to explode with a bright bolt of lightning that streaks over Thea's golden head toward the slamming door. The lightning bolt crashes against the heavy timbers with a thunderous explosion. As the glare dies, you see that the massive portal has been blasted from its hinges, knocking the frightened flind to the floor of the corridor. Inside the room, Neil's unconscious body lies near the smoldering doorway.

Lytir's sinister shape emerges from the opposite door, surrounded by an eerie, shimmering blue haze. The assassin steps over the fragments of the door and through the smoking frame into the room.

The evil half-orc glances quickly at Neil's limp form and smiles. "Your elven friend seems to have fallen victim to your clumsy sorcery, little Druid. Let's just make sure he stays quiet." The assassin bends over Neil and says something you cannot hear, then stands and begins to come toward you, an evil grin on his sneering face.

As soon as he is far enough from Neil's crumpled body, you fling the golden bead from your magical necklace at his grinning face. A bolt of fire engulfs the assassin's cloaked shape. The eerie blue haze surrounding Lytir expands and appears to smother the powerful fireball. Lytir's hideous laughter echoes in the small chamber.

Please turn to page 153.

The talisman throbs in your hand. You raise it above your head and repeat the words your father wrote:

“ ‘Stone of power, talisman of light,
End this reign of darkness and night.’ ”

The magic stone becomes hot, and a low rumble shakes the entire room. The flind looks to Lytir in confusion, but the assassin's eyes are wide with fear.

The rumble becomes a roar, and cracks appear in the stone floor. The quaking walls begin to split. Lytir falls to the floor, making strange gestures with his hands and uttering words you do not understand.

One of the cracks beneath the assassin starts to smoke and grow wider. With an ear-shattering blast, the floor suddenly drops right out from under him, and the evil half-orc vanishes in a cloud of flame and smoke. A huge block of stone crashes into the fiery crevasse, sealing the assassin's tomb forever.

The enraged flind growls fiercely and leaps across the bed toward you. Just as its claws are about to slash your face, its body seems to stop in midair and vanish! In the center of the bed, you see a tiny green caterpillar crawling away from you in terror.

“Perhaps your companion will be more gentle one day as a butterfly,” says a strong voice from the doorway. You see a powerfully built man in a white Druid's robe, his hand on Thea's golden head. Beryl, in her own form, stands beside them, smiling broadly.

“Gwynne,” Thea shouts delightedly, “it's Father!”

With a sob, you rush to the Archdruid. His arms hold you tightly as Beryl tells you about Thea's captiv-

ity and her own efforts, unsuccessful until now, to rescue your father and sister.

"You were just a child when I last saw you, Gwynne," Donel whispers lovingly. "Now you're a beautiful young woman." He holds your chin and studies your features. "Look, Beryl," he calls. "Gwynne is certainly her mother's child." Tears of joy roll down his pale cheeks into the shaggy silver-streaked beard.

"I've thought about you and Thea every minute," he says intensely. "Those dreams sustained me. You have saved all of Erdragh from Lytir's evil plan."

A squat, shaggy form swaggers through the door, carrying a well-used battle-ax over one shoulder. You recognize Kerm immediately. "Them hyenas of ol' Hogface's was last seen headin' into the hills. Without that snaggle-toothed flind to tell 'em what to do, they weren't any match for this here ax."

Kerm's eyes search from face to face. "Where's that pointy-eared blood brother of mine?" The gnome's question fills you with sadness, and you bury your head against your father's robe.

"Here, here, child," Donel says, tilting your chin to look at you. "What's the matter?"

"It—it's Neil," you sob. "Lytir killed him!"

Donel looks where you point and sees the lifeless bard on the floor. "Kerm, get that boy over here on the bed!" he orders. The stout gnome warrior lifts Neil's limp form to the bed, and Donel examines the wound in the bard's arm. He calls Beryl to his side.

"This could be dangerous, but we've got to try. Did you bring my pouch, sister?"

"Everything is here, Donel," Beryl answers, handing her brother a small leather bag.

"All I need is mistletoe," he says. "The boy is not quite gone."

Donel places several sprigs of dried mistletoe on Neil's forehead, mouth, and chest. Then he stands by the bed, with hands upraised over the lifeless body.

"Forces of nature, suspend thy flight.
Crush not this spark of life so bright,
That we may keep our brother fair,
Of lilting song and golden hair."

After a long moment, Neil's eyelids flutter weakly, and his chest begins to rise and fall. Donel removes the mistletoe and commands, "Open your eyes, Neil!" The bard's lids pop open, and he stares up in surprise.

"Donel?" he whispers weakly.

"Yes, brave son of Bors, it is your father's friend. I could not save your sire, but I've rescued you from the assassin's dagger."

"Gwynne? Where are you?" murmurs the weakened bard.

"I'm here, Neil," you whisper softly, rushing to his side. "It's over, darling. Lytir will never threaten Erdragh again." His emerald eyes soften as they gaze into yours, and a smile of recognition parts his lips. You wrap your arms around the bard's weakened body and hold him close to your breast.

A warm glow spreads over your entire being. The Talisman of Valdegarde has not only returned your father and family to you, but it has given you back the gentle bard—for the rest of your life.

THE END

"Your childish magic will not work against me, daughter of Donel. Even the power of an Archdruid is useless against the new master of Valdegarde!"

The half-orc has barely finished his sentence when a low rumble begins to shake the stone floors and walls of the room. Lytir's grin fades, and he draws a needle-pointed dagger from his belt. Agnar peers cautiously through the smoking doorframe, looking frightened.

A crack begins to form in the rock wall of Donel's cell. The Archdruid steps back from the wall, revealing the magical outline. The stone surface begins to glow brightly, and suddenly a pair of bulky arms thrust out into the room. The gigantic form of a monstrous stone creature materializes from the wall and stands with a fierce expression at the Archdruid's side.

"Remove my chains!" your father commands. The hulking stone giant grabs the chains of Donel's shackles and snaps them from the ankle collars as if they were dry twigs.

The Archdruid points to Lytir. "Protect me and my children from that evil monster," he commands.

The massive creature plods straight toward the half-orc. Thea scrambles off to one side as the powerful man of rock crashes past you and straight through the iron bars. Quickly the assassin hurls his dagger at the stone hulk, only to see the thin blade shatter against its hard surface. Lytir's mouth curls in a sneer as he backs away from the creature.

"We're not finished yet, Donel!" he shouts defiantly. "I shall have control of Erdragh yet. And this sniveling girl will be my servant!" he adds, pointing at you. The half-orc turns and dashes through the door, the flind at his heels.

Donel pushes past the hulking stone giant and studies Neil's immobile body. "Now, who might this be?" he wonders aloud.

"It's Neil, Father, the son of Bors! Please . . . please help him," you cry. "If he dies, I . . ." You cannot complete the horrible thought. The Archdruid casts a quick glance at your anxious expression, and a knowing smile brightens his tired face as he turns to examine the seemingly lifeless bard.

"Nothing serious," your father announces quickly, causing your heart to skip a beat with joy. "Why don't you come over here," he adds, "and keep him company while I run a little errand. Lytir's gone for now, but I must fetch something before he returns. The earth elemental will guard you while I'm gone."

You rush to Neil's side, taking his hand in yours and pressing it to your cheek to warm it. You take a fur blanket from Agnar's cot and cover the brave bard's shoulders carefully. Your father watches your movements with a silent smile, then quickly steps out into the corridor.

You remain by Neil's side, comforting him and talking to Thea while the rock giant stands motionless between you and the door. Across the passage, your father tries to open the door to Lytir's private quarters, but it is locked. He takes a pinch of the sacred mistletoe and hurls it against the wooden door.

"Planks of oak, bend and warp!" Donel commands forcefully. The stout timbers of the heavy door immediately begin to curl and make groaning and creaking sounds. Suddenly the door springs open, and the Archdruid rushes into the lighted room.

The sound of a woman's voice from the corridor

startles you until you realize it is your aunt.

"Gwynne! Thea! Are you all right?"

"Beryl!" you answer. "In here!" Your aunt's flowing white robe and jeweled torque shine in the torchlight as she stands framed in the blackened doorway. At your side, you hear Neil begin to stir and breathe normally.

"Well, well!" says Beryl, noticing the earth elemental. "What have we here? And where is your father, child?"

Before you can answer, the stone giant begins to lumber toward Beryl. Neil shouts with alarm and leaps between your aunt and the massive creature, his raised sword glowing brightly.

"Stop!" booms Donel's strong voice as he reenters the room. "These people are not our enemies. Return to your natural home, my friend. Our business here is finished."

The earth elemental turns and lumbers slowly past you. The hulking creature of stone seems to melt back into the wall, leaving only a faint outline of its form in the stone.

Donel turns to Neil, clapping him on the shoulder in friendship. "So the son of Bors has returned to Valdegarde!" Donel exclaims. "You look well, my son. My old friend, your father, would have been proud of you this day."

"Nay, Archdruid," Neil protests. "The real hero of Valdegarde is your own lovely daughter. Without her, Erdragh might be in Lytir's evil hands this very minute. She's the bravest woman I've ever known." Neil's green eyes shine with pride as he smiles at you.

"Young Neil is too modest, Donel," Beryl inter-

jects. "He has been quite busy upstairs. Lytir's gnolls and their troll pets have left Valdegarde in haste. But where is their evil master?"

"The half-orc fled with his flind before the might of my stone companion," Donel answers. "You must have encountered them in the corridor—unless . . ."

"The Cave of Spiders!" Neil exclaims. "They must have escaped to the Misthlip Hills!"

Donel strokes his beard thoughtfully. "They'll be lucky to avoid Kerm's battle-ax if they linger in the gnomes' province for long." He looks at Neil. "Meanwhile, see if you can get these shackles off Thea."

Neil bends over Thea's legs, and in a few seconds the iron shackles fall open with a clatter.

"Thank you, my son," Donel says to Neil as he welcomes Thea's small arms around his waist. Your sister trembles with joy as your father caresses her golden curls.

"Now," the Archdruid says, "I have something for Gwynne." From a fold in his robe, your father removes a curious object. It looks like a smooth stone, carved in the shape of an oaken staff. He places it in your hand and closes your fingers around it tightly. You feel a warm, throbbing tingle inside your fist, as if the stone were alive. "This is the Talisman of Valdegarde, my daughter. You have earned it with your courage and your love. It will protect you and all Erdragh from Lytir's evil plans should he ever return. He fears the talisman more than any of my other powers, for it means his total destruction."

You open your fist and see a dim red glow pulsing deep within the magic stone. Neil moves to your side and wraps an arm lovingly around your shoulders. You



have never been happier in your entire life. Your head nestles comfortably against Neil's arm as you stare at the father you have been separated from for so long.

"Valdegarde will be as it was," the Archdruid declares. "A place of peace and safety for all of Erdragh. These halls will ring with joy and laughter once more, and children will frolic where monsters have lurked."

You glance up from the talisman to find Neil's loving eyes staring into yours. His exotic elven smile makes you feel both comfortable and excited. You lose yourself in the memory of his beautiful song and gentle touch, imagining that he is singing to you alone in the bright and happy halls of Valdegarde.

THE END



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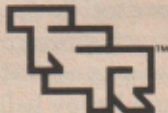
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
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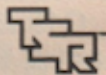
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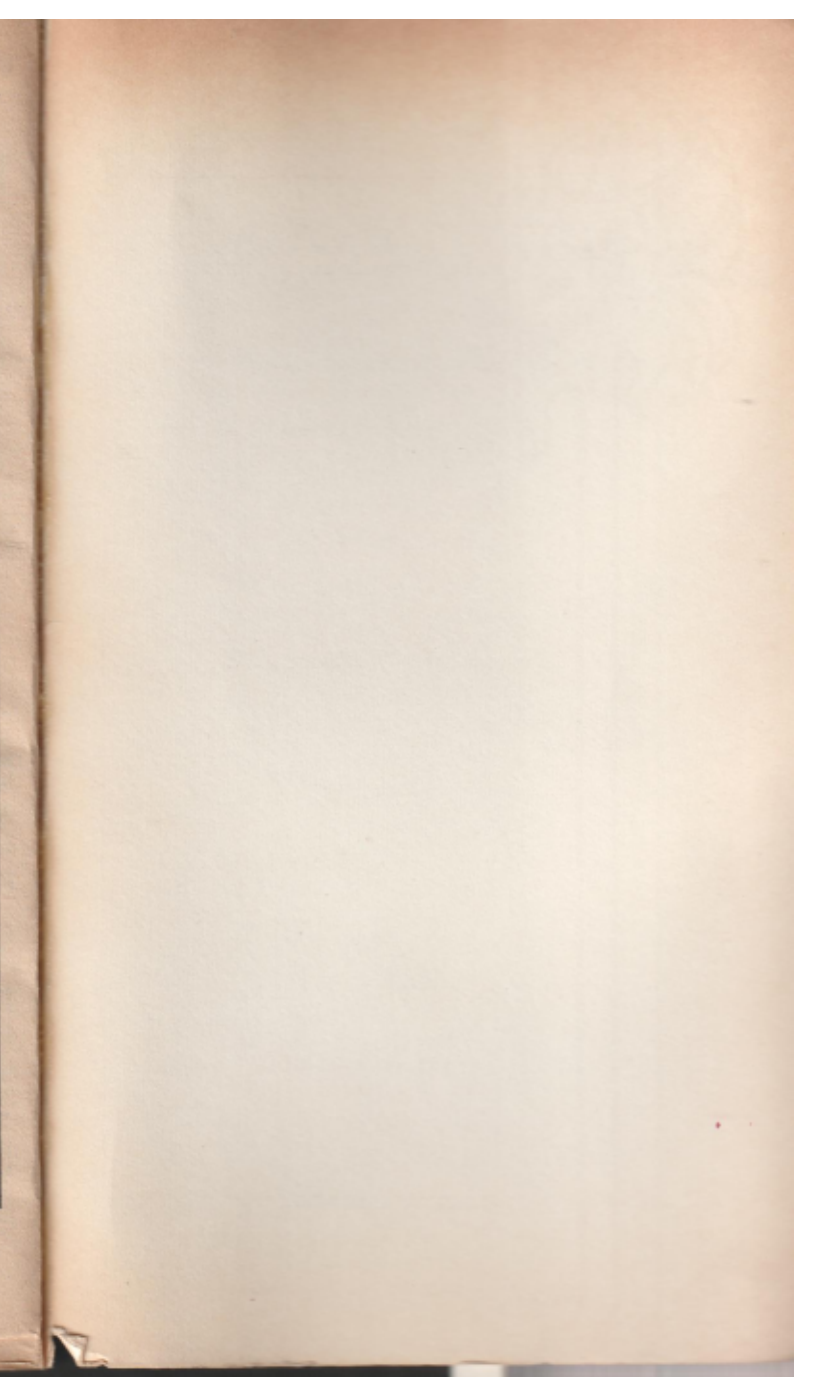
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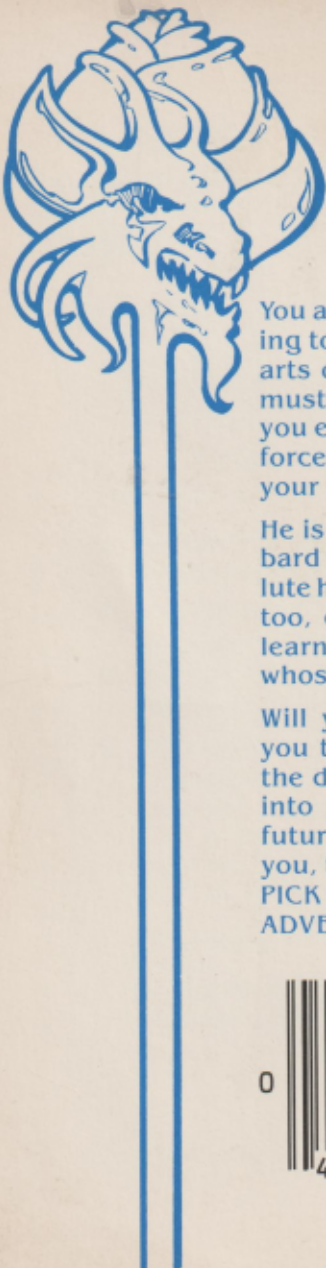
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