*Chapter 3.1: The Year of the Unstrung Harp*

During their evening in the village, Saradette mingled with the young folk, sharing some tales of her travels, and endeavoring to learn about what might be happening in the area. Fortunately, the gossip was bland, as there was not much fodder for scandal or decry here. It was a quiet, little hamlet that had long ago tamed the farmland interspersed with hovels and houses, and other than the occasional displacer beast, not much ill had befallen these people.

Barkley spent some time with the local brewers and wine makers getting tips and sharing what he had learned over the last few years. He also worked on improving his transformation from archon to canid and back again. He hoped to make the transition quicker in order to be more effective in combat.

Having been working on her ability to tumble and be stealthy, not to mention balancing on a moving wagon roof, Elsabet took the greater part of 1371 to become a little more confident in her ability to move gracefully, to dodge blows and bolts, to react more swiftly.

As they buried the dead caravan owners, Barkley said a prayer to Tyr for each of them. He also paid close attention to the different ceremonies that the halflings and gnomes conducted for their dead. Afterwards he offered his condolences to the families, assuring them that the murders had been punished. That night, he spent some time with the local tavern owner, sharing his knowledge of brewing in exchange for room and board as well as helping with, and learning, the wine making and bottling.

Once they’d reached their destination, as PJ went about his business, the group visited the local tavern for a bite and a gulp. Elsabet continued practicing her social skills, talking to people and trying to see whether they were being honest or disingenuous. But additionally, having been shocked by some of the wounds others had suffered during their recent travels, she spent some extra time with the temple healers, learning more about first aid and how to treat various things in a mundane fashion, when healing magic ran out. She’d learned the very basics of healing early in her training, but decided she needed to know more.

Her experiences had been even more rewarding in a spiritual sense, as Mayaheine revealed to her some of the 2nd-level divine mysteries. After much prayer and meditation, she gained the ability to cast spells to temporarily increase strength (*bull’s strength*), to remove penalties and damage to any basic ability (*lesser restoration*), and to call forth an area of complete quiet through which no sounds would pass (*silence*), which she hoped would aid the entire group in moving more quietly when needed, since that seemed to be a problem for herself and some of her companions. In addition, Mayaheine blessed her with another centric, Mending, which was much appreciated as some of her clothes needed a few tips and tears repaired.

While in the city, Elsabet met a young man from a faraway place with whom she immediately felt a kinship. He was a warrior of sorts—not a fighter, nor a ranger, nor a paladin—though he reminded her a bit of Laryssa, the paladin she was traveling with—he called himself a crusader, a type of martial adept whose fighting relied in part on divine inspiration. They spent a fair amount of time sparring together, and discussing religion and faith and fighting the good fight against evil.

Elsabet was intrigued, and learned as much as she could of his way of fighting. And she prayed to Mayaheine for insight as to whether the goddess would approve of her taking that new path in the goddess’ service. She knew she wasn’t suited to the role of paladin herself—but she was willing to put her faith in the goddess’ guidance in battle, and when she prayed, she felt only calm approval from her goddess, so she resolved to attempt to master this new form of combat, in Mayaheine’s service.

Meanwhile, having gathered some wealth from the group’s travels, partly from the sale of items taken from the murderous trio of highwaywomen, she picked up some additional gear, including a grappling hook for her silk rope, a set of manacles in case they actually took a prisoner someday, a climber’s kit and a healer’s kit, an hourglass for keeping better time during night watches, and an oil that could briefly make a weapon magical.

But more importantly, she found a priest who could enchant armor and shields, got her masterwork buckler enchanted as planned, and got an interesting additional enchantment added to her magical chain shirt. The priest convinced her it was just what she needed, after she’d complained about not being able to carry all her useful gear without slowing down. It was called Easy Travel, and once it was on her armor, she agreed, it was great!

She could now carry up to what would have been a medium load before, and it felt no worse than a light load, it didn’t slow her down or encumber her movement one bit! The priest also assured her that it would let her march a full 10 hours a day before beginning to feel the burn, rather than a mere 8. She took his word for that; the important thing was she could now take her morning star with her, and load up her belt and backpack with several items she had previously packed on the mule, making them much handier. Sandy certainly wasn’t complaining at having her load lightened!

Elsabet also heard about another magic item, something called a Handy Haversack, which she definitely wanted to acquire, as it would let her sell Sandy to someone who wouldn’t take her into as many dangerous locations. But that was an acquisition to be made sometime in the future, assuming she could scrape up another couple thousand extra gold.... Though the comforts of a town were tempting, she was ready for more travel and adventures, as soon as she got word from her friends, she would be ready to go!

However, as they were wont to do periodically when they had accumulated enough wealth to follow their respective interests, the party went their separate ways with plans to reconvene in a few days to continue on to Saradush, where retailers awaited the goods in their main wagon caravan.

Laryssa felt a closer connection to the Bright Lady since she began receiving divine powers from her deity and these powers intensified somewhat over time as she ministered to others and sought to increase the worship of Mayaheine.

However, she felt herself torn between continuing the path of the ministry or that of the holy warrior. On the one hand, she would be granted ever more powerful abilities by the Shield Maiden if she was judged worthy, but at the cost of less time to hone her martial prowess and stamina—her predilection for battle eliminated the prospect of a temple priestess—she yearned to take the fight to the enemy too much.

Seeking a compromise, Laryssa appealed to the seniors of her temple to study sacred text for a third option. Finally granted permission, she pored over the seemingly endless scrolls and books every spare moment. Finally, she believed she found what she was looking for—a sect of the church known as Warpriests. While these special clerics were granted typical divine powers slower than the usual priest, they are periodically given other more potent powers especially appropriate for battle and martial ability was emphasized for their members... no quiet day-to-day ministering for them! In fact, the requirements to join their ranks included demonstrating a minimal fighting ability above that which Laryssa currently possessed.

Determined to prove herself worthy of qualifying for the elite corps, Laryssa threw herself into the same intense effort improving her combat capabilities that she had in research. She also spent much of the gold that she had earned into improving her armor and weaponry. During her research, she had discovered it was possible to enchant one’s armor so that it would literally fly onto one’s body when summoned. Laryssa’s inability to arrive into combat alongside her comrades in a timely manner had been galling her, and eschewing wearing the bulky plate until just before contact with the enemy seemed ideal. Unfortunately, upon finding a wizard capable of enchanting armor in such a manner, her current funds proved insufficient for the cost. However, the wizard did agree to enchant the armor to improve its protection and prepare it for the additional enchantment at a future date.

When they finally left Bartergoldustshire, and headed to Saradush, Barkley spent most of the trip practicing transforming from canid to archon. He was not happy with how long the transformation was taking. It was leaving him vulnerable to attacks. He worked on transforming and drawing his sword, making very little progress during the trip.

When he wasn’t practicing his transformations, he spent time working on mending his clothing along with mending and maintaining the leather reigns and harnesses for PJ’s horses. He also took some time learning how to handle the horses and care for them from PJ. At night, when Barkley prayed to Tyr, he received several odd dreams in which he was talking to and understanding many different creatures in their native languages. These were languages the Barkley had never learned and many that he hadn’t encountered.

While in Sarabush, Barkley spent his time between studying in the Library, learning about the various religions by visiting their temples, practicing with the local militia and helping one of the local tavern owners where he was staying.

At the library, Barkley focused his studies on Arcane Knowledge and legends as well as information on religions outside of the region. He also did some research on local history and legends as well. In the Temples he observed the rites and rituals of the various religions and spent time talking to the clerics about their gods and told them about his god Tyr. When he had time to himself, Barkley continued to pray to Tyr for guidance on his path to some day become a true warrior in Tyr’s army.

During his time with the local militia, Barkley continued working on improving his transformation skills as well as working on his tracking skills. On more than one occasion the patrols went out on extended marches lasting several days. These trips enabled Barkley to work on his wilderness survival skills and enabled him to become closer with those he was with. During one exercise the patrol was accompanied by a young wizard wanting to become a war mage, a misdirected lightning bolt struck Barkley. To his surprise, it did not affect him as much as he had expected. That wizard was sent away to work on his casting ability.

During his free nights and days, Barkley would spend time at the Tavern where he was staying. Again, in exchange for room and board, Barkley assisted the tavern owner. In this instance, when he was there at night, Barkley worked as a bouncer, helping keep order. During the day he assisted in the brewing and bottling of the tavern’s ales. He also learned a bit about distilling harder alcoholic beverages. In this case that beverage was Dragons Breath Bourbon. The owner also made a few different types of wines by combining ones he purchased from other winemakers. There was one that Barkley enjoyed, it was called Dragon’s Blood Wine. It was a mixture of 70% rhubarb wine (purchased) and 30% of the owner’s Dragon Breath bourbon. It was smooth, sweat and packed a strong punch.

After he’d unloaded the bulk of his wares and liquidated most of his wealth, he paid the heroes handsomely, and wished them well. They’d agreed that their paths were taking them in different directions, and PJ wanted to take some time off from the business, so he had sold his three wagons, and kept on his best horse, having returned the late merchants’ wagons and horses to their bereaved families.

“So long, my friends,” PJ placed his hand on the shoulders of his friends. “I pray our paths cross again, and perhaps our fortunes will be so great that we can dispense with the formalities of employment and coin. Daughters of Mayaheine, Son of Tyr, may your way be lit by truth and justice.”

And with that, the factotum rode off into the sunset, leaving Saradush behind him.

And so with dreams of becoming warpriests and crusaders, the quartet of heroes convened at their new favorite tavern in Saradush and decided where they would go next.

“We’ve gotten pretty good at guarding caravans,” Barkley shrugged. “Let’s see if there’s a posting for that.”

“We could also stand to switch it up a bit…” Saradette proposed. “Diversify... or maybe try our luck along new routes... like to Chult, or the Shaar.”

“That’s pretty exotic,” Elsabet cautioned. “The most difficult part of navigating those routes is the hinterlands in between here and there. Sure, the climate is nice, but there’s not a lot of water, so you have to bring lots of your own.”

Laryssa posed, “I should be able to procure food and water for something like that.”

The rogue-illusionist proposed, “We could also stay here in town and try to make a living for a while. Maybe a brewery-slash-smithy-slash-tannery. With our respective professions combined, we’re bound to do well even if one of us does poorly.”