

CHAPTER ONE - a ride in the wilderness (or) A trek to Malta

Antioch - Finding a way to Malta

The weather is still clear and cold. Wind is picking up a little though.

Thin "mares tail" clouds are high in the sky.

The sun is about 22 degrees above the Eastern horizon or 1 hour since first meeting today.

A few more merchants wander across the square, mostly from the NE to the SW.

Everyone you see seems to be in high spirits.

A man comes out of Middlebrooks with a pail in his hand. He walks over to the pump in the circle drive and fills the pail. He whistles as he walks back to the door he came out of and a border collie comes out wagging his tail. The man sets the pail down by the door and the dog drinks. He then pats the dog's head and returns into the warehouse.

The man who bought the grain from the vendor in the middle of the square has just left the square with his horse and wagon, heading south. The vendor is warming himself by a fire in a small can on a pole.

Relsyn Saffire sits in the back of the wagon, eyes closed, silently enduring the bumpy ride of the wagon and trying to look as un-bookish as possible. Jewel the Raven, speaks into his ear, then beats his wings and soars high above the small caravan, riding the updrafts as he cruises through the air. But despite the outward appearance Relsyn's mind races. The thoughts come rapidly, often interspersed with prayer as they often do when a true state of meditation eludes him.

Why would Salix order the third company to attack uphill against fortified enemy position; the third company was beaten soundly, and though Salix carried the day, the third company's actions don't seem to fit with the overall flow of the battle. Illumine my mind, St Macedone, that I might discern patterns where they exist and bring to light Truth long obscured in darkness.

What is Wrinkles story?

Macedone, light my path on this journey that I may walk in Truth.

There as many animals as people in this party... I would have preferred the ship.

I've never been to Malta before. I hope we don't mess this up. I wonder if the Gem is really Eli's tear. It must have been a special tree he yanked the staff out of.

I would hate to this for full time employment.

"Sheldon," Relsyn looks over to the driver, "how long have you been driving caravans?"

Sheldon squints harder, grunts and spits off to the side, and then says "thirty year."

Airith enjoys the country side scenery. He adjusts his belongings and tries to make a comfortable seat on the floor of the wagon. Smoke is following just behind the wagon and looks much more comfortable without all his gear on. Airith sits quietly trying to think of what their first move should be when they get to Malta.

How are we going to get close enough to get a good look at each staff? What if we get caught? Where are we going to start looking for this gem? When is the first stop?

Airith adjusts his seat trying still to find a comfortable sitting position.

"Hey Earle, when is our first stop and how many of them are there on the way."

"Well now, let me think. First light [8:00am] we get the camp broke and horses hitched. On the road by 'two bells' of the first day watch, as the mariners say. [9:00am]

First stop is two or three hours later, usually for a quick feed and water of the horses.

We usually stop for two hours or so 'round high noon [12:30pm - 2:30pm] to rest the horses and then again at supper. Afternoon break is three hours later, usually for another quick feed and water of the horses. We try to make camp just before dusk, wherever we find a good spot. Not many people living out here you know."

Airith not looking forward to sitting for two to three hours adjusts his seat again. He looks out of the wagon to the acres of farmland and forest they are passing through. It reminds him of home. I wonder how the folks are doing?

Airith looks at Inwe and then back to the farmland.

And how did she get involved in this?

Finding a somewhat comfortable position Airith closes his eyes and rests his head back on his pack.

If we get caught stealing the staff from any family we are all in big trouble. How are we going to keep the other families from hearing the staff has been taken. Once they here someone is after it they will be more protective of their own staff making that much harder to get a look at. I wonder if we could have a duplicate made? Replacing the staff would give us some time, but we would have to hire someone and that would be another person that would know about it.

Airith almost drifts to sleep when the wagons lurches a bit. "Sorry about that," Earle calls out "the road ain't so good around here."

Probably due to the high traffic. Oh well, I should be keeping a look out anyway.

Airith stretches his arms and looks out the wagon once more.

Continuing... READYING 5, 232. Water-Day

Rumble, rumble, bump, bump... on an on goes the trail Towards Malta.

After the second day, the farms are basicly gone, the road is a well-used, but much rougher trail now. Sheldon, a man of few words, calls to the four of you at dinner the second night.

"I pay ya, not much, but I pay ya. Can ya hunt some game for the dinners?"

"Make yerselfs useful."

As it is better than sitting on a wagon, Inwe finds herself able to not only catch three or four rabbits daily, but also she finds the roots, herbs, and berries to make a decent field stew each day. [+12 survival]

On the eighth day, the weather turns dark and cold. A rainy sleet falls mercilessly for most of the morning, and, while it stops at lunch, it is still very cold. Earle and Zane beg Sheldon to let them stop early. They know of a cave just to the south of the road that would allow everyone, and the horses, to dry out and warm up. "Alright" he reluctantly agrees.

A bumpy ride about two miles off the road, you come to an opening in the rocky hills you have been skirting to your south. It does indeed look like a cave, but from this distance you can not determine its characteristics yet.

You are at the wagons, about 1000 feet from the cave entrance. The ground becomes too rocky for the wagon to continue.

Airith drops his saddle and gear out the back of the wagon and jumps down. "Smoke come here, I can't carry all this gear by myself." Smoke comes over and Airith places the saddle on him and begins strapping it down. "There you go." Airith sees the others are tending to the wagons and horses. So, instead of getting in the way, Airith looks around and sees a boulder for him to stand on and get a better view of the area. It looks very cold and lifeless, rocks and snow surround the area.

Inwe gathers her things and climbs down from the wagon. Then looks around for what more she can do to prepare to move to the cave for camp.

After Airith looks the area over he sees that Earle is having some trouble with the horses and heads over to help him. Airith takes the reins and Earle starts unhooking the horses from the wagon.

"I take it we are leaving the wagons here?"

"Yup, should be safe enough, off the beaten track and all. Besides, they'd need a team of horses to get 'em out of here."

Seeing that Earle has things under control now and the others look ready to go Airith points to the cave to direct Smoke where to go.

"You go on ahead and check things out. I'll be fine walking from here." Smoke begins to make his way to the cave.

Smoke goes about 300 feet closer, wandering back and forth in the valley leading to the cave. He stops to smell different boulders and rocks, as dogs do.

At one point, he races about half way up the valley wall and dives two pawed into a hole, scratching and digging wildly for a minute or two. Giving up on whatever he saw, he continues down the ravine toward the cave, and stops at the mouth of the cave, looking inside. (A chipmunk scurries out of the hole and over the ravine wall when the coast is clear)

Smoke appears content to sit just inside the cave on dry ground watching the party approach.

Earle and Sheldon are the first to arrive, with Airith a half step behind. Relsyn, Inwe, and Wrinkle finish getting their bags and arrive a few seconds later.

The cave entrance

The sun is beginning to get lower on the western horizon, with probably one to two hours before sunset.

The clearing where you left the wagons is on a wider flat area where it appears several ravines come down off a rocky ridge that extends as far as you can see east or west. The ravines are not very large, perhaps a thousand feet deep and mostly straight, perpendicular to the axis of the ridge. [entrance almost due south of wagons]

The cave you are heading to is fairly clear from the wagons, and in the ravine leading up to the cave, soggy leaves and tangles of branches cover the ground. Trees have fallen over the ravine in places, but appear to have been cut and cleared some time back for a trail. From the bottom of the trail, all you can see is up to the ridge and the cave in its side. Smoke, the dog, is sitting watching you approach.

...

The party is standing at the mouth of the cave.

There is a small hollow to the left, about eight feet deep and four in diameter. The bottom looks as if it has been flattened a little. The main entrance is an oval about nine feet tall by six feet wide. Looking in, past Smoke who is looking for an ear scratch, the cave goes in about ten feet and then you can't see much.

Wrinkle continues in ... a few seconds later he comes out and smiles, waving everyone in.

Inside the cave is a room, approximately triangular. Entering at one point, the room extends down and out, perhaps seventy feet deep. It appears horses have been previously stabled on the left side [East]. A natural rock pillar in the center hides an old fire pit from the entrance. It is dry in here, and should be acceptable for sleeping, just as Earle and Zane said.

Airith looks around the cave, "Cozy", and sets his pack down on the ground. "Smoke come here so I can get that stuff off you." Smoke walks over and has his saddle removed. Airith gives him a good scratch of the ears, "Now be a good boy and watch the entrance." Smoke walks to the

entrance and finds a dry place to lay down close to the entrance but still inside enough to block the wind. Airith proceeds to get out of his wet winter gear and hangs it up to let it dry out.

Earle and Zane are tending to the horses, while Sheldon takes what little firewood is available to the fire pit. Airith offers, "I'll go see if I can find anything to get a fire started", and heads to the entrance to see if any of the sticks or brush there is dry enough to light a fire.

Setting down her pack and the couple other sacks she carried to the cave, Inwe walks around the whole cave looking for any possible hiding places or hidden doorways **[search]**. Cildar follows, sniffing at the floor and walls. Then they walk to the fire pit to help start a fire and find food for the evening.

[search]

Working around the cavern, Inwe discovers a door in the wall of the West wall. It is crudely hidden, with stones and dirt piled against it to make it look like the rest of the cave wall. While crudely hidden, it appears to be strongly built with no hinges or latches obvious.

Wrinkle, who is sitting against the wall next to the door, looks up and smiles at Inwe.

Both spend some time clearing the debris away from the door, which draws the attention of the others.

"I'll be..." gawks Earle, "never saw that before." He moves around trying to get a good view of the progress while rubbing the scars on his arms.

Zane manages a "huh" before returning to brush the horses.

Sheldon only looks that way briefly before returning to the fire pit, striking his flint into the tender and gently blowing on the wood and curl of smoke beginning to unfurl.

"Hey, get wood. Open that later." his voice booms to no one in particular.

With the debris cleared, and no obvious way to open the door, Inwe returns to the fire pit, hands a few twigs to Sheldon, and heads out to find some more. She meets Airith outside and both gather the wood while she informs him of the door.

The others tend to making camp in the shelter.

Airith ventures out of the cave and begins to look for anything dry and burnable. The sleet and rain wasn't overly heavy but it has made his search very frustrating. After a couple of minutes he manages to find a few branches that are at least somewhat dry and should burn without a whole lot of trouble. He brings in an arm full of branches and sets it down by the fire pit. Sheldon is busy trying to get the fire started and Zane and Earle continue to brush the horses.

Sheldon looks at the small pile of wood that Airith brought in, "That won't last long."

"Sorry but the rain has made it difficult to find anything worth burning. I'll go try the other side of the cave and bring back what I find."

Airith heads out the cave and looks around the other side of the cave entrance. His search produces even less than last time and most he isn't even sure is dry enough for the fire. Airith starts to head back to the cave when he sees a small tree branch under an outcropping of rocks. He takes a good look at it and it appears that it is dry and of good size. It must have broken off a tree up the hill and some how gotten itself wedged in the rock. Airith gives it a good couple of yanks before it comes free and takes it back to the cave entrance.

(branch: 6-inches wide or so and probably 6-8 feet long, not super heavy but draggable.)

Airith enters the cave to see a small fire going.

"Here you are Sheldon, should be able to get a couple logs out of this."

"Yea, that looks better. Zane start chopping that thing into some decent size logs."

Airith takes his wet coat off again and lays it in a dry spot next to his things.

Wrinkle, too, goes out and searches for wood. He pulls a hatchet from under the cover of the wagon and chops at some dead branches on a stand of pines. "These should burn hot for a while." After bundling these up, he carries them back past the wagon - dropping off the axe and getting the cooking pot. He puts in a little water from the wagon's water barrel, hoists the bundle of branches, and returns to the cave.

After dropping off the pot and wood, he exits again and climbs to the top of the ridge above the cave. The ridge he is standing on tops out about 1/4 mile from the cave entrance and maybe 150 feet higher. The ridge drops off quickly to the south and it appears that there is a small stream running east-west at the bottom. Looking further south, all he sees are rocky hills and ridges as far as he can see. "Limestone and shale - area must be full of caves."

Wrinkle returns to the cave, opens his pack and pulls out his pipe, stuffs a bit of baccy in it, and lights it using a twig from the fire. He sits back, by the hidden door, and hums a little while finding his ocarina. When things seem to be settling down a little, he relays what he saw, glancing at the pot hoping there is rabbit or squirrel stew simmering.

Having previously dropped his gear in the cave, Relsyn, soaked through to the bone, struggles up the hill with a large pile of the driest firewood he can find. Finally he drops the whole lot, picks about half of it up again and brings it to the growing firewood pile in the cave.

"Caw" mocks Jewel from a sheltered nook in the cave.

Relsyn, waving off the ravens mocking, goes back and gets the remaining firewood depositing it in the pile as well. Then he sneaks into the corner of the cave, takes off his wet clothes and slips his dry clerical vestments on, hoping that no one is watching. He hangs his wet clothes on a rock as best as possible.

He then goes over to the door found by Inwe and rubbing his hands through his wet hair and over his scruffy examines it and the area around it, looking for latches, levers or keyholes.

[Search Untrained +3] If he finds nothing he casts Detect Magic and looks at the door again.

[Search Untrained +3]

Relsyn is frustrated that he can not find anything on or around the door.

He casts detect magic and nothing about the door, or the entire room, seems to be magical.

After depositing her contribution to the wood pile and checking the stew in the pot, Inwe also returns to the door to join Relsyn in the search for a way to open it. Pushing on it or trying to wedge something in the crack to pry it open. She also asks the others in the cave if there's anyone who knows more about doors and the crafting thereof.

Relsyn is frustrated that he can not find anything on or around the door. As he gives the ground a little stomp of frustration, a stone moves a little. Inwe spots this and moves in to investigate the rock.

Investigating further reveals that, in fact, the stone is covering a hole in the ground just outside the door. Looking into the hole below, you see it is about nine inches deep with a rod coming out from under the door six inches down.

Inwe and Relsyn look at each other, their eyes meet, the longing in each others eyes destroys any barrier that was between them. They melt together with... Wait, wrong story

Relsyn pushes the rod down and the door springs out and open a few inches.

Sweating with nerves (sudden onset), Relsyn grabs the edge of the door and pulls hard expecting it to be heavy or stuck. Then he peers inside the open doorway.

Airith seeing that Relsyn and Inwe have found a door comes over to investigate. "When did you find this?" He then heads over to his pack and pulls out a torch. He lights it with the fire and heads over to assist.

Relsyn, Airith, Inwe, and Relsyn stand at the open door, while the wagon men look on and show no interest in the door. Zane actually mutters "don't pay me to risk my hide... caves with holes and animals (or worse)..."

Beyond the door, you hear dripping, you see shadows on a rough wall that goes down and to the left, and you smell a strong wet-earth cave smell.

Wrinkle takes the lead, as he feels he is most at home underground, and he is the fighter of the group. The path curves to the left in about a half circle thirty feet diameter, where it ends in a small room. Straight ahead on the far side of the room is a small pool of bubbling water with a spring coming out of the wall just above the pool.

There are four bedding mats against the wall to your right, burlap sacks to the left, and a 18"x24"x18" chest against the wall you enter from.

Airith has the burning a torch.

Airith ventures in cautiously. He looks around and spots the chest which he heads over to. He looks for traps, casts detect magic on the chest and may continue depending on the trap situation or he will try to unlock it if it is locked. If it has a magic trap he will leave it for now.

Inwe also follows in, continuing to [search] along all the walls for any more hidden doors. Also, she tries to determine how recently other beings have been here. Then tests the water for drinking and fills her waterskin. Afterwards, she returns to the main cave to report to the others about the spring, the four bed mats, and anything else she had found out. And she asks for someone to help in determining how the door opened from inside.

Inwe finds nothing else along the walls, which are mostly naturally formed, but expanded to be passable. Some lower holes extend further, but could in no way be passable.

Passing Relsyn, she too determines the bedding has not been used for over a year. The fabric, however, is in good repair and could be reused.

At the pool, the water is fresh and tastes quite good. She fills her water bottles there.

She passes the bags on the north side, peeking inside as she does so. Three of these contain sheeps wool in raw form, but already washed and combed. Two smaller bags contain chestnuts and almonds. The last two bags contain average quality linen fabric of various dull earth colors. After peeking inside she watches what Airith is doing with the chest.

As best he can in the dim torchlight, Relsyn goes over to search the four bedding mats.

The bedding has stale leaves and grass in them, perhaps last used a year ago or the fall before. In fact, everything in here is a bit dust covered and has some crumbling share pebbles on it.

With little effort, perhaps some new leaves could make these comfortable. Oh blessed Salix, it rained and snowed! there is nothing dry around. Could there be spiders in there?!

Having knelt by the chest, he gives a thorough once-over for traps and devices. There is a lock set in the front of the chest, which looks totally common and un-trapped. Detecting magic reveals nothing about the chest or the room, other than the items on the fingers or belts of the others. The lock is so common that Airiths first attempt to open the lock succeeds easily.

With Inwe looking over his shoulder and Relsyn a few steps away watching Airith, he opens the lid of the chest. Inside they find some black cloaks and pants on the top. Beneath are some small daggers [common] and a knife.

In a pouch at the bottom, there are 23 Crowns, 6 Dukes, and 8 Pennies.

Airith takes some time to count the coins. After a couple seconds or so he divides the coins as evenly as possible. 5 crowns and 2 pennies for everyone. Airith then gives an extra crown to everyone and takes the 6 dukes for himself.

[R, I, W each get 6 gold 2 copper, A takes 5 gold, 6 silver, 2 copper]

"Anyone else find anything interesting?"

After looking things over, "I wouldn't mind one of these cloaks and the knife." Airith looks at the quality of the knife and throws a cloak over his shoulder. "Should we take the rest of this stuff to the main cave?"

Relsyn puts the coins in his belt pouch, but withholds three gold to give to Sheldon, Zane & Earle.

"I think we should," He says.

Fearing spiders, he steps clear of the bedding but grabs one of the bags and begins to tote it into the main part of the cave.

"I agree." After accepting and stowing her coins, Inwe picks up the couple bags of nuts and one of the sacks of linen and makes her way back out of the inner cave. "Found some food, water, and goods."

Stepping over the threshold of the door, Inwe notices that the bar that was pushed down in the hole activates a catch which inserts into the bottom of the door and draws it tightly closed.

The others watch as Wrinkle hauls three of the wool bags up behind Relsyn and Inwe. Airith appears a second later with a bag of wool and a large black wool cloak draped over his shoulder and dragging on the ground.

* Earle asks "What did ya find?" as he saunters over from his seat on the ground by the fire. He glances into the bags and cracks open a few nuts and eats them. "ummm, good still."
"Hey, thanks!" he merrily says as he pockets the coin Relsyn tossed at him.

* Zane remains sitting by the fire, looking at the dirty bags you just hauled up like they were garbage. He does catch a few of the almonds Earle tosses him, then crushes and eats them. He just smiles and nods as Relsyn places the coin in his hand and says "found a few of these in there too."

* Sheldon, too, looks up. "Taint yers, but ifn it has to come, it'll fit somewhere." He does take the coin, however, without any apparent qualms.

Wrinkle takes one bag of wool and flattens it out to make a large round chair. Sitting down in it, he snuggles down a bit, wiggles out a few wool lumps as he stretches out, and looks rather pleased with himself. He asks "ssteww ready?" as he picks out his mess kit from his sack and struts over to the fire.

Airith drops the bag by the others and then heads over to his belongings. He folds the cloak in half and sets it on his bed-roll. He lays back and looks at the knife he found in the chest.

I wonder who left this stuff here?

He puts the knife back in his pocket and heads over to the nuts and grabs a few. "Did anyone grab those daggers in the chest?" Relsyn, Inwe and Wrinkle all nod no. Airith heads back into the cave and comes out with a few small daggers. "Anyone interested in these?" No one replies.

After eating dinner, Sheldon goes out and checks on the wagon before bed. As has been usual in the last few nights, Zane moves out of the cave for the first watch tonight while Sheldon goes down a bit earlier than everyone else.

Wrinkle, comfortable on his pillow, smokes his pipe and watches the fire burn a bit lower. He pulls out his musical instrument and plays a quiet lilting tune, ending with a series of longing or sorrowful melodies.

Airith lets out a big yawn and stretches his arms. He calls Smoke in and lets him eat some of the scraps from dinner and a bit of water. Airith then gives Smoke a good pet and rub and then sends him back to guard the entrance of the cave. Airith then goes about checking to see if his coat and other stuff are dry yet and turns over a few of the items. He then lays down on his bedroll head on his pack and pulls up his blanket and new black cloak.

Inwe enjoys her share of stew and some nuts, also giving some to Cildar. She spreads out what of her gear is still damp so it will dry by morning, puts the rest including her newly acquired linen, against the wall of the cave. Then sits nearby, Cildar by her side, enjoying the lingering aroma of her delicious stew and staring into the glowing fire as she drifts into her trance.

Relsyn readies himself for bed. Rolling out his bedroll and tidying his gear. He thinks to himself, *"I guess I'll have to sleep in the vestments, the traveling clothes are still damp. Father Bleter would be appalled."* He settles himself to his knees and works through his evening devotions. This done he settles into bed. "Hey," he says out loud, "Are we setting watches or anything like that?"

On the "road" again: READING 6 - 18

The wagon driver takes their watches, as they have the prior seven nights. The night passes quietly, other than a little more cold rain spashing just outside of the cave mouth. In the morning, Sheldon is quick to get to the wagon and start getting things ready to go.

The horses are once again hitched to the wagons, looking quite a bit refreshed from a long night in a warm cave. In an hour, you make it back to the main trail and head towards Malta. Sheldon looks at Relsyn and Wrinkle sitting by the bags of wool, linnen, and nuts tucked in the wagon. "Probably stolen" he says as he nods to the loot you found. "Bad years for bandits, last few were... guess you got em back" he chuckles.

Wrinkle has taken up playing his ocarina to the creak of the wagon wheels, and has pretty much created a tune that evokes the breadth and beauty of the open spaces in early spring. It is a good tune, but would put any audience to sleep and get him thrown out of any tavern he was playing in. He also plays lively tunes out of the long lost past, as well as well-known drinking songs.

Airith has taken to sitting up by Zane who is actually interesting to talk to. His life as a high family member in the upper-crust of Malta really bored him, as there was not much adventure. He joined this crew as it was usually the safest to be on, Sheldon being feared among the bandits. While not as profitable as working on a ship, Zane claims he likes the pace of this life just fine and it will do him fine for quite a while. Too bad his parents have basically disowned him... he misses his sisters.

Earle has been watching Inwe. He appears to respect her skills in the open lands. He shakes his head every time she wanders off at a jog and returns a few hours later with a basket full of roots and leaves and a rabbit or two hanging off her belt. On the eighteenth day of the trip, he actually asks "How do you do that? I can't see a thing to eat along the trail, yet you make the best stew I've had with a stroll in the prairie and thickets."

Sheldon says that night after stew, "Be in Malta tomorrow. Thanks. Here yare." He gives each of you two Crowns, except Wrinkle who took the two in advance.

Inwe: In response to Earle's questions: "I lived a number of years when i was younger alone in the forest and became very accustomed to searching for food and surviving on what I could gather. I guess I got pretty good at it." She offers to teach him some of what she knows and tells him about some of what she looks for.

To Sheldon: "Thanks accepting our company." And she stows the gold coins. "Think we could sell any of this stuff we found? I doubt we will have much use for two whole bags of unspun wool."

Airith has been rather chatty with Zane this past week, which Zane doesn't seem to mind one bit. He has been asking Zane about his family, the upper crust of Malta, his sister, and some other things that might help with the group's quests but also trying not to be overly inquisitive. To help the conversations between the two Airith has been telling Zane of his past on the farm and some of the rather comical stories that occurred while he worked as a brewer.

Airith thanks Sheldon for the 2 Crowns and pockets them right away. Smoke is resting next to Airith who is waiting patiently for the stew.
I can't wait to be in a real bed again. A beer sounds heavenly right about now.

Relsyn briefly reflects over the last week. He has completed some of the outline for his dissertation, though the bumpiness of the ride and lack of proper library facilities have hampered the effort.

He has spent most of the trip quietly introspective, delving into the pool of magical energies to which his sorceress talents give him access. As always he seeks to push the boundaries of what he can do, as in the past he finds that this--for him-- is an inward looking tasks, rather than an obvious display of magical effects.

In this way too, he has sought to expand the gifts granted to him by Eli though his most mighty agent St. Macedone. Instead of pushing at the boundaries here, though, Relsyn finds that surrender and submission are the firmest route to increased divine abilities. He finds time to prepare all the spells that the Saint has granted us.

"The real adventure begins tomorrow," He thinks to himself. "Angels and Ministers of Grace defend us."

Airith eats his stew a little slower than normal. He is deep in thought looking into the fire. The spoon still reaches his mouth and back to the bowl, he is a halfling after all, but you can see that his mind is miles away.

First to the Underplow Inn on the North side. Probably want to plan out what we are going to do. Don't want people to hear what we are trying to do, Smoke could keep watch though. Maybe Relsyn can find something out at the church. Maybe Wrinkle can play at an inn near the Platinum District and get some inside information. If I do to much investigating myself we might be found out. Am I being to paranoid?

Smoke puts his cold nose on Airith's hand and Airith seems to come to. "Sorry boy, here you go." He sets down the bowl for Smoke to finish. There doesn't appear to be much left but Smoke licks it clean anyway. "Sorry boy I must have been hungrier than I thought." Airith reaches into his pack and pulls out a bit of jerky from his trails rations. "Here you go, a bit of a treat." Smoke licks his chops at the sight of the jerky. Airith gives it a toss to Smoke who catches it and eats it down.

Airith picks up the bowl and packs it away. He then walks over to where Zane is sitting. "Zane, I was thinking... ..if you really wanted to... ..I mean I could deliver a message for you, to your sister if you wanted. Your parents wouldn't have to know and I would be very discreet." Airith pauses to let Zane answer but Zane is thinking about what he would say and how to answer Airith and nothing seems to be coming. "Well Zane just think about it and let me know."

Airith heads back over to his side of the fire with his pack and Smoke. He lays back and looks up at the stars. Smoke shifts over to lay next to him, his back to Airith's legs. "We'll be home soon." As he gives Smoke one last rub before he shuts his eyes and tries to get some sleep.

For several days, Zane and Airith have been becoming better acquainted. Zane really enjoys hearing about life as a brewer assistant, and finds it fascinating that mixing a bunch of grain with water can produce ale. He always assumed it came from the 'secret ale springs', like his nanny told him.

After a while he opened up and began to tell a little of his past.

He was raised by a nanny and well tutored in the world of finance. He had three sisters, all younger. Mendy, Shanda, Jamee all look up to him. He has worked hard to make sure they would not be vain silly girls who primped themselves constantly and hardly have an original thought for themselves. While they enjoy playing the games of the rich families, they are smart about it.

Zane's accounting skills are outstanding, but it bores him to tears. When his father expected him to join the family business at the bank, he said he would rather work in the farmers market. Little did he know that his father basically owned the market, and arranged to have him tend the pig market as book-keeper. Father expected him to be revolted at the menial job, but he did not mind much because there was activity and the people live honestly (not behind the masks of the rich)

While counting the days profit in the market, Zane was able to talk to the merchants who came and went through the area. He heard about the caravans and to possibility of 'making it on your own' if you were good enough. Finally one day, he sought out the best companies to work for, and the routes that generally were safest. With what clout he had, he asked Sheldon to help him get a job driving wagons for a while. Sheldon obliged by taking him on himself, four seasons ago.

His father was furious at first - he was kicked out of the family house and not allowed access to his three sisters. He did not mind much, but was furious he could not see his sisters. His parents have relented quite a bit, understanding this is 'just a phase' but until he is ready to move back and assume his family duties at the bank, he will live as he is now.

When Airith offered to take a letter to his sisters, he was delighted.

"messengers who deliver mail wear the livery of the king, or one of the private services. They go un-noticed by guards and security most of the time. I'll tell you where the Runyon palace is and how to approach as a 'servant-messenger.' You should be able to talk to them yourself to deliver the message."

Zane explains the way to Runyon Hall: North over Bastion Monument. Go over the left bridge. Stay on the north road and after two palaces there will be a road to the ravine on the right. Take that. The gate on the west wall is the staff entrance, that should be open. 'Runyon Hall' is written on the gate. "Go to the

kitchen/staff entrance and tell the cook you have a message for 'DeeDahMee' - she will know it is from me for the girls."

For two nights now, he has been drafting letters in his head. Tonight, he writes the three letters to his sisters and one for his father, Lord Runyon. "Airith, I really appreciate this! if there is anything you need in Malta, let me know. Some day I will return to the family business, but not yet. Look me up some time." Zane hands Airith four envelopes, beautifully addressed to his sisters and formally addressed to his father.

Sheldon tells Inwe, "Take the bags into the market - we'll be right there anyway. Probably pawn em off for a few silver or a decent trade."

Airith overhears and puts in "I know the area - that should not be a problem. The Underplow Inn is just off the street there."

After another o.k. night sleep, the wagons get moving. As you skirt the city to the south, the smell of seaweed and salty fish gets very strong. It only intensifies as you enter the gates on the south-west side just after your now-usual lunch time[2:00]. The wagons thread their way up the main road and on to the bridges through the rough city on stilts, over Kings Island, and up to the warehouse district. You stop at a smaller warehouse identified as Caldwells, where Sheldon gives a brief 'thanks' and goes inside with Zane and Earle.

Zane sticks his head out and yells
"welcome to Malta"
before disappearing back into the warehouse.