

Out of the Frying Pan

Book III: Fanning the Embers

A D&D Story Hour

Written and Compiled by Osvaldo Oyola

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AQUERRA

Content Warning: This story contains some descriptions of gory violence and elements of horror, discussions of rape and other forms of sexual assault, and representations of fantasy racism, sexism, and derogatory language.

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“Out of the Frying Pan” – Book III: Fanning the Embers

Part One: The Fearless Manticore Killers & the Necropolis of Doom!!!

Cast of Player Characters (in order of appearance)

- Ratchis of Nephthys - a half-orc cleric/ranger dedicated to an abolitionist god.
- Kazrack Delver - a dwarven fighter and now devout rune-thrower returned to his homeland.
- Martin the Green - a human illusionist sent by the Academy of Wizardry.
- Derek Jamison - a young human ranger sent by Martin’s order to assist him.
- Beorth Sahkmet - a human paladin dedicated to Anubis, guardian of the dead.
- Jeremy Northrop - a human fighter from Neergaard, seeking adventure.
- Anárie Mathaliel - an elven wizard/rogue sent by the elves to Aze-Nuqerna to aid the party.

Session #40

Ratchis looked up at the sun, thinking that it might be nearly exactly one day since the undead creature had drawn his life force from him, making him feel a bit cold and jittery. He could feel the reverberations of the loss as if his very spirit were undermining his ability to fight off the infection of darkness. The friar of Nephthys knew that soon the battle would come to its climax and called for his goddess’ divine *guidance* to guide him through that difficult moment, and suddenly it was past, and he felt his strength and faith rise in him again.¹

The half-orc was a ways away from the rest of the group, looking for tracks when this happened, as he wanted to be alone for the struggle. He noted the way the lieutenant-turned-wight’s track veered to the east.² It did not seem to jibe with the way he figured the hidden gnomish community must be, but it was possible that the demon-gnomes had a lair elsewhere that could be found, and they could surprise their foes.³ However, the zombies that had been turned the day before seemed to go in a more northerly direction.

Ratchis came out of the brush, where the others waited. The dwarves all looked ever-vigilant, the memory of their first battle with evil gnomish necromancer at this very site, fresh in their mind. The rest of the party stood encircled by the dwarves, not quite as vigilant.

“Martin,” Kazrack asked Martin, scratching his chin in contemplation of the what he was certain to be an up-coming battle with more half-demon gnomes. “If you knew someone was coming to attack you in your home, what magical preparations would you set? Uh, I mean, if you were, uh... you know, that powerful.”

Martin smirked. “I would set snares and sentries of some kind, and traps...”

“Gnomes are said to be mechanically inclined,” Kazrack replied. “It is possible we may run into those kinds of things as well. We need a way to set them off ahead of us.”

No one had any suggestions, and nor did Kazrack seem to really need any to continue his audible inner dialogue, addressing others almost as if out of habit, as he bounced from topic to topic. “And we need to coordinate better in combat. We need to not just rush in and go in opposite directions to go do our own thing. We need to support each other. Glory is good, but...”

¹ **DM’s Note:** I allowed an intelligence check against DC 18 to determine when the 24 hours have passed since the initial energy drain, allowing for helpful spells (such as *Guidance*, which I ruled will also help with level checks) to be cast in time to help. *Energy Drain* itself represents the siphoning off all or part of a person’s life-force and replacing it with a bit of material from the negative energy plane, causing the spirit to battle with this force for dominance; either healing the lost portion or giving in to the infecting darkness.

² The undead wight was encountered at the site of the battle of the Gothian mercenaries against the gnomes and where the party fought Frear and Mokad Steamwind (two of Mozek’s brothers) who had raised the soldiers as undead.

³ The Fearless Manticore Killers were on their way back to Garvan.

“Survival is better,” Martin finished for him.

“Cowardice is a sin,” Beléar commented.

Ratchis interrupted by explaining how the tracks diverged.

“Do we follow the zombies or this thing you keep referring to as a wight?” Derek asked, leaning on his bow. His new battleaxe was strapped to his back, and its bright polished head, shone brightly in the dying light coming through the canopy of budding trees.⁴

“I think the wight is more important,” Kazrack said.

It was agreed, and the large party made their way down an earthen embankment to the west, led by Ratchis who remained a good eighty to one hundred feet ahead at all times. Before leaving, Kazrack cast *Status* on the half-orc tracker.

As they marched the first few miles, the trees grew scarcer and the forest floor became thornier and browner, as the green gave way to budding golden heather that was gray in great splotches.

“We’re not going towards the gnome village anymore,” Thomas chittered in Martin’s head. The watch-mage reached up and scratched under his familiar’s fuzzy little chin. The squirrel’s red fur bristled with delight. He dug his claws into Martin’s green robe-covered shoulder.

“Can you talk to the animals here and find out if they’ve seen any gnomes or undead, or anything else funny?” Martin queried with his thoughts alone, projecting them to the tree-rodent.

“Actually, the animals aren’t the same here. These animals are dumb,” Thomas replied, and then moved to correct himself. “I mean, not as in smart, but as in they can’t talk.”⁵

Martin nodded in understanding, knowing that Thomas would simply sense his understanding without having to fully express it in thought. He and his familiar were bonded and what one felt the other felt. However, he was impressed by Thomas’ increasing vocabulary when he did have to express abstract ideas. As an expression of his own personality, Martin the Green was strangely proud of his squirrel companion.⁶

The landscape grew more fractured, as the party now marched up and down and around great scrub-covered swellings in the earth. They were not quite hills, but too large to step over and they rose on to a large plateau at the horizon. Coming over one of these, Jeremy paused and turned back to look at the line of fifteen men and dwarves. He shielded his eyes with one hand, resting his left on the hilt of his long sword. He had to brush his growing blonde out of the way, and the skin of his neck was caked with dirt from the road, but he still had a youthful handsomeness that shone through the golden stubble on his face.

Beorth walked past him and pausing, turned to see the descending sun as well.

Jeremy sighed, “Whatever you did, it really worked. That wight ran all day and night to get away from you.”

The Neergaardian turned back towards the direction they were marching and began again.

Beorth followed. “It fears my god’s power.”

Jeremy shuddered, as if the shadow of the memory of his death passed over him momentarily.⁷

⁴ Derek was given the Mokad the half-fiend gnome’s captured masterwork battleaxe to use.

⁵ Thomas displayed the ability to converse with other small animals living near the gnomish community when the party was last here.

⁶ In Aquerra, familiars are created from a physical manifestation of the spell-caster’s personality. A familiar, often expresses it in similar, but exaggerated ways as its master, and its developing intelligence mirrors that of the master as well.

⁷ Jeremy was killed by a garbage monster (otyugh) in Session #22 and brought back from the dead in Session #23.

A few more hours past, and soon Ra's Glory's light was dying in a burnt orange sunset behind them as they mounted a final embankment. It was a rough ridge like a split hill that obscured the land beyond. It seemed to run for miles both north and south across their path in the gathering gloom.

Ratchis was the first to see it, and he gasped. He reached down and helped up Kazrack, as Jeremy and Derek clambered up.

"Osiris have mercy," Beorth said when he saw what lay beyond, and the dwarves helped each other up to stare silently at the sight.

Before them was a black and barren land of ash and standing columns of stone. It seemed to go far as they could see. The ridge seemed to be the edge of a great rent in the ground, as if some huge and burning thing had slammed into the ground here. Beyond the ridge the earth was covered in a powder fine black ash, and the randomly interspersed were cylinders of black and gray rock, that varied in diameter from one foot to five feet, and some seemed to taper, but none was any shorter than seven feet high, but some reached fifteen or more feet up. The many columns created a labyrinth of shadowed alleyways that scattered in all directions.

Kazrack leaned over and whispered to Beléar, "Could this be Dralmohir?"⁸

Beléar shook his head, "We are far too westward for this to be that accursed place, and also if this were it I am afraid we would have already been beset by more of the walking dead than we could handle."

"Then what is this foul place?" Golnar asked aloud.

"It looks like a place where undead might be found," Tolnar said, with awe and a bit of fear in his voice.

"I can't wait to get some payback on them," Jolnar said, rubbing his shoulder with one hand where a zombie had slammed him.

The three dwarven brothers' voices carried out across the dead land, as no other sound emanated from the place, not a bird chirp, not a insect buzz, not even the wind seemed to emerge.

Ratchis shushed them.

"Tolnar, keep your voice down," Kazrack hissed at the dwarves who were not all that much younger than he.

"They could wake the dead," Beorth quipped uncharacteristically. Jeremy gave him a quizzical look.

"Shall we make camp here on one of these little hills and tackle this place in the morning?" Martin asked.

"No, we should keep going. The undead creature has too much of a lead on us already and he has no need of rest," Beorth said, regaining his composure.

"But the sun is going down," Derek said.

"We have no need of the sun," Captain Adalar said. "Let us press on."

Ratchis nodded, and Jeremy shrugged his shoulders.

"It's decided," Kazrack said, stepping down into the ashen land, a thick cloud of dust rose up obscuring the thin waxing moon.

⁸ *Dralmohir* is the name for a broken land in Derome-Delem overrun by the undead. It was once a prosperous community of dwarves that was cursed, and their mountain torn asunder, exploding into furious volcano, and collapsing.

The Fearless Manticore Killers and their dwarven companions fell into a staggered line as they marched, still being led by Ratchis, but Kazrack and Beléar followed close behind, with Martin the Green flanked by Helrahd and Kirla. Jeremy and Derek came behind him. Beorth was marching near the rear with Captain Adalar and the three brothers. But Baervard and Blodnaoth came last.

They could all feel the fine black dust like miniscule shards of glass stinging their nostrils and ripping the back of their throats raw. Even in the little moonlight there was, everyone's hair and clothes seemed to glisten black. They were all covered by a thin layer of the inhospitable stuff.

The tall columns of stone were wreathed in the darkness of the shadows of the others, making a web of eerie moonlight.

"You know if I were laying an ambush here, I would use illusions to conceal men...or wights," Martin said, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise. The temperature had dropped considerably, and he could see his own breath in the blueness of night.

"I don't think they have laid an ambush here," Kazrack said, looking back.

"Unless they hid behind those rocks," Jeremy said, a little too loudly. Up ahead Ratchis stopped and looked back, and the dwarves all looked at the blonde human then at each other, and suddenly the sound of their boots crunching in the ash was punctuated with grumblings. Ratchis scowled and continued.

Jeremy seemed to take no notice of any of it.

"Unless they were using mundane means of concealment," Kazrack whispered by way of some form of explanation for his comment, wanting to get the last word in.

"Like, what? Hiding behind rocks?" Jeremy said, sarcastically.

Derek chuckled.

"I wonder if this place was made during the Mountain Wars?" Martin mused aloud, changing the subject.⁹

"In a war? You think a war made this?" Jeremy gestured in a round motion with the torch he carried over his head, sending wild shadows over the nearby dwarves.

"Yes, perhaps through some great magic, or perhaps it was the work of Hurgun," Martin replied.¹⁰

"So you think magic made all this," Jeremy asked again, remaining skeptical.

"I don't know," Martin retreated from his assertion his lack of confidence undermining his readily apparent intellectual superiority over Jeremy. His attitude became sharp and defensive, "You can't say this is exactly a *normal* place."

"No kidding," Derek said softly, smiling. Martin wrinkled his upper lip in anger and slowed his pace to allow Beorth to catch up.

Jeremy looked at Derek and snickered.

They had marched for about three miles, when Ratchis looked up to notice that they had not moved much more than a quarter mile away from the ridge that marked this bizarre land's edge. They had doubled-back on their tracks in long winding trails. The tall stone columns were scattered in a very disorienting way, especially in the dark. He looked back

⁹ The *Mountain Wars* lasted from 409 to 427 H.E., when the Kingdom of Herman Land tried to annex Derome-Delem and met fierce resistance from allied dwarves, gnomes, elves and even halflings.

¹⁰ *Hurgun of the Stone* was a geomancer of some renown, who was said to have constructed his stronghold at some kind of planar nexus. It is a place of power that the party has discovered several factions are searching for.

over the group and could see exhaustion on their faces, even though the dwarves would never admit it. The sudden cold snap, breathing in the ash, the whole day of marching and the battle of the day before all weighed heavily on their shoulders.

“We have to go back,” Ratchis announced. “We are too tired and weak to continue.”

“Heh. Figures,” Blodnoth coughed into his hand.

It was agreed and making their way back to the edge took relatively no time at all. They had to use ropes to help the dwarves (and Martin) get up the other side of the ridge incline. It was very steep and covered in the ash.

They made camp. Ratchis dug a big fire pit and lined it with some of the ash. The few scrubby trees that were in the area did not provide much wood, but the group had carried about enough tinder to last another three days.

The half-orc also used the last of his prepared healing spells to help Jeremy and Kazrack with some wounds that still ailed them. He did the same for himself, softly calling to his beloved goddess.

Kazrack, Beléar and Adalar fell to discussing what spells they might prepare in the morn. “Should we not invite D’nar to join us in this discussion?” Kazrack asked the other two dwarven priests.

Captain Adalar scowled, but Beléar merely shook his bowed head. “He received blessings from his own god. He can keep his own counsel.”

Kazrack reluctantly agreed, his eyes resting momentarily of his half-breed friend speaking with Beorth about the positioning of the tents. The half-orc’s visage was made more menacing and ugly in the harsh shadows of the fire.

After everyone had eaten, the adventurers began to bed down for the night. There was already a frost covering the ridge they had made camp on, but none could be seen collecting on the ash. Ratchis and Beorth took the first watch along with the three dwarven brothers, who circled the camp very enthusiastically.

This watch went by without event, and Martin awoke for the latter half of it, only needing two hours of sleep a night.¹¹

Martin studied his books while he watched with the second shift, Derek, Jeremy, Kirla, Blodnath and Baervard.

In the deadest and darkest part of the night, soon after the moon set there, came a sudden and sharp sound from out across the land of the black stone columns. It was a repeated cracking as if pieces of wood or something similar were being smashed against each other. Even when the smashing stopped, its echo carried on for long moments, and when it died there would be a long pause and then it began again.

“What is that?” Jeremy hissed.

“Someone’s making an awful lot of noise,” Derek said. Martin looked around nervously.

The sound did not seem to come nearer or move further away.

“It does not approach, but should we wake the others?” Kirla looked to Martin, who shrugged his shoulders.

“No,” Blodnath said. “No reason to yet.”

Martin and Jeremy nodded. The sound came again several more times, and then after nearly an hour’s time of on and off again, it stopped and was not heard again.

The sun had not yet risen when Beléar awoke for the third watch, telling the others to go to sleep as he awoke Kazrack and Helrahd. Captain Adalar woke of his own volition. Martin sat up and watched with them all, not having so much as yawned all night.

¹¹ Martin’s ring called “*Lacan’s Demise*” allows him to go without food, water, or more than two hours of sleep.

Isilem, 9th of Prem, 565 H.E.

When the sun did rise, the camp was already bustling and being broken down. The unusual cold of the night gave way to an unusual rise in temperature, and soon all the dwarves were scratching under their beards, where sweat collected. Everyone rolled up their woolen and fur cloaks and strapped them to their packs.

They began by following their own trail back into the labyrinth of columns, but then crossing it deeper into the dead area, as they could now see clearly how they had wandered aimlessly through the ash. Now in the bright light it seemed so clear how to get further into this barren land, but in the darkness of night, the place was much more disorienting.

Disorienting it was still, but Ratchis and Derek soon found the trail of the zombies, which soon re-joined with that of the wight, and they all moved deeper into the maze of spikes and columns. The trail led them in a zigzagging pattern, turning in long curves and then moving in as straight a line as possible. The single wight trail often left the trenches dragged into the ash by the shuffling zombies, but always returned.

The heat began to become unbearable, as the sun seemed to be cruelly pointing out the weary adventurers, as the black ash rose up in great clouds, and infiltrated every nook and cranny of their clothing and equipment. They could feel their lungs and nostrils burning raw from inhaling the stuff.

Derek stopped for a drink of water from his skin. He felt lightheaded, and it hurt to breath. Jeremy began to cough, and Kazrack and the dwarves were all wheezing.¹² Tears streamed down Ratchis' face for ash kept blowing into his eyes. A weakness was coming over all of them from the heat and from breathing the ash. Beorth seemed the least affected, but even he gasped at times. Following the boy's lead, everyone stopped and began to drink and wipe their faces.

"This is a horrible place," Martin said.

"It's likely to get worse before it gets better," Ratchis said. "Everyone drink up. We have to keep going. I think I can see where the trail is going, and the columns looks different in that direction."

Helrahd grunted, "You know we are kicking up so much of this stuff that anyone could see us a mile away or more." As dry as everyone's mouth was, Helrahd still found some mucus to hack up and spit out into the ash.

"There is nothing we can do about it," said Kazrack.

They continued to follow Ratchis after their too brief rest, and the trail the undead left behind led to an odd series of columns. Here the columns were tall and tapered to nearly a point, and they were very close together, so much so that some seemed to create a narrower corridor, only fifteen feet at its widest. It was possible to squeeze between these spires, but not with ease as the ash was piled high around them.

"Oh great, the killing zone," Martin sighed sarcastically, imagining countless foes blocking off either end as they emerged from the shadows of the columns and from underneath the ash.

"Well, I guess we're going to have to turn back then," Kazrack said looking at the watch-mage with a smile.

Martin did not return the expression.

"It was a joke friend Martin," Kazrack said, his face getting serious. "I thought that'd be obvious. It was meant as humor."

"No fear," Martin replied, and then added under his breath. "I knew I wasn't that lucky."

"We all need to remain extra alert," Captain Adalar said. Golnar, Jolnar and Tolnar loaded their crossbows.

¹² **DM's Note:** All the characters were making Fortitude save every hour or taking subdual damage from breathing in the caustic ash.

Kazrack clutched the bag of runes about his neck and spoke out to one of the dwarven gods in his father's tongue, "Krauchaar, give me strength to defeat our foes, crush their skulls and break their bones!"

The dwarf could feel the strength divinely awarded him surging through his muscles. He deftly swung his halberd over his shoulder. It hardly seemed to weigh a thing anymore.

Ratchis led the way down the corridor of pillars, followed by Kazrack, Beléar and Beorth, who were then followed by Derek and Jeremy and Martin. The rest of the dwarves followed behind, with Captain Adalar and the three dwarven brothers taking the rear.

They had walked only a few dozen yards down the curving corridor, when Ratchis noticed two of the spires sticking into the path.

There was something hanging on each of them.

The half-orc raised his hand and slowed his pace. Everyone followed suit.

The wind shifted, and a foul rotting smell wafted over them in that instant.

Beorth grimaced with anger when he saw what it was. Martin gasped.

The corpses of two decaying gnolls hung from the columns, their arms twisted back and tied to each other by the wrist with a long stretch of hide that was looped over the spire.

Without a speaking a word, Ratchis climbed up on of the spires and hacked through the hide with a hatchet. The gnoll body slid down in sickeningly snapping pile of bones, cartilage, and withered hide.

"What are you doing?" Kazrack called to Ratchis, as the ranger hopped back down into the ash.

"We need to take care of this," Ratchis said, walking over towards the opposite column.

"Can't this wait until the return trip?" Kazrack asked.

"I am not so much concerned with proper burial as I am worried about a necromancer using them against us," Ratchis said, climbing up to cut down the other.

"I thought we killed the necromancer," Adalar said, coming to the front to see what was going on.

"There could be another one," Ratchis said, coming back down.

"We do not have time to properly deal with them," Beorth said.

"Can't we just burn them here?" Ratchis asked.

"Why alert our enemies who are no doubt nearby?" Kazrack said.

"It's true," Martin said. "We do not know how many different types of enemies we might find here. These gnolls seem in no way related to either the gnomes or the humans, it is possible that other factions or dangers are nearby. Thus, the cloud of ash we are creating and painfully breathing in might not be so unusual for someone to see from somewhere else; either way we have no choice. However, a fire might rouse some suspicions and we *do* have a choice about that."

Everyone looked at Martin the Green with some surprise.

"Well spoken," said Kazrack

"Let us leave them, we shall return to deal with them properly once we have dealt with the more immediate danger," Beorth said. "Let us not disturb them even more by unduly touching them even more."

The paladin had a look of disdain on his face, clearly not wanting to leave the bodies, but inwardly vowing that he would return for them.

The group continued moving, but Jeremy hung back, and soon was able to creep into a shadowy space between two columns, allowing the trailing dwarves to pass him. He then crept back to the two gnoll corpses and cleaved their heads off with his sword.

“Better safe than sorry,” he said aloud, as he wiped off his blade and hurried to rejoin the others before they noticed his absence.

Blodnath eyed him warily when he returned and the Neerguardian gave him a nervous wink.

They now began to find more pairs of rotting gnolls, each set in a greater state of decay than the last, about every six or eight columns. The final sets were merely bones and hair.

“This is very odd,” Martin wondered, wiping ashy and sweaty forehead with a dust cover kerchief. “Why are these here?”

“Perhaps the earliest ones were freshest,” Jeremy replied.

Martin the Green gave the swordsman a quizzical look, “But why are they here?”

“Maybe they needed to be prepared?” Jeremy speculated.

“Prepared for what? To become the undead?” Kazrack interjected. “I think all you need to become a zombie or something is an evil heart.”

Ratchis snorted. “There is a clearing up ahead. Be prepared.”

The party began to move forward again, but Ratchis stopped them suddenly. He easily noted that a new set of tracks had entered the corridor from a slightly wider space between columns. It was dozens of booted feet that had been hurrying. The shaggy patterns in the ash around this track suggested that it had been living gnolls, and not more than a day ago.

He told the others what he had noted, and then led them to the clearing.

Here the columns of stone were even taller, and widened to create a large oblong space, about two hundred feet long and about one hundred and fifty feet wide. Near the center was black stone that seemed to emerge from the ash. They could not see how far back it reached, but it was nearly fifty feet wide and fifteen feet tall and was flat on the top. The front of it looked like it had once been partially melted, and a raised shelf of stone about five feet up led to a recessed portion on the front, flanked by awkward steps that seemed to have been made of flowing magma and led to the flat surface atop. Two large painted stone statues of tall gnoll figures dressed in feathers stood waiting. The statues seemed weathered, and one was missing an arm, which must have once pointed down at the stone shelf. The way the stairways curved towards each other, gave the stone the rough appearance of a horned beetle.

On the shelf was the prone skeleton of some huge humanoid. Its bone white wrists were still held in shackles attached to chains that reached back into the five-foot recess.

However, what was most unnerving about this place was that the entire ‘clearing’ was not black with ash, but a washed gray of crushed shards of bone. There were all sorts of femurs, and skull fragments, and clavicles and pelvis and tons of unidentifiable shattered parts and powder.

“Maybe we’re not ready for Hurgun’s Maze yet,” Jeremy said, gulping dryly.

“You think?” Martin replied.

“What makes you think this is Hurgun’s Maze?” Kazrack asked, shocked by the suggestion.

“Well, he *was* a stone wizard, wasn’t he?” Jeremy gestured to the odd monolith.

“Stone, not bone,” Kazrack said, gesturing with his halberd to the ground before them.

“This is not an auspicious place to be battling a necromancer,” Martin said, running through worse-case scenarios in his head.

Beorth stepped to the front and gestured for the others to stand back. Most of the group hovered at the entrance, while Golnar, Tolnar and Jolnar turned to watch their backs at Captain Adalar’s direction.

The paladin of Anubis covered his eyes with his left hand and reached out with his right.

“Anubis grant me sight beyond sight to sense the emanations of dark powers in this place so we may put the dead to final and deserving rest in your name.”

Beorth reached out with his senses feeling them unite and become greater than the sum of their parts. It was as if he could see despite covering his eyes, but he could see more than he normally could. There was a dark shadow that passed over his heart when looked at the base of the stone, in a corner on the right beneath one of the stairways.

“Beorth, do you sense something?” Ratchis asked.

Beorth nodded and pointed. “Somehow it seems to be coming from beneath the ash and bone.

“Something’s coming,” Derek spoke up, his keen ears catching what all the others now heard, the sound of bones crunching under feet, coming from the right side of the stone.

Around the right side of the huge black stone came the shambling figures of four Gothamian soldiers in tattered armor and tunics. They wore empty scabbards on their sides, and their faces were rotting and ripped up. One had its skull crushed, one eyeball resting like a gray jelly on his face. The four zombies moved towards the party, arms outstretched and moaning their eternal agony.

“Form a line!” Ratchis commanded, stepping forward and drawing his long sword. “Kazrack do not go too far. Martin, watch the flank. I will not waste my divine blessing on these!”

“Watch the back,” Captain Adalar reminded his young charges. “Do not let anything through and call us if you see anything!”

The crunching of bones beneath their boots accompanied all their movements.

Derek threw his bow over his neck and shoulders and pulled his battle axe off his back, stepping up to join the forming line. Jeremy and Kazrack joined him, while Martin hustled over to the other side, checking to see if anything was coming from that way. He was slightly ahead of the line.

“More are coming from the other side,” the watch-mage warned.

Beorth broke the line slightly, stepping forward to be even with Martin and taking a swing with his long sword at one of the zombie soldiers, who had nearly reached them, but he misjudged and missed. Derek stepped forward again, to support Beorth, but the chop of his axe was short as well. If the guttural moaning of the thing had not been constant, it might have seemed mocking.

Grunting, Ratchis joined the two humans and his blade did not miss its mark. A huge chunk of this first zombie’s arm fell off the bone, splattering near-liquid rotten flesh on the bones piled around. Martin pulled a torch he always carried in his belt, and waving a hand incanted, *Manus Incantati!* He let go of the torch, but it floated in the air, supported by an invisible hand.

Jeremy stepped up and joined the forward moving line, but further on the left, waiting for more zombies to approach,

while Kazrack slashed at the first zombie twice, cutting it into three flailing pieces that soon stopped moving.

“Thank you my lords and lady!” Kazrack cried out joyously in dwarven.

Another zombie reached the line and swung its calcified fists at Beorth, who ducked and thrust with his sword. The blade entered the zombie point first but seemed to have no effect.

More zombies approached, Derek swung his axe fiercely, having to jerk it back and forth to pull it out of the collarbone of the first to reach him, but the zombie did not fall.

Ratchis’ sword blow was blocked by the forearm of his foe, doing no damage, while Martin sent his now lit torch over to the closest approaching zombie.

Jeremy gritted his teeth and swung at a zombie’s neck with all his strength. The former soldier’s head tumbled off, and for a moment the zombie continued to flail its arms menacingly at the Neerguardian and then fell.

Another zombie fell to Kazrack’s pole-axe.

The dwarves set up a second line behind the party, readying to support them, except for Helrahd who stepped up and joined them with an axe in each hand. He spit in the direction of the zombies.

Now the entire party was locked in combat with the zombie soldiers, but their combat skill was enough to avoid the awkward flailing blows of the mindless creatures.

And suddenly there was a sound like a hissing roar. Atop of the black monolith, above the stone shelf with its chained skeleton, there appeared a gnoll, dressed in a robe of faded feathers, and a mask of flayed human skin. A nasty stench of death, even stronger than that of the zombies, wafted from him, and his fur looked mangy and falling off in large clumps. Red glowing eyes shone from beneath the mask of skin.

Not a second had passed when the skeleton in chains began to rattle and shake, as if trying to rise, as a cloud of dust rose from the corner where Beorth had sensed the presence of evil. The Gothanian lieutenant wight came burrowing out from under the ground frenzied. Its eyes shone red as well.

“Revenge,” it hissed, as it surveyed the party struggling with the zombified remains of his troops.

“Revenge,” the former Gothanian officer, hissed again. He left a rain of bones behind him as he ambled forward, his shoulders hunched, and his lower lip ripped open and oozing yellow pus spotted with purple-black splotches.

Derek smashed the skeleton before him into shards, his fear giving him sudden vigor.

“Natan-Ahb!” Beléar stepped up behind the line and called out to the father of all dwarves. “I implore you forger of our souls to allow your divine wind fill me and blow out again like the great bellows of your forge! And to cast these undead things back into whatever pit they crawled from!”

All the zombies turned to flee, their automatic motor functions reacting to the presence of a divine force.

Ratchis took this opportunity to call upon Nephthys to bless his sword with an enchantment, while Martin sent his torch flying over towards the wight-lieutenant. Jeremy however took advantage of the zombie turning from him blindly and hacked at it deeply. It fell to the ground and feebly tried to get back up though one of its legs was missing and its head was cleaved open, before it just stopped moving entirely.

Kazrack also took the time to call upon one of his gods. “Mother of Blessed Mercy, raise your shield and defend me from those who would wish me harm!”¹³

Helrahd took off after a zombie moving to the left of the monolith.

¹³ Kazrack cast *Protection from Evil*.

“We can no longer hold the line, there are enemies with a vantage from above!” Kazrack called out. “We must advance! Half to the left! Half to the right!”

Jolnar, Tolnar and Golnar left their positions ‘watching the back’ and jostled to get past Kirla and the others.

“Let me through!” Tolnar said, shoving past Blodnath with a grin.

“There is space over here,” Jolnar said, moving to take the place at the entrance to the clearing that Helrahd had just vacated.

“Tarnitch!¹⁴ Don’t rush up there!” Captain Adalar barked, and the younger dwarves startled, seemingly more afraid of him than of the undead danger before them. “Let the others take care of that! You watch the back! My orders have not changed.”

“Yes, sir,” Golnar replied meekly.

Up on the monolith, the rotting gnoll shaman rose up to his full height. His bones and sinews could be heard to crack even above the din of the battle.

The thing shook its shoulders violently, moldy feathers fluttering from his cloak and shoulder regalia. It cried aloud something in the barking and laughing tongue of the gnolls. It pointed to Martin, who looked up in horror to see three pulsating shafts of light hurling at him. They struck him with the force of fists covered mailed gloves. The watch-mage gasped in pain.

The torch dropped to the ground. The concentration on his *mage hand* spell was broken.

The former lieutenant shrieked as it rushed at Kazrack, who stopped short, to feel the whiff of blackened and dirty claws in front of his face.

It was the sound of the chain scraping and clanging that awoke Beorth from his mind wandering in awe. He could sense of the evil of this place in his pores. Though he could not remember his former life, his family, or even his companions or the details of the undead he had been trained to fight, he did not lose his sense of purpose. For a moment it had been as if Anubis himself had illuminated this place for him to see it, and not the dragging tracks of a foul wight. The paladin allowed himself a smile and called upon his jackal-headed god to enchant his weapon, and he move steadily towards the left hand stair. He ignored the sound, which had awakened him, not taking his eyes off of the undead shaman above, but the others did not.

They could all see the nearly nine-foot-tall skeleton of what must have been an ogre, pull the chain from the wall as it stood, and swung the heavy shackle over its head.

Ratchis moved to follow Beorth, scooping up some pebbles from the ground and calling on Nephthys to enchant the stones as well.¹⁵

Martin hurried back to the relative safety of the line of dwarves, casting his *shield* spell in the process. He passed Derek who moved to wait just out of reach of the giant skeleton’s weapon. Looking for an opportunity to get within its reach.

Unlike Ratchis and Beorth, who moved past Kazrack to get to whom they perceived to be the leader, Jeremy moved up to support his dwarven ally and with a quick chop of his long sword, removed the wight’s right arm at the elbow. Black blood spurted and then oozed out.

The wight screeched again, and side-stepped Kazrack’s thrust of his halberd. The dwarf’s momentum caused him to lean overly forward losing his balance, and the wight took full advantage, clawing the dwarf across the face with its black nails.

¹⁴ In Dwarven culture, a group of dwarves of the same lineage can be called collectively or individually by their family or clan name.

¹⁵ Ratchis cast *magic stone*.

Kazrack could feel the cold of the thing's touch reach down into his very soul. He felt shaken, as if death had cast its shadow on him for less than a moment.¹⁶

Helrahd continued after the zombies on the left, hacking into one with an axe, as it still tried to flee.

The skeleton stepped forward and swung its chain at Derek, who ducked and took a swing with his battle axe at the thing's leg. It awkwardly, but quickly lifted it up to avoid the blow.

"Heh-ma-na-neh-FAA!" the undead gnoll croaked and tossed something at the bottom of the stairs where Beorth and Ratchis had begun to climb. The half-orc stopped dead in his tracks, but the paladin suddenly felt as if he were trying to walk across a puddle of molasses. His feet slipped out from him and he fell painfully on his back, smashing his helmet on the first step.

Blodnath moved with great speed, short sword in hand to help Kazrack and Jeremy finish the wight, but the thing punched the flat of the blade knocking it out of alignment. It also used the stump of its arms, still dribbling black blood, to throw off Beléar's blow with a warhammer, as the elder rune-thrower had also advanced.

Ratchis tried to carefully step past Beorth, but did not get far, slipping and falling with little grace.

"Good dwarven brothers, continue to guard the rear!" Martin the Green called to Golnar, Jolnar and Tolnar and he stepped forward, flicking his left hand towards the large skeleton facing off with Derek. *"Lentus!"*

The skeleton's movements slowed, and its chain lost momentum, making it a less effective weapon.

By this time, Kirla had made her way into the fray, with her flail in one hand and a shield in the other. She ducked the chain, and slammed the skeleton's femur, sending a lengthwise crack down the bone. The undead giant teetered for a moment and then regained its balance.

Again the former lieutenant shrieked, though flanked by dwarves and Jeremy, it still refused to fall. It suffered another slash of Kazrack's halberd across its chest. Its ribs were cracked open and the flesh on its chest cut away, and the thing's black and unbeating heart was revealed, but it would not fall. Its remaining arm backhanded the dwarf again, and again he felt the cold grip of its dark touch shake him down to the soul.

"Flammus sphaeres incendius!" the gnoll atop the monolith croaked, now speaking arcane words that Martin could barely decipher, and from his hand rolled a tiny ball of fire that puffed up to about six feet in diameter and rolled down the stairs towards Ratchis.

Derek seeing that Kirla seemed to be handling the skeletal ogre just fine by herself, took the opportunity of the undead witch-doctor's distraction and charged up the other steps. However, the blow of his axe fell short, as he was shocked to see what had been out of view from below—two more of the undead gnolls.

"Two more up here!" Derek warned the others, fear tinging his youthful tenor.

Captain Adalar hustled up to the base of the monolith between the stairs and slammed his great axe into the skeleton's ribcage, cracking a few.

Beorth managed to roll out of the magically greased area and scrambled to his feet, but was still at the bottom of the stairs. He watched the ball of flames bounced down towards his half-orc companion. Ratchis got on his hands and knees and spun himself out of the greased area and stood. The ball singed his matted hair, but did no real damage.

Jeremy, Blodnath and Beléar were a flurry of blades and hammers as they desperately tried to cut down the wight before it drained Kazrack of his very life energy, but the thing had not lost even a bit of its agility and prowess. It avoided some blows easily and used the thick crust over hide of its shoulders and back to absorb others.

¹⁶ Kazrack was *energy drained*, gaining a negative level.

However, Kazrack, in his fury could see an opening and plunged the heavy blade of his pole-arm into the thing's neck.

"You may have stolen my life, but now creature, I end yours!"

"I am already dead," the thing croaked and crumbled into a wet mass of rotten flesh and crumbling bone.

In the meantime, Helrahd was still chasing the fleeing zombies, and Baervard followed him, swords in hand.

Captain Adalar cleaved into the shoulder of the skeletal ogre with his great axe and the thing fell into many pieces. Kirla threw him a disappointed glance, having hoped to handle it on her own.

The first undead gnoll whirled around and reached out with a clawed hand, ripping into Derek's stomach. The young man felt the claws pierce him, but worse still he felt the cold reach into his body and touch his very soul. Startled, he swung his axe down sharply, and there was a snapping sound. He had cleaved off the thing's left hand.

Derek's jaw dropped as the thing howled as much in anger as in agony. The other two undead gnolls moved to join their companion.

"Uh, I could use some help up here!" Derek called through chattering teeth. He could see now that these things had flanked some kind of shaft that went straight down at the rear of the stone platform. A long flat rock like a gravestone was parallel to the front of the monolith, but behind the shaft. In many places the flat surface of the monolith was stained with something darker still, blood.

Now handless, the undead gnoll barked at Derek in the gnollish tongue.¹⁷

Beorth leapt up on the stairs, hoping to miss the greased area, and succeeding. He made his way up onto the monolith.

Ratchis did not follow but positioned himself to throw one of his stones made magical by the blessing of his goddess. It struck the undead gnoll as if it weighed fifty pounds not a few ounces, and punched a hole through its body, piercing the shoulder and shattering bone.

The witch-doctor spun around to keep abreast of his new foes, his remaining rheumy eye spinning in its partially exposed skull beneath the mask of human skin.

Martin looked from one group to another, trying to determine what they would do next and what he should do. He looked at Derek and Beorth flanking the flailing undead gnoll witch-doctor, and Ratchis tossing his stone. He saw Kirla turning to charge up the right-hand stairway, while Beléar and some of the other dwarves moved to help Helrahd round up the Gothanian zombies.

Kazrack fell to one knee, his hand on his chest, gripping his pouch of runestones and called out to his deities. "Natan-ahb! Judge these creatures and find them wanting! They are lifeless husks! Turn them from your sight!"

But the power of this place was strong and dark, and Kazrack's faith was not strong enough to overcome it. He bowed his head in shame.

Jeremy charged towards the monolith and using the platform the skeleton had been chained to as a step he leapt up, caught the lip of the stone. He pulled himself up onto the monolith, and redrew his long sword, chopping down at the undead gnoll. There was more cracking bone as the thing wobbled, but then pushed away.

"Somebody called?" Jeremy quipped with a wink to Derek, who smiled despite the danger.

Kirla followed by way of the stairs, and Captain Adalar was right behind her.

By now the undead gnoll shaman had backed away from Derek, while the other two moved to cut the young tracker away from the paladin, but Kirla was now arriving for support and Jeremy was in position to attack any of them.

¹⁷ It said, "*I will make you my slave.*"

The undead gnoll shaman leaned backward and pointed down at Ratchis and with a snarl snorted, “*Oh-ley-ah-say-fah-rah-sa-owrn!*”

Ratchis felt a spell wash over him, but it had no effect. Firmly entrenched in his faith, no fear could ever enter his heart.¹⁸

The other two undead gnolls lurched at Derek, clawing at him with backward-bent broken fingers. Staring with red glowing orbs in empty black eye sockets. They seemed to have pushed human teeth into their decayed flesh to decorate their bodies. It was all Derek could do to keep from retching as he swung his axe to keep them at arm’s length.

“Anubis, show this creature your righteous anger!” Beorth swung his quarterstaff around and called upon the divine vengeance of Anubis to smite the spell-casting abomination.¹⁹ The thing’s head popped like a melon and splattered green and gray matter across the top of the black stone. It crumbled, its cracked head rolling into a puddle of what once had been its contents. The jaw still moved, and words croaked forth in the barking tongue.²⁰

Ratchis bounded up the stairs, using his momentum to chuck another of his blessed pebbles at one of the undead gnolls. The stone pierced the thing’s skull from the right and rear with a resounding crack, and emerged through its left eye, splattering Derek. The thing did not fall.

Jeremy cleaved into it with his long sword, forcing it to turn to face him and move out to his left, to keep from being surrounded, as Kirla moved in to take a wide swing at the other.

Kazrack cautiously made his way up the left staircase, while Martin braved the right.

The undead gnoll that moved away croaked some arcane words, and soon another sphere of flame was bouncing and rolling towards Ratchis. The hulking half-orc tried to move out its way too late. The flames licked up his clothing and singed his hair. He frantically tried to pat it out as he danced to avoid the ball, which rolled back and forth in place, trying to immolate the ranger/priest.

Ratchis turned hard to his left and threw his last stone, but it went high and missed the sorcerous undead thing.

Derek deftly avoided another attack from one of the gnoll-wights, drawing the attack towards where Kirla waited, causing it to flinch and miss. The young tracker swung his axe down at it, but since it had not committed to the attack, it was able to pull away and avoid the blow.

Beorth edged his way to his right and joined Kirla against the other undead gnoll, slamming its hip with the divine vengeance of his god behind the blow. The thing’s leg crunched painfully inward, and it swayed, but stayed up.

Martin got to the top of the stairs and put a drop of oil on his right index finger and held a piece of flint between his ring and index finger on his left hand and watched the fight, waiting for an opening.

Jeremy proving his constantly increasing prowess with the blade, gritted his teeth and felt his sword bite into neck of the undead gnoll spell-caster and then fly clean through. The head flew into the air, spinning wildly before coming back down.²¹

The remaining gnoll-wight turned and looked wildly around, seeing how Captain Adalar waited for an opening and Kazrack was just arriving. It took off for the shaft that was at the back of the monolith, leaping up into the air to tumble down into the inky blackness beneath. However, before it could disappear Marin spoke the final word of his spell,

¹⁸ Friars of Nephthys as immune to all *fear* effects.

¹⁹ Paladins of Anubis gain the ability to call down *divine vengeance* instead of the ability to remove disease. This allows them to use a turning attempt to deal an additional 2d6 of damage to undead. At each level that they would gain an additional casting of remove disease, they gain one additional turning attempt per day.

²⁰ Had anyone spoken the gnoll tongue they would have known that it said, “...*the Shadows will take you soon.*” The emphasis on the third inward snort after the sixth snarl would have indicated that the word “shadow” was being used as a proper noun, or at least the gnollish equivalent of one; something regarding special attention or being unique.

²¹ This was the third critical hit Jeremy scored in this combat.

spinning the flint towards the oil, which grew hotter, and suddenly—and with a loud whoosh!—there appeared and arrow of flame which went hurtling at the wight. It slammed into him and it burst into fire, its shriek becoming an echoing wail that was swallowed by the shaft.

“I think I killed it,” Martin said, scratching his chin.

“Why don’t you do that all the time?” Kazrack cried, with a broad smile. “I can put on my armor!” He went on to announce, but then his smile faded, and he shuddered.²²

Jeremy and Ratchis both looked at Kazrack like he was insane.

“They are not all dealt with yet,” Beorth snapped. “There are still zombies that the others were chasing.”

Ratchis’ face had looked for a second like he might crack a smile as well, but Beorth’s words fell heavily on him and he took off down the steps. Kazrack was right behind him.

Jeremy shrugged his shoulders and went after them, but Derek just sank to the floor, sighing loudly.

“I don’t feel so right,” the young man said.

Soon, all the zombies were accounted for and the rotting corpses were dragged back to make a large pile in front of the monolith, where Beorth covered them with oil while praying aloud to his god. In moments, the bodies were a bonfire against the coming night.

Martin and Ratchis stood at the top of the shaft, looking down into the darkness.

“It goes further than I can see,” said the half-orc.

“That means it goes deep into the ground then,” Martin replied. “I don’t think we want to go down there.”

“Well, I think we need to find a way,” Ratchis said, noting that the stone was scraped and notched in three points around the shaft. He speculated there must have once been some device for lowering things. It was long gone.

Near the right stairway, Beléar was speaking with Derek and Kazrack, while Beorth looked on.

“Those creatures are called ‘wights’ in the tongue of men. We dwarves do not speak our names for such things aloud. A wight is a man of evil whose very evilness and stubborn will brings them back, either that or they are made by other wights.”

“Surely it does not happen to dwarves,” Kazrack said.

“I wish it would be so,” Beléar replied, looking down. “The first day shall be hard, but then it shall be seen whether your spirits can overcome their infection by the darkness of negative energy.”

“I must pray,” Kazrack said, walking off to be alone at one corner of the monolith.

Helrahd walked over beside Ratchis and looked down into the shaft.

“Let’s lower a rope down there,” Ratchis said, turning to Martin. “We’ll tie a lantern to the end.”

End of Session #40

²² Kazrack had made an oath to Krauchaar to refrain from wearing armor until he had fulfilled what he thought was a blow worthy of his place as warrior and protector.

AQUERRA

Session #41

“Something happened,” Ratchis said, feeling the rope jerk and hearing the crunch of metal echo up from deep down in the pit. He had already lowered the lantern on the end of the rope over fifty feet and felt no bottom. He was able to notice however that thirty feet below the area expanded either into a room, or the shaft itself became wider.

The half-orc pulled up what was left of the lantern. The metal was twisted, and the glass was broken, the lamp oil had all spilled out.

“There goes yet another lantern,” Martin sighed.

Ratchis looked over at him annoyed. “We’ll make do,” the ranger grunted.

“There used to be some kind of something built over this shaft,” Helrahd said, and hawked something green and yellow down into it.

Martin cringed.

Blodnath snorted his agreement with the red-haired dwarven scout, and pointed to scuffs in the stone, “Something was bolted at three points over this shaft, probably a winch mechanism of some kind for lowering things...”

“Or bringing things up,” Martin suggested.

The balding white-haired dwarf glared at the watch-mage. He placed a stone sliver he carried behind his ear in his mouth and moved it back and forth with his tongue.

“We can rig something up so one or more of us can get lowered down easy,” Blodnath continued. He looked to the silent brown-haired dwarf behind him. “Ain’t that right, Baervard?”

The dwarf did not nod.

“Yeah,” Helrahd spit again. “We’ll take care of it.”

“I’m going down first,” Ratchis demanded.

“I don’t think many folks are gonna argue with ya,” Blodnath sneered, and set to getting the ropes ready with Helrahd and Baervard.

Soon, Beorth, Derek and Kazrack returned from having searched the perimeter of the monolith and the nearby area for some other way into whatever structure lay beneath. They had no luck.

“There could be some other entrance miles away if it is some kind of cave system,” Derek said.

“This is the only one we have. This is the one we are going to use,” Beorth said.

“We will be so vulnerable getting down there,” Martin said. “Whoever is on the ropes is at the mercy of whatever might be down there.”

“That’s why I’m going down first,” Ratchis repeated for the benefit of the newly arrived companions.

Helrahd snickered from ten feet away.

“And I’m going with you,” Beorth said.

“And we will send one of our number who is a good climber,” Captain Adalar said, stepping into the conversation.

“Why do we have to go down there at all?” Jeremy asked. He had his arms around his body as a cold wind brushed past

them and swirled up the ash around them into miniature black cyclones. “We don’t know what is down there and whether it has anything to do with the gnomes.”

“The wight came here and he was under the control of the gnomes,” Kazrack said. “This could be their secret lair or something. It is certainly foul enough.”

“The boy might be right, however,” Now it was Beléar’s turn to chime in. “The wight was not in control of the necromancer gnome once he was killed, but he came here anyway. He wasn’t sent here for all we know. This could be a time-consuming sidetrack while our true goal is back in Garvan.”

Captain Adalar who moments before was ready to go down and explore, now carefully considered the elder priest’s words, “That could be true. Perhaps a more direct approach would be better than a delve into a dangerous and potentially irrelevant place. We do have time constraints. We came to aid the gnomes, but we do want to return to our people and give the news of the drow and aid them against the bear-men beasts.”

“Quaggoths,” Martin said. All the dwarves but Beléar and Kazrack turned and glared at the watch-mage, who looked down.

“On the other hand,” Kazrack said, rubbing his chin. “There may be a tool, weapon or information in this place we can use against the fiends if this place is theirs, or once was theirs.”

Beorth nodded.

“You speak wisely,” Beléar intoned.

“We explore it some and then come to a decision if it is necessary for us to continue,” Ratchis offered.

“This a foul place, where the darkness of evil reigns. I cannot leave here without attempting to destroy it,” Beorth said. “I can sense it from the very stone. I can smell it emanating from the pit.”

“That’s called rot,” Jeremy said, and he turned away, to watch for anyone or anything approaching as Blodnath called them over to the pit’s edge.

Derek followed the Neergaardian, and patted him on the back warmly, but he did not say a word.

Blodnath had talked them through getting the rope harnesses on as he rigged them up. At the end of the rope were a large loop and two smaller ones askew from it, allowing someone to slip the rope around the waist and then put each leg through a smaller loop. As a person was lowered down, they need only steady themselves with the rope, and did not have to hold on. Two of the ropes were tied and looped around the statues, and a third around the headstone-like protrusion at the top of the shaft for the third, and using pitons hammered into the stone as levers on the rope.

Ratchis was sent first.

The half-orc descended into the darkness of the shaft. He could see with the vision granted him by his orcish lineage, but the glare of the sun from above still put a strange sheen on his vision and he found himself squinting. He looked up to see Baervard being lowered quickly after him.

They had worked out a system of tugs on the rope that told those doing the lowering when to stop, go up or continue down. And as the ten-foot shaft opened on either side of Ratchis, he tugged once meaning stop, as he just came into view of the area. The shaft continued down further than he could see with his darkvision.

Just where the shaft opened there was kind of shelf all around him. It was a round level ringed with a low wall and holding four large stone sarcophagi. He could see some kind of masks hanging from the spaces between the sarcophagi on the wall.

Ratchis slowly turned and surveyed the first level of the shaft, as Baervard was lowered even with him.

Baervard grunted and pointed down, and Ratchis looked in time to see two strange figures floating up towards them in the darkness. They were like wavering slices of shadow only visible where they crossed the meager light gleaming down from above. They had thin glowing red slits for eyes.

They split from one another and swooped at both Ratchis and Baervard, but perhaps they were playing with this bait being lowered them, because they missed.

“Undead shades!” Ratchis hollered up the shaft as he swung his long sword with one hand and steadied himself on the rope with the other. The thing easily flew out of his range, but it flicked a shadowy finger as it passed again, and Ratchis felt its cold touch cut him to the bone. He could feel his muscles cramp up as if they were slowly atrophying.

Baervard stabbed at the one that dogged him with a short sword, but his blow was ineffective, slipping through the thing as if it were not there.

Above, Beorth leaped out of the harness he was being helped into and ran over to Ratchis’ rope which was being held by Golnar, Tolnar and Jolnar.

“Pull him up! Pull him up!” the paladin cried, grabbing the front of the rope and starting.

“But he didn’t tug the rope,” complained Jolnar.

Kazrack looked down the shaft and called to his gods, “Lords and Ladies, please come to me and allow me to emit your divine will to force these creatures to flee from your sight!”

The shadow attacking Baervard took off in a straight line down into the darkness of the shaft, but the lower one still dogged Ratchis, and reached out and touched him easily as he spun on the rope, trying to fend it off. Again, he felt that deep cold down to his bone and soul, and his muscles shriveled even more. The rope began to burn his hand.

“Pull him up now!” Beorth commanded, and Captain Adalar echoed the paladin with a guttural bark and pointed. The paladin and the three young dwarves began to pull Ratchis up.

The half-orc jerked upward as the creature took another swipe at him and it missed.

Jeremy and Kirla began to quickly and smoothly pull up Baervard.

“Nephthys! Send this dark thing from my sight until such time that I can free it from the curse of unlife!” Ratchis cried, clutching his belt of bent, scored and broken chain links. The shadow fled down into the darkness of the shaft.

The two spelunkers were pulled all the way back to the top.

“This is too dangerous,” Ratchis said. “We need a better plan to handle this and we are weak from our fight.”

“We should leave these dead lands and make a camp and rest some,” Martin suggested. “We *are* all injured and some of us are suffering deeper wounds.” The watch-mage looked from Kazrack to Derek.

“Why not just camp here?” Kazrack asked. No one seemed to pay him any attention.

“I am loath to leave this place and its undead to walk the world of the living for even one more night,” Beorth said without emotion. “Even if it is at the bottom of some pit.”

“Are you sure you’ve lost your memory?” Jeremy asked. Beorth sneered.

“We cannot hope to succeed in our current condition and without a way of handling those shadow-creatures,” Beléar offered.

Ratchis snorted his agreement, and soon the Fearless Manticore Killers and their dwarven allies were marching back across the ash that roiled up and burned their lungs and eyes.

The sun was an orange sliver ahead of them, as they got back to the embankment and climbed up panting and faces black with soot. They made camp.

Watches were set, and a cold night fell.

It was decided that the next day would be taken doing nothing but resting. As the day waned, both Derek and Kazrack felt the weakness of the life drained from them make their bones aches and the spirit wither. Each fought a battle with that darkness within them, but while Derek overcame his peril, Kazrack felt the bite of shadow deep within himself. The darkness did not leave him, and the worry of doubt took up a space in his mind and in his faith and spirit.²³ He walked off to pray alone.

Tholem, 11th of Prem, 565 H.E.

As the previous day had been hot and the night had been cold, so again was the next day unusually hot. The sun pressed down on them as if to smother with its palpable heat. The air was so dry, their eyes stung them even before they began to march out across the acrid ash again, amid the tall often conical stone pillars.

In an hour's time they were back at the monolith that marked the entrance to whatever subterranean tomb they had stumbled upon. They rubbed their burning eyes and wheezed, preferring the shards of bone to walk upon to the black ash.

It was deathly quiet, and the remains of rotting undead baked in the uncharacteristic early morning heat for this early spring morning. The ropes remained undisturbed, still coiled neatly by each stone they were anchored to. Soon, Ratchis, Kazrack and Beorth were putting on the harnesses to be lowered down.

Jeremy handed the *Right Blade of Arofel* to Beorth.

"Take care of her," the Neergardian said with a melodramatic smile.

"It's a she?" Beorth asked, quizzically, it seemed his amnesia had the same effect on his demeanor as having been raised in a monastery.

"It's a sword," Jeremy replied.

Ratchis and Kazrack both called upon their gods to enchant their weapons, and Ratchis went one step further and cast *light* upon his longsword as well.

They had not been long hanging in the darkness of the shaft, when Ratchis' keen eyes spotted one of those shadowy undead creatures swooping towards Beorth.

The half-orc reacted quickly and pulled belt of scored, twisted and broken chain links from around his waist and swung it with all his strength.

"Nephthys, let you divine light send this thing away so we may penetrate the mystery of this tainted place!"

The show of divine power was too much for the shade and it fled back down the shaft.

"That will give us some time," Ratchis said, turning to the others.

When they again arrived at the point where the shaft opened and revealed the ledge, Kazrack was able to shift his weight and begin to swing. He grabbed the stone ledge and pulled himself over the low wall.

Beorth tried to emulate the dwarf, but his lack of physical grace caused him some troubles and soon he was swinging

²³ **DM's Note:** Kazrack permanently lost two levels from the encounter with the gnoll-wight-witch-doctor. (See Session #40)

back and forth wildly and spinning out of control. Above, Jeremy, Helrahd and Derek cursed, and the rope twisted and burned in their hands.

“All those years of training and I end up a damned pulley operator,” Jeremy quipped.

It took Ratchis two tries to grab the ledge, but soon he was over as well, holding out Kazrack’s light flail for Beorth to grab on to, as he straddled the low wall and held on to a narrow stone support. Feeling more embarrassed than dizzy, Beorth was soon on the ledge as well.

They walked around the ledge, trailing their ropes behind them, and pulling for slack, while trying to be careful not to tangle themselves up too much.

The sarcophagi were large, and a thick stone lid covered in etched runes covered each one. They were so long, there was barely a foot of space on either side of them on the ledge, as they pointed from head to foot in towards the shaft.

Beorth examined the runes but did not recognize them. Nor did Kazrack.

The floor of the ledge and the tops of the sarcophagi were thick with dust. It did not look as if anyone had stepped here in years and years. Kazrack pointed out some masks he found hanging about five feet high on the wall. There were four of them and they hung between pair of sarcophagi. They were a deep rust color and lacquered, and they had snouts like a gnoll’s, each with a different expression. One was baring its teeth and seemed to be angrily growling. One had down cast eyes, and the snout was turned to the left, as if the turned away from whomever it was facing with a look of docility and fear. The snout of the third was scrunched and twisted, and the face was one that suggested pain, while the fourth was expressionless.

Beorth covered his eyes with his right hand and reached out with his left, stretching out his senses to detect the presence of evil from the masks or sarcophagi, but except for the palpable sense of evil he could feel all around them, the objects did not seem to be tainted with darkness.

Kazrack called to Lehrathonar to allow him to sense dweomers but there were none to be seen, except for the glow of Ratchis’ boots and white prayer shawl draped over Beorth’s shoulders.

They disentangled themselves and gave the sharp double yank, causing those above to pull up the slack and yank the spelunkers up over the ledge wall and to swing back and forth in the pit. They swung there for a few moments, and then gave the signal to continue their descent.

It was only twenty more feet before they came to another ledge. This one also had a low wall, and had sarcophagi made of the same stone, but these were rectangular. They could see the lids on some were cracked.

Again, Kazrack easily maneuvered himself into a swinging arc to grab the ledge and climb over. Beorth also had an easier time of it, but Ratchis spun wildly for several moments. Ratchis glared at his companions who seemed to be ignoring him every time he spun round and saw them. Beorth and Kazrack took to looking around. There were more lacquered gnoll-face masks. Beorth noticed the angry one was hung crookedly on the wall.

“Maybe I should fix it,” Beorth suggested to Kazrack, but the dwarf did not hear. He had just noticed that three narrow stone staircases led down to a lower ledge, and there was some clinking of metal and footsteps coming up one that was nearby.

Ratchis was finally able to steady himself on the spinning rope as those above swore in the terrible sun, but Kazrack did not notice. The dwarf yelled out, “Look!”

A figure ascended to the final step. It was a skeletal figure dressed in ring mail armor and in a torn and filthy burgundy tabard that had some heraldry ripped from it. It held a long sword in one bony hand, but as it rose it pointed and finger and spoke a muttered word. Arrows of black light exploded from the creature’s finger and went racing towards Kazrack in a blink’s time.

The dwarf cried out as he felt a deep cold reminiscent of the wight’s touch, but just a shadow of that shadow. He

staggered forward, swinging his flail, and smashing the thing in the shoulder. It did not cry out. It's only sound was the clinking of its armor and the cracking and stretching of leathery tendons.

Beorth turned as he saw a second one emerge from another stairway, to point at him and send two the cold arrows rocketing into his chest.

Ratchis finally grabbed the lip of the ledge wall only to feel the sharp cut of a long sword blade across his forearm. He yanked his arm back and rolled over the wall and onto his feet cursing under his breath. He had his own long sword in his hand.

"Anubis, use me as a vessel to fill with your divine might and send these creatures from here so we may better purge this place of evil," Beorth cried, and a wave of positive energy erupted from him, and his white shawl began to glow, filling the ledge with pure white light.

The creature hanging over Ratchis turned and the half-orc took his opportunity to cleave into its hip bone. It wobbled but continued to hurry away towards the staircase it had emerged from. The one that had attacked Beorth also fled and the paladin thrust his sword through its rib cage as it turned, but Kazrack found himself barely deflecting a sword blow from the first. The shock went down and numbed his arm for a moment.²⁴

However, the dwarf did not despair, he swung his flail with all his might, slamming the thing in the thigh-bone. There was a cracking sound as it fell to its knees, awkwardly.

Ratchis slipped out of his harness and stuffed it into a crack on a sarcophagus lid. He hurried over to aid Kazrack, who was amazed that he missed as he swung at the skeleton's head, but it leaned forward, essentially ducking as it came back up to its feet. Ratchis came up alongside his dwarven companion and thrust his sword into the thing, but there was no chip or crack of bone. He had pierced the armor, but there was no flesh underneath.²⁵

The thing pulled away from him and turned to go down the stairs, but with a quick flick of his meaty wrist, Ratchis cracked the thing's helmeted skull and it tumbled in a jumble of bones and armor down the stone steps.

"We must go down and finish them," Beorth said, sliding from his harness and frowning when he saw where Ratchis had put his.

"Wait, that last one wasn't turned," Ratchis said. "It was only trying to draw us down there."

The half-orc lit a torch and handed it to Beorth.

Kazrack had a puzzled look of growing horror on his face.

"What is it?" Ratchis asked, the spell on his sword glaring in the half-orc's face.

"Nothing. I...uh, thought I heard something..."

Ratchis put a finger to his lips and crept over to a stairway. He crouched down and looked and could see one of the minions at the bottom of the stair, cringing. By moving over to another stairway, he could see the other doing a similar thing. Just to be safe, he slunk over to the third staircase and looked down. There was something small and gray that seemed to crawl just out of his field of vision as he crouched.

The Friar of Nephthys went back to his companions and placed a finger to his thin brown lips again. He quietly prayed to his goddess for her healing blessing, closing the wound on his forearm.

He pointed to Beorth's harness and grabbed his own and slipped it on. He gestured down to the pit and moved to the

²⁴ **DM's Note:** Not every hit a character takes for hit point need to be described as drawing blood. Bruises, twists, dizziness, fatigue, and a whole other little details can be used to relay the loss of energy as one engages in melee. Of course, blood is good too.

²⁵ **DM's Note:** Not every miss completely misses the target. I often describe armor absorbing damage or a foe parrying a blow or other similar things to keep combat lively and fresh.

ledge wall. Beorth slipped his rope harness back on and Kazrack walked over still looking pale. As they clambered over the wall hoping to swing down and surprise their foes, Kazrack heard the sound again.

This time they all heard it. It was the muffled and cracking sound of a baby's cry, echoing from deep down in the darkness of the pit.

The trio of heroes swung down with anger, trying to ignore the disturbing cry below which now faded into their cries.

Ratchis brought his feet deftly down on the low wall that marked the lower ledge, and though he teetered for a moment, he kept his footing, slipping his chain belt from his waist to call on Nephthys' power.

Beorth's boots struck the low wall and the paladin went flying back, twisting, and spinning wildly. Above, Jeremy, Helrahd and Derek cursed under their breaths as their hands burned with the twisting jerking rope.

Kazrack was dropped too far and he slid past the lower ledge, where the shaft continued downward. He looked back up at his companions as he passed them, crying out, "No! No! Too Low!"

Ratchis jumped down from the wall, spotting one of the skeletal guardians moving towards him from the left, while another moved around a sarcophagus to take aim at Beorth's spinning form. This level like the previous had the rectangular stone coffins, but no masks.

"Nephthys, please heed me and send my foes away," Ratchis cried, spinning his chain, but the guardian on the right fired two of those bolts of black light at the helpless paladin. Only the tiny figure on the floor moved away from the half-orc priest. He saw it move at the bottom of his vision, so he tipped his head to get a better look before it disappeared behind a sarcophagus.

It was a baby.

But its skin had gray tone with no luster, and its little big head was split open down the front and raw with gore, fragments of skull sticking out. It dragged one little broken leg, the bone sticking out the side of his chubby thigh behind it.

Ratchis gagged, as he noticed the already protruding jaw, the black coarse hair and the ridge of bone down its back. There was no doubt it had orcish blood.

Meanwhile, Kazrack took advantage of hanging too low to help to look further down the shaft, as a shuffling and murmuring sound drew his attention. He could see that the shaft ended only twenty feet below this last ledge, but what was down there horrified him.

The bottom of the shaft was filled with the blank and rotten faces of babies struggling to look up at him. They crawled over each other's sore-covered leathery flesh, their exaggerated jaws salivating; their little hands, most missing fingernails, some still having them twisted back and protruding from the dead flesh they punctured, reaching up to Kazrack as they took notice of him. They bubbled like a cauldron of pure horror. The dwarf could see that the infants were several feet deep, crawling over each other and pushing others down blindly in their vain attempt to reach him. A handful of emaciated rats crawled in and out of the pile of tiny bodies nibbling on filmy eyes and tiny tender ears and toes, squeaking delightedly.

Suddenly, one of the babies cried out that halting cry of hungry baby, and another took it up and then another, until they roiled and cried in a cacophony that rose up the shaft.

"What the hell is that?" Helrahd asked aloud.

Derek felt a chill wash over him and he shivered though he was covered in sweat.

Golnar, Tolnar and Jolnar were having trouble interpreting the jerks on their rope, which Kazrack hung from.

Captain Adalar walked over. "Play it safe. Pull him up."

Below Kazrack began to scream, “By the gods! The babies are demons! Pull us up! Pull us all up!”

There was a final hard jerk and Kazrack dropped closer to the pit of zombie infants, but then he began to rise smoothly up.

He was in time to see the second skeleton guard, side-step to avoid Ratchis and fire two more of the dark bolts at Beorth.

The paladin tried to keep his calm. While buffeted by the necromantic bolts, and he did not cry out. He reached out pathetically to press a hand against a support and steady himself, but he failed.

“You fools! Ascend! Flee!” Kazrack cried passing them on the way back up. He looked up to the top of the shaft and cupped his hands over his mouth. “Pull us all up!”

The armored skeleton turned back to Ratchis and swung its sword at him only to have it blocked by the half-orc’s own sword, which threw off crazy shadows of the thing as he parried its blows.

“Beorth! D’nar! Fall back!” Kazrack was quickly being pulled into the darkness above.

Ratchis tried to move in such a way to put the sarcophagus between him and the undead guardian, but he over-extended and the thing took the opportunity to swing, nicking the leaping priest in the thigh. The wound burned, and Ratchis could feel a sheet of blood rush down his leg as he grunted angrily.

But the dark-cloaked undead warrior did not concern the friar of Nephthys. It was the enslaved remains of an infant, trying to crawl into the wall to get away from him. It repeatedly smashed its already split head into the wall, gurgling.

“Nephthys, forgive me,” Ratchis whispered. His vision was fractured for a moment by a swollen tear, but then he brought his sword down on its little head, cleaving all the way down to its stomach, which exploded into hundreds of tiny insects that scurried into all directions.

Beorth was finally able to steady himself in time to see Ratchis dive off the ledge wall. He bounced twice, as Baervard, Blodnath and Kirla groaned. The half-orc jerked the rope twice, so the paladin did the same. In a moment, they were being pulled up. But the skeletal guards walked to the edge and pointing up murmured their arcane words and fired more of the black bolts at Beorth. He felt cold and weak, and bruises swelled up painfully wherever the things had struck him.²⁶

Ratchis reached into his bag and pulled out a flask of oil he had prepared with a strip of oil-soaked cloth and he lit it off of Beorth’s torch and tossed it down.

It exploded and one of the guardians shuffled back and screeched.

He lit another and dropped it straight down on the zombie babies, for a moment there was a flash that allowed him to see the crawling bodies twist and roll as they were engulfed in the splattering burning oil. The wail rose in intensity, and the smell of burning flesh rose with it. The scorched babies were swallowed and smothered in the ceaseless and futile crawling of the others, the flames going out as they were sucked down.

And there was darkness again, from which the murmuring and crying emerged.

Soon, all three of the adventurers were back at the surface; the top of the black stone monolith with the others.

Kazrack was laying on his back on the black stone, covering his eyes with his hands, the rope harness still around his legs and waist.

²⁶ **DM’s Note:** These were simply *magic missiles* with different flavor text to make them seem like the tools of an undead creature. These skeleton guards were adapted Baneguards from *Monsters of Faerun*.

Ratchis fell to one knee and began to pray quietly to Nephthys, while Beorth simply stood head bowed silently.

“Was it really that bad?” Jeremy asked, cautiously.

“Yes,” Kazrack replied. “There are horrors down there.”

“This is truly a terrible terrible place,” Beorth added.

“It doesn’t make any sense, how did all those... *babies* get down there?” Kazrack said, sitting up.

Martin blanched.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ratchis said, standing. “We’re going to put them all to rest and destroy this place.”

There was a long silence.

“It doesn’t matter if it has anything to do with the gnomes or not,” the half-orc added with a barking tone. “Though I am sure it does.”

Beorth nodded in agreement.

“Let us just hope our delay here does not mean more gnomish lives will be lost,” Beléar said.

“And what of Ephraim?” Derek asked. “We have to warn the gnomes that the Gothanians might mistakenly try to make war on them.”²⁷

“It will take him some time to get to capital and deliver his message, and even if the King decided to use force, Gothanius has no standing army. It will take time to gather and organize the militia,” Martin explained.

“It is a long walk back, and I am still weakened from our encounter with the shadow yesterday, as are we all wounded,” Ratchis said. “Let’s us go back and camp for the night and return in the morning.”

“I am loath to leave this place unrazed,” Beorth said, with a bit of visible frustration.

“And patience will allow you to see it razed,” said Beléar quietly. “The half-breed speaks wisely. Let us return to the edge of this dead land and camp again to regain our strength, now that we know the true horrors that await us below.”

So again they secured the ropes and hefted their gear and began the long march back to the dimpled scrubland that they camped at.

“And tomorrow, let’s figure out a better way of determining who holds which ropes,” Jeremy announced, but no one reacted to his comment.

The sun bobbed up and down out of view ridge that bordered this sunken dead land. The long shadows of the stone pillars crossed diagonally across their path, making it even darker.

Boots crunching in the black ash and the occasional cough were the only sounds. Derek found it unnerving and pulled his cloak closer around his shoulders and looked around. He hated that there were no animal sounds, no sound of wind in reeds or branches; it was unnatural.

Derek’s eye was struck by movement across a narrow band of light coming between two narrow pillars. He turned his

²⁷ Ephraim was the only survivor of a mercenary expeditionary force sent to explore the area north of Greenreed Valley for further expansion of the Kingdom of Gothanius. He claimed all of his companions were killed by gnomes that used magic and undead. (See session #39).

head to see a humanoid figure made of shadow emerging from the blackness and swooping at him.

He ducked and cried out. The rest of the troop was ahead of him and they all stopped and turned in time to see it fly up and turn for another pass. Ratchis came charging from what had been the front of the group, and Golnar, Jolnar and Tolnar who were closest, pulled out their respective weapons.

“There might be more!” Derek warned, worried that everyone was now looking in his direction as opposed to looking for another attack.

Martin the Green turned to watch the front.

The shadow flew down without effort, drifting like a leaf and ran a cold finger across Derek’s face. The young man moaned as his muscles sagged and drooped as if meat had been sucked from his arms and legs. He felt the weight of pack and his armor much more heavily.

“Krauchaar, bless my weapon!” Captain Adalar cried out, hefting his great axe into the air, and for a moment the blade shone with divine light.²⁸

Golnar charged at the incorporeal undead as it moved to drift past Derek. He was over-enthusiastic, however, and fumbled the warhammer as he hefted it over his head and it went flying back, landing at his brothers’ feet.

Martin cried out as another shadow swooped at him, emerging from around the base of a large pillar.

“Martin! What are you doing? Put your back to something!” Jeremy cried out, drawing the Right Blade of Arofel and running to the front of the group, placing himself between the watch-mage and the undead thing.

Tolnar fired his crossbow at the one dogging Derek, but the bolt flew right through it.

“We must retreat from these things!” the young dwarf cried out, fear in his voice.

Kirla harrumphed and charged as well, but the head of her flail also went through the thing. She looked at her weapon with puzzlement.

“Anubis! Send these things away so we may destroy them in your name when we have regained our strength!” Beorth cried out, clutching the silver jackal’s head around his neck. There was a wave of positive energy and the shadows screeched and took off straight into the air and the inkiness of the falling night.

They all let out deep breaths and then wordlessly fell back into formation and hustled back to the site of their former campsite.

They were all silent as they set up their tents and unpacked their bedrolls and lit small fires with what was left of the tinder, they had brought with them. They spoke the fewest words possible to arrange watches, and soon the only sound was the snoring of the dwarves and Ratchis.

The night passed without event, but the next morning both Ratchis and Derek still felt the weakness in their limbs, and the priests in the group spread around their healing, along with Ratchis’ use of *Lesser Restoration* on Derek. The rest of the day was spent in rest and idle speculation of what might be found even deeper in the place they had uncovered.

“I just don’t understand how so many babies, half-orc babies could be in the same place at the same time,” Kazrack mused aloud.

“I cannot even begin to conceive of how such a thing is possible,” Ratchis replied solemnly.

“Soon their souls will be at rest,” Beorth commented.

²⁸ **DM’s Note:** Captain Adalar cast *Magic Weapon*

“But for now, how about we rest some more?” Jeremy said, crawling into a tent.

Balem, the 12th of Prem – 564 H.E.

The next morning, dawn came up with a stiff wind that sent sheets of ash cascading down on the campsite. The previous night had been spent with nervous watches of five people at a time looking in all directions for the return of the last shadow and going out in groups of three to collect what little wood they could from the patches of scrubby trees.

Beléar was examining the spellbook that Martin had taken from the necromancer gnome, Frear several days before.²⁹ The watch-mage had asked the dwarven priest to prepare a miracle that might allow him to break the magical spell on the book, which Martin was convinced was a dangerous ward of some kind.

The elder dwarf was unable to break the enchantment.

“Are we going back into that nasty place?” Thomas chittered in Martin’s mind. He had a tone of disgust and anxiety.

“Yes, Thomas.”

“Why do we keep trying to get in there?” Thomas whined. “I want to go back to the gnomes. I like the gnomes.”

“We all do, Thomas,” Martin replied, patting his familiar’s head absently. “But we have to do this because Ratchis and the others think it’ll help them.”

“Do you think it will help them?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think.”

“You know, you should be the leader,” Thomas said, lovingly.

“No, I shouldn’t,” Martin replied. “But thanks for saying so anyway.”

Later in the day, a bored Jeremy began to pester Blodnath with questions again, when he saw the dwarf doing something with his ‘trap-box.’³⁰

“Hey, Blodnath!” Jeremy plopped down with his back to the wind behind the tent, right beside the wiry white-haired dwarf. “D’you think you could show me how that toy of yours works?”

“It’s not a toy.”

“Uh, yeah... whatever it is...the training device. Can I see it?”

Blodnath eyed the blonde human, “Sure, “I’ll set it up for you.”

“I once saw someone use a bulb full of oil to help pick a lock,” Jeremy chattered. “Do you have one of those? Or is that too advanced for this type of game?”

“This is not a game,” Blodnath snapped with annoyance. He pulled the box off his lap. “I don’t think you’re really serious about this, boy.”

²⁹ This was in session #39.

³⁰ Blodnath carries a box designed to be set into simulations of different kinds of traps and locks, which he used to keep his skills sharp and to train others.

“No, no, I promise to take it seriously,” Jeremy protested. “I am a quick study.”

“Humans are really no good at this kind of stuff because it takes patience,” Blodnath said. “You’re not ready for the box. I’ll tell you about different kinds of locks instead.”

Jeremy sat and listened and soon his curiosity overcame his disappointment, and he asked an annoyed Blodnath a question about everything the dwarf tried to explain. Derek sat around the corner of the tent. Listening to it all.

The rest of the day passed without event. Beléar and Ratchis spread around the *lesser restoration* spells, to help out Kazrack and Beorth—along with a good deal of healing for the original trio to descend.

The next morning they’d march back to the monolith.

End of Session #41

AQUERRA

Session #42

Teflem, the 13th of Prem – 564 H.E.

It was not until noon that they reached the monolith again. Ra's Glory hung at its apex, a chariot racing over a blue hill, casting heat without mercy. The march back and forth was several hours, and the ash was unrelenting. After days of breathing it in, they all felt a weight in their chests and their throats were raw and hurt when they swallowed. Jeremy had torn the bottom off his cloak and made a scarf that he kept wrapped around his nose and mouth. The torn ends billowed in the breeze.

The day before they had discussed strategies and argued about priorities...

"If we are to get a foothold in that place from which to explore the rest of it we must destroy the shadows first," Beorth said, he had already expressed his belief that there was much more to the place that had not yet been discovered.

"I think it is obvious from our encounters thus far that we are incapable of destroying these shadows with the power of our gods, for we are too weak of vessels," Beléar intoned.

"Well, we can drive them away, but I do not think that will be enough," Beorth said. "We cannot hope to uncover whatever it is about this place with those things dogging us and draining our very strength.

"Perhaps this will take too much time," Captain Adalar started up on a topic he had brought up repeatedly since they had arrived at these dead lands. "Let us leave this until after we have dealt with the gnomes."

"I do not think we can leave this," Ratchis said. "What if something happens to us when we fight the gnomes? This is an evil place and needs to be dealt with."

"I cannot let this lie," added Beorth.

"And what if something happens to us here? Who will help the gnomes?" Martin asked.

No one had an answer. In the end the final decision was left to Kazrack as he represented both of the opposed groups.

"We explore this place some more," he said, after weighing it carefully for a few moments. "Lehrathonar sometimes hides his secret lore in strange places."

Beléar nodded gravely. Captain Adalar accepted the decision without a word.

They went over a code of rope tugs to let those doing the lowering when to stop, continue descent or go back up.

Captain Adalar wanted to change the code.

"I think we should use a system of long tugs and short tugs," he said. "You know, as in short-short-long means go back up."

Jeremy snickered and elbowed Derek.

"Let's not," the Neergaardian laughed obnoxiously.

"I'll have you know that is the system used in dwarven mines," Adalar was insulted. "You can spell out the entire dwarvish alphabet with short and long pulls."

"That's fascinating," Jeremy replied sarcastically.

"Yeah, interesting," added Derek. They laughed together; their similar attitude and age having made them bond over the

last several days.

And then Kazrack, Beorth and Ratchis were being lowered into the shaft again. The ropes cracked and wheezed, as they were slowly uncoiled and fed into the chasm.

Beorth's helm shone with the divine light of the dwarven gods, as Beléar had cast the spell upon it as they were first lowered in. The light illuminated the cobwebby and dusty first ledge as they passed it, and they did not stop until they again reached the next split-level ledge where they had first encountered the skeletal armored guards.

Three sets of two tugs and they were all dangling there. Ratchis made it to the lip of the ledge with its low wall in his first try, but Kazrack swung twice before frantically grabbing the wall in a scramble and pulling himself over. Beorth however, was soon spinning wildly in dizzying figure eights.

Ratchis slipped out of his harness and yanked hard once, signaling for the others to pull it up. The plan called for more of them come down and face this menace.

Kazrack remained in his harness and leaned out with his halberd, to allow Beorth something to grab on to. The paladin clutched the pole-axe and the dwarf pulled him in. The way the light spell shone against the scales of the paladin's armor gave the dwarf the impression that he had just reeled in a shining fish.

Beorth sat on the low wall and took a deep breath.

"I am amazed the shadows have not attacked yet," Beorth said.

"Because we wanted you to be comfortable," a voice hissed, and two shadowy forms emerged from the darkness at two of the staircases. One was harder to see, being in the dimmer area that Ratchis stood in. It swooped at him, clawing with a cold insubstantial claw. The half-ore priest could feel his limbs whither as the cold passed through him. The second shadow dove towards the light of the shining helm like a black moth, turning effortlessly in the air and lazily leaning out a hand to pass through Kazrack. The dwarf shivered and he felt a great weight upon him, as his limbs protested.

The adventurers barely had time to register what had happened when the shadows swung about and did it again. Ratchis let out a weak growl, and Kazrack's teeth chattered as his halberd sunk in his hands.

"Foul servants of light, you will join us!" one of the shadows hissed.

Ratchis leapt back and around putting a sarcophagus between him and the shadow.

"Nephthys, bring forth your wrath in the form of your favored weapon to destroy these foul creatures!" Ratchis called out to his goddess and translucent spear of golden light appeared on the other side of the shadow and thrust forward. Ratchis could see some the thing's "shadow stuff" dissipate with the blow and he smiled.

Beorth stood upon the lip and took a hard swing over his head at the shadow that pestered Kazrack, calling on Anubis power to fill his blade. However, the shadow danced easily out of the way, hissing at him.

Kazrack leaned back and while ducking his body about wildly was still able to enchant his halberd with one of his gods' miracles.

The shadow near Ratchis fled from the face of the spear and dove at Beorth, clawing him and drawing more strength from the paladin. Kazrack was still moving about wildly and was able to avoid another attack from the shadow he was facing. He swung his halberd through the shadow, but it passed through with no effect.

Ratchis however was having more success. His spiritual spear thrust into the shadow troubling Kazrack with a sizzle of divine energy. The thing let out an unearthly shriek that echoed up and out to the others.

"Maybe we should go help them now," Martin suggested, but Ratchis' rope was still being hauled up the long length of the shaft.

“I’m going down now,” Jeremy announced, and leapt onto the rope that was attached to Kazrack and began to slide down hand over hand with great proficiency, his swords dangling and slapping back and forth as he disappeared with a look of determination into the darkness.

Ratchis need not control his spiritual weapon, so he let it do its thing while he ducked behind the sarcophagus fished out some stones he had collected out at the scrubland. He waved his hand over them, and whispered, “Nephthys, bless these rocks so that they may contain some small measure of your righteousness in this bleak place.”

The stones glowed for a moment, and they were warm in his hand. Whenever Ratchis felt the divine power of his goddess pass through him it always reminded him of what he was fighting for.

“Anubis, I failed in my last attempt,” Beorth was having a conversation with his god at the top of his lungs as he fought, as if he needed encouragement to maintain the fervor he had forgotten with the rest of his life, and that he now desperately tried to reenact. “Please grant me some more of your divine wrath so that I may return this creature to the peace of death.”

There was an audible ‘whoosh’ as the sword missed cleanly.

The shadow mocked him, “Why not call upon your god’s power to send us away, so that we might come again and again and remind you that you and it are too weak to keep us at bay for long.”

“Soon, you will be one of us,” the other shadow hissed as it dodged back and forth to avoid the spiritual spear and Kazrack’s poleaxe.

“Natan-ahb, I fear these creatures will steal my last strength, but my strength is for you and you alone,” Kazrack intoned, clutching his pouch of runestones with his left hand. “Send these things away.”

“You are only delaying the inevitable,” the shadow before him hissed, as swirled like smoke to avoid Ratchis’ spear. The attempted turning had failed.

Beorth moaned softly as he felt the cold claw of one of the shadows again. He stumbled, but the rope and harness jerked him back up, and he returned to his senses.

The spiritual spear found its target again, as Ratchis threw one of his magic stones at the one harassing Beorth. The stone flew past them both and plummeted into the shaft bouncing about loudly.

“Anubis! I implore you! Bring forth your wrath even if you must strike me down as well for having failed you these two times. Please show forgiveness and show these creatures the coldness of death!” Beorth swung his sword with his little remaining strength, calling the vengeance of his god to fill his blade and as it passed through the shadow, he could feel the blade jerk as if it caught on something.

The shadow shrieked as a good portion of his essence seemed to ‘tear away’ from it as the sword left the other side. It melted into nothingness.

Kazrack by this time able to position himself beside the sarcophagus that Ratchis hid behind, looking to gain its cover as well. The shadow he faced let the dwarf go and flew into Beorth, who shuddered and wobbled again, as he lost even more of his strength.

Jeremy was hanging about ten feet above the ledge when he saw this happen by the light emanating from Beorth’s helmet. The young Neergaardian hesitated for a moment, but then shrugging his shoulders he swung on the rope and threw himself down towards the lip of the ledge.

Even he seemed surprised when he made it.

Ratchis spear danced about the remaining shadow, but failed to score another blow, as one of the half-orc’s stones flew right through it without effect.

Beorth missed again, the very last of his strength making his swing look feeble even with divine guidance.

“Jeremy! We’re weakened,” Kazrack called out. “Finish that creature as quickly as possible!”

“I’m on it!” Jeremy cried leaping over a sarcophagus and getting between Beorth and the shadow, but it was too late. The servant of Anubis collapsed under the weight of his armor and weapons. He was helpless.

“Get away from him!” Jeremy commanded the shadow, and it hissed.

The spiritual spear disappeared, and Ratchis stood and walked over to the melee casting *magic weapon* on his masterwork war hammer.

Kazrack hurried past Ratchis to try to flank the thing, while Beorth though lying on the ground tried one last tactic. He called on Anubis’ power to try to turn the thing and make it flee before one last hit made Beorth into one of those things.

“Anubis, I am weak,” Beorth implored softly. “But my faith in you grows stronger. Please drive off this creature that seeks to make a mockery of my living breath.”

The turn attempt failed.

The shadow ignored Beorth, however, as the paladin posed no threat, and it attacked Kazrack who barely ducked out of the way.

Jeremy’s blade went right through the thing with no effect.

Ratchis swung at the black floating abomination, but his hammer missed as well, as the shadow bobbed back and forth between the combatants.

Beorth would not give up. Again, he called on his god’s divine energy and tried to force the shadow away. Once again, his shawl glowed with a brightness of daylight, and this time the thing shrieked and took off at an angle down the shaft. Kazrack took one last swing at it, hitting, but the blade passed through. The thing disappeared into the darkness.

There was a moment of no sound except for the heavy breathing of the four adventurers, and then came the baby cries again.

Jeremy shuddered. “Gods! What a terrible sound!”

“Something is moving up the steps,” Kazrack warned. He turned to see more of the skeletal minions coming up the stone steps to this level of the ledge. “Everyone run! I’ll hold them off!”

The dwarf moved to the closer stairs, calling on his gods to send off the skeletal guards, but the dark oppression of this place seemed to make channeling the divine energy more difficult.

Ratchis hefted Beorth up by his armpits, using the low wall for support and then tugged on the paladin’s rope four times (which was the signal for those above to pull someone up as quickly as possible without stopping) and yelled up cupping his hand to the side of his mouth. “And send Beléar down!”

Above no one heard the command, but they felt the rope tug and soon Beorth was making his way up. His head lolling from side to side as he barely had the strength to hold up the glowing helm.

Ratchis winced as he felt the cold blows of the black bolts sting his side. He turned to face the second guardian, which was at the top of a set of stairs fifteen feet away. Jeremy sheathed *the Right Blade of Arofel* and leaped at the thing with his long sword in two hands

Kazrack roared as he exchanged blows with the strange undead thing. He cut a large rent in its ring mail armor, but suffered a sword blow to the collar, that he barely was able to turn away from. The dwarf could feel his neck stiffen and

swell and blood vessels burst.

Jeremy dealt a devastating blow to one of these Minions making it spin in place and amble around the sarcophagus towards Ratchis, who smacked it once with his hammer, crunching bone. But it still did not go down.

Meanwhile, Beorth was being hauled up and taking the light with him. Below Jeremy began to curse.

Beorth was barely able to look up to see that Martin the Green was being lowered down. He was tied up in the harness that Ratchis had sent back up. The shaggy red-haired mage, his fancy green robes stained with black ash in long streaks looked down worriedly.

“Beorth! What’s going on?”

“Our strength has been drained,” Beorth replied weakly.

“I’ll need your helmet,” the watch-mage said, and he grabbed the glowing helm off the paladin’s head as they passed each other and slipped it on his own.

Beorth shrugged, as he was pulled further up towards the light. Martin’s descent continued.

Below, the adventurers’ troubles were worsening. Kazrack’s halberd blade went right through his opponent’s neck... as if it were a ghost!

“What the...?” the dwarf was dumb-founded. He squinted his eyes and then opened them wide and could now tell that these things were suddenly ‘blinking’ in and out of existence with great speed, giving them the ghostly feature.

“I need light!” Jeremy called, cautiously making his way towards the Minion that faced down Ratchis.

Ratchis stepped back and called to Nephthys. In a moment, his hammer was glowing with light as if it were a torch.

Jeremy moved and flanked the thing, but his sword went right through as Kazrack’s weapon had at the other.

“Gods dammit!” Jeremy cried out. “I hate these things!”

Kazrack let out a muffled cry, as the ghostly nature of his opponent did not stop it from sending two bolts of black energy at him.

As Martin was coming level with the fight he chanted, “*Parma Magica*,” casting his *shield* spell. Realizing that he had forgotten to give the “stop” signal on the rope, he began to tug wildly as he moved past the ledge.

The smell of mildew and rotting flesh was overwhelming down here, and he gagged, feeling unused bile come up to the back of his throat.

“I’m glad I haven’t eaten in weeks,” Martin said, when he finally stopped being lowered. He could hear the muted mewling of the babies below and shivered.

Again, Kazrack and Ratchis both tried to call on their ability to channel divine power to send these undead away, but it failed. Unlike the shadows, these foes were silent never speaking a word, and always coming straight on.

Kazrack felt more blood pouring down his body as the thing’s long sword slapped him in the ribs.

“Let’s try a different approach,” Jeremy said, swinging his sword downward in a wide arc, and feeling it cleave the thing’s helmet and skull. As it tumbled to the ground, into an awkward sitting position, the young swordsman felt the blade of his sword yank out of the skull. He slashed again, striking its shoulder, and now its left arm hung by some thin tendons.

The Minion awkwardly got to its feet weakly swinging at Jeremy, who easily avoided the blow.

As Martin tried to make it to the ledge to help out (managing only to swing about the shaft wildly, losing all control), Ratchis' hammer was going right through the minion he and Jeremy were facing.

"I will prove that my gods have not abandoned me!" Kazrack cried out. "Natan-ahb! Send these creatures back to the tombs from which they came!"

Nothing happened.

"They must be illusions," Kazrack speculating that the failure of his god's power had to have some reasonable explanation.

As he stood there flabbergasted, his opponent found an opening and its sword went diving into the dwarf's neck. The blow should have sent the dwarf's head flying, but instead it passed through him in ghostly form.

Kazrack was even more shocked now, bewildered by these things.

Jeremy continued to whack the Minion before him with blows that would have long ago killed a man. The Minion's armor was scored, and gray brain matter bubbled and spurted from its cloven helmet, but it was not slowed. It moved to place a sarcophagus between itself and its combatants.

Jeremy took the opportunity to strike it again. He could hear ribs falling loosely behind the armor. Ratchis tried as well, but the thing spun around and jerked backward, lifting a hand to fire two more bolts into the half-orc.

Martin was finally able to stabilize his swinging, but he still hung in the middle of the shaft, helplessly watching the battle.

Kazrack struck his foe again.

"Kazrack, force it down the stairs!" Jeremy called to his companion. "You can do it!"

"Nephthys, turn your blessed compassion into this creature's doom!" Ratchis begged his goddess, as he cast *cure light wounds* and reached out to simply touch the thing, but his hand went right through. The spell was not wasted, but no damage was done either.

Above, Beorth was dragged off the rope and Derek quickly grabbed it, and was beginning to be lowered down to join his companions.

Jeremy moved around behind Ratchis to aid Kazrack, causing a resounding ring as he struck it in the head with his long sword.

Ratchis ducked a long sword blow from the other guardian, as Martin began to swing wildly again, unable to make it to the ledge. The half-orc reached up with his ensorcelled hand again and felt the positive energy discharge. The Minion collapsed into a pile of bones and rusted armor.

"Thank you, Nephthys," the priest said softly.

Kazrack thrust his halberd at the Minion, which was now at the very top of the stairs to the lower level, but missing left himself open for a riposte, feeling the sword blade drag up his side, tearing a rent in his chain shirt. Jeremy cleaved it in the right arm, sending shard of bone and gore flying out in a shower, but the thing still did not fall.

Kazrack withdrew and swung his halberd to keep the thing at bay, as Ratchis ran up without fear of his own danger and calling on his goddess' power again punched the thing in the skull. Again, he felt the positive energy discharge, and in a moment the thing was tumbling loudly down the stone steps.

Again, there was silence, except for the creaking of ropes. Even the zombie babies below were quiet.

Derek came level with the ledge everyone was on, as Kazrack leaned out with his halberd to help Martin steady himself.

“Go back up, Derek,” Ratchis said to the young tracker. “We have to all go back up.”

Derek nodded. Martin looked at Ratchis and understood that party was in no shape to continue. He tugged on the rope and soon he was being pulled back up as well.

“I will go up last,” Kazrack announced in typical fashion.

Jeremy snickered.

“Kazrack, that makes no sense,” Ratchis replied, frustration in his voice. “You are severely weakened.”

“I’ll leave it to you two to determine who is last,” Jeremy said, and leapt onto the rope Kazrack was still attached to and started climbing up hand over hand.

The dwarf and the half-orc waited for rope to be lowered to Ratchis, and thus were both pulled up at the same time.

“This place is more fraught with peril than we thought,” Beléar commented.

“We’ve killed more of those things, however,” Ratchis replied. “And only one shadow remains to block our way.

No one replied.

“We should rest for the night and again the next day and then return,” Ratchis suggested. “Does everyone agree that the patient approach is the best?”

Beléar nodded. The dwarves were silent, but some grumbled. Jeremy looked frustrated.

“I will need my strength before I can do what Anubis asks of me,” Beorth croaked. “I will need to rest.”

“Yes, that is the best course of action,” Kazrack concurred.

“In the meantime...” Beléar walked over to Kazrack and lay a hand on him calling out to Rivkanal, the dwarven god-mother. Kazrack felt some small measure of his strength return to him. Beléar walked over the Beorth and did the same, and now the paladin could lift his own weight and walk.

The weight of the company’s gear was redistributed so that those who were weakened need not carry as much and the march back to the edge of this crater of dead land began again in earnest.

Anulem, the 14th of Prem – 564 H.E.

The next morning found the company marching across the ash once again towards the monolith and the shaft entrance. Ratchis had cast *lesser restoration* once again first thing, but the paladin (and Kazrack, as well) was not back up to his natural great strength.

As they marched, they discussed their options for exploring the area below.

“I believe we should all go down and set up a base there to explore deeper if we must,” Captain Adalar suggested. “I think we are making a mistake dividing our strength as we have been doing.”

“It is too dangerous to just leave one or two people up there to guard the ropes, and that would counter the whole point to begin with, and if someone cuts the ropes from above we could be in trouble,” Ratchis said.

“You mean ‘trapped’,” Martin interjected.

“I would say, *‘in trouble’*,” Ratchis replied to his companion, with an air of contempt.

“I would say, *‘trapped’*,” Martin said.

“That’s because you’ve always been the optimist of the group, Martin,” Ratchis lashed out with his words.

Overhearing, Beorth wondered at Ratchis’ behavior. If the paladin of Anubis had still had his memory, he might have been taken back with how much Ratchis had changed since they had first met him.³¹ Once taciturn and impulsive, he was now very vocal about his opinions, and often used intimidation to enforce his desires over Martin’s and sometimes, even Jeremy’s, to push the party towards his way of wanting to do things. Ratchis had sharpened his tongue into as effective a weapon as any other the burly half-man carried and wielded it with an indomitable will that only a Friar of Nephthys could have. Months exposed to soft-headed, but good-hearted men like Jeremy, or men with impeccable conviction, but no real direction, like Martin, or frightened and ignorant commoners, and officious and reputation-conscious such as the alderman of Ogre’s Bluff, or simply selfish and bullying men like the constable of Ogre’s Bluff or Devon had all served to do what years of living among orcs, or alone in the woods, or as a student of elder Friars of Nephthys could not do. Ratchis had become arrogant.

Again, they arrived at the monolith.

A fourth rope was set up the best it could to allow Derek to join Ratchis, Beorth and Kazrack on the initial descent. It would also allow quicker descent for those coming after.

The foursome had barely made it to the first ledge, when a shadowy figure swooped into the light that was once again emanating from Beorth’s head, thanks to Beléar.

“I will take you this time,” the shadow hissed, but Beorth shifted his weight on the rope, and the undead thing flew right past him with a cold shiver.

Everyone tugged on their ropes to stop their descent. Ratchis cast *magic stone* once again and kept an eye open for the thing. It did not take long. It swooped at the paladin again, this time found his target with a cold black claw. However, even as he felt what was left of his strength wane again, he swung his sword with the divine vengeance of his god. Again, he felt as if the blade had caught on something.

The thing shrieked. Ratchis cast a stone at it, but it missed, clattering among the sarcophagi. He began to swing back and forth on the rope with the strength of his toss.

The shadow circled and swooped and bobbed like an insect. Again, Beorth felt its cold touch drain even more strength from him.

“Your power is strong in me this day, Anubis,” Beorth called out. “Please grant me an extension of that power through my blade.” Unfortunately, the blow slipped through the shadow’s essence without effect.

Kazrack and Derek were too far away to aid Beorth. The dwarf waited, readying himself to attempt the turn the thing if it looked like it might kill Beorth. They had agreed ahead of time to try to destroy the thing before sending it away to be faced again.

“Nephthys! Guide my hand!” Ratchis bellowed as he let loose another magic stone. This one passed through the shadow as if it were not there.

The shadow cackled and spinning clawed Beorth once again. The paladin shuddered, and his sword felt heavy his hands. The shadow launched itself upward into the darkness of the narrower portion of the shaft and disappeared.

“Let us keep going down,” Ratchis said. “I will restore some of your strength down there.”

They tugged their signal and made it down to the level with the steps unmolested. There, Ratchis was able to restore

³¹ Ratchis joined the party outside of Tallow’s Post in session #5.

some of Beorth's strength.

It was agreed that Derek, Beorth and Kazrack would wait there while Ratchis accompanied the ropes back up and determined who would come down next. It was important that each group going down was accompanied by someone who could turn undead in case the shadow returned.

Actually, they did not have to wait long.

As Ratchis was being pulled up, the thing came at him, but Ratchis was ready. He still had an enchanted stone remaining from his previous spell, and he let it go at the thing. It struck the shadow dead on, and its form shattered as if he had been made of black stained glass. It then melted into nothingness without the time to hiss or shriek.

"I got it!" Ratchis called down to his companions who had no idea what he was talking about.

End of Session #42

AQUERRA

Session #43

“The last shadow has been destroyed,” Ratchis said, when he got back to the top of the shaft. “Everyone can come down and we can deal with the, ...uh, dead things at the bottom.”

As the rest of the company of men and dwarves made their way down the shaft, Kazrack spent his time searching the lower level for secret doors. Derek made a half-hearted attempt to search as well, but the near-constant rustling and crying of the undead babies below made it hard for the young warrior to concentrate. He was sweating and feeling queasy. Beorth stood guard, vigilant for the arrival of some other undead menace.

In time they were all on the lowest level of the shaft, where they could look down by the light Beorth’s helmet (or using their darkvision) and see the writhing undead infants crawling over each other like mindless insects. On this level (from whence the skeletal warriors had emerged) were more square stone sarcophagi and no masks, but there was a wooden and painted statue of a gaunt man with a ram’s head.

Across from it was another statue, of a tall blue-headed gnoll with a morning star. It snarled with carved wood for teeth. It leaned over the low wall and its head stuck out into the shaft. Some sort of gray flesh was gooped on the top side, and dripped down into the babies.

There was a stark contrast between these primitive statues and the decor of the rest of this tomb.

Kazrack covered his mouth with the back of his hand as he looked down at the writhing infants.

“Perhaps we should call on our gods’ powers to end the suffering of these... infants, as it would be more merciful than plowing through them with weapons,” Kazrack suggested softly.

“I agree,” Ratchis replied.

Beorth’s helm blinked out, and the humans groaned. In a moment, Martin lit one of the party’s last remaining torches, and when it caught there was a sharp blue flare of the flame, with swirls of pink.

“Whoa!” Martin cried, flinching.

“Eh? That’s gas!” Kazrack was alarmed, and the dwarves all turned their heads to look at them.

“Is it dangerous? Should I put it out,” Martin looked even more bleached white than usual, the lack of sleep, the lack of desire for food; the circumstances of his first appointment by the Academy, it was weighing heavily on him.

“If we enter a place with less ventilation you must be alert to the color of the flame changing,” Kazrack said.

“Feh. By then it’d be too late,” Helrahd croaked.

“If we know we are going to enter such an area we’ll put it out ahead of time and rely on the blessings of our gods,” said Kazrack.

“Hmph,” Helrahd spit. “And since we are going to the realm of sunshine and flowers, we should expect to not have to worry about it.”

Kazrack’s jaw dropped. He was unused to being treated that way by a fellow dwarf. Helrahd walked away, passing Kirla, who twisted her beard-draped mouth and shrugged her shoulders, as if by way of apology for her brother. She was actually quite handsome by dwarven standards, but Kazrack turned back to the matter at hand.

“Too bad we don’t have a canary,” Kazrack said.

“What?” Martin was confused.

“A canary.”

“A what?” Now it was Beorth’s turn.

“If it drops dead you know there is poison gas, since it is smaller and its lungs are smaller,” Kazrack said. “Like when Thomas was paralyzed by the poison incense first when we were attacked by Mozek.”³²

Martin’s head drooped when the incident was mentioned. Beorth squinted and scratched his head and tried to remember what Jana has said about that encounter.³³

“What we always said was, ‘bring a human in’,” Blodnath said, with a chuckle. “Oops! The human died! We’d better get out of here in three or four hours when it’ll finally affect us!”

“I wonder how many dwarves died before you figured that out?” Jeremy said with ill humor.

“Eh? What is that supposed to mean?” Blodnath sneered at his sometime student.

“I say that if we had time,” Martin stepped between them and addressed everyone. “We should go back to town and get a few barrels of oil and burn this whole place down.”

“We don’t have time,” Ratchis said.

“Did anyone recognize the deities depicted in those statues above?” Beorth suddenly asked.

“One of them is obviously the gnoll god, Kesh,” Martin said. “Or at least, I’d assume.”

“The other is some meaningless human god,” Kazrack waved the question off.

“It seemed familiar,” Martin said, scratching his chin.

“A Ram! Duh!” Jeremy made a knocking motion at Martin’s head and pointed at Beorth.

“I think it is a good idea that we did not touch them,” Derek said nervously.

“Perhaps it is a gnoll good, too,” Kazrack combed his beard with his fingers, reconsidering his hypothesis. “I could see how they could worship a ram—some kind of god of prey.”

“It is Rahkefet,” Ratchis said. “Or at least, I think it is. He is supposed to be the son of Set, but I know little of him, as he was said to have passed during *The Time Before*.”

“The time before what?” Kazrack asked.

“Long ago, when the world was all a sea of sand,” Ratchis replied.

“Oh, that’s an interesting story,” Kazrack said. “I remember something about that during that holiday we celebrated with you.”³⁴

“Every race has its own story about what came before the known ages of history, but none can agree on what it was like,” Beléar added.

“We are getting distracted from the gruesome task at hand,” Beorth said, waking over to the edge and looking down at the babies. They began to cry and cough again when they saw him.

³² See Session #17

³³ After Beorth lost his memory to the Pixie Curse (See Session #33), he gained most of his information about the party, its members and their adventures from Jana, the young witch of questionable background that once belonged to the party.

³⁴ Ratchis and the rest of the Fearless Manticore Killers shared a meal for one of the “*Malar Days*” (a nine-day holiday commemorating the nine day ordeal of first priest of Nephthys as he fled the Minions of Set) in session #15

Ratchis walked over to the edge and swung his holy symbol chain around, “Nephthys, I call on you to get rid of these horrid creatures that were put here to test our dedication to the cause of good by our enemies.”

There was horrible hissing sound and a burning smell that wafted up suddenly in the form of a wispy smoke. The babies were lit up and then they began to burn away as if they were paper dipped in oil and cast into a fire. The stench was terrible, but the sound was worse. The hissing filled all their ears, and then suddenly stopped. There was hardly a second of silence before the baby crying began again like a constant wail of pain and confusion.

Ratchis had succeeded in burning off a top layer of zombie babies with the divine might of his goddess, but there were still dozens left, crawling around and now screaming like frightened children. Everyone in the company cringed as their eyes revealed a horror, but their ears plucked at their heart’s strings, for what good-hearted person can stand to hear a child cry in that way?

“Oh gods!” Jeremy covered his ears. “Somebody shut that up!” He was near tears.

“Lords and Lady, please end the suffering of these blighted creatures!” Kazrack intoned, as he walked over to the edge. Again, more of the zombie infants crumbled into dust with inhuman shrieks. Again, there were a few left crawling around at the bottom of the pit (another twelve feet deep) and crying out.

Ratchis hopped onto a rope and slid down halfway and called to his goddess again, “Nephthys, end these creatures’ suffering so we may move one and cleanse this den of evil.”

The sound of shrieking echoed up the shaft for a few more moments, and then died away.

Now that the zombie infants were gone, they all looked down to see the twisted remains of whatever apparatus once stood at the surface to raise things up and down. It looked as if it had once been a metal wheel, and a thick rope and a hook and bar of some kind. It was badly rusted and broken in pieces in many places. There were also a few rotten strands of straw of what might have been a basket things were lowered in.

They also noticed that the pit itself seemed to open into some kind of ramp that faced the front of the monolith above.

The ropes attached above reached all the way to the very bottom of the shaft, so Kazrack, Ratchis and Beorth grabbed ropes and made their way down. Once they were safely down, Blodnath, Jeremy, and Derek and followed.

The smell was growing increasingly worse. Large waterbugs crawled in and out of cracks where the shining red eyes of rats could be seen cowering from the light. The ramp did not go far. It was a gentle slope that went down about ten feet to a strange metal door with no visible hinges. It had two horizontal handles about six inches long on either side of it close to floor. The door was ten feet high and ten feet wide.

Kazrack walked towards the doors.

“No! Wait! Don’t touch it!” Blodnath’s voice echoed up and down the shaft, and everyone was startled.

Kazrack stopped an arm’s length from the door.

“Nephthys, grant me a portion of your all-seeing vision so I may see what might block our way in this awful place,” Ratchis intoned. In a second, he could see Jeremy’s short sword glowing faintly blue. Beorth’s shawl was iridescent and brighter. He looked at the door. There was a blazing sea-blue rune visible on the door at about five feet high.

“There is a rune on the door,” Ratchis said, and kneeling he traced it in the dust.

“I don’t recognize it,” Blodnath said, walking backward towards one of the ropes. “I’m not touching it.”

“I will open the door,” Kazrack said, turning to face the others. “My dwarven hardiness will allow me to shake off whatever ill-effect some foul and weak wizard might seek to cast upon me.”

“Whoa! Whoa, there!” Derek’s eyes narrowed, and his young face grew creased as if he aged twenty years in a moment, and then it was soft again. “Let’s not do anything hasty.”

Martin was called, and he examined the rune and began to think back to his classes at the Academy. The rune seemed to be based on the triangular warding runes of dwarven make, but the circles were all wrong. He scratched his head.

Kazrack tapped his foot.

Martin called for his bag to be lowered to him and rummaged in it for the black leather-bound book that Richard the Red had given him as a gift for the Festival of Isis.³⁵ The mage flipped through the book for some time, eventually sitting down in the muck cross-legged, flipping through the pages and humming to himself. At times, he stopped looked at one page for a long time but would inevitably flip the page with a snap and keep browsing.

Finally, he hopped up to his feet with an “A-ha!”

“You found something?” Kazrack’s face was hopeful.

“It is a glyph of a protective ward,” Martin announced proudly.

Ratchis’ shoulders drooped, and he let out a big sigh.

“Uh, didn’t we know that already?” Blodnath snorted.

Derek and Jeremy began to laugh.

“It’s good to know that at the bottom of a shaft of some evil tomb, in a pit once filled with crawling zombie babies, facing a magically trapped door that could fry us all, you can all still make me laugh,” Jeremy coughed out and slapped his knee.

Derek seemed to have caught the giggles, too and placed a hand on the wall to support himself as he doubled over and grabbed his gut.

Everyone else just stared at them. Beorth imagined how satisfying it would be to grab the two young men by the scruff of the neck and bang their heads together. The image made the tickle of laughter nip at his throat, but he suppressed it.

“Well, there is more,” Martin finally said. “It is a sonic attack of some kind. It will likely deafen, perhaps even burst the eardrums with sounds. Of course, if Ratchis traced it wrong it could be a fear spell of some kind, but I don’t think the triangles would be upside down then, and they’d have a pronounced flare to the left if following what is called the Abyssal school of Third Age Thricia, or curved like talons if of the eastern school of tribal rune-form.”

Silence.

Kazrack turned back to the doors. “Okay, so sound. That’s good, Martin. Thanks. That’s helpful, really. I could plug up my ears, or something.”

Jeremy and Derek giggled again, and Ratchis shot them a withering look. They were silent.

“I will open the door,” Kazrack said. “We have no other choice. I am most likely to resist some attack, and no other means of circumventing this ward.

“Beléar could try to dispel it,” Martin offered with a shrug.

The elder dwarf was called down, and he cast his spell, but it did not break the magic.

³⁵ The book was Runes, Sigils & Wards: Their Roots and Variations by Master of Wards Methuselal of the Academy of Wizardry (see session #38). It is a handy, but rare tome.

“I will open the door,” Kazrack repeated. “The rest of you should climb back up to the previous ledge in case it is an area effect.”

The others grudgingly agreed, and those that had climbed down, began to climb back up one by one. Beorth was to be last.

“Kazrack, are you sure you have the strength to do the job?” the ghost-hunter asked the dwarf.

“Of course,” Kazrack was grim faced.

Kazrack stood over by the left handle and realized that poor leverage would likely not allow him to open the door alone.

“This door is too wide for one,” Kazrack called.

Beorth let go of the rope, as he was about to climb. “I will come help.”

The two of them got back in their rope harnesses after Blodnath looped the ropes around supports for easier leverage in case they needed to be pulled back up quickly.

The paladin grabbed the handle on the right. Above everyone looked over the side, with their hands over their ears and eyes wide open.

They counted to three and pulled up evenly and slowly. Inch by inch it crept up with the sound of twining chain and nothing had happened.

Kazrack looked over to Beorth and smiled, as the door was just about three feet open, and there was a sudden high-pitched sound that blasted from the door and echoed painfully up the shaft. The door rolled open the rest of the way as if caught by some counterweight. The hooded lantern that was still at the bottom of the shaft shattered and the place was plunged into darkness. Those above reflexively turned away from the shaft and doubled over in pain.

But in less than a second it was past.

There was no sound from below.

“What’s happening?” Martin asked aloud in the dark.

Ratchis shushed him and crawled over the wall and looked over and down.

At the bottom, Kazrack was lying on his side, with his arms around his head and his knees to his chest. Beorth was doubled over and stumbled forward a few steps and then leaned on the wall.

Blood trickled from their ears.

“I’m alright,” Kazrack said overly loudly.

“We have no lantern,” Beorth croaked, and then cried out. He felt the familiar pain of those bolts of cold black light strike him from the direction of the now open door on his left.

“We are under attack!” Beorth said. “We need light!”

“Hurry with the light!” Jeremy fumbled towards the lip of the ledge, feeling for the rope.

Beorth clenched his teeth. Invisible in the darkness, he felt two more of the black bolts strike his chest.

“Pull us up!” Kazrack cried, but Ratchis had already called to Nephthys and cast light upon one of his javelins. He dropped the weapon down into the pit.

Jeremy already had his hand on the rope, and he leapt over the wall and followed the light down to aid his friends.

Derek did not react in time. The ledge was shaded in darkness again, as the light did not reach very strongly from below. He was forced to fumble for the remaining rope in the darkness.

“Should we start pulling?” Tolnar asked aloud.

“Should we start pulling?” Jolnar echoed.

“Wait for the signal!” Captain Adalar roared. He moved to look over the edge. Martin snapped his fingers and tiny colored lights danced off his fingers to leap about his head happily. He looked over to see the fate of Beorth and Kazrack as well.

What they saw, was Beorth stumbling away from the open door and beseeching his god for healing as he lay hands on his chest and felt the divine healing warmth.

Blodnoth leapt over the low wall into the pit without the aid of a rope. He clambered down, thrusting his fingers and booted toes into tiny cracks and fissures. However, the lower half of the climb proved too smooth. He faltered and tumbled down the last fifteen feet into the pit, with an ‘oof!’

The ensorcelled javelin did not provide enough light for Beorth to see past the very entrance to the area beyond, but he was able to get the sense that it was very large and vaulted. Kazrack could see with his gift of dwarven vision that the door opened onto a stone stairway that led down into a vaulted chamber. He thought he saw the outline of what looked like columns. There was an armored skeletal thing, one of the Minions of whoever ruled this place waiting patiently, sword in hand. Kazrack noticed that floor seemed to be a checker of alternated colored stone tiles. His jaw dropped open as several of the tiles burst open, and necrotic corpses began to pull themselves out of the earth below. They crawled over the tile, dressed in shredded woolen clothing, and aprons.

Kazrack lifted a fist over his head and held his bag of runestones in the other hand. “Lords and Lady! Put the fear of dwarvenkind into these creatures and turn them away from us and our might.”

The dwarven priest felt the swell of divine energy release and wash out in all directions.

The undead kept coming.

“They are coming up from the ground!” Kazrack called to the others. He hefted his halberd.

Ratchis had heard the sound of the bursting stone tiles and was already coming down a rope as fast as he could. It was the rope that Derek did not see until the half-orc grabbed it. The young woodsman sneered and then sucked his teeth to hold back a wave of sudden anger.³⁶

Derek moved over to help the three dwarven brothers instead, they still held the ropes attached to the harnesses worn by Beorth and Kazrack.

“Get ready to pull as soon as we get the signal,” Derek said to them.

“We already know that,” Tolnar snapped.

“We need reinforcements,” Beorth called, as he slipped the harness off.

“Ta-da!” Jeremy replied, leaping the last few feet to the bottom of the shaft. He drew his two swords with a flick of his wrists.

“Maybe we can draw them out,” Blodnoth suggested, thrusting his chin towards the open door, while creeping behind the metal refuse half-buried in the dirt.

³⁶ Derek’s species enemy is the orc.

Kazrack moved to the door to get a better view of what was happening within. And Ratchis leapt down the final fifteen feet. Martin grabbed a rope and began to come down. Jeremy moved to stand at Kazrack's right in the broad door. The human could not see far into the darkness, but Kazrack could see chains that were connected to counterweights and were strung along pulleys and then disappeared into the wall above the doorway. There were cold braziers flanking the stairs. The room was greater than sixty feet across and nearly seventy feet long. There were four columns supporting a vaulted ceiling, and the walls were decorated in a crumbling mosaic. The other end of the room was shrouded in darkness even to a dwarf's keen eyes.

With a yell, Beléar came tumbling down, slipping from the rope he had tried to use. The elder dwarf landed atop of Blodnath, which cushioned his landing.

"Ugh," Blodnath spit, and looked up. "Are you okay master?"

Beléar leapt to his feet, as if embarrassed.

Beorth picked up his quarterstaff, which he had brought down with him earlier. He moved in to support Kazrack and Jeremy.

The battle that followed was chaotic and spread out.

By now a group of zombies were making their way up the dark stairs with purpose in their dead eyes. They marched with their hands stretched before them and emitted an almost mechanical droning moan.

Kazrack stepped into the room and called to his gods. Four of the zombies broke ranks and began to shamble away from the dwarf into the dark end of the room. The armored Minion's skull-face could show no emotion, and it was disturbing how perfectly still it stood, pointing at the dwarf, while holding a sword in its other hand.

Ratchis pushed past Jeremy and Kazrack to charge into the room. He cut a huge chunk off a zombie's shoulder, and sent it crashing down onto the steps, leaving a slimy trail of gore behind it. It still fumbled to stand. The half-orc winced, as he took a second to hold his ribs. He had run past two zombies hoping to reach the Minion, and they had hammered him with their calcified fists.

To Jeremy it appeared as if Ratchis plunged into total darkness.

"I need to bring the light with me," he said aloud.

Martin stepped away from the rope and cast his *shield* spell, while Jeremy moved to the rear of the shaft to pick up the enchanted javelin.

"Derek, come down here!" Jeremy called up to his new friend. "We're bringing the fight to these undead suckers!"

Derek deftly came down the cracked stone side of the pit and then leapt from the wall with a graceful flip. He landed on the balls of his feet and turned to the open door.

Beorth stepped into the room as well, the light of the javelin now in Jeremy's hand only illuminated a bit more, but he could see that a zombie had made it up the stairs, ignoring Ratchis. The paladin slammed it in the neck with his staff.

The Minion ambled backwards now, trying to stay out Ratchis' furious reach. More zombies burst from beneath the tiles here and there and blocked the way.

As Jeremy stuck the javelin into his pack so he could still use his swords and have light, Kazrack and Ratchis struggled with zombie limbs, exchanging blows. The Neergaardian re-drew his short sword and made it to the door, as Beléar stepped up and called to the dwarven gods as Kazrack had. Five of the zombies suddenly shrieked and then vaporized. The sound of the dirt that had been on their bodies rained across the ground, even as their clothing flared up and burned away in a second. Jeremy, who could now see into the room (but was still too far away to see the Minion), gasped.

Beorth began to move down the stairs, and the Minion pointed up at him. Wordlessly, it sent two more bolts of black light slamming into the paladin's chest.

Ratchis roared and ripped through these gray zombies dressed as servants as he ran towards the armored Minion. Kazrack also came running, but Beorth sped past the short-legged dwarf with an unusual burst of speed for the paladin. The dwarf still wore his harness, and he had jerked back as he had reached the end of its length. He cursed.

The ghost-hunter's staff dented the thing's armor and it shuddered. In a moment Derek and Ratchis were beside the paladin, and Jeremy was there as well. The Minion took a swinging chop at Beorth, that the paladin ducked, and then it jerked backward allowing Ratchis and Beorth an opportunity for a devastating blow. Beorth, however, was off-balance and his staff spun wildly. Ratchis' long sword ripped a section of armor off its shoulder.

The Minion had stepped back between two of the large pillars that looked dark blue in the bobbing light of the javelin. Ratchis stepped forward to press the attack, but as he stepped between them there was a barely audible zapping sound accompanied by a flash of black and blue light that shimmered back and forth between the pillars in an instant.

Ratchis felt a deep shock to his system, followed by cold, as the negative energy passed through him. He shuddered.

"Well, that's not good," Derek muttered.

Martin hurried behind Beorth whose shoulders were hunched in pain from the wounds to his chest. "*Distortus*, the watch-mage muttered, casting *blur* on the paladin.

Derek and Jeremy stepped up to the edge of the space between the pillars afraid to pass through. They watched Ratchis as he still moved to attack the Minion, which was ready to parry. More of the room was visible now. There was a crude painted wooden statue of a gnoll with blue skin holding a feathered scepter and a crook. It lay on its side and was twelve feet long and two feet wide.

Beorth made his way around the other side of the pillar, running to join Ratchis in his battle, but essentially, he was now running between this pillar and another equally spaced pillar also on the left side of the room. There was another sizzle and flash of black and blue light.

With a 'yerk!', Beorth dropped to the tiled floor, unconscious.

"Beorth!" Derek cried out.

The Minion swung its long sword at Ratchis, who pulled back parrying the blow with his own sword. Kazrack took that moment to move into a flanking position, but his halberd went through the thing as it was suddenly ghostly. Ratchis' riposte also eerily swung through the thing's body.

The smell of rotting and death wafted up from the spot where the tiles had been smashed from below. The dirt below it was a rich red-brown, and full of dark stones, worms, and maggots.

Derek chased after a zombie that threatened to make its way to Beorth. He cart-wheeled over the large wooden statue, laying a hand on it for support, but as he flipped over it. He heard it creak and lurch as the floor below it gave. In less than a second the young warrior's feet were on the floor on the other side of the statue, but he could see now that the tiles in this area were already all shattered, and the floor was not stable. He felt the floor give way beneath his feet, so he hopped awkwardly further into the room, and to the edge of the light. Here the floor was sturdier, and he chopped at a zombie with his battleaxe, which had never left his hand.

Martin hurried over to the fallen paladin. In the bobbing light he could see dull bronze glyphs etched into the columns facing each other. The watch-mage found that Beorth was still barely conscious. He flitted in and out of awareness.³⁷

"Beorth, stay with me! You have to stay awake, Beorth," Martin shook the blanch-faced man. "If you go to sleep you could die."

³⁷ **DM's Note:** Beorth was at exactly zero hit points.

Over the sound of Kazrack and Ratchis roaring at the elusive Minion, and Derek's axe cutting deep into necrotic flesh and withered bone, could be heard more shuffling of undead sandaled feet, and that droning moan. It was coming from the hole in the floor beneath the statue (which was now a quarter of the way sunk into the floor at an odd angle). There were dozens more zombies milling around beneath them!

The sound of steel on steel rang out as Ratchis parried another of the tenacious undead warrior's blows. There was another metallic cracking as Kazrack drove the point of his halberd into a seam in the thing's armor and pried back. A rain of pulverized bone burst out and the thing sagged. Ratchis tried to take advantage of its hesitation, but again his sword went right through it.

Jeremy turned from the harmless, yet disturbing, still flailing limbs of a zombie he had butchered in time to come around Martin and put himself between the watch-mage and the cowering zombies on the other side of the statue. What the Neergaardian did not notice, however, were the minute cracks now spreading out along the tiles. The floor gave out beneath his booted feet and he yelped, twisting his body to jump back to where he had come from. Instead, he disappeared into the darkness below.

Martin and Derek both called the blonde warrior's name, as the only light source tumbled with him.

Kazrack turned thinking that Jeremy had fallen to some wound, "The power of my gods will save him... Uh, where's Jeremy?"

"He fell in the hole!" Martin screeched hysterically. "I heard *things* down there."

Kazrack looked away again, seeing that the Minion he and Ratchis faced, turned to hurry away from them. He slashed his halberd through the thing's side, sending it to the cracked floor in a rain of bones and armor.

Beléar had finally made his way to Beorth, with Blodnath guarding his flank. The elder dwarf laid his hands on the human paladin and spoke to his gods, "Mistress Rivkanal, please give me your healing powers that I may heal this brave warrior of the human jackal-god that we may smite this undead menace."

Beorth felt the warmth and discomfort of his wounds closing, and the burns on his skin from the black lightning lessening. He sat up.

"That you for reviving me," he said to Beléar. "The blessings of the dwarven fathers are much appreciated."

Ratchis was handling the last of the zombies that were not cowering, while Kazrack walked over to aid Beléar and the others with Beorth.

Derek carefully moved towards the dim light emanating from the hole in the floor. He looked over the edge of the hole and called down.

"Jeremy? Do you need back up? There are more of them down there!"

When Jeremy fell through the hole in the floor, he felt the jarring pain of stones and dirt momentarily impeding him and then giving way, causing him to tumble wildly and be knocked back and forth in the ruinous shaft. He slammed past what seemed like limbs and roots that were protruding from the dirt sides of the hole and landed heavily.

Jeremy shook off the pain and was quickly on his feet. What he saw was a chamber with a ten-foot-high ceiling that reached into the dark in all directions, but he was able to note two things. First, the columns above seem to spring from this lower chamber, and second that the ceiling of this chamber and the floor above were the same chunk of dirt and stone, with long wooden supports. Most importantly, the living dead were encased in this dirt and as far as he could see the legs, arms, torsos, and heads of zombies that had been buried here stuck out of the ceiling. The instability of the floor above extended to the ceiling down here, and several zombies were shaken loose. Dressed in tattered and rotting workman's clothes, they ambled towards the warrior, black wiry hair protruding from their nearly fleshless heads.

Jeremy had a sword in each hand. He heard Derek call from above.

“I know, I got four of them in front of me right now,” Jeremy called back. “I can take ‘em.”

He stepped forward and cut one across the forearm as it reached for him, but did not notice that in the hole above, a zombie had finally been able to pull itself free of the dirt and was climbing to the chamber above.

Kazrack crawled towards the hole on his belly, trying to distribute his weight to keep more of the floor from collapsing. He peeked over the side in time to see a zombie arm come reaching up to pull its body up and out of the hole.

Whack! Derek sunk his battleaxe into its skull, sending it plummeting back down the hole. Whack! Ratchis’ blade echoed the blow, as the half-orc moved about the room decapitating cowering zombies. They still shivered in mindless fear of the divine might of the gods of good.

Jeremy was bobbing and weaving and knocking dead flailing limbs away from him with his blades. There was the sound of shifting dirt and stone and in the cloud, he made he saw two more forms coming out of the darkness. He looked to his right and there was another he hadn’t seen before. He was surrounded.

Jeremy sheathed his swords and in one smooth action leapt straight up driving his hands into the dirt and scrambling to gain purchase with his feet. The zombies grabbed at him as he leapt, but it was too sudden a move, and their slow undead bodies could not react in time. He hustled up the hole, holding himself on either side.

“Somebody give me a hand!” Jeremy reached up and found Kazrack there to haul him up. Derek and Ratchis finished the last of the zombies up here.

Ratchis lowered his sword and wiped sweat and gore from his ridged and swollen brow. He walked back towards the others and then started at some movement near the back of the chamber where they had entered.

“Is everyone alright?” Beorth was asking Kazrack, who had walked over to check on him.

“There’s another one here!” Ratchis cried out seeing what it was that had caught his eye. It was another of the black armored skeletal Minions lurking to the left of the entrance, shadowed there at the edge of the light.

Kazrack hurried about one of the pillars in time to join his companion in seeing the Minion take a hack at one of the chains attached to the counter-weights. There was a metallic snap, and the chain flew back, and the metal door to chamber jerked and one side dropped considerably. The metal creaked and squealed in protest.

“Beorth, can you stand?” Jeremy threw out an arm and helped to haul the paladin to his feet.

“Jeremy, get me my staff,” the paladin asked, calmly.

Kazrack ran to towards the Minion, roaring, and chopping into it with his pole-axe.

Ratchis came running to join him, but at that same moment an unseen zombie came stumbling out of the darkness, slamming a fist into the half-orc’s face. Ratchis retaliated with a deep chop of his sword, which made blue-black embalming fluid begin to spurt from the thing’s neck, but still it did not let him by.

Martin moved to stand by the remaining chain. He gulped, knowing that he could not do much to slow the Minion, if it got past Kazrack.

Derek hacked another zombie, as the armored Minion ignored Kazrack and moved past him towards the other chain.

“We can’t let it trap us in here!” Martin cried out. Kazrack swung his halberd backhand and chopped into the thing again, but it did not fall as the armor absorbed most of the blow. Beléar hurried over and his warhammer slammed into the thing as well, but still, it did not fall, nor did it even look at its foes. Whatever it had that passed for a mind was focused on the chain alone.

There was a loud ‘clang’ as the undead thing’s sword slammed into the second chain. Luckily, the link the blade hit was

only scored and bent but did not give.

Jeremy tossed Beorth his staff.

The Minion deftly parried more blows from both Beléar and Kazrack. Martin suddenly remembered that he still had his *shield* spell up and stood so that his body touched the chain. Now the magic shield also blocked the chain. The Minion's blade bounced off the invisible shield, but then was amazingly in position to ward off Derek's axe, as the young woodsman had come running over.

Ratchis still struggled with the remaining zombie.

Jeremy drew his long sword and charged the thing, having to push past Derek to get his blow in, which crunched its skull easily. It crumbled to the ground. As if in echo, the great metal door groaned again as it settled more, but the remaining chain still held.

Beorth hobbled over to aid, Ratchis and slammed the thing in the head. It turned slightly, as if to regard this new danger, and Ratchis removed its head with his own sword.

The chamber was quiet for a moment.

"Hey there are doors over here," Blodnath called from the far end of the chamber.

"Are you alright down there?" Captain Adalar called from out in the shaft, he was finally getting to climb down into the pit.

"Yes," Jeremy called back, but added sarcastically. "Thanks for asking."

Below, more zombies shuffled mindlessly and droned their undead moan incessantly.

End of Session #43

Session #44

“There is magic here,” Kazrack said. He was holding three of his runestones in his open palm and looking from them to the right of two doors at the rear of the chamber. “It is very strong. Stronger than I think any of us can cast.”

The doors were made of bluish-black stone and framed in a jet-black stone. They broke the continuity of the mosaic that encompassed three of the chamber’s four walls.

Beorth was examining the mosaic and taking in the story it told of a man’s birth, life and then his journey into the afterlife.

Beléar, Ratchis and Kazrack had dispensed the healing miracles of the their respective deities, and the group felt strong after their victory.

It was agreed that moving forward, Captain Adalar would remain on the lowest level of the shaft with the three young brothers, Baervard, Helrahd and Kirla, in order to guard the exit. They were in a position where they could be called for support, or to prepare the escape. This was also where the others, Ratchis, Kazrack, Martin, Jeremy, Derek, Blodnath, Beléar and Beorth, would return to camp when fatigue suggested that a day was done.

“I can attempt to break the enchantment on the morrow when I can prepare my orisons and prayers,” Beléar said.

The other door was askew, as the stone above it was cracked and pressed down on it. The passage beyond was clearly collapsed. Kazrack and Blodnath began to examine it to insure that it did not speak ill of the integrity of the rest of the area.

“I think the hole in the floor pretty much shows us this place isn’t stable,” Derek quipped, winking at Jeremy, who chuckled.

Kazrack frowned at the party’s newest member.

It was agreed that they’d camp here for the night to guard the remaining chain and their way in and out to this portion of the subterranean structure that went deeper than any save Beorth expected. They were afraid something might emerge from the doors or the crack in the tiled floor and cut the remaining chain, blocking them from probing deeper without great effort of getting through the heavy plated metal door.

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It was hard to tell if the sun was shining above, but hours later they all awoke in the dark. Martin lit a torch and commented that the party was running out of natural light sources now that both lanterns had been lost.

The watch-mage used his *mending* spells to fix the broken chain links of the door, while Jeremy held them together, and Beorth propped the door with Derek’s help. Ratchis, Kazrack and Beléar prayed and prepared their spells, and soon Ratchis was using the *lesser restoration* prayer to restore some of Beorth’s strength and some of his own from the battle with the final shadow the previous day.

After sharing some rations, everyone gathered and waited while Beléar tried his hand at breaking the enchantment on the right-hand door. He chanted some words in dwarvish and reached forward as if to touch the door with his open palm but stopped short and grunted.

Wiping sweat from his brow, he stepped back and sighed.

“I believe I successfully broke one of the spells on the door, but I think there may have been more than one,” the elder priest said.

In a moment, Ratchis cast an orison and he could see the blue dweomer shimmering on the door. He nodded in agreement with the dwarven priest.

“I will open the door,” Kazrack said.

Ratchis shrugged and Jeremy rolled his eyes.

“I will cast some of my gods’ blessings upon myself to help protect me when I do,” Kazrack added. He was always flustered at the party’s reactions to his willingness to risk his life.

Martin looked to Beorth nervously, but the paladin’s face was placid as always.

Kazrack got down on one knee before the door and prayed to his gods in the tongue of his people. “Lords and Lady please watch over me. Forever guide me in the right direction and help me to resist all things that would take from that path whether they be dangers or temptations.”³⁸

Kazrack stood and pushed at the door. It was very heavy, and he had to put his weight into it. The sound of stone scraping on stone filled the room, and the frame settled as the weight of the door came off of it. Suddenly, Kazrack felt the door move in a strange way and he flinched. The door was open a crack, but the surface of it was changing, melding into the protruding face of gnome, with a large mole on its nose, and scaly skin.

“Found the lair of my father, have you?” The stone moved as if fluid, moving the jaws and lips. The voice was shrill, like a gnome gargling shards of glass with his ale. “Well, let *this* be a lesson to ya!”

Everyone froze, and could feel every muscle in their body tense up. All except Kazrack, who quickly turned away from the door in horror of what was about to happen. Martin braced himself for whatever horrible spell was about to be released by the opening of the door.

But nothing happened.

It was silent for another moment, and then everyone let a breath out. Beléar must have successfully dispelled the warding spell, but the *magic mouth* had still been there.

“There is something very satisfying about that,” Jeremy said.

Martin nodded.

Kazrack and Ratchis pushed the heavy stone door straight back. It fit into a nook opposite it, and the entrance led to the right into a narrow hall and led down a very narrow and very steep staircase of small steps.

Kazrack quickly wedged pitons into the crease around the stone block that served as a door to keep from it being pushed back in place from the other side, though how one might get to the other side was unclear to him. He snorted at the shoddy and unmaintained workmanship of this place and thought of the secret dwarf-carved chambers of his people back in Verdun, and of the dim memories of his youth in Llurgh-Splendar-Tar.³⁹ His brief hammerfalls echoed through the narrow corridor, sand and grit poured from the creases between stones.

Ratchis ducked his head, as he led the way, long sword in hand. The rest followed, Jeremy taking up the rear, both he and Martin carried among the last of the party’s torches.

“I’m the rear guard from Neergaard!” Jeremy guffawed. Derek snickered. Martin sneered.

“Keep it quiet back there,” Ratchis hissed, looking back over his shoulder.

“What was that Ratchis?” Jeremy exaggerated the gesture of putting his free hand to his ear. “I can’t hear you over Beorth and Kazrack stamping around in their armor!”

³⁸ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack cast both *Resistance* and *Guidance* before opening the door.

³⁹ The small dwarven community of Verdun is very ghettoized living in an isolated area of the Residential District. They have secret tunnels and chambers beneath their city where they gather and worship.

Ratchis growled. Derek frowned at Jeremy but had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing.

At the bottom of the steps, the narrow corridor turned left, and opened into a small chamber. There was a wooden sarcophagus leaning upright in the corner. Ratchis noted the absence of many cobwebs across the narrow corridor. Someone had been here, and had been here often, but perhaps not that recently.

Ratchis stepped past the sarcophagus and stepped to the right leaving room for Kazrack and others to come past. Beorth stopped at the sarcophagus and spoke a quiet prayer. He then pulled it open to ensure its occupant was not animated. A cloud of bone dust erupted when it was open, and the clatter of the disturbed shards. He enlisted Kazrack's help in lower in it down. The paladin spoke another prayer over it, and then pushed it to the side out of the way.

This was a small antechamber that was connected by a narrow hallway to a longer and wider room. It was mostly cloaked in darkness. They crept in to find an office or lab of sorts. On the right was a stone slab like a body might be laid out on. Above it, built into the corner of the wall was a bookshelf. There were nine books. The third one was larger, squarer and thicker. Across from this on the left was a wooden desk covered in papers. There were shards of glass scattered atop them, and all over the floor. A rotting wooden chair lay on its side, among puddles of some deep blue liquid, and bright red liquid that poured from the desktop. Where the liquids met, they did not mix, but the red flowed quickly over the blue, pooling on the other side. At the head of the room was an immense bronze statue of woman.

Kazrack moved forward never taking his eyes off the statue but being careful not step in the strange liquid. Beorth came up behind him. Martin made his way forward and got down on all fours to examine the spill.

The woman in the statue depicted had four arms. The upper right and the lower left held curved bladed swords that looked like over-sized butcher knives. The upper left hand was making a clawing motion, while the lower right held a bronze depiction of a human head by its wire hair. Despite the fact that she had four breasts, and her expression was filled with rancor, full lips retracted to reveal sharpened teeth, she still had a menacing beauty about her. The statue was bolted to the wall from its bat-like wings in order to give her the appearance of coming through the wall and leaping over her pedestal. She had tiny horns nearly hidden by her long flowing hair. Despite its content, Kazrack was flabbergasted by the workmanship. Immediately below the statue, flanked by cold bronze braziers was a stone sarcophagus atop a stone bier. There were no markings on the sarcophagus of any kind, but there was a large metal padlock gleaming as it hung through metal rings sunk into the stone.

Ratchis began to carefully pull the books off the shelf and pass them down to Derek who laid them out on the stained stone slab. He noted that there were silver markings on the spines of the books, circles and vertical lines; as if numbering them. The markings seemed to have been added long after the books' binding.

Martin had moved over to the desk, lifting the hem of his robes to keep them from dragging into the unidentifiable liquids. He shuffled through the papers. The tips of the crusty parchment crumbled to dust in his hands, and he began to turn them more carefully. They were written in some flowing script that reminded him of dwarven runes from which the common script is based.⁴⁰ However, there was marginalia obviously written a lot more recently, and in the coded script of the gnomish people, called Bindar.

Kazrack dropped three runestones into his hand spoke a prayer. Soon he was checking the room for magical auras. The lock on the sarcophagus shone brightly, only slightly less bright were the auras around the second and fourth books that had been taken down from the shelf.

"We are running out of torches and thus light," Beorth commented. Kazrack nodded. Ratchis and Martin, however, were too busy looking at the statue.

"Who is she?" Martin asked aloud, pointing to the statue.

"Obviously, she is a demon of some kind," Ratchis replied.

⁴⁰ The modern common script is based on elvish letters, but the common tongue itself has is greatly influenced by dwarven, and early writings emulated that race's runes.

“Mozek’s mother?” Kazrack asked.

“Could be,” Martin replied. “Though the warding on the door referred to what we can only assume was Mozek’s father.”

“You think this place was his?” Beorth asked. He had to struggle to remember all the fractured details that Jana had given him about the gnomes, the fiends, and the other troubles the party had been involved with, as his own memory of it all was blank.

“Even a gnome could build a place better than this,” Kazrack said, gesturing to the architecture.

“It seems too old,” Martin speculated. “Even gnomes do not live this long. My guess is he found it.” The watch-mage flipped through one of the books that did not detect as magical. Inside he found better-preserved pages in the same script, and more gnomish marginalia.

“Do you think he wrote these books?” Beorth asked.

“I think he found them,” Martin replied. “He obviously translated them. The marginalia could be bits of translation, or if he knew the language well, they could be notes about whatever they say.”

“You can’t read them?” Kazrack asked.

“I don’t quite recognize the script,” Martin said. He began to flip through another book and saw many plates with anatomical drawings of types of undead. “It seems like some ancient form of common, or maybe a corrupt form of dwarvish.

Kazrack walked over and looked. He cocked his head and grunted. “I can’t make heads or tails of it.”

“Nor can I,” Beléar said, he was flipping through another book.

“On the morrow I can cast a spell that will help me comprehend what is written here,” Martin said.

“Lehrathonar grants me a similar miracle,” Kazrack said. Martin nodded.

“In the meantime, let’s put them away,” Ratchis interjected.

The books were split up among the party. Jeremy carried the biggest and heaviest one but each of the books covers seemed to be metal covered in some kind of black (or stained) reptilian hide. They were heavy.

“And what about light?” Beorth asked.

Ratchis looked down at the chair, and then over at the desk. After a ton of noise, these were smashed into makeshift torches. The extra lantern oil (now that they had no lanterns) was used to soak the large wooden sticks, and a winter blanket was shredded and also dipped in oil and wrapped around the heads of them. They would not be as good as torches made by an expert, but they would do for now. In all they were able to make two-dozen makeshift torches. These were divvied up as well.

Kazrack was looked around the room and noticed a trap door in the floor to the left of the statue and behind a brazier. The brazier was moved. Blodnath came forward and looked for traps while Derek looked on from over his shoulder. Jeremy crowded the old dwarf as well, and he hissed and spit at them, gesturing for them to move away.

“But I know how to do that stuff,” Derek said.

“That’s nice kid,” Blodnath said. “Maybe if you keep distracting me, I won’t find the trap and then you can take a turn, eh?”

Derek frowned, and he and Jeremy moved away. Almost immediately, Blodnath leapt up to his feet and shook his head,

“It’s safe. There ain’t nothing here.”

He reached down and pulled it open. There was a shower of dust below. He moved out of the way to let the others by. Kazrack went down first, followed closely by Ratchis.

Below was a short metal ladder leading down to a very small passage that went off to the left, and it was so low Ratchis had to get down on his knees to get through it. Fortunately, it was not very long and after about twenty feet it opened up into an area with another ladder going up. Ratchis opened the trap door above and immediately heard a shuffling sound and a very deep grinding moan.

“There are undead up here,” the half-orc called down and leapt up out of the trapdoor to leave room for Kazrack who quickly climbed up behind him. Beorth and Jeremy were close behind. Beorth held a torch.

Ratchis moved forward into a narrow passage with taller vaulted ceilings and little alcoves holding embalmed dead and skeletons on either side. Ahead the passage broadened into a room, Ratchis could see a pillar, but then his view was blocked. Towards him lurched a nine-foot-tall muscular humanoid, but its leathery hide was blackened, and it wore a leather harness, as if it had once been used as a beast of burden. Its forehead was swollen, and its eyes vacant.

“Ogre zombies!” Ratchis cried out and stepped forward to where the chamber widened to hold the entrance. He readied his sword to strike when the undead reached him. Unfortunately, Ratchis forgot that the thing’s fists were on the ends of meaty arms longer than a sword’s length. He felt the knotted fists of the thing slam him with incredible might on the neck and shoulders, and he crumbled to the ground. The other ogre zombie reached down and slammed him again in the side of the head. Ratchis moaned and tried desperately to roll back to his feet, though the pain was excruciating.

Kazrack came leaping over to his companion, light flail in hand, better than a halberd in such a confined space. There was a resounding crack as the undead ogres slammed their meaty fists in the dwarf’s face. Kazrack’s blow never connected, he found himself lying on his back beside Ratchis.

Beorth did not hesitate. While the ogre arms were recoiling back to strike again, the paladin leapt within their reach and calling upon the *divine vengeance* of his god, cracked the closer one’s skull open. One of its milky eyeballs burst and dribbled down its face, as the other side of the staff slammed into its chin.

The paladin moved aside, allowing Derek and Jeremy to move into the narrow confines of the chamber. Jeremy tore open one of its legs, while Derek’s battle-axe bit into its ribs. It fell over, pouring gray-blue embalming fluid across the sandy floor.

Derek slipped past the lumbering hulk, but was surprised to see two more of the thick forms shambling out of the rear of the passage which continued past this small chamber.

“There are more!” he warned, as Ratchis scrambled to his feet and asked Nephthys to bless some stones he picked up off the ground.

Jeremy ducked a blow by the remaining ogre zombie at the front of the chamber, while Derek scrambled to avoid the blows of the two that came into the room from the other side.

“I could use a little help here,” Derek whined.

Jeremy parried the blow of the ogre before him and using the force of the dead arm pressed down on the flat of his blade to swing his body towards Derek, and then drawing his short sword with his left hand he shoved it deeply into the gut of one of the zombies menacing Derek.

“That’s what you get for going ahead by yourself,” Jeremy quipped with a smile. “Who do you think you are, Kazrack?”

He followed this up with a slash across its chest. A piece of rib ricocheted back and forth across the room for a moment, but the thing did not fall. So, Derek finished it off with a chop of his axe.

Kazrack got his wind back and stood, slamming the head of his flail against the first ogre zombie. It did not fall.

Ratchis was able to get past it and threw one of his stones at the ogre at the rear of the chamber, that still reached dumbly for Derek. The stone smashed the thing's yellowed teeth and lodged itself in the roof of its mouth. It did not react.

The ogre in front ignored Kazrack and turned around to swing at Jeremy, who just barely noticed in time. The thing's dead fist slammed the stone wall instead, leaving a round impression of cracks in its surface. Derek was not so lucky, and he felt his back strike the wall, as a zombie fist nearly caved in his chest.

Kazrack roared, feeling a fury enter him that he rarely felt. It was as if Krauchaar's invigorating ales had been poured down his gullet.⁴¹ He slammed the ogre before him in the shin, and it cracked. A long splinter of bone burst out through the thing's thick skin and it fell over to the right, its head crunching as it slammed against the stone wall. It was now a huge obstacle of dead rotting meat wedged between the walls of the narrow chamber. It was pinned there, askew, partially blocking the view of Ratchis, Derek and Jeremy in the other part of the room.

Martin, Beléar and Blodnath made it to the narrow chamber, but could not get past Kazrack and the two huge bodies right there.

Ratchis tossed another stone. This one caught the thing in the neck and its jugular vein snapped, spraying the caustic embalming fluid on Derek. The young woodsman moved back out of the spray, coughing, and spitting, and rubbing his eyes with the butt of his left hand.

The ogre pushed past Derek and slammed a fist into Ratchis' face, but Jeremy's long sword struck it in temple at the same instant. And it stopped moving.

"No need to thank me," Jeremy said to Ratchis, sheathing his swords.

Ratchis grunted.

"What do you think these things were doing here?" Kazrack asked, rubbing his neck where he had been struck.

"Work horses," Ratchis replied. He pointed to the leather harnesses on the monsters. They were probably used to carry or cart heavy things. Those metal rings on the back of the harness were probably used to connect them to the stones and things used to make this place so they can be dragged around."

"Undeath is the worst form of slavery," Beorth muttered.

"Not even an ogre deserves it," Ratchis added.

"I think they were used to push the stone door back in place," Derek said, slinking ahead to see a narrow alcove where a large block had been slide from the other side. "We are behind the door that led into this area."

Some time was spent looking for hidden or disguised doors or passageways, but the stone gave away nothing—even to trained dwarven eyes.

"There is nowhere else left to go," Martin said, as everyone came back out into the central chamber.

"There's one place..." Jeremy pointed to the crack in the floor, where the statue had gone through, along with Jeremy.

"Yes, there are more undead down there," Beorth added. "At the very least we have to deal with them, so we might as well explore."

"I am not sure that there is much here worth staying for," Beléar said, solemnly. "Do not forget the gnomes and do not

⁴¹ Among Krauchaar's followers are the furious *Tavern Brawlers*, who can drink themselves into a rage where they feel no pain and swing their weapons with great strength (aka Battle-ragers).

forget that our people are endangered by the dark elves by your own admission.”

“The books might be the key to helping us defeating the fiendish gnomes,” Martin said. “And they obviously have something to do with this place.”

“This place is tainted,” Beorth said. “I must know more about it, and I must destroy all undead I come across. I may not remember taking my vows as a ghost-hunter of Anubis, but I know that I made them in my heart and in my spirit. I will not abandon them.”

“No one is asking you to abandon them, Beorth,” Ratchis said, softly, the rasp of his voice making him almost indecipherable. “And I agree that we have to search below. It will take time to translate the books and this is a foul place that needs to be cleansed in the meantime.”

Kazrack and Martin nodded.

Jeremy shrugged his shoulders.

“I am here to help Martin the Green and thus help you all,” Derek motioned to the rest of the Fearless Manticore Killers. “And if you need me here, I guess here is where I’ll be. That dragon doesn’t seem to be going anywhere.”

Martin shot the young man a look.

“We’re going down,” Kazrack said. “Blodnath, ready the ropes.”

End of Session #44

AQUERRA

Interlude⁴²

“Do you really think we should go down there?” Josef asked skeptically. He held the hooded lantern close to his goatskin coat and shielded the light even more. Moisture that had collected on the warped trapped door dripped down into the shaft, plinking off the iron ladder than led down into the darkness.

Carlos looked to Finn.

Finn rubbed his chin with a calloused hand. He sorely wished was back on his family’s fishing boat heading into Corbay with a big haul of black sea bass, and not aching from too slowly recovering wounds, and clutching a long sword in his sweaty palm.

“We have to go down,” Frank said. “Gwar is down there. Other people are down there. I’m going down there with or without you guys.” The former shepherd had not bothered to clean off his tunic after their last battle. The blood of those they had recently killed slipped down the front in great clots.

Finn gagged, but nodded.

“Couldn’t we go back to town and find those friends of yours?” Josef tried another tack. “You know, the big half-breed guy and the dwarf?”

“We don’t have time,” Finn replied, wiping his mouth. “That priest, or whatever he is, is up to no good and he has townspeople down there that he might kill or sacrifice before we get back with them, even if they are even anywhere around, which knowing them they are probably off actually facing the dragon.”

“I’ll go first,” Frank said, gruffly and moved to make his way down, but Carlos put out his arm and stopped him.

“Yo voy primero,” Carlos glared at the lone twin. “I will go first.” He laid his quarterstaff on the ground and then climbed down into the shaft, stopping to grab the staff again.

Frank sighed and moved to follow.

“I’ll take the rear,” said Josef.

Finn looked at his weaselly companion and clucked his tongue.

“What? You think I’m gonna run out on you?” Josef feigned insult.

“If you don’t want to come, I certainly won’t make you, but it’s on your conscience,” Finn said and began to make his way down.

Josef looked around at the dark cave they were in. He sighed and carefully climbed down, holding the lantern out as to not bang it.

⁴² This interlude was an experiment in re-telling the events in this campaign. While during actual play none of the players were witness to this scene, I included it in the re-telling to give a sense of what was happening with the group’s friends who had been absent at the Festival of Isis celebration the party attended back in session #37.

Session #45

Kazrack held the knotted end of the rope between his feet, as he held the length tight to his chest. Derek and Jeremy grunted as they lowered him into the rent in the floor of the main chamber, and the rope bit into the earth underneath the tile, sending a rain of pebbles and soil down on the dwarf. The other end of the rope was fastened to one of the large pillars. The earthen area between the floor of the chamber above and the ceiling of the chamber below was just nearly fifteen feet. Kazrack tensed as he felt his feet go past the threshold of the misshapen shaft and into the room. A moment later he was hanging in the room, the floor a little more than six feet below him. The chamber down here was about the same size as the one above, and the columns above had been anchored down here. There were four round shafts into stained white stone on each side that led off to the left and right, and he could see the flailing limbs of zombies sticking out the earthen ceiling. There was movement, and suddenly three more of the undead things dressed in dirty white servant's clothing came lumbering towards the dwarvish bait.

“Natan-ahb! Fill me with your divine might so that I may turn these abominations from your sight,” the dwarf bellowed, but the zombies did not halt. The dwarf closed his eyes and brought a hand to his bag of runestones about his neck and called to his god again. He heard the things turn and scramble away, and he was lowered the rest of the way on to the dirt floor of this lower chamber. There were empty sconces on the columns, and the zombies were climbing back into the shafts, which were about five feet off the floor.

Jeremy swung over the side and began to make his way quickly down, only occasionally using the rope to steady himself. Above, Beorth awkwardly climbed over the side and tried to shimmy down the rope, while using his feet on the shaft wall to steady himself. A little more than halfway down, he lost his footing and the rope burned through his hands. He slammed the back of his head in the dirt and a cascade of stones preceded him. Jeremy hugged the wall as the clumsy paladin scraped past his back, just barely avoiding getting knocked down as well. Beorth slammed into Kazrack, and knocked them both prone, winding them.

Jeremy snickered, but the sound of the low moaning of the undead and the shuffling of their feet came to him from below when the sound of the falling dirt had settled. He dropped down and nimbly swung out of the way of Kazrack and Beorth. The dwarf was already on his feet, but Beorth was stunned, trying to stand and swooning, as he would collapse again.

“Natan-ahb! This place is overrun with evil! Again, I implore you to fill me with your essence so these thing may flee and let us do your good work!”

The paladin's helmet glowed with the light of a spell, so Jeremy could see that while two zombies were fleeing, one more was coming from his left. He did not see that one was emerging from the darkness behind him, ignoring Kazrack and Beorth to mindlessly go for the closest target. It reached out to grab Jeremy's neck. The Neergardian was unaware of his danger, when suddenly there was a grunt and the sound of something falling behind him. He turned quickly to see Derek had dropped from somewhere further up the shaft and landed on a zombie. Now the young huntsman and the animated corpse struggled to get back to their feet.

“You're almost as crazy as I am,” Jeremy said mouth agape.

Beorth cleared his head and stood, and with a quick motion of his long sword lopped the head off the prone zombie. It convulsed for a moment and then stopped moving.

There was no time to relax. There was rumbling sound and more dirt began to fall from the ceiling. There was a cascade of stones and soil, as five zombies dropped in the chamber from the ceiling, knocked loose by the slight tremor. Dust filled the air, and even where the magical light emanated vision was hampered.

Below, Jeremy had both of his blades out in a flash and chopped at one of the zombies that fell near him (widening the shaft at the bottom). It looked up and the blonde warrior buried his longsword in its forehead. It fell back down and stopped moving.

Above, Ratchis began a frantic, but measured descent, wanting to help his companions but worried he might fall and let loose more zombies and or even collapse the whole ceiling on those below.

Beorth wiped dust from his eyes and chopped weakly at a zombie reaching out at him. It had a few wiry strands of black hair coming from its head, where its cracked skull was visible under a thin gray scalp. The thing raised its fists to slam the paladin, but suddenly Derek was on his feet and chopping down with his battleaxe. The zombie was now pieces of inanimate decaying meat on the ground.

“Again, I call on thee, Father of All Dwarves to cascade from me like the mighty waters of your cup!” Kazrack bellowed, again trying to turn undead, but it failed.

The newly arrived zombies got to their feet, while another came lurched from the darkness and fell towards Beorth, who moved aside easily avoiding the awkwardly moving thing. This one had been a woman in life and her flaccid shriveled breasts were thick with black veins.

Ratchis finally jumped down.

Jeremy hacked at another zombie with the tip of his long sword and was forced to yank it back as it got stuck in the thing’s breastbone. It did not fall.

Beorth called to Anubis to enchant his blade, while Ratchis and Kazrack moved forward to meet the coming dead.

Blodnath climbed down and jumped to the floor, to find them all engaged with zombies.

Black ichor was spurting weakly from the stump of a zombie’s wrist, as Jeremy’s blades whirled magnificently in the bobbing light of Beorth’s helm.

The chamber was filled with the sound of dried decaying flesh being hacked apart and the cracking of bones. The dirt floor was soon sopping with ichor and blood as the Fearless Manticore Killers spread out, calling to each other when more zombies were spotted in the dark corners. More and more were emerging from the horizontal shafts on one side of the chamber.

Blodnath crept along the walls, finding the cowering zombies that had fled from Kazrack’s display of divine power, as sliced their hamstrings. When they fell, he’d hack at their skulls over and over with a wood-cutting hatchet, as his short sword was not as effective against the corporeal undead.⁴³

“Beorth, when you are done there are three more in the corner on your left,” Kazrack called to the Paladin of Anubis, as his dwarven vision allowed him to see where the magical light could not reach.

More and more emerged from one of the set of shafts, and Jeremy moved directly in front of one, hacking limbs as they emerged, creating a nasty pile of flesh and limbs at his feet. Soon, he and the rest of the party were covered in slimy black ichor. Derek wiped the stuff from his eyes, and suddenly noticed a zombie lurching towards him. Instinctively, he swung his axe, and he felt the resistance of the thing’s neck for a mere moment, and then giving way. The zombie’s head flew across the chamber, but its body kept moving, for it could still seek out life to snuff even without its head. It slammed black fist into Derek’s face, and the young huntsman groaned.

“No need to lose your head!” Jeremy quipped, and this time everyone groaned, but the Neergaardian had grown cocky, and as he rushed forward to rip out the headless zombie’s guts, he stepped on the head and lost his footing as it rolled away. Jeremy tried to turn his body to slow his fall, but his head struck a pillar, and he was stunned. The headless zombie fell over and twitched for a moment and then stopped.

Kazrack hustled over to the deep niches the zombies were emerging from and cut the arm from another that was emerging. It fell awkwardly from the round passage, and he chopped down on it. It stopped moving, but the dwarven rune-thrower was so involved in slaying that one that he did not notice one emerging from the shaft immediately next to him and turned to look too late. Undead arms reached out and grabbed hold of him and started dragging him up into the shaft with the strength of a dead laborer’s limbs.

⁴³ Corporeal undead are resistant to damage from piercing weapons because the piercing of organs does not hinder their evil animate force.

Kazrack roared and broke free of the grip and nearly tripped as his booted feet touched the ground again. He stepped away and whirled around. Behind him, he could hear Ratchis calling to his goddess to heal the many scratches and bruises he was suffering from.

Jeremy got up to all fours, and he stumbled to his feet shaking his head.

Derek's arms began to throb from swinging his battle-axe back and forth relentlessly, and Blodnath having finished the turned zombies crept back to the rope.

But there was no time for rest, more and more of the black-haired zombie with graying skins stretched taught over their skulls, and dressed in dirty workman's clothes, some with leather aprons that still held rusty chisels, shears, spades and other tools, continued to emerge from the shafts. Already over a score of hacked zombies lay on the chamber floor, but there seemed to be no end of the source.

"Anubis, preserve us," Beorth said under his breath.

End of Session #45

AQUERRA

Session #46

“Nephthys, send these things away with your righteous might so that my companions and I may strike them down!” Ratchis cried out, swinging his scored chain belt over his head, but the zombies did not flee. They kept coming.

Kazrack stepped further away from the niche where the zombie had tried to drag him into, and he too called his gods. Several of the zombies awkwardly began to shuffle back down the horizontal shafts, but other more came stumbling out of those on the far end.

Jeremy and Beorth ran at one that lumbered towards the dwarf, hacking it down with a flurry of sword blows. Derek moved up to support them and chopped down another one with a single blow. Black blood and ichor mixed with sweat streamed out of the young man’s brown hair and down the side of his face.

“Ratchis! Beorth! What is going on down there? Do you need help?” Martin called from above. He grabbed the rope and started to finally make his way down.

The last few were mopped up, but a good number had fled back down the tunnels, filled with the fear of the dwarven gods.

Martin landed on the chamber floor with a grunt.

“They will be back soon,” Beorth said, wiping his brow and dropping the point of his sword into the mucky dirt. He began to work at lighting one of the torches.

“Let me do that,” Martin said, and gesturing with his left hand the torch burst aflame and the paladin replaced the burnt nub in one of the sconces with his own; made from the furniture in the room above, it burned wildly, spitting and smoking as the pine tar finish ran down its length.

“How much longer will the power of your gods keep them at bay?” Ratchis asked Kazrack, and laying a hand on the dwarf’s head, called on his goddess’ power to heal.

The dwarf was covered in innumerable bruises and cuts. He cast a healing spell upon himself as well and then answered. “I do not know. The ways of all the gods are mysterious.”

Soon, Jeremy and Derek had two more torches burning in sconces on the dark pillars.

“When they do return it will be easier to destroy them all here,” Beorth said, picking up his sword and wiping the blade of black ichor. He sheathed. “We can cut them down as they emerge from these long niches or tunnels or whatever they are.”

“Could it be that these other niches contain zombies?” Kazrack asked, turning and gesturing to the four tunnels on the opposite wall.

“That is possible,” Beorth replied.

“Well, let’s decide how we are going to handle this,” Kazrack began going through scenarios aloud. Jeremy and Derek sighed in unison. The Neergaardian wrung out his wispy blonde hair, for it was caked with blood and gore. Derek leaned against a pillar and spit.

“I am going to scout out the niches,” Ratchis said, interrupting the one-sided conversation about tactics and began to march over to the ones where no zombies had emerged yet.

“Let us not be hasty,” Kazrack said. Martin nodded.

“Ratchis is right,” Beorth said. “We should be proactive. I will go with him. I am not afraid.”

“This isn’t about being afraid,” Kazrack said. “It is about maximizing our effectiveness while destroying our enemy.”

Jeremy elbowed Derek. "This from the fellow who wouldn't wear armor."

Ratchis did not wait. He hopped up into one of the horizontal shafts and began to slowly make his way down it. He had to squat way down to make his way along it, as it was barely five feet tall. He made his way thirty-five or forty paces into the darkness that was gray to his orcish vision but found nothing. The hulking Friar of Nephthys hurried back the best he could.

"They go down pretty far it seems," he told his companions. "I saw nothing."

"They should be back by now," Beorth said, and for a moment no one seemed to know what he meant, but the paladin gestured to the tunnels on the opposite side where turned zombies had fled.

"Naw, those things are slow," Jeremy said, clicking his tongue. "If those passages are as long as Ratchis thinks, it could take them forever to get back."

"No, it strikes me as strange as well," Beléar intoned. The elder dwarf had just made his way down the rope with Blodnath's help. He combed his black and gray beard with his fingers. "Such things would return as soon as the fear of the gods left them, unless ordered to do something else, or there was another source of life closer by."

Kazrack's face grew worried.

"We have to see what is down there," Ratchis said. He hopped out of the tunnel he had scouted and moved across the room to begin going down one of the opposite ones.

"I would consider it an honor to go first," Kazrack said, stepping before his half-orc companion and blocking his way. "And, I am uniquely suited to this environment."

Blodnath cleared his throat.

"*We* are uniquely suited to this environment," Kazrack gestured to Blodnath and Beléar with a smile.

"I am going as well," Beorth said, flatly.

"Hey, you aren't leaving us behind," Jeremy spoke up and gestured to Derek who nodded his head, and patted the haft of his axe.

Martin shrugged his shoulders.

"We cannot all go, someone needs to guard the rope," Kazrack said.

Blodnath was sent back up and he called to the rest of the dwarves guarding the upper shaft. It was agreed that Helrahd and Kirla would guard the rope, and if the wait were long, they would switch a shift with the triplets.

"How long until we come after you?" Captain Adalar asked.

"If we do not return, go seek out the gnomes and help them as they can. That is more important," Kazrack replied. Blodnath climbed back down.

They paired off and each chose a tunnel.

Derek and Ratchis took one with Ratchis leading the way. Jeremy and Blodnath took the next one, with the white-haired dwarf taking the lead. Kazrack and Martin took the third, and Beorth and Beléar took the last, the dwarves leading in those cramped tunnels as well.

The humans (and Ratchis) awkwardly ambled down the horizontal shaft, led by the dwarves that marched stoutly along, happy to have the earth so close above their heads. The tunnels were lined in smooth dressed stone, so obviously great

care went into making them. Kazrack's fine dwarven senses noted that there was the slightest grade downward.

He mentioned this to Martin, who nodded, trying to keep his shaggy and frizzed out red hair from catching fire in his makeshift torch. Random patches of red fuzz were splatter across his soft round face. No one would ever guess he had not eaten in weeks.

The pairs crawled along slowly, unsure if the other pairs were safe even though they were only separated by a few feet of stone. Ratchis tried tapping the stone, but decided it was pointless. They could only go on.

Soon, Kazrack thought he heard something up ahead and stopped suddenly. Martin nearly fell down.

"What is it?"

The dwarf placed a finger to his lips and then Martin heard it: the soft grinding groan of a zombie. The awkward shuffle of an undead gait and worn sandals came to their ears with great dread. Though it was only a few moments, it seemed a long slow time before the thing came into view of Kazrack's darkvision.

"It is coming," Kazrack said. "There is only one. Are you ready?"

"Uh... yeah?"

The thing came scrambling on its hands and feet; it's gnarled knees not touching the tunnel floor. Kazrack let go with a crossbow bolt when it was just barely within the torchlight, but the bolt went high and cracked against the stone ceiling, falling ineffectively.

Martin and Kazrack moved back in tandem, and Kazrack hurriedly reloaded. The zombie continued to scramble, often losing its footing as its stiff muscles seemed hesitant to leave the rigor of death. Kazrack fired again, and again the bolt went too high.

They moved back again, and Martin cast his *shield* spell.

"We aren't going to make much progress this way, are we?" Martin asked.

Kazrack grunted. He loaded and fired again. This time there was a distinct pop and crack sound as the bolt buried itself into the thing's skull. However, it did not stop coming.

Over and over again the dwarven rune-thrower and the human watch-mage fired and retreated, fired, and retreated. The bolts struck the zombie several times, including once right through the eye as it looked up, but they could not stop it and the zombie could not reach them.

"I am going to let it catch up with us," Kazrack said, handing his crossbow back to Martin and drawing his light flail. "Get ready."

"Would you like to use my torch?" Martin offered it.

Kazrack merely frowned, and then turned back readying himself to crush the thing's skull with one blow.

And then suddenly it was upon them. Kazrack punched forward with his flail, slamming the thing with all his might in the chest. Splinters of rib bones punctured out of the thing's desiccated chest. Kazrack smiled, but his joy was premature. The zombie got its black calcified fist up under the dwarf's guard and slammed Kazrack's chin so hard the dwarf fell on his back. The dwarven priest tried desperately to get to his feet, but his vision was shaking, and his ears were ringing, and he gasped for breath. He could see the black figure moving to crawl over him.

Martin did not hesitate. He leapt forward, and thing's next blow slammed against the transparent shield. He buried the torch into the thing's chest wound and bloodied clothes, and in a moment they and the thing's dried flesh were burning.

The zombie swung its arms with mindless fury, and Martin recoiled, holding out the torch. He was amazed to see that

now the zombie's arms were on fire. In a moment, it stopped moving, and Martin was barely able to drag Kazrack out from underneath the burning and collapsing corpse.

Kazrack shook his head clear and wobbled up to his feet. He placed a broad calloused hand on Marin's shoulder.

"Martin, I must thank you," the dwarf said, quietly. "That is the second time you have saved my life."

"Uh, don't worry about it," Martin replied flustered at being singled-out for doing anything heroic. "You've saved all our lives enough times. Uh... thank *you*."

Kazrack cleared his throat and then gestured for them to continue in their original direction, kicking through the smoldering corpse.

"The others are bound to have gotten a substantial lead by now," Kazrack said.

And he was right.

Derek spotted the glimmer of flickering light ahead. The tunnel was finally opening into another area. Ratchis moved over as far as he could to allow Derek to pass. The young huntsman moved to within fifteen feet of the opening and then fell to his belly, dragging his body silently to the edge. The light became brighter as he grew closer, but there was the smell of rotten burning filling the air, which grew hazy.

To their right, Jeremy and Blodnath had noticed the opening, too. Jeremy signaled for Blodnath to wait, and he crept up cautiously.

Derek winced as his chin hit the stone floor. He could not believe what he was seeing. The tunnels opened near the top of the ziggurat which stood in an immense natural chamber. The ziggurat was carved with steps leading forty feet down to the chamber floor. The floor of the chamber was littered with broken stones of many sizes. It looked like at one time there were more stone structures here, but smaller than the ziggurat, and a corral of some kind with a stone railing. There were rotten and ragged canvas tents covered in dust and freckled with holes. Some were no more than stained rags hanging on wooden poles. And there were scores upon scores of zombies. Like those the Fearless Manticore Killers had faced above, these zombies were dressed as laborers. They milled around in scattered lines that seemed to have been based on a semblance of order. They moved from place to place, in and out of the darkness as if completing tasks on some list or as part of some procedure, but they actually seemed to be accomplishing nothing. There were lines of them trailing off to the left and right of the ziggurat as well.

The zombie activity seemed to be focused on an enormous pedestal for what must have once been an enormous stone statue. Derek could barely make out the cracked feet of whatever it had been. The surface of it looked like it had some kind of weird texture carved on it. Four tall fires in large bronze bowls surrounded the pedestal. It was these smoky fires that lit up the chamber.

Derek watched in awe, giving up on doing a head count of the walking dead. He could now see that every so often the zombies *were* accomplishing a task. Some were dragging corpses up on to stone biers at the base of each fire, where others would tear the clothes from them and tossing them into the braziers. It became clear that these were the tasks the other zombies were mimicking. They moved mindless to their own inefficiency. While the corpses piled on the biers slid down in great piles of rotting desecration, Derek noticed one other thing, a significant portion of these zombies were naked.

"Well, what have we got out there?" Blodnoth asked Jeremy, when the latter had crawled back a bit.

"We've got a sold out show and no script to go by," Jeremy replied quietly. He squatted against the tunnel wall.

"Huh?"

"It's a packed house."

“Let’s retreat some and keep sight of the opening,” Blodnath suggested. “Maybe someone else will come and we can decide what to do.”

Jeremy nodded.

“When you say *countless*,” Ratchis paused and looked at the young woodsman who had just hurried back on his belly to report what he had seen. “Do you mean as in, too many to count quickly, or…”

Derek shook his head. “Countless.”

Ratchis wiped his face with one of his huge ham-like hands.

They were silent for a long moment.

“Well? Should we go back?” Derek finally asked, in a sharp whisper.

“Uh, no,” Ratchis twisted a thick chunk of natty lock on his head. “Let’s wait a while and see what the others do.” He squeezed past Derek and crept up to the edge of the tunnel. Derek waited a moment and then followed. Ratchis let out a low breath when he saw the great chamber beyond. He noticed that a group of zombies were wandering aimlessly on the steps on this side, and seemed to be meandering up towards the tunnels, without real purpose. He pinned Derek back with a muscular arm, and pressed his own back to the tunnel side, squatting awkwardly. It seemed that one or more zombies might enter the adjacent tunnel. They moved back to decide what to do. Ratchis squeezed past Derek once again.

Jeremy squatted with his back to a tunnel wall as well, looking back and forth from the opening to Blodnoth, who was cursing under his breath about how cursed this place was.

“Do you think the others will hang back as well?” Jeremy asked during a lull in the invective.

“How in the hells should I know?” Blodnath spat. “What? Do I look like I can read minds or see through stone?”

“I mean, how will we know what anyone else does if they stay back, and if they do run out there, they’ll get torn to shreds and then we’re gonna have to run out there and try to save them.” Jeremy was exasperated; these infrequent bursts of wisdom gave him a migraine.

“What do you mean, ‘we’?” Blodnath coughed. “Look out kid! One of those things is coming in here!”

Jeremy startled and bumped his head on the stone above. He turned awkwardly toward an approaching zombie. It plodded along on its knees, falling occasionally to its hands and then kind of leap-frogging back up with awkward jerky movements. Blodnath leapt to his feet and drew his short sword.

“Wanna switch places?” Jeremy asked the dwarf, seeing that the shorter warrior would have an easier time in the confined space.

“Uh-uh,” Blodnath took a few steps back.

Jeremy readied himself with a torch in hand, realizing that he had no room to wield his long sword, and that a short sword would not be so effective.

“Take this,” He heard Blodnath say, and instinctively, Jeremy held back his open palm. Blodnath placed a mallet in the Neergaardian’s hand. The small metal type used to hammer in pitons.

And then suddenly the zombie leapt at him, Jeremy threw himself to the right, and held up the mallet to fend off the blow. He nearly dropped the torch. Frantically, he thrust the torch at the zombie ineffectively, but was happy to hear and feel the resounding crunch of the zombie’s nose being smashed in.

In the adjacent tunnel, Derek turned suddenly, as he heard the shuffle of a zombie crawling into the tunnel. It had barely made it up to its knees, when Derek cleaved its head open with awkward strikes of his ultra-sharp axe.^{44 45}

Ratchis squeezed past, yet again and paused at the tunnel opening, listening for any more zombies. He heard the droning moan from the adjacent tunnel, but there were still more zombies milling around on the steps, at the base of the steps and scores more in the great lines going from place to place.

Jeremy's torch was going out, and the mallet was proving too short to do much good as a weapon. It kept striking the zombie's flailing arms to no effect. Jeremy, however, got his nose-bloodied by a graze from the zombie-worker's fist.

"Keep your head down kid," Blodnath coached Jeremy from behind. "He's coming in with the left."

"I can't keep this up," Jeremy swore and dropped the mallet.

"Looking good kid, play to your strengths," Blodnath continued with his dubious encouragement. "Use your sword kid."

Jeremy sighed and taking advantage of the zombie's slow reflexes edged further back into the tunnel and awkwardly drew his long sword from the sheath.

"Looking good! Keep it up!"

Ratchis risked a peek in time to see another zombie climbing into the adjacent tunnel.

"Watch my back," he hissed to Derek, and then climbed out of the niche and swung into the next one in time to see Jeremy shove his long sword into the first zombie's chest and yank hard to the floor, sending a torrent of black liquid that smelled of rotting licorice back out the end of the tunnel. It oozed over Ratchis' hand.

"How ya doin' kid?" Blodnath asked.

"I need some blasted room to work!" Jeremy said angrily and folding his arms before his face threw himself into the oncoming zombie, hoping to push it back out of the tunnel. However, he did not count on Ratchis blocking the way. He sensed resistance and jerked back. The zombie swung a fist at him, but he ducked.

Not noticing the half-orc, Jeremy cursed his inability to knock the thing back.

He thrust his sword again and cut into the thing's hip. Its head then jerked backward, and it spit up black bile and bits of never digested food now crawling with mealworms. It collapsed, and Ratchis pulled his own sword from it.

"Ya!" Jeremy cried out. "Yer frightening the life out of me."

Ratchis snorted.

Derek swung around hurriedly, noting that Beorth was sticking his head out of the fourth tunnel and taking in the horrid scene of the zombie processions, and crammed in behind Ratchis.

"Beorth and Beléar have made it," he said.

"No sign of Kazrack?" Ratchis asked.

"No Kazrack. No Martin. Unless they are staying back, which is what we should have probably done."

Ratchis squeezed back past Derek and found Beorth squatted down out on the top step, still surveying the huge

⁴⁴ **DM's Note:** The close confines of the tunnel gave PCs a -4 circumstance penalty from using any medium or larger slashing or blunt weapon, and to a large weapon of any kind.

⁴⁵ Derek's fine axe was taken from one of the half-fiend gnome brothers of Mozek Steamwind, Mokad. (See Session #39)

chamber.

“There is reason behind these things’ movements,” Beorth said in a funerary whisper. “Anubis’ will is being thwarted here, and I will not stand for it to be in my sight.”

Ratchis opened his mouth to speak, but Beorth cut him off.

“However, I understand the wisdom of retreating from here and making a plan,” he bowed his head. “Impatience never gained a man profit in anything.”

“Didya see all the zombies, Beorth?” Jeremy whispered harshly, crawling up behind him. Derek was sitting in the tunnel entrance. From his vantage point he could see the blue-black bald heads of zombies marching around and spotted that more were heading for the steps. His keen hunter’s eye noted movement to his left. Another of the walking dead came around the corner up on this level and was stumbling towards Ratchis with outstretched hands.

“We have company!” Derek said, pulling his feet into the tunnel and holding out a hand to Jeremy who instincts told him that this was a fight that would turn ugly quickly.

“We should return the way we came,” Beorth said, agreeing with Jeremy’s idea of retreat. “I will hold them off.”

Ratchis stood and turned, with a curled lip of disgust and cleanly cleaved the blade of his longsword into the top of the zombie’s head; one of its eyes burst, but it did not fall.

There was a roar as a squat form came charging out of the third tunnel. Kazrack whipped his flail over his head and smashed the thing in the back of the head, sending it careening down the steps of the ziggurat, coming apart as the negative energy that maintained it dissipated.

From below dozens more zombies turned their bodies and looked up and began the painful climb up the ziggurat stairs to beat the life from the Fearless Manticore Killers.

Martin appeared at the edge of the third tunnel with a torch in one hand and flask of oil in the other.

“Let’s all fall back!” Ratchis ordered.

Beorth turned to the approaching mass of zombies and closed his eyes willing the divine energies of his god to pass through him. The chamber’s dim light was supplemented by the pure white light of the *Shawl of Estes*, which shone as bright as day as the paladin cried aloud. “Anubis! I call on you to fill these soulless forms with fear and drive them away so that I, your humble servant, and my companion might escape unscathed to plan how destroy this wanton profanity!”

The zombies that were closest to converging on the tunnels held up their arms and moaned loudly; turning away from the ghost-hunter, but the ranks behind them did not pause and passed them by. Jeremy leapt back out of the tunnel and waited for the approaching zombie line.

“I said, we need to fall back,” Ratchis ordered again, but he himself did not move back, taking a step forward to take an early swing at an approaching zombie. The sword’s tip whiffed through the air.

Jeremy moved to the right, and swung at a zombie, but missed it also, as it came within his reach and slammed him in the face with a bony fist.

Ratchis and Beorth both cried out as they, too, were dealt heavy blows by the mobbing zombies. Kazrack slammed the one on Beorth and it tumbled down the stairs as well. The dwarf then leapt back into the tunnel, helped up by Martin, who was eager to get going as he feared crawling through the tunnels chased by zombies.

“If we all hurry back, we can be waiting for them in the other chamber,” the watch-mage strategized with a frightened voice. “We will have the advantage there.”

“Martin is correct,” Kazrack concurred. “Back there we need only face a few at a time.”

One hard blow was all Jeremy’s zombie needed to fall to the ground and stop moving. He stepped back towards his tunnel, as Derek moved out and back to the first one.

Beorth called to Anubis again, and again the closest zombies turned away. Ratchis destroyed one last one as it passed him, and then the remaining members of the party leapt back into their tunnels and began to hurry back.

Behind them the zombies did not stop coming.

Ratchis hurried out of the tunnel and breathed a sigh of relief to see the rope still hanging there. Derek came into the dark room behind him, and soon the others began to trickle in.

“I’ve got the rope,” Blodnath said, grabbing the end to steady it, while Jeremy, Derek and Ratchis drew weapons. Ratchis waited by the tunnel entrances to deal with any zombies that might emerge after them, but Jeremy and Derek hurried over to the sconces in the support pillars and slipped their burning torches into them.

“Everyone get up and out of here!” Ratchis commanded, as he spotted a zombie stumbling out of the tunnel. “I can handle this until the others arrive.” The half-orc cleaved open the undead thing’s skull, but it did not stop moving.

The zombie scrambled to its sandaled feet and lunged at Ratchis, who stepped back whipped his sword at the thing again. This time it fell and stopped moving.

Another zombie came from one of the tunnels, and Jeremy skewered it, but it tried to slide down the sword blade to grab him.

“Ugh!” Jeremy pulled his sword out and stepped back.

“I said, get out!” Ratchis roared. Derek obeyed and began to get up the rope Blodnath held. The half-orc ranger chopped the zombie that had come after Jeremy and it stopped moving.

Martin emerged panting from the tunnel he and Kazrack had gone down. “There is one right behind Kazrack,” Martin wheezed.

Kazrack stumbled out after the green-robed watch-mage and then Jeremy hacked at the zombies as it hesitated, but then it continued to emerge spilling black ichor on the tunnel edge.

Ratchis stepped over and put an end to it.

“You go on up without me,” Jeremy told Ratchis, gritting his teeth. “I have the best chance of climbing up without the rope!”

“No, you go!” Ratchis replied. “I can turn them away from me if I am surrounded!”

“It’s not you I’m worried about,” Jeremy said.

Above, Derek let out a “whoa!” as the floor crumbled a bit as he got up to the top, sending chunks of dirt and stone down on his friends. The rope was biting into the tiled floor, cracking it.

“Wizard! Get up the rope!” Blodnath called to Martin. The white-haired dwarf seemed eager to do the same himself.

Kazrack readied himself to attack any more zombies that emerged from the holes, but Ratchis stepped in front of him. “Kazrack, it’s going to take you a half hour to climb that rope! Get going!”

“We need to wait for Beorth,” Kazrack explained. “We’ll turn the ones that come before he arrives.”

Jeremy sheathed his long sword and leapt for the edge of the hole, pulling his way up deftly by shoving his calloused hands into the dirt. Below him, Martin grabbed the rope and started trying to climb, but his flabby arms were not strong enough to gain him any altitude.

“Get on my back!” Blodnath order, and the dwarf squatted down. The watch-mage stepped up on to the dwarf, but even the boost was not enough. He just kept sliding down the rope feebly.

“Help,” Martin called up, pathetically.

“Get up there!” Blodnath roared.

Jeremy pulled himself up beside Derek, and the two of them grabbed the rope.

“Martin, hold on tight!” Jeremy called down, and the two young men began to pull the watch-mage up.

“Oh, thank you,” Martin said to Derek and Jeremy as he finally made it to the larger chamber above.

Meanwhile, another zombie emerged from one of the tunnels. Ratchis struck it and knocked it to the floor, where Kazrack sliced it with his halberd. However, another zombie grabbed the dwarf from behind as it emerged from the tunnel, clawing his neck. Kazrack swung around and sliced the newest foe, but the zombie on the floor was able to get up, dropping chunks of rotten flesh onto the increasingly mucky floor.

“Beorth better hurry up,” Ratchis said, his voice betraying a bit of desperation, as his blow missed the standing zombie. Kazrack thrust his halberd into the tunnel, skewering the one that struck him and pulling its now inert body out into the room. Another zombie fell into the room, and Ratchis turned to keep an eye on it, allowing the one he had just swung at to slam him in the face with a calcified fist. The half-orc turned back, and his sword plucked black and twisted entrails from the undead thing and it fell, sending a spray of filth across the room. It still struggled to get up.

Finally, Beléar stumbled into the chamber, “There are zombies right behind us.”

“Just move back and away from the hole,” Jeremy said to Martin sharply, seeing more cracks appear in the floor. The watch-mage obeyed, but forgot about the warded pillars in this chamber, and stumbled between the two that had not been set off yet. His body jerked in pain and shocked as he was struck by the blue lightning. “Yearhg!”⁴⁶

“C’mon! C’mon!” Blodnath called up the hole. “Drop the rope. I’m coming up!”

“Nephthys, grant me your strength to turn these vile abominations!” Ratchis cried out, swinging his chain belt over his head, and the zombies began to cower back and away from him.

Beorth finally stumbled from the tunnel. He was covered in many scratches and bleeding wounds, as he had been forced to fight off zombies in the cramped tunnel. However, never one to be discouraged, he turned and faced the tunnel to wait for more to emerge.

“Kazrack, get Beléar up the hole!” Ratchis said, letting the swinging chain wrap up his arm.

“Beorth, back away from the tunnels!” Beléar said. “I am going to turn them all so we can escape!”

“Beorth, you will need to be hauled up, so please get to the rope now!” Kazrack added his own commands to those of the others.

“It is my duty to die fighting the undead! Save yourself!” The ghost-hunter of Anubis replied.

Jeremy and Derek had dropped the rope, so Blodnath gave a quick look back at Beléar and shrugging his shoulders began to make his own way up.

⁴⁶ See Session #43

“None of us need die,” Kazrack said to Beorth.

More zombies stumbled out of the tunnel furthest to the left.

“Anubis! I am threatened! Save me and my companions so that we may destroy this place in your name!’ And with that Beorth reached for the silver jackal’s head about his neck and felt the divine force sweep from him like a wave. The zombies began to cover back into the holes.

“Now that they’re turned can the slow people *please* get up the rope?” Ratchis said, with annoyance dripping from his gravelly voice.

Beléar and Kazrack reached the rope, and the younger dwarf steadied it. “You go first.”

The elder dwarf shook his head and tugged on the rope. “Pull him up!” he called up and Derek and Jeremy did just that.

“Beorth should be next!” Kazrack called down and he flew upwards.

Above, Martin lay whimpering on the floor, as Jeremy, Derek and Blodnath moved away from the increasingly unstable hole, holding the rope at three different spots to create a lever for easier lifting.

Zombies scrambled over each other in the narrow tunnels, some fleeing the divine power of the party’s gods, and other drawn towards it like insects.

“All should go up! I can climb the rope easily,” Ratchis repeated himself in more than one way, cleaving open the head of a zombie once again. A huge chunk of brain splashed on his magical boots, and he kicked it away. Another zombie began to climb out behind that one, while two more fell from adjacent tunnels.

“I will bow to your wisdom,” Beorth said to Beléar who handed the lowered rope to the paladin. In a moment, he too was being hauled up, with greater speed as now Kazrack was helping as well.

“Natan-Ahb! Fill me with your divine might so we may escape these things that are ever on our heels!” Beléar called grasping the sack of runes around his neck. There was crackle and hiss as the three zombies that stumbled towards Ratchis crumbled into dust.

Beorth made it to the top, but finally the floor gave way as it had threatened, and the paladin felt himself tumbling back down the deep hole to the chamber below. Jeremy, who was closest, leapt forward to grab him, but was too slow. Beorth was able grab hold of the crumbling edge about a foot down and then hefted himself out to roll to safety. Jeremy’s failed attempt to save the paladin, however only succeeded in his stamping down on a widening crack, and with a yelp he tumbled painfully down the hole. In a moment, he was bruised and bloodied back in the chamber below, stunned by the fall.

Ratchis and Beléar turned with shock at the sound of their fallen companion. “Beléar, go up,” Ratchis said. “I will take care of Jeremy.”

Beléar nodded. In a moment, those above had untangled the rope and dropped it back down. They now had a chain of people pulling to avoid concentrating too much weight in any one spot. Soon, the elder dwarf was on his way up.

Ratchis leaned over Jeremy, keeping an eye open towards the tunnels, and pressed a hand to his companion’s temples.

“Nephthys, grant me your power to revive my companion.”

Jeremy coughed and awoke.⁴⁷ “Thanks, Ratchis.” He leapt to his feet and started climbing. Ratchis was forced to dispatch one last zombie before he, too was able to get to the relative safety of the chamber above.

⁴⁷ Any of the *Cure* spells can eliminate the *stunned* effect.

They all took a moment to catch their breath.

“It appears that the only way we have of moving forward is to open that unlocked sarcophagus...” Kazrack commented.

“Do not forget the books and papers we found,” Beorth said.⁴⁸

“Tomorrow I can read the first few pages of each of those books before we set off,” Martin added. “If I can risk preparing some different spells.”

“I think we should spend a day resting before we decide what to do anyway, so perhaps you will be able to read even more than that,” Kazrack replied. “And I can gain a miracle from Lehrathonar that will let me read the loose pages of notes in the gnomish tongue.

Martin shook his head. “I do not think the charm of translation will work on gnomish.”⁴⁹

“I am sure that miracles of my gods will let me to read these,” Kazrack insisted.

“If that is so, I commend them to your care,” Martin replied with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Where are we going to rest?” Derek asked, eyeing the cracked floor suspiciously.

“We’ll make our way back up to the level of the entrance shaft we left the others at,” Ratchis said.

“No, given the choice of being trapped on one side of the door or the other, I prefer it be this one,” Kazrack said, pointing to the weighted chains that worked the large door to this chamber.

“Uh, I see,” Derek said, looking to Jeremy with a look that asked, “Is this dwarf crazy?”

“Whatever do you mean?” Martin asked. “If we got trapped on this side, we’d likely all die as there may be no other way out.”

“Better to be trapped on this side where we can stop the source of this evil even if it means we must die than on the other side and be cut off from it.”

“I agree,” said Beorth, nodding.

“You’re both crazy!” Jeremy exclaimed. This time it was Derek’s turn to nod.

“There are other more present dangers in the world that we must see to, Kazrack,” Beléar intoned. “I would rather have the freedom to do so and have this place be sealed away but let us hope it does not come to that choice.”

“Well said,” Ratchis agreed.

The Fearless Manticore Killers and their companions joined the rest of the dwarves on the circular level with sarcophagi. Captain Adalar and the others were happy to see them relatively unharmed. Adalar immediately ordered Jolnar, Golnar, and Tolnar and the other dwarves who had not been below to take up the night’s watches to allow those who had been fighting uninterrupted rest.

Before bedding down, Beléar cast spells of healing on Kazrack and Beorth.

⁴⁸ See Session #44

⁴⁹ Martin’s little exposure to the gnomish written language (called Bindar) while living with the Garvan gnomes taught him that the language is naturally in a form of code—which makes it very difficult to learn, and impossible to translate without powerful translation magics.

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The next morning found the group chewing on dried pieces of meat and fruit. Derek and Jeremy restlessly practiced handstands against a wall, as Beorth looked on reproachful of their behavior in a tomb but spending his day in quiet reflection.

Ratchis *restored* some of his own strength and that of Kazrack, and then spread around the healing graces of Nephthys; after that he just paced back and forth, and the dwarves all watched him grimacing.

The dwarves all spent the day alternately catching up on sleep or talking softly among themselves in dwarvish.

“If there is another excursion they had better let us go,” said Jolnar to his brothers. “I came along for some action!”

At first, Kazrack, tried to help Martin the Green with the books the party had found in the room with the locked sarcophagus.

“Grey-Giver, Keeper of the Hidden, please reveal these inscrutable circles and lines to me,” the dwarven rune-thrower said, having spread the loose gnomish notes around him and casting his runestones upon them.

All that was revealed to him were lists of tightly packed random words, most of them rather common in use.

“This is gibberish,” Kazrack sighed. “I hope Martin will have more luck with the books or else we will have to make a choice of what to do next blindly.”

“We may have to do that anyway,” Ratchis replied.

Martin had prepared to cast *Comprehend Languages* several times, and he also detected magic on them and found that two had wards upon them. These he set aside in hopes that Beléar might be able to dispel one later as it was beyond his own meager power.⁵⁰

He read for hours, quickly flipping from book to book to absorb as much as possible in the limited time he had. He gasped and shuddered, and more than once frowned and snapped a book shut to grab another.

The very large book seemed to be mostly pictures, and the gnomish marginalia was untranslatable. There was one thing he was pretty sure about however, the books had been written a long time ago and then bound afterward, and he did not think the fiendish gnomes, or their father had written them. The books were old even for gnomes.⁵¹

Two of the books were on necrology and had extensive info on various types of undead; their abilities and the methods for creating them—including new types of “experimental” undead fusing animal spirits with human corpses.

Another of the books was on demonology, and had color plates of various demon types and specific information on some specific and very powerful-looking demons; including the sacrifices they preferred, methods for summoning them and where in the abyssal realms they might be found.⁵²

The first book, marked with a one, seemed to be a detailed explanation of the resources required to build the Necropolis. Including lists of slaves from places Martin could not recognize, and notes on tons of stone and methods for moving them and raising undead slaves to have them keep working.

There was a planar treatise and book on Rahkefet, the ram-headed son of Set, which the builder of the Necropolis and

⁵⁰ **DM’s Note:** While Martin the Green was 5th level at this point, he had not yet found a copy of the *Dispel Magic* spell or had time to research it for himself.

⁵¹ The party suspected the books might have been written by the gnomes, since they were in a room guarded by a gnomish magical ward in Session #44.

⁵² In Aquerran cosmology, the Abyss is the area “outside” of the fiendish realm called “The Hells.” It is where fiends who refuse to submit to the hierarchy of the diabolic monarchy dwell. It is a fluid and torturous place, and not really a place at all at the same time.

the author of the books seemed to serve.

The color-plates in the large book were extremely vulgar, portraying various accounts of mortals consorting with demons and birthing monstrous half-fiend children.

However, there was little that seemed to indicate where to go next or what to do, and Martin said this to the others. The information held within these tomes would likely prove invaluable in the long term, but for right now the Fearless Manticore Killers found themselves no closer to discovering the source of the evil here and how to stop it.

End of session #46

AQUERRA

Session #47

“Mozek’s mother is a succubus,” Martin said in a low tone.

“A what?” Kazrack asked.

“A female demon sent to tempt men to do evil,” Jeremy answered for the watch-mage, and everyone’s head slowly turned to look at him. “What? You think I never listen to legends and warnings?”

He threw his hands into the air and marched away from where Martin sat surrounded now not only by books, but by Ratchis, Kazrack, Beorth, Beléar and Captain Adalar.

Martin opened the large book with the color plates and showed one to his companions. It depicted a four-breasted, bat winged woman with a beautiful face, resting upon a divan of iron needles. She twirled a gold crown around one finger as she tilted her head back, mouth open. It was unclear if she was laughing or screaming. She had a huge engorged belly and was being tended to by human women. A greenish scaled and horned baby seemed to be painfully crawling and pulling its way out of the demon-woman’s womb.

Martin explained the accompanying text said that the off-spring of this ‘greater succubus’ and mortals can change shape and hide their demonic nature and be planted into ruling families and tribes to gain power in the mortal realm and wreak chaos.

Martin then looked sheepishly at Ratchis, “Uh, what tribe of orcs do you...uh, come from?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because orcs are mentioned in one of these books by the man who built this place,” the watch-mage explained.

“Darksh,” Ratchis replied, his heavy lids narrowing.

“Oh.” Martin looked away.

“What is it?”

“A, uh... breeding program is mentioned, uh... with that tribe,” Martin cleared his throat. “It mentions intentionally breeding humans and orcs, and us sacrificing a certain number of the off-spring to the lost god.”

Ratchis did not respond, but a shadow seemed to come over his face.

“Lost god?” Kazrack asked.

“Rahkefet,” Martin whispered. “He is said to be a ram-headed god, son of Set.”

The dwarf looked at Beorth when the word ‘ram’ was mentioned, but he turned back to Martin. “Do any of the books say this foul wizard’s name who built this place?”

“No,” Martin replied. “But I have not had time to read the books in detail. I have only skimmed over them and jotted down some notes of my own, and remember, I cannot decipher the gnomish notes in the margins.”

“Margins?” asked Ratchis.

“The empty space around the text in books,” Jeremy said from about fifteen feet away where he sat next to Derek sharpening his long sword. “Or am I not allowed to know that either?”

Derek elbowed the blonde warrior.

“Could the wizard be a gnome? Or could a gnome be in the sarcophagus?” Ratchis asked.

“I see no reason to believe that a gnome could not be one of the undead,” Martin replied. “But I have a feeling that the person who built this place was human.”

“Do you think it could be a vampire?” Ratchis continued with his questions. “That is, a very powerful foe that we might not be able to defeat?”

“Yes,” Martin paused. “Yes, that is possible, but I am at a loss as to why it’d be locked in its stone coffin.”

“Perhaps the gnomes found this place and forced the vampire in there since they could not defeat or destroy it,” offered Beorth.

“If only you had your memory back,” Martin cursed. “I am certain you had information we needed, and at the very least I am sure you would know something about vampires. There is something in one of these books about them and other forms of undead, but I would have to wait to prepare more spells to read it.”

The round chamber at the bottom of the dark shaft was silent for a moment, and then Martin turned to Beléar. “Do you think you might be able to heal Beorth’s amnesia?”

“Even if I could, it would not be my place to undo the punishments of his gods,” the elder dwarf replied.

“But father, that punishment came from a place other than his god,” Kazrack said.

“That does not mean he did not deserve the punishment,” Beléar replied solemnly.

Beorth nodded.

Kazrack sighed, “Our tasks grow. Now in addition to dealing with Mozek, we must also discover what other tribes and societies have been infiltrated by these fiends.”

“One at a time,” Jeremy said, walking over again. “My question is, what do we do right now?”

The Fearless Manticore Killers fell to discussing their options, asking Beléar and Adalar to join them in the decision-making. Derek, however, hardly spoke a word.

“Beléar, could you dispel the magics on those remaining books?” Kazrack asked the elder dwarf.

“I could, but not until tomorrow, for I have not prepared that spell this day,” Beléar replied.

“Do we want to take the time to wait?” Kazrack asked, looking to Ratchis and Beorth.

“There may be something in the books that will tell us more about Mozek,” Ratchis said, in his gruff voice. “A way to defeat him.”

“Hmmm,” Martin scratched the downy brown tuft growing on his weak chin. “I do not think he will confront us directly. When he defeated us last time it was through trickery and we are stronger and wiser than then. When he moves against us again it will be with overwhelming force.”

Kazrack slapped the ground with his open palm. “And the only thing that will overcome his trickery is knowledge. Knowledge like that in these books!”

Jeremy made a face like he smelled something funny and Martin’s brow furrowed, not quite following Kazrack’s logic.

“I do not think that Mozek would leave the key to his destruction on a shelf in a workroom used for the creation on zombies,” Beorth said flatly. “I say we try to explore the lower levels some more and find the sources of these zombies dressed as workers. There is great evil here, and I must endeavor to destroy it, and since it seems Mozek and his kin are involved *somehow* it is in our primary interest to investigate it at the very least.”

There was silence, but Beléar was nodding, and Ratchis stood. Martin looked back and forth from Beorth to Kazrack. Jeremy hung his head and walked away to sharpen his blades, but Derek smiled impressed by Beorth's resolve.

Finally, Kazrack spoke. "Fine. Then I volunteer to go scout out the situation and explore the lower tunnels on the other side."⁵³

"I can accompany you again, if you like," Martin offered. He smiled at the memory of saving Kazrack's life last time.

"As safe as that would make me feel I think it would be unnecessary," Kazrack replied. The Watch-Mage's brow furrowed again, trying to sense how sincere the dwarf was.

And so it was decided without too many more words being spoken that Kazrack would be sent down the opposite tunnels just to look. Blodnath remained behind this time, but Kirla and Helrahd came along, and Jolnar, Tolnar and Golnar groused until Captain Adalar glared at them. Derek, Jeremy, Beorth, Martin Ratchis and Beléar would come along to guard the lower room while Kazrack was away, to assure it was free of the undead when he returned.

More zombies had crawled into the lower chamber while the party rested. Kazrack was lowered by rope and held there while Beorth made his way down accompanied by one of Martin's *mage hands* holding a lit torch. The paladin of Anubis turned the offending undead, his pearly white shawl gleaming in the smoky torch light. Two more zombies that seemed unaffected, came shambling towards the dwarf, but he called on his gods as well and they fled in the face of the divine power, too.

"Kazrack, go quickly," Beorth ordered, pointing to the set of tunnels the party had not yet explored. "I will keep this chamber clear of the undead for you return."

"I will try to not be long," the dwarf replied with a serious nod and he scrambled up into one of the tunnel, not needing to even duck his head to navigate it.

"Do you need help Beorth?" Derek called down.

"It would be good if we had another guard, just in case," the paladin replied, and soon the young hunter had deftly made his way down.

He had not been down but a moment when more zombies came streaming into the room.

"I hope Kazrack is okay," Beorth said, raising his sword to meet the walking dead in battle. He and Derek stood back-to-back, hacking the decaying limbs of the creatures' blackened flesh.

Meanwhile, Kazrack's reconnaissance was not without event. He had barely made it halfway down the tunnel, when he spotted a zombie awkwardly crawling in his direction. He drew his flail from his belt and waited, swatting it with a skull-crushing blow as it approached. Kazrack fought a retreating fight, always stepping back to allow the zombie to get back its knees and awkwardly come to him again so he could send it down again. The thing did not seem to want to stop, and it took several blows and most of its head being a mushy pulp for the animating force to be set free. Letting out a long low breath, Kazrack continued onward down the tunnel.

While Kazrack's dwarven vision allowed him to see in the dark at short distances, he did not need the blood of the stonefolk to see what was going on when he finally reach the ends of the tunnels on the opposite side of the ziggurat in the great dug out chamber. He ducked low as to not be seen, but still he gasped and covered his mouth with a calloused hand.

There were many braziers lit throughout the great chamber, and like the party had observed from the other side of the ziggurat the chamber floor was a maze of partially collapsed stone walls, trampled tents, crumbled stone columns, protruding metal poles and square stone foundations worn by dripping water and time. The ceiling, way above, was

⁵³ The lower room, beneath the partially collapsed chamber with large blues tiles and four support columns, has eight horizontal shafts (four on each side) going out to the larger lower cavern, opening at the top of a large ziggurat.

maw of stalactites. However. What was most bizarre about this side of the chamber was the increased zombie activity. Here the lines of undead seeming to mimic the living were much more numerous. There was no point in counting. There were scores and scores, perhaps hundreds, perhaps nearing a thousand. They seemed to be clawing at the dirt with their fingers, digging up rotting timbers of some structures that once stood down here and carrying armloads of it to the braziers and keeping them lit. Others seemed to be carrying corpses from the dark shadows of the far end of the chamber, where Kazrack could not see, and while some corpses (those in the greatest disrepair) were used to feed the fire, others were being carried to biers that surround a great pedestal like that they had seen on the other side. However, this pedestal still had its statue intact.

It was immense. The statue was so incredibly detailed it seemed like it might take flight, for the folds of its hooked bat-like wings reached up nearly twenty-five feet. It was a demonic woman with four arms and four breasts, like that seen in the chamber of the sarcophagus above.⁵⁴ She held a whip in one hand and a flaming sword in another. Her fingers, ended in long cruel claws, but her figure was voluptuous and enticing, her right hip shifted out as if to accentuate the curves of her demonically twisted body.

As Kazrack observed, the zombies stripped the outer clothing of the corpses of the corpses laid out on the biers, leaving them in the dirty white workers' tunics and sandals that the party had seen most of the zombies wearing (those that were not naked). The stripped clothing was thrown on the braziers as well. The corpses laid there for a moment, but then began to stir, standing as a zombie to join the lines of the other undead workers.

"Natan-Ahb, preserve us against the plague of darkness and evil," Kazrack prayed under his breath. He could take little solace in the fact that he noticed that it seemed like less than one-third of the working zombies seemed actually carrying serviceable corpses. Most brought bodies parts to be burned, and others went through the clockwork motions with empty arms, parroting the foul work without the resources to undertake it.

Looking around one last time from his perch atop the ziggurat, Kazrack turned and hurried back.

Back in the small chamber, Derek and Beorth stood among the chopped pieces of zombies, waiting in the eerie quiet for Kazrack's return.

Ratchis was announcing that he was going to climb down and go after him when the dwarf finally emerged from the tunnel, out of breath and admonishing those on guard to hurry up the rope.

Soon, they were back in the tiled upper chamber, and Kazrack did his best to describe what he had seen.

The Fearless Manticore Killers once again retreated to the lowest level of the entrance shaft where the rest of their dwarven allies waited, to discuss their options.

"I bet that statue is the cause of all of this," said Kazrack.

"From what you describe that seems like a reasonable conclusion," said Ratchis.

"Do we think that destroying the source will destroy all the zombies in this place?" Beorth asked.

Kazrack was taken aback by the question coming from the undead hunter, it was sometimes hard to remember that the paladin suffered from memory loss when his demeanor was so unchanged, but questions like that brought it back.

"It is unlikely," said Martin. "But it will keep more from being made."

"I think we should do what we can to destroy the statue," said Ratchis.

"It is large and of good construction," Kazrack said. "Destroying it utterly may be impossible without the right tools."

"We may not need to destroy it utterly," replied Ratchis.

⁵⁴ See Session #44

“Or we can use its own weight against it,” suggested Captain Adalar, offering his opinion on the subject for the first time. “I am something of an engineer. Perhaps we can rig something where we can topple it and it would smash itself.”

Beléar and Kazrack nodded. The plan made sense to their dwarven sensibilities.

“I think we should take more time to allow me to peruse the books some more and see if Beléar can dispel the dweomers on the two remaining books,” Martin said. “Perhaps they explain about the statues.”

“Statues?” Jeremy cocked his head. “Kazrack only described one.”

“Yes, but we saw the pedestal for another that was broken,” Martin explained. “It was obviously destroyed either by accident or by intention by someone. Perhaps the books can shed light on this matter.”

Beléar and Kazrack nodded again.

“My goddess grants me access to a miracle that may allow us to walk among the zombie horde unseen,” Ratchis explained. “We can send a small group to test the waters, so to speak, and see about attaching a rope to the top of the statue and so it can be pulled down, if it is top heavy.”

“I will be part of the group, so that I might best instruct you on how and where to apply the rope, and perhaps we can find a way to lever it,” Captain Adalar volunteered.

“No offense, Captain,” Kirla interrupted, sounding as if she were the one who was offended. “But I am as good, if not better an engineer as you are. I think I should be the one to go.”

Captain Adalar opened his mouth to reply, but Kazrack spoke first. “This may be true, but if things go wrong, the captain can call upon the power of the gods, and if things go wrong it is only the power of our gods that will protect us.”

“A good engineer would make it less likely for things to go wrong,” Kirla’s eyes narrowed.

But now it was Beorth’s turn to interrupt.

“So, what you propose is for one of more of us to climb up on statue and be surrounded by hundreds of undead creatures?” The paladin asked with disbelief in his voice.

“Yes,” said Ratchis.

“Yes, but we will be invisible to them,” Kazrack said.

“I think we should open the locked sarcophagus and face whatever is in there,” Beorth said. “It is not only a more direct option, but we will all be able to take part in ensuring whatever it is in there is destroyed.”

“I fear we may not be up to handling what is in that sarcophagus,” Martin said, a quaver in his voice. “It is likely a great and powerful evil.

“All the more reason to not waste our efforts on a statue and get killed in the process while letting a greater evil continue to exist,” Beorth replied.

“Huh? That makes no sense,” Jeremy interjected.

“I think he is suggesting that if we face the *lesser* evil we might not live to face the greater evil,” Martin explained.

“Hey, if we can’t handle the lesser evil, what makes you think we can handle the greater one?” Jeremy threw his hands in the air and let out a sigh, looking to Derek for support, who shrugged his shoulders.

“Ratchis,” Martin looked to the half-orc. “Are you certain faith that your goddess will protect you in this way you described?”

“I have certain faith that she will grant me what she wills,” he replied.

“And I have certain faith that my god will grant you a peaceful rest,” Beorth said.

Ratchis scowled at the paladin.

There was a long silence.

“It may prove too difficult to arrange for ropes to be set up to pull the statue down,” Kazrack said. “We should try to simply smash it first.”

“Yes,” said Ratchis, not looking at Beorth. “I will climb atop it and try smashing it with my hammer.”

“Regardless,” Beléar finally spoke. “Let us rest again and regain the powers our gods grant us. I will try to dispel the spell one of the books tomorrow to see if it will help us, before we undertake this endeavor.”

On this, everyone agreed.

Osilem, 17th of Prem – 565 H.E.

A night of rest, if it were truly night above—for they had not seen the sun in four days—became an extra day of rest as Ratchis and Kazrack doled out more divine healing, and Martin spent more time reading. Jeremy watched jealously as Blodnath and Baervard played a dice game, which Kirla and Helrahd joined in on. However, even if they had invited him, he could not read the dwarven runes on the eight-sided stone die they sometimes spin on one point, and he could not follow the complicated rules, as they shoved stacked copper coins at each other, alternately laughing and cursing. As usual, Baervard never spoke a word.

When Jeremy grew tired of watching, he got Derek to spot him as he did handstands against the shaft’s curved wall. Beorth poured over his own leaves of paper, where he had written down lists of the things the party had found out on their adventures. However, lists that included names of places, objects and people meant little to him now, as he could not place them or put them together, except with the tenuous strings that had been provided by Jana. But now she had been dead weeks and weeks, and no one else took the time to try to bring him up to speed. Frustrated, he put the papers away, deciding to just concentrate on the problem at hand. There were abominations to be destroyed. He would have to rely on his faith to bring him through this darkness of memory.

Beléar tried and failed to dispel the magic on one of the two remain books.

Captain Adalar went through prayer recitations with the triplets while showing them combat maneuvers.

Balem, 18th of Prem – 565 H.E.

“Though the power of my gods is infinite, the strength of my faith is flawed,” Beléar said, sweat beading on his wrinkled brow. “I cannot break the spell upon either of these books.”

He handed it back to Martin, who nodded.

“Then we have delayed enough,” said Kazrack. “We must see to the evil that is happening in the lower levels and see if we can destroy it.”

It was decided that Jeremy, Derek, Martin and Beléar would remain in the small lower chamber and keep it clear of zombies, while Ratchis, Kazrack, Beorth, Kirla and Captain Adalar would try to deal with the statue of the demoness and the raising of zombies.

Ratchis wiped sweat from his brow, with each step he could feel the tension in his body rising. While his unwavering faith in Nephthys kept fear at bay, there was just something naturally unnerving about walking albeit unnoticed through lines of shambling zombies.⁵⁵

Cloaked in the *hide from undead* spell, he crept toward the towering statue of the four-breasted, four-armed winged demoness. Lines of zombies, some naked and some in the tattered remains of worker clothing, and leather aprons, some clearly made from tanned human hide ambled past him. The hulking half-orc halted to let one go by. Its stench filled his nostrils as it nearly brushed his cloak. Ratchis had to quash the urge to simply strike it down. He risked a few hurried steps to avoid three more that walked blindly right towards him.

Up at the shafts that opened at the top of the supporting ziggurat Kazrack made a sharp intake of breath. He gritted his teeth with anxiety, certain that one of the zombies would bump into the half-orc. Ratchis had been sent across first to find the easiest path and to see how tough it really was, and as bait for any intelligent undead that might notice him.⁵⁶

The way was clear, and he began to hustle towards the stone platform the statue stood on. He was only about twenty feet away when from the corner of his eye he saw a figure move too quickly to be a zombie, and with a determined hustle in his direction. Ratchis jerked his head up and saw a figure in a long gray coat smeared with mud and covered in dust. The undead thing was covered in fine black soot and its face was torn away on one side. It had bush of greasy black hair atop his graying scalp.

“Stop the living one!” It croaked, pointing towards Ratchis, and hustling towards him.

Ratchis was startled, but did not hesitate, he immediately changed directions and moved back towards the stairs.

“Oh no. He may be in trouble,” Kazrack said to the others, and ignoring Kirla’s protest he stepped out of the tunnel on the top the stairs. “He may need our help. Stand ready.”

Ratchis had to gulp back a roar of frustration as he saw Kazrack step out of the tunnel. From all directions zombies once walking in their habitual lines turned in his direction and moaning shambled towards the dwarf. He began to wave his arms to motion the dwarf back.

Captain Adalar stepped out as well but stayed near the entrance. Beorth leaned out as well, long sword in one hand.

“Fall back to the other room!” Kazrack yelled turning back to the openings. And began to make his way back to an unoccupied opening.

Ratchis took the steps two by two hurrying past the zombies that were closing in on the place he was heading.

“I am bringing an intelligent undead,” Ratchis said, breathlessly as he reached Kazrack.

A zombie reached Captain Adalar, who jerked back. Kirla crawled back as commanded and Beorth followed.

Kazrack leapt up into the opening Adalar had come out of and turning cried out, “Natan-Ahb! Send these things from your sight!” The braziers about the statue flared up angrily. And while quite a few zombies paused, only five turned their enslaved spirits harrowed by the release of the divine power. However, even more zombies from more distant lines now seemed to know what was going on and were attracted by the sound and the smell of life.

“Damn it!” Ratchis slowed having risked a look over his shoulder and seeing the undead thing closing. He drew his long sword, “Nephthys, bless my blade against these horrid creatures!”

He spun around, but it was too late. He felt the cold black claw of the former foreman, and the soul-wrenching sensation

⁵⁵ **DM’s Note:** Friars of Nephthys gain immunity to fear as one of their granted powers.

⁵⁶ **DM’s Note:** Intelligent dead gain a saving throw to see those cloaked by this spell.

of his lifeforce being drained.

“You will join us!” the creature hissed, its common strangely accented. “You will lead us!”

“Adalar, fall back,” Beorth said to the dwarven captain, as he came back out of the tunnel, but the dwarf was pulling his axe out of a zombie’s shoulder and hollering in the joy of battle, his god’s name on his lips.

Kirla, not to be left out, climbed back out the shaft, flail in hand.

Sighing, Kazrack climbed back out as well and calling to his gods, made five more zombies that were approaching the opposite direction flee.

“Is Ratchis coming?” Beorth asked impatiently, looking down at Ratchis trying to keep the willed undead at bay with his divinely enchanted sword. The half-orc sliced deeply into its leg, but it did not fall, laughing as black blood dribbled weakly from a major artery. It continued reaching for him, but the sword kept a distance between them.

“A-ha!” cried Captain Adalar slicing his great axe right into a zombie’s right side. It collapsed weakly throwing fists at the dwarf.

Kazrack ran down to where Ratchis fought and stood by his side, he thrust his halberd taking the thing slightly by surprise. It growled and hissed and leapt to the right, momentarily distracted. Ratchis grabbed his sword in both hands and swung, following through. The thing’s head went flying into the air, spinning wildly and the body collapsed, as years of decay caught up with it.

“Your evil ends now,” Ratchis said, and spit on the pile of clothing.

Another zombie reached them, but it had a lame leg and tripped as it came up the stairs falling on its face. Something about the thing flopping on the ground in such a vulnerable way reminded Ratchis of their former humanity and they seemed more repellant and pitiable at once.

Again, Kazrack turned undead and more fled.

“Re-cast the invisibility spell,” Kazrack said to Ratchis.

“Adalar! Kazrack!” Ratchis cried to his companions, moving backwards up the broad steps of the ziggurat. “Move back into the passage. I’ll try to destroy the ones closest to us before we re-group.”

Adalar stepped over and chopped into the back of the prone zombie and then hurried back to the entrances with Kazrack.

“I think they’re safe,” Beorth said to Kirla. The two of them moved back into the passage. “We should go back to the small room and help the others hold that room, more zombies are bound to come.”

“Beorth, wait!” Kazrack called, arriving at the opening. “We cannot risk this wight or whatever it was being replaced while we re-group, we should attack now while the iron is hot!”

“We’ll regroup in the tunnel,” Ratchis said, reaching them and pushed the dwarves in and followed.

Beorth kept moving down the shaft, ducked awkwardly. Kirla and Adalar followed.

“Wait, another of those foremen could come while we are gone, we should deal with the statue now,” Kazrack reasoned.

Beorth ignored the dwarf and made his comments to Ratchis as if appealing to the former’s reason was wasted effort, “We need to hold the room so we can all get out alive.”

“We just need to fall back some and hope it calms down out there and then go back and check the statue,” Ratchis said.

Beorth paused, “We don’t know what is going on in that room. There could be zombies overwhelming them from the other side. We have to check.”

“Why don’t you go back and warn them, and we will stay here and do what we have to do?” Kazrack suggested. He turned to Ratchis. “You should have led that creature into one of the tunnels and we could have taken care of it in here away from the notice of the lines of zombies.”

Ratchis’ hand curled into a blood-pounding fist and he gritted his crooked and yellowed teeth. “That is what I was trying to do, but you stepped out and drew their attention. We had no plan.”

Beorth did not respond and continued down the tunnel towards the others. Kirla was blocking his way and looked to Captain Adalar, who pointed after the paladin. She turned and the three of them made their way back down the shaft. Ratchis’ anger at Kazrack swelled in his head and in a second he decided that Beorth’s was likely the better idea. He gestured for Kazrack to follow as well.

The young rune-thrower shrugged and followed.

Ratchis took up the rear and looking back he saw the silhouettes of zombies climbing in after them.

“I guess Beorth was right,” he thought and called for the others to hurry.

“I hear zombies coming,” Derek said, standing by the entrances to the shafts the other group had crawled down.

“Why are they coming this way?” Jeremy mused. “What does that mean about the others?”

Derek shrugged his shoulders and lifted his axe and stepping over, chopped a zombie’s head in half as it emerged. It was still animate, its brain dangled from the socket of its cleaved skull by the spinal cord.

“Lower me down,” Martin said to Blodnath and Helrahd who were guarding the upper chamber with him. “They may need my help.”

Beléar was already down there, and calmly listened at the opening at the other side of the lower chamber while Jeremy and Derek did what they did best.

Jeremy stood a few feet away from another of the shafts and just let one of the zombies tumble out. It scrambled to its feet, but Jeremy chopped it down. It fell onto the dirt floor and stopped moving. Jeremy stepped forward and thrust his sword at the one Derek, fought, but it had barely made it to its feet, its brain dangling on its shoulder, when Derek ended the horror of it.

Another zombie began to emerge from the shaft on the other side of him, so Derek spun around and cleaved open its head as well. This one stopped moving, but then started moving again as a zombie behind it began to try to push past it.

As zombies spilled out, Martin made his way down and Beléar kept watch on the other side. Derek and Jeremy mechanically chopped them to bits as they emerged staying clear of any wounds. Martin grabbed a torch from one of the sconces and made ready to set any zombies alight that came through the tunnels.

“Zombies are coming! Zombies are coming!” Kirla’s voice was heard to echo from down the tunnel all the way to the left, from which no zombies had yet emerged.

Jeremy and Derek let out deep breaths of encroaching exhaustion and relief, but Derek recovered first and pointed to the tunnel before them.

“There are more coming from this tunnel,” Derek said, happy for his keen ears. “Take care of them, I will go help Kirla.”

Soon the Kirla emerged followed by Beorth and then the others, as streams of zombies came from behind them and the adjacent tunnels.

However, a few turn attempts from Beléar and the party's increasing skill at taking out zombies in this room and the fight was soon over, with another near two dozen corpses in the room and clogging the tunnels.

“We need to go back and try to destroy that statue,” Kazrack said.

End of Session #47

AQUERRA

Session #48

As Martin was dragging one of the desiccating corpses into a corner to set it afire with some others, Derek hissed. “There are even more coming!”

“I don’t hear –“ Captain Adalar jerked to attention as a zombie came spilling from one of the shafts on the left side. Beléar did not hesitate and smashed it with his warhammer.

“There seems to be no end to these foul horrors!” The older dwarf cried.

“We shall make an end even if one does not exist yet,” Kazrack said, heroically. He thrust his halberd blade into the zombie’s chest, flinging it across the room.

Ratchis ran across to the other side where more zombies emerged, while Derek moved close to one shaft and listened.

“There are more coming and... something else, as well,” the young huntsman said and pulled away.

Jeremy moved past Derek to cover the other end of Ratchis’s side, cleaving the head off of one as it emerged and then sticking it deeply with his short sword and dragging it into the room. He was covered in black ichor and gore, and the smell of the acrid embalming fluid stung all their nostrils.

“What do you mean ‘something else?’” Jeremy tried to wipe some gunk from his eyes with the butt of his hand. “How can you tell?”

“I because I can hear it,” Derek said, nervousness creeping into his voice, like the last strained break of his adolescence.

More zombies fell in from both sides. Kazrack hustled to the help Ratchis as many more were on that side, while Jeremy had crossed to aid Derek who was turning pale beneath his ichor-stained cheeks.

“Look!” Martin cried, stepping between them, and pointing to the ceiling above one of the shafts.

“Martin, what are you doing? Stay back!” Jeremy stepped before him as he spotted the thing. It appeared as a man but covered in a black oily chitinous skin. Its arms and legs were bent backward, and its hands and feet each held a singular gray talon that bit deep into the stone. It opened its mouth and chittered.

“There is something crawling on the walls and ceiling!” Derek announced, half in fear and half remembering to keep his companions abreast of the field of battle.

The undead monster turned its head all the way around and scampered across the ceiling towards them.

“What are you talking about?” Kazrack cried, cleaving a zombie in twain, turning to deal with another.

Ratchis was just grunting with each swing of his sword and with each swing a zombie stopped moving.

“It’s on the ceiling shorty,” Jeremy quipped, and his curiosity overcame his fear. The Neergaardian stepped forward and sliced at the thing. It screeched and hissed as Jeremy’s accurate blow severed the thing’s right hand and it swung off at the feet, painfully. But Jeremy did not stop, even as Derek was forced to turn to deal with another approaching zombie, leaving him to deal with the thing alone. Instead, he pressed in close to the startled black thing and chopped at it twice more with all his might.

The thing collapsed on the floor in a pile of rotting purple meat and black scabs of the chitin.

“Zombies, not zombies... I’ll take whatever they got,” Jeremy said, leaning on his sword with a forced smile for a moment and then moving to help Derek.

Soon, that wave of zombies had been dealt with as well, but the bodies were piled high and the tunnels were beginning to be clogged.

“I think I know what that thing was,” Martin said after the fight, pushing at the remaining pieces of the black undead thing with the butt end of a dead torch.

Kazrack was not concerned and turned to Ratchis, “Do you still have access to that miracle that will hide us from the senses of the undead?”

“Yes.”

It was decided they the smaller party would return to the large chamber.

“I’ll tell you one thing I could immediately tell when I saw that chamber,” Captain Adalar said. “There is no way that place is not collapsing on its own. It *should* collapse. Just the lack of support and the striations I could see on the stone connected to the top of that ziggurat thing.”

Kirla nodded, her own engineering experience had told her the same thing.

“Well, we can only hope that when we destroy whatever is creating all these zombies it doesn’t also bring that whole chamber down,” Beorth said flatly.

“If we can cause the chamber to collapse that would destroy the statues and the vast majorities of the zombies,” said Kazrack.

“I do not think we want to risk that,” Martin said, quietly.

“It would be too great a risk,” Kirla said. “That chamber is beneath us, we could bring all these upper levels down on our own heads.”

Captain Adalar nodded.

“Well, no matter, we must try to destroy that statue and see if that does what we hope it does,” said Ratchis, climbing into one of the tunnels.

“I still think we should check the sarcophagus,” Jeremy called to him.

“We’ve already discussed this,” Kazrack said, following Ratchis. Beorth, Kirla and Adalar followed as well.

Again Ratchis crept forward invisibly, hidden by his Goddess’ power from the eyes of the undead zombies, or whatever other senses they might use to sense the living. Captain Adalar, Kirla, and Kazrack were also blessed with the same miracle by the goddess of freedom. They followed evenly spaced and carefully avoiding touching the jerky stumbling zombies. Beorth, whose dexterity could not be trusted to get him by the awkward obstacles was left behind to guard the escape. He hid, crouched watching their progress from one of the tunnels.

Ratchis made it to the platform and took a moment to look around from the base of the statue. There was no sign of any of the ‘foremen’ wights. He grabbed on to one of the demoness’ lower arms and pulled himself up and reached for an upper arm, putting his feet on the lower, and then he hauled himself up until he straddled her head.

The brutish half-orc hefted his hammer and swung out at one of the raised arms. There was a resounding “BONG” as the whole statue shook. The heroes in the chamber flinched with the sound and looked around nervously at the zombies. The zombies seemed to pause in their lines and seemed to consider going one way or another, but then they all began to move again.

Kirla let out a deep breath.

Panck! Panck! Ratchis hit it twice more. Now some of the zombies turned in circles and wandered toward the statue, but then walked right past it and then milled around more at the base.

There was not even a mark on the metal statue. Ratchis looked down at his companions and shrugged his shoulders and took another swing.

Below Kazrack noted a figure moving with purpose in the direction of the statue. Its flesh was blackened with terrible burns, and its eyes smoldered as if red coals still slowly burned their way into its skull. It wore a dirty white tunic and the shreds of a black leather cloak.

“Heads up!” Kazrack yelled and began to hustle towards it to intercept, holding his halberd out in front of him.

The wight sprung high into the air and onto the stone platform the statue pedestal rested on. Ratchis had already leapt down and he moved back, leaping off the platform leaving it between them.

Captain Adalar and Kirla halted and began to ease their way back towards the ziggurat.

Suddenly, the wight lifted its head and snapped its neck quickly to the right and looked right at Kazrack as if suddenly noticing him. With a shriek he leapt at the charging dwarf and tore at his face with its blackened claws.

“Ugh!” Kazrack halted and swung wildly at it, but the thing had moved within the reach of his halberd and it was an awkward blow that missed.

“Nephthys! With all the power you see fit to imbue me with, please destroy these abominations!” Ratchis cried swinging his belts of chain links over his head.

The wight looked at him with disdain, as five zombies crumbled to dust.

“Beorth!” Ratchis cried out for the reserve.

The paladin began to hurry down the ziggurat steps.

There was a twang as Kirla fired her crossbow at the wight, but the bolt went wide.

Kazrack leapt back and suffered another claw to the face but was able to get his halberd back between him and his foe and chopped into its side. The dwarf took a few more steps back from it warily.

The zombies began to moan and turn towards the heroes. Ratchis called out to Nephthys again and three more zombies crumbled to dust. Beorth finally arrived, weighed down in his armor, and held aloft his golden jackal’s head.

“Anubis! Send these away so that we might learn our lesson!” Seven zombies began to move away from him. Kirla and Captain Adalar moved towards him. Four more zombies moved to intercept them, and Captain Adalar reached for the bag of stones about his neck and called to Natan-Ahb to send them away. The zombies fled.

Kazrack and the wight circled each other, each looking for an opening, leaving the thing vulnerable to Ratchis. The half-orc came hustling towards it fearlessly; a prayer to Nephthys on his lips and slapped it on the back with an open hand. There was the white glow of healing light from beneath the point of contact and the undead creature shrieked inhumanly. And then it fell backwards crumpling into a pile of clothes and dust.

“Come on! Come on!” Beorth waved the others to join him in retreat as even more zombies turned towards them, the combat drawing their attention.

“Look out behind you!” Adalar cried. Beorth whirled around to see another wight coming around the corner of the ziggurat accompanied by a dozen more zombies.

A zombie reached for Ratchis, but he cleaved it down the middle with one blow of his sword. However, in the half a moment it took him to yank the blade free four more gathered around him and began to slam at him with their fists. He pulled the sword to himself as he was battered around. He felt bruises begin to swell. Kazrack was taken a little by surprise by the sudden attack of zombies that had moments before had been ignoring them. He took a blow to the head, and then slammed into the hip of another that checked him as he moved into a more defensive position.

Captain Adalar turned round and buried his axe into one of the one's around Kazrack and drove its still animate body the ground.

The new foreman came rushing at Beorth, but the paladin turned his jackal's head towards it and called to his god. The thing hissed in fear and fled, but the zombies which it had passed (now in both directions) continued to come.

"Let's drive these things away and then try moving the fires beneath the statue," Kazrack called to Ratchis, as he broke free of the ring of zombies. He turned when he was clear. "Lords and Lady, I once again implore your mercy and ask that you drive these things from my sight!"

The zombies moaned and turned, and some others that had been approaching also turned.

"What?" Ratchis replied incredulously, cleaving the leg off another, and giving it one quick blow as it fell. "We have to get out of here!"

Captain Adalar, Kirla and Beorth were having troubles with zombies of their own. Adalar's trouble was that they could not come fast enough for him to kill, chopping one down and then hustling up the ziggurat stairs to get another nearing Beorth.

Ratchis ducked the arms of one of the three zombies and spun away from the falling clenched fists of the second only to stand up right into the fist of the third.

He let out a roar, and with one hard blow another fell to pieces into the packed earth of the bottom of the cavern.

"This may be our last chance to deal with this statue!" Kazrack insisted moving away from two zombies still near him.

Beorth called to Anubis yet again, and again a great number of zombies began to move away. His shawl would shine with a bright white light every time he did so, illuminating the cavern even more and sending crazy shadows of ambling zombies and flying weapons against the great walls and the broad ziggurat steps.

Ratchis began to flag, and lifting his sword too slowly, he allowed another blow to whip down and smash his nose. Blood came out in a torrent.

Kazrack turned and put all his weight into a swing of his halberd and a zombie fell. The blade was still in it as it fell forward, causing Kazrack to turn to keep his balance. He could see a dozen or more zombies coming from around the other side of the ziggurat now.

"Run!" He cried to Ratchis and everyone else, changing his tune. "We are near unto death!"

Ratchis bolted from his foes and leapt up the steps. Beorth and Kirla followed, with Kazrack and Captain Adalar taking up the rear.

There was a scuffle with a half-dozen zombies that had reached the top step, but they cut through them, and hurried into a tunnel. Captain Adalar led the way in one tunnel, while Kirla led Beorth in an adjacent one.

Behind them the zombies kept coming.

Meanwhile, Jeremy danced backward, his two swords whirling around him keeping the blows of another foreman that had already grabbed him once in its icy claws. It crawled into the chamber among a rush of zombies that arrived from the other side from which the others had gone. He moved back towards Beléar who was able to help draw its attention. Derek chopped zombies handily, dropping one with each blow, making his way across the room towards three that Martin had *slowed*.

The watch-mage leapt forward with an outreached torch and set one of the slowed ones on fire. It moaned and patted

weakly at the flames. In a moment it collapsed into a smoldering pile of rotten flesh. Derek chopped another down.

And finally as Kirla and Captain Adalar came bursting out of the tunnels, Jeremy thrust the *Right Blade of Arofel* into the chest of the wight and torn it out with a sickening long crack. It reached up at him, but he kicked it hard and chopped one last time with the long sword. He yanked the short sword and spun around to help Derek, throwing the swords from one hand to another.

“There are zombies right behind us!” Kirla warned. She turned and readied her shield and flail once again.

“Everybody up the rope!” Ratchis commanded as he emerged.

“Did you destroy the statue?” Jeremy asked.

“Just help people get up the rope,” Kazrack said, hopping out of the tunnel.

“Can we leave now? Did you destroy the statue?” Jeremy asked again, not moving.

“No!” roared Ratchis.

Beorth, the slowest of the group, emerged with zombies right behind him.

Martin was the first back up the rope, followed by Derek and then Beléar. Kirla and Captain Adalar went next. Beorth and Kazrack argued, but finally the paladin was pulled up to safety.

Jeremy hustled up the hole.

“Sounds like you were having fun down there,” commented one of the dwarven triplets.

“Yeah, next time we want to go,” said another of them.

“No, you don’t,” Jeremy said, getting away from the hole’s edge to keep it from collapsing more.

“You can take my place next time,” Derek joked.

“Okay!” Golnar, Jolnar and Tolnar chimed together.

Derek and Jeremy laughed.

Kazrack and Ratchis climbed up into the upper chamber, as the number of zombies in the room below became too much to deal with. They streamed into the room like mindless ants, crawling over each other and moaning their endless moans.

“I thought we were going to try to hold that room,” Jeremy said.

“There is no point,” Ratchis said. “The statues must be magically protected. I could not make a dent in it.”

“Or maybe you just weren’t strong enough,” Jeremy said.

Ratchis growled.

Below the moaning of the zombies echoed him.

“So what now? We leave?” Derek’s voice betrayed a hint of hopefulness. He missed the sun.

“We open the sarcophagus,” Beorth said.

“Wait! We might still be able to destroy the statue,” Kazrack said. “What if we were to dig from the surface? And then

collapse the cavern from above?”

Ratchis shook his head.

“Maybe we need to stop looking at this from a warrior’s point of view and look at it as an engineering problem,” Kazrack added.

“I don’t think it will work. First of all, it is too deep to dig and second of all I am starting to think it is the statue that is keeping that chamber from collapsing. It is obviously magicked, and Adalar did say he thought that chamber should not be able to support itself,” Martin commented.

Captain Adalar and Kirla nodded.

“But we have nearly a score of us, and more than half of us are dwarves!” Kazrack didn’t want to let it go. “We should be able to dig in no time.”

“With what tools?” Derek asked, now frustration crept into his voice.

They voted. Kazrack was the only one who wanted to try the digging scheme.

“You are out-voted,” Ratchis said.

“Grr! You are all lazy and shiftless,” Kazrack cursed.

Captain Adalar bristled, but Beléar placed a hand on his shoulder, calming him.

It was agreed that they would rest the remainder of the day before attempting to open the sarcophagus in the small anteroom they had found when first arriving at this level.

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“Nephthys, grant me your divine strength so that I help defeat whatever evil might emerge from within the sarcophagus.”

They were now all gathered in the small room that appeared to serve as a laboratory. Ratchis turned to Kazrack as he walked past and cast *bull’s strength* upon him as well.

The half-orc stepped behind the stone slab that looked as if it were once used to prepare the dead or perform autopsies. Beléar and Beorth walked to the front, while Jeremy took a spot on the other side of the entrance from Ratchis. Blodnoth was in the front of the room, to the left of the immense statue that was leaning over the stone sarcophagus.⁵⁷

Golnar, Jolnar and Tolnar were in the narrow hall that led to the stairs out of the room, with Baervard behind them, and Captain Adalar before them. Helrahd and Kirla, stood over on the other side of the desk from Jeremy, and Kazrack was in front of them. Derek squeezed in beside Jeremy.

Blodnath gave the statue and sarcophagus a very slow look over.

“She seems clear,” he said, wiping sweat from his dirty brow.

⁵⁷ Much like the statue in the great cavern below, it was a bronze statue of four-armed, four-breasted demon woman. The upper right and the lower left hands held curved bladed swords that looked like over-sized butcher knives. The upper left hand making a clawing motion, while the lower right held a bronze depiction of a human head by its wire hair. Despite the fact that she had four breasts, and her expression was filled with rancor, full lips retracted to reveal sharpened teeth, she still had a menacing beauty about her. The statue was bolted to the wall from its bat-like wings in order to give her the appearance of coming through the wall and leaping over her pedestal. She had tiny horns nearly hidden by her long flowing hair. (See Session #44).

Beléar looked around to see if everyone was ready and then began his chant in dwarven, designed to break the enchantment on the lock that held the sarcophagus closed.⁵⁸

Everyone tensed up.

It was a long moment, and then as Beléar's chant died on his lip there was the sound of snapping metal and the lid of the sarcophagus burst off and smashed into a shower of rock and dust. Beorth and Beléar reared back, covering their faces, while Blodnath instinctively ducked.

Everything seemed to be moving too slowly and as the dust cleared there was a tall gaunt figure floating above the sarcophagus. The figure had black wiry hair and pale flaps of desiccated skin that hung off its bones. It wore a midnight blue gown, that might have once been very fine, and golden jewel-covered rings hung limply on its talon-like fingers.

It hissed loudly, throwing its head back as if in utter agony, revealing long canines behind its black pruned lips.

As if in answer the very walls and floor shook violently. Dust fell out of cracks that began to snake their way across the ceiling and floor.

This seemed to bring time back into its proper flow.

Before anyone could and without saying a word, Ratchis ran forward pushing past Beorth and Beléar, and leaping upward, brought his sword across the thing's neck with both hands.

The thing's red-eyes glowed more brightly for a second, obscuring the yellow dried pus crusted around them, it seemed to tense as if to counter-attack but instead its head toppled off its shoulders. The head had not reached the ground when it and the entire body collapsed into a pile of dust beneath the dirty gown and littered with jewelry.⁵⁹

The entire place shook even more violently, and behind them on the stairs they heard the sound of cracking rock and then a blast of cold air.

Ratchis turned and looked at the shocked faces of his companions.

"We have to get out of here," he said.

End of Session #48

⁵⁸ **DM's Notes:** *Dispel Magic*

⁵⁹ **DM's Notes:** Ratchis' player rolled a critical hit and then rolled a '99' on the percentile for determining the effect: *decapitation*.

Session #49

“You are truly blessed by your gods!” Kazrack said in awe of Ratchis’ mighty blow, but there was no time for congratulations. The walls rumbled and shook again, and the cracks spidered everywhere. This place was going to collapse. The Fearless Manticore Killers and the dwarven company knew they had a long climb out before escaping.⁶⁰

“We need to make for the main shaft,” Captain Adalar yelled over the increasingly loud rumbling.

Derek, however, went in the opposite direction, hoping to search for something in the sarcophagus that might stop the collapse of the structure. Martin handed him a torch.

“Blodnath! Baervard! Jeremy! Hurry ahead and get to the ropes. Go up as quickly as you can,” Ratchis ordered. “We’re going need you to pull up those who are bad climbers.”

And as if to emphasize he meant for them to do what he said immediately, he spoke a quick word to his goddess and patted Jeremy’s shoulder. Suddenly, the Neergaardian’s cloak gave off an aura of bright light.

Blodnath had already snaked past everyone and was making his escape. He paused just before a large square stone that made up the floor where the two narrow halls joined.

“This floor is gonna go soon,” he pointed at the clouds of dust bursting up from around the seams of the stone and then took off up the stairs. There was a deep yawning sound punctuated by crashing from deep beneath them. Baervard and Jeremy were right behind him, but the latter turned back, for everyone else seemed to be reacting too slowly for his tastes.

“Come on!” he said with some panic in his voice.

Kazrack stepped over and began to run his hands through the dust and rags inside the sarcophagus with the aid of Derek and Martin the Green. They moved frantically and strained to see any detail about the sarcophagus that might help them in this predicament. But there was only one very clear thing about it. The inside was lined with fist-sized rubies that gleamed in the torchlight.

Ratchis cast his miracle of *light* once again, this time placing it on Beorth’s helmet. A second later it rang out, as a stone fell from above sending the paladin reeling towards the exit. He fell and seemed stunned. He held his head and tried to straighten his helmet. Jolnar, Golnar and Tolnar ran into the room, were yelled at by Adalar and then went back to follow Baervard and Jeremy up and out of the narrow corridors that led out of this place. Helrahd stepped over to help Beorth to his feet.

“Gods!” said Kirla. She had made her way over to the sarcophagus just as Derek fled for the door giving up his search and pushing Martin in front of him. She reached down and placed her calloused palm on one of the rubies and tried to pry it loose.

Beléar was moving to the exit past Ratchis, who stood his ground waiting to make sure everyone was at least heading out before sprinting for the exit himself. Kazrack moved to the door, while admonishing Kirla.

“Leave the gems,” he said. “We have to get out of here!”

⁶⁰ **Expository Note:** This entire session (approx. six hours) was done in the same initiative order in rounds, based on the initiative rolled the session before. As the PCs made their way out of the Necropolis of Doom, I rolled an initiative for the collapse of the place itself. And when its number came around, I rolled an increasing chance of an ‘effect.’ Effects ranged from simply a cinematic description of something breaking or crashing, to the whole place shaking (calling for balance checks) to pieces of the floor or ceiling collapsing. There was a tense atmosphere of fear and excitement around the table and when it was all over, the players gave me a round of applause because they had enjoyed themselves so much and were impressed with what I had come up with. I never received round of applause from players before. I was taken aback and felt like Kevin Kulp was about to step out of the bathroom to award me some kind of DMing plaque. But, if I can for a second imagine that Kevin Kulp did come out from lurking in my bathroom like a three-legged spider in the drain, indulge me this little humble acceptance speech: I’d like to thank my players because without them this would all be impossible, or I’d be a little weirder than I already am.

Kirla just screwed her face up with more determination and pulled a small chisel from her belt and went to work on the ruby with that. To her trained eyes, she could tell this stone was loose and worth a great deal.

Ratchis looked to Kazrack and then to Helrahd who was pointing Beorth in the right direction, and then back to Kirla. The Friar of Nephthys then turned and followed Beorth up the narrow steps.

Behind him, the stone statue in the corner fell over, widening the crack beneath it, and partially blocking the way out of the sarcophagus room for Helrahd, Kirla and Kazrack.

The half-orc came up to the main chamber above, just in time to see the floor give way beneath Martin and the watch-mage tumble into the darkness of the smaller room below.

“Oh!” cried the watch-mage.

“Martin! Come to me! We’ll get up the pillars,” Jeremy cried out from a cloud of dust pierced through with the light emanating from his cloak. He had already fallen into the lower level with Baervard, who was fending off the zombies to make it to a pillar of his own. Martin crawled behind Jeremy and stood, making his way over the bodies of countless zombies. More were falling from the dirt ceiling above them, and still others were still trying to dig their way out of the collapsing side tunnels. Jeremy kept an area around him clear with a wide arc of his blades.

Above, Ratchis leapt over the hole, but barely made it. Flailing his arms to regain his balance he hustled towards the gate-like door to the chamber that led to the shaft to the surface, counting on Jeremy and the others to make sure Martin made it out.

“Damn it, woman!” Kazrack reached for Kirla’s wrist. “Leave the stone be! We know not its purpose!”

Behind them Beléar squeezed past the fallen statue, stepping widely over the crack, as Helrahd levered the statue a bit with one of his axes. The elder rune-thrower began to make his way up the narrow and rapidly cracking steps to the upper chamber.

“It is going to take time for you to squeeze past that statue. I’ll be right behind you!” Kirla said, jerking her hand away and continuing to work on the gem. It was turning much more freely now.

“Just leave it girl!” Kirla’s older brother, admonished. Kazrack had never heard real concern in the grizzled dwarf’s voice before.

Captain Adalar had made it across the upper chamber but seeing that all but Tolnar were having trouble making it across, he ran back down the steps, pointing to Blodnath. “Get a rope around a pillar,” he commanded. “We need to get those people up from down there!” However, the floor beneath him gave as he stepped back into the large chamber and soon, he and Tolnar were down there with Jeremy, Baervard and Martin.

“No!” Ratchis, slapped his forehead in shock.

“Lentus!” Martin cried, and *slowed* a group of zombies, keeping them from mobbing the stunned dwarves that had just fallen. Jeremy made his way over there, cutting a swath in the undead limbs, and a moment later Blodnath’s rope came down.

“Martin! Up the rope!” the Neerguardian cried. Martin hurried over, lighting a torch as he went.

“Thomas?” the Watch-mage reached out with his thoughts to his frightened familiar, which was hidden in the hood of his cloak.

“Yes?”

“If I can’t make it out, I want you to run.”

“I’m not leaving you,” the squirrel replied adamantly. “At least not yet.”

The watch-mage took a moment to scratch his familiar lovingly behind the ear.

Derek was beside Blodnath and looking down at the horror beneath.

“You can make your way up this way,” he instructed. “There are some beams to help support you. I’ll hold the rope.”

“I don’t like zombies,” Baervard said, pushing past Martin and grabbing the rope. Martin was agog. The dwarf had never spoken a word that the watch-mage had ever heard the whole time he had been with the group. Now, he was climbing up the rope.

“I got it!” The fist-sized ruby popped into Kirla’s hand, and the room shook, more. Kazrack barely stepped out of the way of a piece of ceiling. And despite this, Kirla paused to admire the gem and smile broadly. “Beautiful.”

“Put the stone back!” Kazrack commanded. “We don’t know why it was there in that formation.”

He snatched the stone from her hand.

“You have no right to take that from me!” Kirla replied, with a look of indignation.

“I will be happy to discuss propriety when I don’t have stones falling down around my ears! Now go!”

“You should not grab things out of my sister’s hands like that!” Helrahd said angrily and snatched the gem out of Kazrack’s hand and handed it back to Kirla in one smooth motion. “Now come on!”

Kazrack’s eyes opened wide with incredulity. “You are being foolish, girl!” He followed the siblings to the partially blocked exit to the room. Helrahd squeezed through first.

“Go!” Kazrack motioned to Kirla to follow her brother, but she shook her head stubbornly.

“You go,” she replied.

The whole place shook again, but this time with a deeper rumble and the demoness statue fell over onto the stone sarcophagus, shattering it.⁶¹

Kazrack sighed and squeezed under the statue, but the wall on his right gave way some and he had to thrust himself forward to avoid being crushed. A huge section of the wall fell off and the statue fell through the floor, revealing a deep chasm below. A great cloud of dust rose, and Kirla stepped back, placing an arm before her face. When the dust cleared, she could see Kazrack struggling to hold on to the edge of the new chasm. Helrahd had already made it around the corner to the stairs, so without help Kazrack was barely able to pull himself up.

He turned to Kirla. The statue no longer blocked the way, but the chasm was over five feet wide.

“You’ll have to jump,” he called to the dwarven woman. “Don’t worry. I’ll catch you.”

Kirla took a few more steps back and tucked the large ruby in her cloak pocket. She screwed up her face with determination and began to run at the gap.

Helrahd came back around the corner, “Where’s Kirla?”

⁶¹ **Expository Note:** As the action was happening in separate places, I took some license to describe several rounds of action in one area and then in another, while in game it took place simultaneously. I tried to use specific events to tie together PC/NPC action chronologically.

“Stay back from the edge,” Kazrack said, looking over his shoulder at the dwarven scout. “The floor may be weakening.”

Kirla came hurtling over the gap and was just a few inches short. She went tumbling down the chasm. Kazrack turned back around, but too late to reach out for her.

“This is all your fault!” Her voice echoed up the shaft at Kazrack, and she pointed at him accusingly.

Ratchis started tying people’s packs to the bottom of one of the ropes. He had made it all the way across the room, and was determined to get up to the surface to be able to pull up others with his divinely-enhanced orcish strength.

Blodnath left his rope to Derek and made his way to the bottom of the shaft and began to climb up one of the ropes, hand over hand.

Jolnar and Golnar moved to flank Derek and look down the hole.

“What is going on?” Jolnar asked.

“Are they okay down there?” Golnar asked.

Beorth came around the other side of the hole as Baervard pulled himself out, grabbing onto Golnar and Jolnar’s outstretched arms.

Below, even more zombies fell out of the chunks of collapsing ceiling.

“Anubis! These lost souls wander aimlessly and seek the life force of the living. Guide them away from my companions!” The paladin aimed the divine energy down the hole, but at the moment he chose to lean over the hole the whole place shook, roaring as if trembling with anger. He tumbled down to join his friends, landing with a bone-jarring ‘oof!’

“Beorth! Get up!” Jeremy yelled, hacking into yet another zombie. Captain Adalar finally shook off his own dizziness from his fall and hacked an approaching zombie with his great axe.

“Has everyone escaped?” Beléar asked, finally getting up the steps to the main chamber. He looked around and took in the scene, answering his own question. He gave a silent prayer to Natan-Ahb, touching his pouch of runestones about his neck.

“Get away from the edge!” Derek told Golnar, Tolnar and Baervard. “The whole floor is going to go soon.”

As Ratchis grabbed the rope to begin his ascent, he heard a crack and a cry above him. He looked up just in time to see Blodnoth come hurtling down atop him with a huge chunk of a fallen stone railing from one of the levels above.⁶²

Martin grabbed the rope and Derek pulled him up.

“Beorth, you go up after the dwarves,” Jeremy said to the paladin. “I’ll find another way up.” He hacked another zombie to pieces, ichor, and blood dripping from his blonde locks.

Jolnar made his way up next, as Martin hurried to the shaft, and helped Ratchis to his feet. Blodnath shook off the fall and immediately began to climb again, even though blood flowed steadily from a gash in his forehead.

Baervard grabbed the third rope in the shaft and began to climb, but the blood on his hands made gaining traction hard and he made little progress. Ratchis began his ascent, while Martin held the rope for Baervard and gave him a boost on his shoulders.

⁶² Remember, the shaft to the surface had four levels that held masks and sarcophagi.

However, at that moment there was another rumble and another piece of stone, nearly a foot in diameter tumbled down the shaft. Ratchis and Blodnath swung out the way, and Baervard leapt off the rope and off Martin's shoulders, letting the mage take the full brunt of the blow in the face.

Martin the Green fell to the floor bleeding. Baervard stepped around him and began to attempt his climb again, not saying a word.

"What did you do!?" Helrahd cried to Kazrack, hurrying to look over the edge. Fortunately, Kirla had landed only about twelve feet down on a rocky outcropping, but behind her the chasm was falling away and becoming deeper and wider. There was a shudder, and the earth swallowed the entire statue, sarcophagus and raised dais. "We need a rope! Go get a rope!"

"Grab this!" Kazrack said and thinking quickly he got down on his knees on the edge of the widening gap and pulled off his cloak and holding it down to the dwarven shield-maiden. Kirla got up, and rubbed her head, shaking it back and forth. She leapt up and grabbed the cloak, and Helrahd grabbed at Kazrack's end to help pull her up.

However, there was another rumble, and Kirla swung back and forth, and as the cloak ripped, she tumbled back. Once again, she landed on the rocky ledge, but it slid down another ten feet away.

"Grab my ankles!" Kazrack said to Helrahd, and the other dwarf complied. Kazrack cursed under his breath, as he was lowered into the hole, for he could see that the cloak, now ripped would not quite reach.

"You are going to have to climb some!" He called down, but Kirla was already looking for a handhold, and she pulled herself up about four feet and grabbed the cloak again, this time more near the middle, and with more cloth.

Helrahd pulled up Kazrack, who pulled up Kirla, and they all lay there beside the gap for a moment trying to catch their breath.

Kazrack looked at Kirla, "Just as it incited Natan-Ahb to split the Dwon, it is fascination with shiny things that caused this, not I."⁶³

Kirla huffed and stood.

The three dwarves hurried up the stairs as the hole behind them cracked open even wider, and they could hear large stones tumbling down into the gaping maw, knocking away swathes of lower stones to create an increasingly yawning abyss.

Kazrack was the first to turn the corner and come to the top, "What's going on? Where is everyone? Have we all made it out?" He turned to Derek who still held the rope, "What are you waiting for?"

In the meantime, Ratchis had made it over thirty feet up the main shaft, only to have a huge chunk of stone balcony strike him in the shoulder as it tumbled down and send him hurtling down the rest of the way. As he lay at the bottom, stunned, Beléar hurried over and cast a healing blessing on the half-orc, spitting to one side in disgust as he did so.

Below, Jeremy decided he could not wait down there any longer. Huge chunks of the dirt ceiling continued to fall, and with it came loose more zombies. And still, even more zombies were managing to force their way through the rubble strewn side tunnels into the increasingly cramped chamber.

⁶³ Kazrack refers to the time before the First Age, when all dwarves were united under one king and there was but one immense island in the world. However, in punishment for their greed, Natan-ahb smashed it with his great hammer, making Aquerra into the many islands it is today.

“Quick, before more the ceiling goes and traps us all!” He leapt onto one of the pillars that stretched from above and down into the lower chamber and started to make his way up.

Beorth and Captain Adalar were still too busy fending off zombies, while Tolnar was amid the beams trying desperately to get up to Derek and his brothers.

Martin looked back and forth, not sure what to do. He grabbed for one of the ropes to begin to try to make his way up to the surface, but again the whole complex shook, and he fell to his knees. Below Beorth and Adalar both fell, as did many of the zombies, and Tolnar had to stop climbing to merely hold on and keep from falling back down. Cracks began to spider across the main floor above and Derek gulped with fear and anticipation of the worst, and the rope still in his hands moved towards the broad steps leading to the shaft.

There was a deafening crack, and suddenly the whole center portion of the main room between the four pillars collapsed. A mountain of dirt and crack tiles fell into the lower room, Beorth scrambled against a wall avoiding the majority of the rubble, but Captain Adalar disappeared beneath it, and Tolnar fell amid the beams he had been climbing only a moment before atop the pile.

Over sixty feet above, Blodnath swung over to the stone railing of the highest level before the last part of the climb that led to the top of the stone obelisk above. Bracing himself there, he took a moment to rest.

Golnar and Jolnar had rolled out of the way of the collapsing floor, and Martin looked through the broad doorway in shock.

“The floor went ‘boom’,” chittered Thomas.

It was barely half a moment later that Kazrack came hurrying into the room. Helrahd and Kirla came in behind him and passed him and moved to the edge of what was now a huge hole. However, Helrahd misjudged, and stepped in a place where the floor was still in the process of cracking even further and with a flash of dust and mortar, he plummeted down as well.

“Helrahd!” cried Kirla.

Beorth began to frantically try to dig out Adalar, ignoring the zombies, most of which were either buried as well or awkwardly struggling to get back on their feet.

“Beorth, I’m coming back down to get you!” Jeremy called down into the hole. “Get your armor off. I’m gonna carry you out there if I have to!” And with that he grabbed hold of one of the pillar and began to shimmy back down.

Derek wrapped his end of the rope about one of the chains that held the counterweights for the door to the main shaft, and then started making his way out. Jeremy only went halfway down the pillar, seeing that Derek’s rope now secured, and waited there to give those who came up a final boost up.

“Arrrgh!” Blodnath’s blood-curdling screaming echoed over the incessant rumbling as he came tumbling down the entire length of the shaft. He had lost his grip on the rope and landed, a bloody pulp, at the bottom of the shaft. He was unconscious and barely breathing. A shower of smaller stones, followed him, wounding him further, as well as Beléar and Jolnar who tried shielding him with their own bodies. Martin pressed himself against the shaft wall and avoid the stones, and Ratchis swung out their way, cursing.

Captain Adalar burst out from under the rubble with a rasping gasp, blood flowing from several wounds on his body, and his armor dented and rented in many places.

“You are going first,” Beorth told him. Dazed, the dwarf did not argue, in a moment he was grasping the rope and being pushed up from below, while Jeremy reached down from above.

Kazrack found his progress across the room blocked by the great hole, and running to leap across a narrower section, found himself tumbling down painfully.

“Kazrack!” Jeremy cried.

“I’m fine,” Kazrack said, getting to his feet. “Get Tolnar up that rope.”

The young dwarf began his ascent, while Adalar hurried the best he could up the steps to the main shaft, accompanied by Derek.

Kazrack turned to the paladin of Anubis, “Beorth, you are more important to the success of our mission than I am. You go after the dwarves!”

Beorth did not respond.

Way above, Ratchis finally made it to the surface. He squinted, as the sunlight painfully stabbed his yellow eyes. He looked around quickly and noticed that not only the great block of stone was shaking, but the various pointed -pillars of stones that littered this dead land were tilting in the ashen earth, and shaking on occasion. Furrows were spidering out in all directions from the stone. Clouds of dust burst up from the earth in places.

“Somebody grab my rope so I can pull them up!” Ratchis cried down with all his might, cupping either side of his mouth with his hands. He prayed to Nephthys that someone heard him and then spitting on his hands grabbed the rope, waiting for the tell-tale tug that would let him know when to pull.

Helrahd made it back up to the collapsing upper room, by climbing another pillar, and grabbing Kirla’s hand.

Derek began climbing the rope that Blodnath had used to climb most of the way up.

“I don’t expect an argument from you, Beorth,” Kazrack added. “You are going next.”

There was another yawning rumble, and one of the pillar’s upper portions, cleaved straight off, bringing a huge chunk of ceiling with it and ripping right through the floor of the lower chamber, only a few feet away from where Beorth and Kazrack stood.

Kirla and Helrahd’s escape was even further blocked now, and Kirla swearing, ran at a place where the hole was narrowest, but as before, she did not make the jump.

“Kirlaaaaaaa!” Helrahd cried, as he watched his sister fall down into the abyss below. However, she was able to catch herself at the very lip of the lower hole, and keep herself from joining the rain of dirt, rock and zombies that was now disappearing into the impenetrable darkness of the chasm.

Kazrack turned and looked, but Kirla was far from his reach. Helrahd started to make his way down the partially broken pillar to reach his sister, but his weight was too much for it, and finally it creaked and groaned and tipped over, bringing another chunk of floor and ceiling with it. The top of it slammed into where Kirla held on for dear life and the brother and sister disappeared into the abyss below.

“Nooooo!” cried Kazrack. He brought a hand to head and held it for half a moment before turning to Beorth. “You go up next!”

Beorth began to take off his splint mail, hurriedly letting straps snap, and cutting others with a knife. “You go, Kazrack,” he said. “I will not make the climb with this on.”

Above Jeremy hefted Tolnar up, and the dwarf ran to Golnar who waited for him on the steps and the two of them ran to the main shaft.

“You should not have waited for me brother,” Tolnar panted.

By now, Ratchis was pulling Baervard up along with several packs. The silent dwarf gripped the rope and sat with the packs beneath his rear like a seat, twisting around and around as he slowly made his way up.

Ratchis seeing who was on the rope, called down, “Baervard, when I get you up untie the packs immediately and throw the rope back down, I am going to start pulling up whoever is on the rope on the right!”

Martin helped Tolnar up onto another rope, and the dwarf began to try to climb it as well, but he was weak from his many falls and soon lost grip tumbling back down. He landed with a painful thud at his brothers’ feet. “I am not going to make it. Go on without me,” he croaked, and fell unconscious.

Below, the yawning chasm stretched even further. Kazrack glanced back at it nervously, and then up at Jeremy who had also stolen a glance at it, as he felt the column he was on begin to buckle.

“Hurry!” The Neergardian called down to his companions. “Just take my hand. I’ll help you up!”

“Beorth, the likelihood of my delaying you is too great,” Kazrack tried explaining to Beorth as if the world were not collapsing around them. “You must go first. Lords and lady, please help this most dwarf-like of my friends in his climb.” And with that the rune-thrower, cast the miracle of *guidance* on the paladin as he still worked on his armor.

“Kazrack, your pride will be the death of you,” Beorth said.

“Call it pride if you will, but better the death of me than the death of you,” Kazrack handed the rope to Beorth, who sighing began to climb.

Derek came tumbling back down the shaft, banging his head painfully against the wall. He had lost his grip and tried to use his acrobatics to slow his fall.

He managed to land on his feet. “Ratchis is going to pull that other rope, I heard him telling Baervard. Someone grab it!”

Martin sighed and grabbed it, while Beléar who had just finished staunching Blodnath’s wounds, healed Tolnar, who sputtering regained consciousness, though he spat blood.

Golnar began to climb the rope his brother fell from.

“I can take more than one on a rope!” Ratchis called down, as he pulled Baervard to the surface and grabbed the next rope. The taciturn dwarf began to untie the packs to throw his rope back down. No one could hear Ratchis’ cries over the distance and rumbling.

Beorth grabbed Jeremy’s hand and then climbed past him, reaching the tattered floor of the upper chamber, but unfortunately, he grabbed a splintering wooden beam for support and came tumbling back down, just inches from what now seemed like a bottomless pit.

“Argh!” cried Jeremy, sweat dripped down his nose, and he looked nervously around. “Help him! Help him! Get him up!”

Kazrack lowered a hand to help up the clumsy paladin, “My desire to see you to safety has not been diminished by your difficulty. You go first.”

“My cowardice and my god’s displeasure have landed me here, Kazrack. You go first!” Beorth replied standing.

“Will one of you come on! Stop fighting already! Make up your minds! Let’s go!” Jeremy was now scolding them like children.

Kazrack ignored the young warrior, who risked himself to aid them and continued to argue with Beorth. “If anyone has been abandoned, it is I! Now go!” And with that he sat on the shaking floor and folded his arms across his chest.

Beorth simply stood there not replying.

There was another crack, and Kazrack was forced to roll away from the edge of the hole to keep from going down with

some stone. While Beorth clutched his head, as a remaining portion of the ceiling fell on him, drawing more blood.

“Please!” Jeremy begged. “It’s now or never! You are going to kill us all!”

“Beorth!! Go already!” Kazrack yelled. The earth shuddered as if to reinforce his command. “Do you realize what you are doing? Who is the proud one now?”

“I am headed to meet my maker,” Beorth replied calmly, and the laying a hand on his own chest said. “Anubis, give me bit of your strength that I might see the light of day again, or at the very least ensure my companions do.”

“Please?” Jeremy begged again, and he blindly sought purchase for his left foot on the pillar, for a piece of it had fallen away. “I want to see my mother again!”

This seemed to stir Kazrack’s heart, and sighing, he stood and grabbed the rope and started making his way up, as Beorth boosted him.

“Finally,” Jeremy said, grabbing on dwarf’s hand and helping him past him to what remained of the upper room.

The floor below Beorth shook again. A crack appeared right beneath his feet, so he did not wait for Kazrack to complete his climb, before beginning his own.

Jeremy could hear cries of pain and horror echoing from the main shaft, where progress up to the surface was progressing in fits and starts. A cloud of dust billowed out through the broad door, and one of the chains holding it open snapped, causing the metal door to slide down askew.

Much as Beorth did, Kazrack reached the crumbling floor and trusted it to hold too much weight at once. There was a snapping sound and back he fell into the lower level. Both Jeremy and Beorth reached out to grab him, but they could not. He slammed painfully on the floor and it cracked more beneath him.

Beorth paused and appeared to be considering heading back down.

“Oh, no you don’t!” Jeremy said, and grabbing Beorth by the shoulder yanked him up. The paladin sighed resignedly and made it up to the broad stairs. He looked back at Jeremy. “Keep going! Get out!” Jeremy commanded, and the Beorth turned and hurried through the cloud to the main shaft.

Jeremy risked going a little further down the pillar and tried whipping the rope in Kazrack’s direction. The dwarf stood and leapt away from a piece of floor falling out from under him at the rope. He tried to pull himself hand over hand but kept slipping. For a moment, his fingers laced with Jeremy’s, but then slipped loose and he fell back to the unstable floor.

“Jeremy, my fate is in the hands of gods. Go!” Kazrack called up.

“No! Come on Kazrack, you have to do this! I am not leaving you behind!” Jeremy insisted.

Kazrack roared and leapt for the rope again, and pulled himself up to Jeremy’s feet, but another portion of the pillar cracked off, and Jeremy had to hurriedly move to keep from falling himself, and again Kazrack fell back down.

“You are just in my way!” Kazrack panted. “Go! At this rate, the entire floor will collapse!”

“I have an idea!” Jeremy called down beginning to climb up to the upper floor. “Stay where you are. I’m gonna cut the rope and pull you up!”

“Just go!”

Jeremy clambered up dexterously and made it to the where the rope was fastened to the remaining chain. He cut it free and moved carefully back to the edge of the hole, swinging the rope towards Kazrack, who he could see was once again trying to climb, but this time he struggled on the bare pillar. Seeing the rope drop near him again, Kazrack grabbed it.

Grunting, Jeremy pulled the heavy dwarf up hand over hand. Soon they both lay on the steps breathing hard.

“Let’s go,” Jeremy said, standing and helping Kazrack to his feet. “And don’t look back.”

The column they had been on just moments before, groaned and tipped over, taking most of what remained of the floor on this and the lower level with it.

Beorth came through the dust cloud into the lower end of the shaft to the surface, and the light shining from his helm pierced the darkness and revealed the owners of the frantic dwarven voices around him. Beléar lay bleeding and unconscious, and Captain Adalar was seeing to him. The elder dwarf had been being pulled up as he grasped Blodnath’s unconscious form and both had tumbled down when struck by falling stonework.

Above Ratchis, was yelling down for three people to grab the rope he was about to pull, while Baervard and Derek pulled up Golnar, who was now holding Blodnath. Martin, who was already up, was dragging the party’s packs away from the monolith as quickly as he could. Tolnar and Jolnar had already made it to the top, and were making ready to grab the third rope, when there was another great tremor, and they fell on the blood-stained flat surface of the stone above.⁶⁴

“Oh Nephthys! Oh-Siris, Oh Isis! Give me strength! Give me strength! Give me strength!” the watch-mage repeated as the earth shook around him. Craters began to mark the ashen earth around him, and several times he had to change his direction to avoid them.

“Beorth! Help me tie Beléar to the last rope,” Captain Adalar said, as he grabbed the end of a rope. The paladin helped, and then tugged on the rope. Adalar hefted the elder dwarf and held on to the rope and in a moment Ratchis was pulling them up.

Beorth began to wrap a rope about his arm as Jeremy came into the shaft chamber.

“Is Kazrack behind you?” Beorth asked. Jeremy nodded, and turned to gesture, but at that moment there was an explosion of stone as another of the great columns fell and a shower of dust burst into the shaft. In a second they were all covering their eyes and coughing.

“There is no way anyone survived that,” Golnar said, above helping to pull a rope. A plume of dust was rising from the shaft, and the whole stone groaned as it sunk into the earth askew.

“We are going to keep pulling people up until all of my friends are here!” Ratchis said.

Derek shook his head discouraged and looked up at the plume of smoke. “We have to get out of here. This is just a signal for someone to come and get us.”

Ratchis glared at the young ranger.

“Kazrack!” Jeremy cried, and turned to go back into the main chamber, but the dwarf came stumbling in, his helmet gone and his head bleeding profusely.

“There is no room back there anymore,” he coughed. “Just a pit, and you should be up the ropes.”

Beorth was startled as the rope he was attached to began to pull him up. Another rope was dropped beside him. “Take the rope that just came down! Hurry!” he called down to his companions as he disappeared into the darkness above.

Jeremy grabbed the rope and started pulling himself up hand over hand.

⁶⁴ The party first came upon the monolith in Session #40.

“Someone is on this rope!” Derek said, looking back down and feeling the weight of Jeremy on it. Hope filled him again.

“Adalar! Help Derek!” Ratchis commanded, straining as he pulled Beorth up.

The Captain handed Beléar to Golnar. “Get moving,” the dwarf told him and his brothers. “Bring him and Blodnath out of the area. Follow the mage!”

They obeyed.

Jeremy felt the rope jerk and looked back down frantically, but the dust and the darkness did not let him see if Kazrack had grabbed on. Far below, the metal door to the main chamber fell, and the floor of the shaft cracked open, sending another rush of dust up. The Neergaardian did not want to leave it to the speed of being pulled up and he again began to go hand over hand to quicken his ascent.

In a moment, Beorth came up over the side of the shaft, taking deep rasping breaths between lung-shattering coughs.

Ratchis hurried over. “Where are the others?”

Beorth shook his head ambiguously, but there was still weight on the remaining rope and the hulking half-orc stepped over and helped Adalar and Derek pull on it. Soon, Jeremy appeared, coughing as well.

He let go of the rope and crawled away from the hole.

There was still weight on the rope.

“Kazrack?”

The dwarf was pulled up.

“Where are the others?” Ratchis asked, doing a quick headcount and realizing he had not seen Helrahd and Kirla.

Kazrack just shook his head. “Let’s go.”

The Fearless Manticore Killers hustled off the great monolith as the earth rumbled around them and great rents appeared in the ashen soil. The pointed columns fell inward, and the sand slid down towards the center. They scrambled up and away from the increasing incline like ants fleeing their hill when it has been carelessly kicked.

Audible just below the groans and crashes, they could all feel and hear a secondary rumble that seemed to be growing from behind and beneath them. They could hear coming up the shaft. It rose to a cressendo until it was the only sound to be heard, and throwing themselves in the dirt in fear and exhaustion, they looked back to see the great black monolith swallowed by the ground. Several rows of pointed columns followed after it, along with tons of the ashen earth, sending a secondary black plume that rose up even taller than the first gray one.

The earth gave one final hard shudder, and those who tried to stand to keep running were knocked back down.

In a moment, it was eerily quiet.

“I think I just lost ten years of my life getting out of that place,” Jeremy said between gasps.

End of Session #49

Session #50

“I never thought I’d say. . .” Beléar coughed, his body was wracked with painful spasms. Ratchis stood to give the elder dwarf some room to breathe after having just cast a miracle of healing on him. “But I looked forward to seeing the sun.”

Beorth wandered away from the group and fell prostrate to pray, “Oh Geb, thank you for devouring that place of evil and abomination.”⁶⁵

Captain Adalar was asking for the details of Helrahd and Kirla’s apparent death, when there was another deep rumbling beneath them and a crunch of stone from where the monolith had one been. It was echoed by a great belching sound.

“We should get further way,” Martin croaked, wiping dust from his mouth.

A second and prolonged rumbling seemed to concur with the watch-mage, and soon the whole group was running for the border of the dead land, as behind them more and more it collapsed into the hole at the center, creating a huge crater. Black dust rose higher and higher into the sky, and also blew out in all directions. In a few moments, it swallowed the Fearless Manticore Killers and their dwarven companions.

They fumbled about in the dark for the edge of the cloud.

It took a few hours, but eventually they were able to gather on the other side of the ridge that marked the perimeter of the deadlands. The dust cloud dissipated a great deal there, as fresh breezes blew on those low grassy hills. The party was surprised to also see that while the grass had been patchy and brown when they had passed through here, before now it was bright green and small flowers were beginning to bud across it.

“Did anyone else see it?” Derek asked, out of breath as everyone began to make camp and wait for Blodnath and Baervard, who had gotten separated from everyone in the cloud.

“See what?” Jeremy asked.

“Eh?” Martin cast a *prestidigitation* to clean his robes and looking around, applied it to Beorth as well.

“A dragon,” Derek sputtered, looking up and around with some fear. “Or at least a great green and black reptilian shape flying over the area, just before the dust cloud overcame us.”

“I saw it as well,” said Beorth, taking a deep drink from his waterskin. “I wasn’t sure what it was, but it definitely had that shape and aspect to it.”

“What?!?” Jeremy exclaimed with some shock.

“Are you sure that’s what you saw?” asked Ratchis, looking up and around as well.

“I saw it, too,” said Blodnath, as he and Baervard finally joined the group, climbing the low ridge a little further north from where everyone else had. “It was black but seemed to shine green where the sun hit it.”

“So, I guess that confirms that the dragon is real?” Kazrack said.

“Who said the dragon wasn’t real?” Derek asked, confused. “Isn’t that the reason why we all ended up here in Gothanius in the first place?”

“Yeah, but we had no confirmation that there really was a dragon,” replied Kazrack. “And some evidence that it was a fiction, a combination of gnomish illusions and sightings of the manticore.”

“But I came with some evidence about the dragon that Barnstable the Brown sent,” Derek said, exasperated. “I told

⁶⁵ Geb is the god of earth and stone.

Martin all about it when we first met.”⁶⁶

“I...uh...never told anyone else,” Martin said, sheepishly. “I guess I forgot.”

Ratchis glared at Martin with disgust.

“Well, that explains why you all never seemed overly concerned with the news,” Derek sat by the small fire that had been made.

“I hope that this campsite won’t attract this thing,” Jeremy said, sitting beside his friend.

“What would you have us do, Jeremy?” Ratchis asked, in a tone suggesting that he was certain that Jeremy had nothing to offer.

“We could go back into the cloud,” Jeremy suggested, but shrugged his shoulders.

“It is too dangerous,” Derek said. “Plus, the collapse of several square miles of land has already attracted whatever attention that there is to be attracted. I doubt a small fire would make it worse.”

“Oh, we can *always* make it worse,” Jeremy said, pessimistically.

The party took inventory of what they had left. Jeremy’s pack had been left behind, and Beorth’s armor was lost, along with several of the dwarves’ packs. Supplies were low. Derek, who had been carrying around the breastplate worn by one of Mozek’s demon-gnome brothers, gave it to Kazrack, who discarded his heavily damaged chain shirt for the more protective armor. Beorth took the suit of scale that Ratchis had once worn and cleaned it in preparation for using it.

The day waned, and the Fearless Manticore Killers and their dwarven allies used it to take small naps, clean and repair equipment and to clean their wounds. There was a short discussion about the budding flowers, and a disagreement as to whether the destruction of the Necropolis had allowed life to fully return to the area, or whether spring had more fully arrived while they were all underground.

Martin maintained the illusion of a ledge of stone sticking out of the ground to provide cover from the air but was unable to be disturbed while doing it.

While the day had been much warmer than the party had been used to in the days before going into the Necropolis, a snap of cold came with nightfall. Watches were set, and soon everyone was sleeping a deep, if aching, sleep.

Teflem, 20th of Prem – 565 H.E.

“My compliments on that amazing stroke back there,” Jeremy said to Ratchis, hurrying his pace to keep up with the half-orc’s ample stride. The Fearless Manticore Killers and their companions marched westward over the low grassy hills towards the edge of the forest where the gnomes lived. They could see the dark outline of larger hills to the north and west, several days away. “You know, the thing that jumped out of that sarcophagus.”

“Praise Nephthys, not me,” Ratchis grunted.

“But, next time give us some warning, okay?” Jeremy continued.

Ratchis gave the blonde warrior a glance of half-confusion and half-disgust.

“I mean, after you chopped that thing’s head off back there everything started falling apart.”

Ratchis took a deep breath as if to holler, but then let it out slowly. “...Next time I’m goin’ to chop the head off of a powerful undead creature in an underground labyrinth, I’ll let you know beforehand.”

⁶⁶ See session #37.

“Good enough,” Jeremy slowed his pace again, and soon fell back near the rear of the column. This was his usual spot, where he and Derek traded whispered jokes about the other party members and discussed the warm meals and mead they’d drink when they got to Garvan.⁶⁷

“That is, if we don’t have to fight a gang of demon gnomes,” Jeremy warned.

Derek nodded solemnly, and then laughed nervously. Jeremy echoed it, and Martin looked back at them and glared, certain they were making fun of him.

They marched through the day, up over and around the dimpled earth.

“Beléar, can you remind me the name of the first champion?” Kazrack asked the elder dwarf, who still showed signs of his recent wounds, but only that.

“You speak of Jocham?”⁶⁸

“Yes... yes that’s it,” Kazrack shook his head, and then beat his breast with a fist as if pained.

“Kazrack, I think the touch of those black wights has addled your mind,” Beléar stopped and put his hand on the younger dwarf’s shoulder.

“I am just ill. I will be fine,” Kazrack replied. “Though I do feel strange, as if my soul was shaken.”

“Yes, you have had some of your life essence drained out. A bit of the very divine spark that gives you life and keeps you linked to the gods and to the world has been taken. This darkness in your spirit shakens not only your faith in yourself, but in your gods. You have suffered a great loss.”⁶⁹

“I will be fine tomorrow,” Kazrack replied.

“No, you will not.”

They had not yet quite reached the treeline as the sun ducked behind it before them, when Kazrack realized that Beléar was right.

“Is there nothing to be done about my state?” he asked his former teacher.

“You may still have time, but it is beyond my faith to restore this sacred energy to you,” Beléar replied.

It was then that the debate started. After camp had been made beside a large flowering tree, Beléar called over Ratchis, Martin and Beorth at Kazrack’s request. Captain Adalar walked over as well.

“I feel as if my faith has been shattered,” Kazrack began. He explained how having had his life force permanently drained that his connection to the gods was weakened, and there was a whole set of miracles now denied him. “I am weak, and my gods know it, and now I do not know if I am even worthy to continue on in their name. I feel as if I should try to regain at least some of that lost strength as soon as possible and before anything else if I am to declare myself worthy of it.”

“Do you mean delay going into Garvan to see what has been happening there? And freeing the gnomes from the rule of Mozek and his brothers?” Martin asked, disbelievingly.

⁶⁷ Garvan is the name of the gnomish community the party spent most of their winter at.

⁶⁸ Jocham was a powerful holy warrior of the dwarven people, in the time of what is called the Third (or Last) Great Dwarven Kingdom in the Second Age. He is also called the First Champion, and Dwitak’s Hand. Dwitak Chem was the last dwarven king who ruled over a united dwarven people.

⁶⁹ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack permanently lost two levels after blowing his Fortitude saves by rolling a ‘2’ once and being one point short because he lost that level of the second roll, thus losing another level.

"I mean, no offense, brother," Captain Adalar said, stepping towards him. "But we have been delayed enough by the ill-fated descent into that necropolis."

"Well, it served some purpose," Martin protested. "The books we found inside are turning out to be very enlightening. I just read last night about how the Necropolis was one of several planar 'nodes'."

"Plana-wha?" asked Jeremy walking over.

"This doesn't concern you, Jeremy," Ratchis said.

"And why not?" Beorth asked. "We are talking about what we are going to do next. Jana explained in quite a bit of detail about the problems of the gnomes, of Richard the Red, and all the various quests and enemies we've collected. I may have lost my memory, but I think this also gives me a fresh perspective, and we need every perspective we have." The paladin patted Jeremy's shoulder. "And if what Jana said was right, Anubis let him back through the gate, and that does not happen often and for no reason, even though I feel a deep unease about it. And we need to consider the tasks of Osiris that still need doing."

"Hold on," Derek stepped into the circle, feeling drawn in by Beorth's words. "Why do you have tasks from Osiris?"

"It was the price for bringing *him* back from the dead," Ratchis pointed at Jeremy, who looked down nervously.

"Whoa! You were dead?" Derek turned to his friend. "And you were brought back to life?"

Jeremy nodded.

"Let's not get side-tracked," said Ratchis. "What are you proposing, Kazrack?"

"I am not sure... Only that maybe we should see if we can find someone who can restore that lost life essence before it is too late, especially since without it I am of a lot less help to the party."

"I don't know where you hope to find such a restoration," Martin said. "Hmm, but then again, perhaps the priest of Bast would be able to do it..."

"He is missing," said Beorth.

"Or he just wasn't around that day," Jeremy offered.

"We have no way of knowing if he can do it or if he is even around," Ratchis said. "I think it may be too much of a long shot."

"Plus we can brook no further delay," Captain Adalar said, looking to Beléar. "We agreed to come help free these gnomes from their corruptors, but was it not you and your companions that warned us that the hairy bear-beast men were just servants of a greater and older evil, a great foe of our people? Every day we let pass is another that goes by without our people being warned."

"I would not have anyone do what they cannot or would not do," said Kazrack. "I need to reflect on this for myself and will throw the runestones for guidance, but it is wholly possible that I may have to seek this out on my own, and that you and Beléar and the others can return to Abarrane-Abaruch sooner and leave the gnomes to me and my companions."

"I can't bel..." Adalar's temper was kept in check by Beléar's raised hand.

"Let the stones be thrown and then we will see what needs to be done, all of this debate may be moot," the elder dwarf said wisely. "It could be that we stand a day or two's further delay."

Kazrack and Beléar retreated into a copse of trees away from the others, as the last lights of Ra's Glory reached up from behind the mountains of the west, muted into a golden orange.

“Friendship repaid awaits where men rest upon the summit of your first dilemma... Time wanes, but it is still ample.”

There was a long discussion as to what the words meant.

As for Beléar’s reading, he said he had not had as successful a reading as Kazrack’s, and that it seemed too many things were in flux in regards to Abarrane-Abaruch to know a decisive course of action.

Kazrack wanted to return to Summit. “That is the ‘summit of our first dilemma’,” he said.

“But there is no one in Summit who can restore you,” Martin said.

“I think there will be a friend there, who we do not expect,” said Kazrack.

“Unless the stones meant the summit of gnome’s hills, or the summit upon which the castle at Twelve Trolls stands, or somewhere else,” said Martin.

“Or our first dilemma could be where we fought the one-eared goblins back outside of... what was the name of that place?” Jeremy added.

“Cutter Jack’s,” said Beorth.

“Huh? How do you remember?” Jeremy was puzzled.

“I took careful notes of everything Jana told me, and I have put together a lot from what I overhear,” Beorth explained.

“Regardless, that town is not close enough to allow ‘ample’ time to get there before it is too late for me to be restored,” Kazrack posited.

“But what is time ‘ample’ for?” Ratchis asked. “Could it be ample for us to go help the gnomes and then get back to Summit if that is the place where it talked about?”

There was a long silence, while everyone thought it over.

“Well, was there a capital letter for ‘summit’?” Jeremy asked, thinking he was being clever.

“There are no capital letters in the dwarven alphabet,” Martin said. “The concept comes from the elvish script.”

Jeremy frowned.

“Anyway, things are not spelled out like that when the stones are thrown, more like things are suggested within runic context and in the shapes the thrown stones make,” Kazrack tried to explain.

“This is getting too philosophical for me.” Jeremy complained and walked off to sharpen his long sword. “Just let me know what we are gonna do next when you all decide.” He signaled for Derek to join him, but the young woodsman seemed too interested in the conversation to be pulled away.

“I believe we should go to Summit. If help for me does not exist there then we will return to Garvan and do what needs to be done,” Kazrack offered.

“You are being bull-headed, Kazrack,” said Beorth. “You are putting yourself before the welfare of the gnomes you swore to protect, and you are taking advantage of your kin here by making them wait for you when they need to return to their stronghold and warn of the danger of the drow.”

“Do not insult me, Beorth,” Kazrack, stood growing angry. “I do not question your faith even though we cannot be

certain that you interpret all things regarding it correctly now that much of your study has been wiped from your mind due to your transgression.”

“I have sinned, but I also continue on doing my best regardless,” Beorth retorted. He did not raise his voice. It remained cold and flat. “Anubis has not abandoned me of yet, nor have I abandoned him.”

“And I believe by going to Summit I am not abandoning my gods,” Kazrack said, lower his voice back down after sighing. “I have to believe in this reading of the runestones. If I chose to go on and ignore it, I would be giving in to whatever doubts plague me.”

There was a long silence.

“I support you, Kazrack,” said Ratchis, finally breaking the awkwardness. “I just hope you are not letting your pride get in the way of your judgment, and I hope you will not be too disappointed if this ‘friend’ ends up being cast in the mold of Richard the Red.”

Kazrack nodded, and then looked at Beléar, who gestured to Captain Adalar.

“I have spoken with Beléar and he seems to feel we should leave this choice up to Kazrack,” Captain Adalar said. “His wisdom has always served his people well, so I defer to him.”

“Then we leave in the morning,” Kazrack said.

The group dispersed to eat what was left of their dry rations and bed down, leaving watches for the night. However, most did not get in their bedrolls very happy about the decision.

Anulem, 21st of Prem – 565 H.E.

Morning found Thomas the Squirrel leaping from tree to tree parallel to the group. He stopped and sniffed the fresh spring air and wished for the ability to enjoy food again, and then he noticed something else seemed to be on the air that he should be wanting, but somehow he lacked the desire. Screwing up his tiny brain to try to figure out what it was, he gave up and leapt back down, landing on the scratchy padding of Ratchis’ natty hair. The half-orc did not seem to mind and raised a ham-hand to scratch the tree-rodent, who chittered in delight and then pounced onto Martin’s nearby shoulder.

The group came back to the scorched remains of the gnomish safehouse that marked the edge of the border of Garvan. They needed to find this place as a landmark before making their way back to Summit.

“There have been gnomes here recently,” said Martin.

“How do you know? I see no tracks,” Ratchis asked, looking up from where he examined some twigs on the muddy ground.

“Thomas can smell them,” the watch-mage replied, patting his familiar on the head. “But he thinks the scent is from more than a day ago.”

“Good gnomes or demon-gnomes?” asked Jeremy.

Martin shrugged his shoulders.

The march the rest of the way to Summit was without event. They marched through the tunnel below the raised plateau that created Greenreed Valley and saw that the great area of steam they had once traveled through seemed taller and larger, remaining thick even above the level of plateau.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ The party traveled through the great area of steam way back in Session #18.

It was dusk when they finally picked their way up the stone path to the edge of Summit. They could tell immediately that something was off. The paper lanterns and other decorations from the Festival of Isis had either had not been taken down or had been put back up. It seemed strangely quiet.⁷¹

At the center of town, the dwarves made to travel to their old camping spot, not feeling comfortable remaining in a human town.

Kazrack was about to suggest they stick around in case there was trouble, but at that moment there was a rousing cheer from the inn, which was visible at the far end of town. There was light from within, and it was clear people were partying in and around it.

The dwarves began marching off as two children came running by, obviously arguing.

“Hey look! It’s the Fearless Manticore Killers! And a whole bunch of dwarves!” cried one of the kids and both stopped dead in their tracks in awe, but then one almost immediately began strutting about like a cheeky show-off.

“Nya!” he stuck his tongue out at Ratchis.

“What’s all this about?” Ratchis asked him.

The young boy stuck his tongue out again and then turned shaking his rear mockingly at the hulking friar.

Ratchis’ expression changed to one of consternation, but it was enough on his scarred and horrid face to make the boy still facing him pale.

“Uh...uh... Everyone’s celebrating the victory of the Shepherds,” the boy announced, proudly at first, but then looking down as he could not interpret the hard-ridges of Ratchis’ brow, or the glint of spit on the half-breed’s protruding tooth as merely quizzical and not homicidal.

The dwarves continued marching off.

Ratchis flipped the kid a silver piece. “Oh wow,” was his response.

“Who are the Shepherds?” asked Martin.

“I know you!” the other kid turned back around and stepped over to Martin. “You’re the watch-mage. You can do magic!”

“Um... yes,” said Martin.

“The Shepherds are the town heroes!” the first boy said, answering the question and hoping for another whole silver piece. “They found the missing people and brought them back after they killed the bad guys!”

“Which bad guys?” Beorth asked.

“Uh, a bad man who steals people, and the dog heads,” the boy looked frightened again.

“They’re called gnolls, dum-dum!” the cheeky boy said. “Give me a silver, too!”

Shrugging his shoulders Ratchis threw that boy a silver piece, too and they both ran off back towards the inn.

“I bet its Finn and his crew,” said Jeremy.

Martin nodded.

⁷¹ It was just around the Festival of Isis that the party had last been in Summit (see Session #37)

“Who is Finn again?” Beorth asked.

They all marched to the inn.

They were hit by a resounding cheer as they entered the common room of the Sun’s Summit Inn. They had never seen it so packed, and the smell of pipes and ale filled the room, along with the occasional whiff of a peppery beef stew some were eating.

“The Fearless Manticore Killers!” someone cried and then more people took up the name, while others cried, “The Shepherds! The Shepherds!”

“I hope that Finn’s crowd doesn’t get them in trouble by people thinking they are more capable than they really are,” Martin leaned over and whispered to Kazrack.

“That’s a good point, Martin,” the dwarf replied.

“Oh, let them enjoy their moment,” Jeremy scoffed coming in behind them. “Listen to you two, you sound jealous!”

“Of them? Never.” It was Kazrack’s turn to scoff.

A table was cleared for them, and Finn jumped up from where he had been sitting by the bar, an overflowing mug of ale in his hand.

“Martin! Jeremy! Ratchis! Kazrack! Great to see you safe and sound!” The young fisherman came over to them, and Carlos fell in close behind.

“Hola!” he cried. “Hello!”

Finn Fisher seemed have lost some his color, and there was dirt caked under and around his fingernails. He carried a longsword sheathed at his side like he had had it there every day for a long time. His hair was longer and shaggier. Carlos, on the other hand, had shaved his head, and he wore a short sword and a suit of studded leather—mostly unbuckled—as if he had grown more used to its weight and discomfort.

As Martin sat, he recognized Josef at another table, smiling as he talked with two other young men. The mousy fellow was growing a black beard, but his hairline seemed to have receded even more. He thought that two were missing and craned his neck to look for more familiar faces. It was then that he noticed Simon and Peter, the other brothers from among the dragon-hunter recruits, ones he had traveled with to Gothanius from Westron.⁷² They waved to him excitedly, though their faces had lost some of the innocent roundness.

“When did Simon and Peter get here?” Martin asked Finn. The barmaids brought pitchers of ale, and said bowls of stew and some bread would be served to them right away. The noise of the common room simmered down and became more generalized as people’s attention went back to their individual songs, conversations, and meals.

“Oh, they were among the people we rescued,” said Finn Fisher, putting his hand to his mouth to cover a momentary smile of pride. “Maria is somewhere here, too. We rescued her early on, so she was able to help us some. Man, I’ll tell ya, she is killer with a sword.”

Martin kept listening but scanned the crowd for more familiar faces. There was the smith/constable, Maxel, trying to get away from a gentleman extolling the virtues of his daughter who was soon to come of age, in order to get over to their table and greet them personally.

“What happened?” Ratchis asked.

“Well, there is a lot to tell, but let me just tell you this much,” Finn leaned forward and cupped his mouth to whisper.

⁷² The party met Simon and Peter (and Martin) at the ball at Castle Gothanius way back in Sessions #11 & 12

“There was an evil priest kidnapping people and charming them to do his bidding. It was pretty horrible. Frank... well, Frank had to...”

Finn’s voice cracked, and Martin feared the worse, but then noticed Frank in a corner, holding a mug of ale in each hand. He looked deep into his cups with a blank stare and then took another long swig.

“Spit it out,” Jeremy admonished.

“Frank had to kill his brother, Gwar,” Finn finally, said, and Carlos dropped his head sadly, shaking it in disbelief. “Gwar was more than charmed, he was changed or controlled more powerfully somehow, and Frank had no choice, though he tried at first to subdue him.”

Ratchis growled in anger.

“That is bitter tale,” Kazrack intoned. “To have to kill one’s own brother would be a foul fate for any dwarf.”

“Frank’s not a dwarf,” Jeremy said with a smirk.

“Jeremy,” Ratchis scowled, and the Neerguardian put a finger to his lip signaling that he’d shut up.

“But listen, that is not the story we’ve been telling the common folk,” Finn added.

“The common folk?” Martin was surprised by Finn’s use of the term.

“Frank insisted we all say that Gwar was a great hero and died killing the priest and we all agreed, though Maria is still pissed about it,” Finn continued. “But I figured I’d tell you since you know about how hard these things can be and because, well... look at Frank yourself, he’s pretty broken up about it.”

“¿Como no?” Carlos chimed in, and Martin nodded as if he knew what the dark-skinned young man had said.

“Anyway, once the party dies down, we’ll tell you all about it,” Finn said and then suddenly stood up. “A toast to the Fearless Manticore Killers!”

“Here! Here!”

Ratchis leaned over to Beorth, “Can you think of a better name? This would be a good time to announce a change of name...”

“If anything, it is a mark of pride to be named by others like that,” Kazrack said, overhearing.

“Yeah, but it’s an awful name,” Ratchis replied.

The party in the common room continued for another couple of hours. Maxel came over to say hello and to let Martin know that the alderman had been called away to the capitol but was expected back any day. Eventually, Simon and Peter made it over, and so did Maria. Soon the Fearless Manticore Killers and their friends all retired to the room Ratchis would be sharing with Beorth, and Finn told his tale.

Finn Fisher took a deep breath.

“We decided it was time to follow up on some of the clues we had gathered about the missing people. A lot of locals thought it was the dragon, and others thought it was orcs getting back to their old tricks before the skirmishes of a few

years ago.⁷³ However, there were no signs of orcs, but there were plenty of witnesses who had seen or encountered gnolls not far from places where people had disappeared from, so we put two and two together and went looking for their camp.”

“That is dangerous,” Ratchis said, pouring himself an ale from one of the three pitchers he had brought up to the room with him.

“Well, we figured if the place was too big and had too many gnolls, we’d mark where it was and come back and warn Maxel and maybe gather up you guys or some other dragon-hunters if we found them,” Finn continued, holding out his mug for some more ale. “But it wasn’t the case. There were certainly a lot of gnolls, but they seemed to be fighting among themselves, and a large group headed south, while we ended up running into a smaller group and dealt with them, though Carlos was severely wound. That left me, Josef and Frank to get into the gnoll camp and see if we could find signs of prisoners ourselves.”

Finn took a swig of ale.

“I had never been so scared in my whole life, but... but... that was before how bad I knew it could get. It’s been much worse.”

“We have had our own brushes with danger and death,” Kazrack said, and Beorth frowned at him.

“Don’t let the cheerfulness and drinking fool you,” Finn replied, his eyes opening wide. Ratchis noticed worry lines at the corner of those green eyes that had not been there months before when he had first met the kind young man. “We’ve had an awful, awful time, and for every person celebrating the return of their loved ones, there are two grieving the loss of others.”

He shook his head and then continued.

“We finally found the gnoll chief’s hut, and there was the sign that it *had* been them that had been stealing villagers and farmers from outlying areas. It was... It was body parts hanging from tree branches to dry... *human* parts. At first we thought they had just eaten everyone, and were going to leave not thinking revenge was reason enough to risk our lives.”

“Very wise,” said Martin.

Josef shrugged his shoulders and Maria made a disapproving clicking noise in the back of her throat.

“But then we saw they had more prisoners and they seemed to be readying them to travel somewhere, somewhere far from the looks of it, because they wrapped them in furs and skins and had them tied up in line to be pulled along. We waited awhile after they left because it had recently snowed and figured we could follow them at our leisure and hope to be led where the others were being held, and that part worked, except we were spotted by the remaining gnolls and were forced to fight for our lives.”

“Luckily, it was soon after dawn, and...”

“Most of the gnolls were sleeping?” Ratchis interrupted.

“Yeah. How’d ya know?”

“I know a bit about gnolls and their habits,” the half-orc ranger replied.⁷⁴

“Yeah, we killed a few and then we were able to kill a bunch while they were still getting ready or barely waking up,”

⁷³ In late 562/early 563 H.E. the Gothanian Militia was finally able to route or destroy most of the orc occupying the area of Greenreed Valley and to the south by southwest of it, leaving that area open for settlement. Sightings of the dragon began several months later.

⁷⁴ **DM’s Note:** Gnolls are Ratchis’ species enemy.

Finn said, he was looking at his feet dejectedly. “I...uh, felt kind of bad about killing them that way, but if we had let them wake up or get ready, we would have been killed.”

Maria sighed loudly and everyone looked at her.

“What? They were gnolls!” she protested. “The deserved whatever they got.”

“You had to do what you had to do,” Ratchis said. “Continue.”

“We searched the chief’s hut very quickly and found a map of Summit and the surrounding area, including the temple of Bast. It was weird, because it did not strike us as the kind of map a gnoll would make. It was painted on hide, but on cow hide, not on the hide of one of their big laughing dog beasts, and it was very detailed. It seemed like a human made it, maybe... Anyway, we took it and some other tidbits we found and set fire to the place, and then hurried after the trail of the other gnolls and their prisoners, hoping that dragging prisoners would slow them down enough to let us catch up. Carlos here has become pretty good at following a trail.”

Carlos smiled at Ratchis and patted his chest proudly.

“Hmmp,” was all the half-orc said.

“So we followed them and they led us around that hill just northwest of here and to the temple of Bast,” Finn paused to let the news sink in. “And the priest met them at the door, and he had these little blue dog men as servants who took the prisoners, and he paid the gnolls as we watched.”

“*Perritos*,” said Carlos. “*Come se dice*? Kobolds.”

“We ambushed and killed the gnolls at that point. Even though it was over a day away to their camp, the last thing we wanted was for them to find the ruins of their encampment and follow us back to the temple with reinforcements. The next day we forced our way into the temple, especially since Carlos was feeling much better.”

“Are you saying a priest of *Bast* was working with the gnolls to capture locals?” Martin said with disbelief.

“It turned out he wasn’t a priest of Bast at all, but a priest of,” Finn lowered his voice to the slightest whisper, afraid to say the name. “Seker.”⁷⁵

“Are you sure?” Martin asked, with even more disbelief in his voice.

“Yes,” Finn answered. “He admitted as much in his over-confidence, thinking he would defeat us. He was using some kind of phylactery to dominate the wills of others. Some could be reasoned with, but still saw him as a friend, but others were his puppets. Gwar was one of the latter, unfortunately. He had all the taken people working as his slaves, digging a great tunnel underground. You see beneath the temple are a few levels of catacombs. I thought sneaking through a gnoll camp was bad, that place was horrible.”

“I understand the fear of darkness,” Kazrack commented. “I have felt it in my very soul as some of my life-essence was stolen by the undead.”

“Oh yeah!” Finn said, not seeming to be in the mood to match stories. “That priest, he had skeletons down there and some zombies.”

“We found Maria locked down there,” Finn continued.

“The fiend kept trying to charm me, but my will was too strong for him,” Maria added. “He tried every few days. If they had not come along, I fear he would have fed me to his kobold guardians.”

⁷⁵ Seker is the god of deception and betrayal. Also known as the god of light and darkness, his priests are legendary for taking deep cover in organizations for years before finally using the trust and authority they’ve gained to cause bitter chaos and cause great bloodshed and loss.

“Simon and Maria and I were taken by the gnolls while we were out hunting the dragon,” Peter said. “Uh, our brother James was killed trying to defend us, and so was Birinius.”

The two brothers’ faces grew dim.

“We think Cheribuck was killed, too,” Peter added, but we never saw it happen.

Martin remembered Cheribuck as a tall and over-talkative pale young man who seemed more than a little touched. Birinius had been pious young acolyte devoted to Ra who had not yet been ordained, life on the road had been hard for him.

“I am sorry for your loss,” Beorth said to the brothers, and Kazrack and the others nodded. They shrugged their shoulders; as if unsure of how to show whatever grief they felt.

“What did you do with the phylactery?” Martin asked after a few moments of silence.

“We burned it,” Finn replied. “It must have been pretty powerful thing because he seemed to be controlling the skeletons with it as well. As soon as we destroyed it, they all fell to piles of bones, and those who were charmed were freed, though it was too late for... Gwar.”

“*Pobrecito*,” intoned Carlos, placing a comforting hand on Finn’s shoulder. “Frank eh hassa taken hard, you know?”

“He had to kill his own brother,” Simon said, shaking his head. Even Maria’s usually annoyed expression softened, and a tear came to her eye. She excused herself and Simon and Peter followed her out.

Beorth stood and walked over and looked down at Finn, “Would you mind if I were to use the power of my god to look into your heart and make sure there was no evil influence upon you?”

“Uh...” Finn hesitated. “Sure. Go ahead.”

Beorth closed his eyes, covering them with his left hand and reaching out towards Finn and the others with his right.

“I sense no evil,” Beorth said.

“What was the evil priest trying to dig up?” Kazrack asked.

“That’s the thing, they never finished,” Finn explained. “It was deep, deep down and he needed more people, but by the time we got there it was partially uncovered, a black stone portal of some sort.”

“What do you mean by portal?” Martin asked, his eyes narrowing.

“It just seemed to be a black square stone door that plugged up an archway or something,” Finn shrugged. “We covered it back up the best we could.”

“Is there anything else?” Ratchis asked, feeling the weariness of the last few days climb onto his shoulders all of sudden.

“Oh, just that we found some stuff,” Finn stood and smiled. “Some loot! We found a bunch of clay vials we figure might be magical and a scroll tube. We figured that if you helped us find out what they were you could take two of the potions and the scroll if it is some kind of magicky thing. You know, as repayment for saving us from the bounty-hunter that time.”

Finn handed a small sack to Martin. “They are all in here. Take them, find out what you can about them and then give us back what you don’t want.”

“Tell them about the necklace,” Josef said.

“Yeah, there is a ruby necklace in there. Josef says it’s worth a whole lot, but it is too much for us to get a good price for anywhere around here. We figured you guys travel further abroad, you take it and see what you can get for it.”

“But what about yourselves?” Kazrack asked.

“We got some other stuff we split,” Finn explained. “It is not a big deal, really.”

The young fisherman smiled at the Fearless Manticore Killers.

Everyone bade each other goodnight and promised to meet up again the next day. Kazrack explained that he was going to make his way to where the dwarves of Abarrane-Abaruch were camping and stay with them. As the others left Martin turned to Beorth and Ratchis, “Could the portal beneath the temple of Bast be Hurgun’s Maze?”

Kazrack found the common room had emptied and was lit by one dim lamp in the corner. He was about to make his way out when he heard a soft sobbing to his left. He investigated.

It was Frank. The young man had a beard growing in, the hair even lighter than his already near golden brown hair unlike his late brother’s darker features.

The dwarf walked over, as Frank looked up at him. The former shepherd still had a pitcher of ale before him and a mug in his hand. Drops of foam dripped down onto the damp table, and his head swayed as if he was trying to steady himself on his bench.

“Hey! Kazuh... Kazama..., Rackatak, whatever, did ya hear?” He raised his mug above his head, sending ale sloshing over the side. “We’re heroes!”

Frank’s head dropped back to the table and he let out another whimper.

Kazrack took a seat beside him and did not say a word.

Frank looked up and wiped his eyes with his sleeve and then took another long sip of ale and coughed.

“I think you’ve had enough of that lad,” Kazrack said.

“I’ve had enough of everything!” Frank wailed.

“I know right now the loss of your brother is hitting you pretty hard,” Kazrack said with sincere sympathy. “But it will get better.”

“No! It is only going to get harder!” Frank moaned.

“It only feels that way,” Kazrack insisted.

“No, you... you don’t understand,” Frank’s words were slurred, and he gestured with his mug, splattering Kazrack with the remaining drops of ale. There was a long pause.

“Lemme ask you sumthin’, Rata, Kaza...rackum, whatever... You’re older right? I mean, dwarves live longer, you been around, you know stuff, right?”

Kazrack nodded.

“My brother’s dead, but... but... he had a girlfriend, and... and... before he disappeared, he... he..., she’s going to have a baby.”

Frank poured himself another mugful of ale. “And... and now, now she wants *me* to marry her and be...be the father of that baby...”

“That is quite an honor,” Kazrack said.

“I...I don’t think I want it,” Frank said. “What should I do? It is bad enough my brother is dead, but now I have to live his life for him? He wanted to settle down...I, I was getting used to life on the road. I almost had Carlos convinced to strike out and form our own adventuring company, and... and anyway, I don’t want to stay here and be a shepherd. If I wanted to be a shepherd, I would go home one day and do it there... I... I just don’t know.”

He paused again and then continued, “But what kind of brother and uncle would I be if I did not take care of this child and its mother? What kind of man would I be if I just ran away?”

“Frank,” said Kazrack very solemnly. “There is nothing more precious than a child. There is no treasure you can find on *any* adventure that would compare to the chance to shape this child into the man he will become.”

“Whu...what if it’s a girl?” Frank sniffed.

“Either way. It matters not,” Kazrack replied. “And it is possible to learn to love someone. Would you condemn this girl to be without a husband? To raise a child on her own? Your brother’s child? Your own nephew?”

“Uh... uh...” Frank put his head back down on the table. “I... I guess you are right. I have to think on it more, but I think you’re right. Thank you, Rat-cast.”

Kazrack helped the young man to his feet and helped him walk to the Widow Beatrice’s house, where he was being boarded. The dwarf then made his way down the other side of the ridge to the dwarven camp, where he handed Beléar the scroll tube.

The elder dwarf opened it and looked at the scrolls within.

“Why, this is a scroll of *restoration!*” Beléar said with surprise in his voice.

“I knew it would be,” was all Kazrack said.

End of Session #50

Session #51

Beorth decided he did not want to stay at the inn and made his way down to where the dwarves were camped, and Derek joined him. Jeremy ended up staying with Ratchis.

Martin left the room and made his way to the room that had been prepared for him. He opened the door and sitting there with a glass of wine was a figure in robes of varying shades of red, from deep blood red to nearly a flaming orange. He had curly red hair and a well-kept beard.

“Richard!” Martin said, coming in and closing the door.

“I was hoping I’d run into you,” said Richard smiling and standing.

“Well, waiting in my room uninvited is one way to assure that,” retorted Martin.

Richard the Red shrugged his shoulders. “I was hoping you had time to discuss a few things.”

“Of course,” Martin replied. “Do you have a room?”

“No, but I have a... place I am staying,” Richard said, he gestured towards the door.

The two Academy mages left the inn. Richard began to lead the way northward out of town.

“Where are we going?” Martin asked.

“Oh, I got tired of having to keep a guise up all the time while in town, so when a nearby place opened up, I decided to headquarter there for a while,” Richard explained.

“The temple of Bast?” Martin asked.

“Uh-huh,” Richard replied. “Now, tell me, what have you been up to? I hope you have not forgotten our deal to exchange information.”

“No, I have not,” Martin said, grudgingly and began to go into a truncated version of what had occurred at the Necropolis. Richard seemed most interested in the books that had been recovered.

“Any enchantments on the books?” he asked.

“On two, but we have a rune-thrower with us that should be able to dispel them,” Martin explained.

“You still have not gotten that spell?” Condescension entered the older watch-mage’s voice. “You know, as part of our information exchange, if you let me examine the books, I would be happy to pen you a scroll with the *dispel magic* spell on it.”

Martin stopped walking. The woods were dark. There was a nip to the air, and crickets were out in force.

“I remember the talk we had before about the watch-mage oath,” Martin said.

“What about it?”

“That newly graduated academy wizards are less experienced, and that older...uh, more mature wizards such as yourself are in a better position to regulate magic and know what can be used safely and for what purpose.”

“I still believe that,” replied Richard.

Martin stepped backward away from Richard and back towards Summit.

“What else did you want to talk about?” Martin asked, a hint of nervousness and annoyance entering his voice.

“Why are you getting so frazzled, Martin?” Richard asked, stepping towards the younger watch-mage. He flashed a smile that glowed in the blurry moonlight of Mind’s Eye. “Look, we are each doing our own thing. We have our own agendas and responsibilities, but obviously these overlap in places, and information you have may help me and vice versa. Or you may have information you do not understand completely yet, and much like when one puts together a jigsaw puzzle., sometimes you have to turn the pieces around and examine them from all angles to see how they fit with another. And another set of eyes, so to speak, can really be helpful. We are both watch-mages of the Academy, both tradition and mandate say we are supposed to aid one another.”

“I don’t believe that what you are trying to accomplish is all that helpful and good,” Martin replied. “And I am not sure I *want* to provide you with information that you can ‘turn around.’ It is my responsibility as a watch-mage to assure that one of our order is not misusing his power and authority. And... and... I get the impression that there is a lot you don’t share with me.” Richard sighed and looked down. When he looked back up the smile had left his face and his blue eyes burned with derision.

“I’ve been nothing but helpful to you, Martin. Training, spells, information. If anything, you’ve been withholding from *me*.”

He paused and composed himself and then continued. “I assume you don’t have the books on you, so if you want to turn around and go back and get them before we go any further, let’s do it now.”

Martin paused. “I think I’ll be going back...” He finally said.

“For the books?”

Martin shook his head. “Our agreement was limited...”

“Martin, you are making a mistake,” Richard said. Now it was his turn to shake his head.

“Two great evils released into the world,” Martin said.

“Huh?”

“Two witches,” Martin explained.⁷⁶

“Two? I released only one,” Richard protested. And Martin was taken aback. Certainly, Richard was a good liar, but it seemed a strange thing to lie about when he readily admitted he was planning to free all three.

“One, three, it does not matter,” Martin said, recovering quickly. “I don’t think I should give you the material to do even more harm.”

“You don’t see the whole picture,” Richard said.

“I’ve heard that before.”

Richard paused again.

“The wedge between us may cause you more harm than it will me, Martin,” Richard said, sitting on a stump. “I know you know more than you’ve told me about the gnomes. Fine. I know you know more than you’ve told me about the books. Fine. I know you know more than you’ve told me about Rindalith. Fine. But don’t think you can hold against me some information I may have withheld. This works both ways. And I know you have been cautious. *Overly* cautious.”

⁷⁶ The party first met Richard the Red when he was trying to go through with a plan to free three powerful drow witches from captivity in order to sow more chaos and dissension in the dark elf ranks and delay the war on the surface they were planning. (See Session #21)

Richard stood again.

“If you want to end our agreement to share information, fine. But answer me one last thing. You owe me at least that much since it is you who are breaking your word. The monks of Anubis, or whatever they are, that you mentioned, are they looking for a place or a thing?”

Again, Martin was surprised. “What do you want to know about them for? And, uh... I don’t know what they are looking for anyway.”

“Then our agreement is ended,” Richard said with disappointment in his voice.

Martin shrugged his shoulders and turned to walk back to town. “I wish I could wish you farewell and good luck.”

“Well, I can wish you good luck, Martin,” Richard called after him. “There are far too many watch-mages that do not make it back to the reunions. Let us hope you are not one of them.”

Ralem, 22nd of Prem – 565 H.E.

The next day was one of errands and chores. Beléar was able to use the scroll to restore some of Kazrack’s life energy and Ratchis used a gem to pay for the mighty composite longbow he had ordered the last time the party was in town.⁷⁷

Midday found Beorth and Derek in the inn common room sharing a meal.

“I’ve been thinking about the people in our little band,” the paladin said.

“Yes?” Derek took a swig of goat’s milk, and then wiped his upper lip.

“It seems I don’t know much about anyone in it, and what I did know I have forgotten,” Beorth continued. “So, I was wondering if you could tell me a little about what you’ve done before you joined us as a start... It’s just that, well, you seem very young.”

“I’m old enough to be conscripted,” Derek said with a laugh. “I guess that is all that matters. My dad signed my up with a recruiter to come up to Derome-Delem as a way to avoid the war. However, my entire group was slaughtered in the Ogre Wood on our way westward from Ettinos.”

“The Ogre Wood?”

“It is about two weeks east of here, maybe slightly more, since you have to go south around the undead lands,” Derek explained.

Beorth nodded solemnly.

“I was left for dead but was found by a woodsman named Red Arrow. He was a ranger who helped people on the road and who traveled a lot. He nursed me back to health and showed me some his craft. I did not learn until later that he was sick...dying. He asked that I bring a message to Martin the Green that he was supposed to deliver; a message from Barnstable the Brown in Ettinos, another academy wizard.”

Beorth nodded again.

“So, what do you think of the others in our group?” the paladin asked.

⁷⁷ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack had one level restored, bringing him to a level 2 priest / level 3 fighter.

⁷⁸ **DM’s Note:** Despite his 18 strength, Ratchis was only able to afford to get a strength bow that allowed for bonuses to damage up to a 14 strength due to lack of funds.

“Well...” But Derek did not get to answer as Ratchis came walking into the inn and joined them.

Martin walked in soon after, having returned from talking with Maxel. And at the same time Maria came down from her room and sat with them when Ratchis waved her over.

“So, where do you plan to go looking for the dragon?” Ratchis asked her.

“We’re planning to go into that steamy area. It’s gotten bigger over the last few months. They say the dragon breathes fire, maybe it’s the cause,” she replied.

“There are dangerous creatures in there,” Ratchis said. He signaled for one of the barmaids to bring more food to the table.

“I didn’t come all the way out here to avoid danger,” Maria said. “Bad enough I was locked away out of action for so long.”

“Well, I don’t think the dragon is there,” Ratchis said, his eyes widening at the tray of stew and bread the barmaid brought over.

“Well, once we scrounge up two more people to come along with us we’ll be finding out for ourselves,” Maria stood, grabbing a huge chunk of bread and dipped it in Ratchis’ stew and took a big bite. “I need to get some gear and see who’s around. Nice talking to ya!”

She took off and Martin took the opportunity to tell the others about his conversation with Richard the Red the night before.

“Is this the group of monks I fought with?” Beorth asked, trying his hardest to delve into the inky depth of his memory, but only coming up something Jana had recounted to him.⁷⁹

“I assume so,” Martin replied.

“Did I ever say why I fought with them?” Beorth asked.

“No, I don’t think so,” Martin replied. “But I guess you felt they were in the wrong about the dire ram they had captured.”

“I think that ‘door’ beneath the temple is a more immediate problem than the monks,” Ratchis said.

“Well, now that your deal with Richard is off, do you think that he will allow us to examine the door peacefully since he is now holed up in the temple of Bast?” Beorth asked the watch-mage.

“The chances do not seem very high,” Martin sighed.

“Perhaps a message to Barnstable the Brown can help you decide if this Richard the Red person is worth trusting,” Derek suggested.

The feasibility of getting a message to the distant watch-mage (and getting a reply) was then discussed in detail.

Kazrack soon entered the inn and made the suggestion that the party hire Finn Fisher and his crew to deliver the message for them.

“Don’t you think their preparations for traveling to Ettinos will look like their preparations for deserting?” Ratchis asked.

“Anyway, it might be important for them to stay here,” Martin suggested. “From what Maxel says the aldermen of all

⁷⁹ The fight in question occurred in Session #31.

the alder-villages of Gothanius have been called to Twelve Trolls to discuss the matter of the gnomes and the dead mercenaries.⁸⁰ The last time this happened it led to what people around here call ‘the orc skirmishes,’ that is, the gathering of the militia. I don’t think they want to be caught wandering too far abroad when all these militia men start wandering in this direction.”

As everyone but Kazrack thought this put an end to the idea of sending a message by means of the group of dragon-hunters that had come to be known as ‘the Shepherds,’ the discussion was put to rest and it was decided that they would gather their things and leave immediately for Garvan to find out what was happening to their gnomish friends and see what could be done about averting war between the peaceful earth people and the people of the Gothanius.

The Fearless Manticore Killers and their dwarven companions marched down into Greenreed Valley and then northward to the tunnel leading back out of it and to the woods beyond it where the gnome community was somewhere to be found.⁸¹

It was suggested to Martin that since Thomas knew the way he might be sent ahead and see how safe it was since he might be able to communicate with a gnome if he found a friendly one.⁸² Martin sent Thomas off to scout ahead with a reminder to be careful.

“I’m doing this on one condition,” Thomas said mentally to his master, leaping to a tree.

“What’s that?” Martin asked.

“That when we get to gnomes, you’ll take that ring off so I can enjoy some nuts for a change,” the squirrel admonished.⁸³

Martin agreed. “I already told you I would.”

The group marched past the burnt out safehouse where they had first encountered the gnomes and where they had seen the projected image of Mozek.⁸⁴ It was hard to believe that the first was just months ago, and the later just barely two weeks before. They headed towards where they had fought the undead Gothanian mercenaries and Mozek’s fiendish gnome brothers.

They were not far past the site when Martin called mentally to Thomas to find out if he had seen or heard anything. Ratchis called for everyone to stop. He could see a wolverine climbing head first down a tree towards them, growling and its fur bristling.

“I think...” he began.

“The gnomes are here!” Thomas cried mentally to Martin.

“Everyone hold where you are!” A high-pitched voice called from the brush surrounding them.

“We have come to help you and your people,” Ratchis called out, putting his hands in the air, but holding his hammer in them. Kazrack gripped his halberd.

From all sides there now appeared several gnomish armored forms, and three more wolverines. The dwarves all tensed automatically, and Captain Adalar swung his great axe above his head.

“Hold!” called the voice of burly gnome with a long gray pointed beard and a trimmed mustache. It was Captain

⁸⁰ The party came across the aftermath of this battle in session #39.

⁸¹ Remember, When the party was first brought there, they were blindfolded and led around a while so as to not be able to determine where Garvan actually was.

⁸² Some gnomes learn the ability to speak with small burrowing animals.

⁸³ Thomas has been ‘suffering’ from the effects of *Lacan’s Demise* as well (the Ring of Sustenance).

⁸⁴ See Sessions #15 and #39.

Fistandlus. "There are those among you we count as friends. We only ask that you drop your weapons and kneel on the ground."

Beorth leaned in slowly towards Martin the Green and whispered, "Are these friends or foes?"

"These are friends, not the enemy," Martin replied, crossing his fingers.

"If you are truly our friends you will know we need not lay down our weapons," replied Kazrack to the gnomes, and Ratchis nodded in agreement.

"Hey come on these are our friends right?" Jeremy asked spinning around looking at familiar faces. Obenhammer waved at him and then quickly placed his steadying hand back on his cocked crossbow. "We can just put down our weapons. I don't see any of the bad ones."

Martin got on his knees and put both hands in the air.

"How do we know this is not a trap of the evil gnomes?" Captain Adalar asked, leaning into Kazrack.

"I have faith that these gnomes mean us no harm and are only protecting their home as any would," said Beorth dropping his sword and getting on his knees. "I have only heard of their hospitality and friendship secondhand, but I will not repay it with suspicion; even if my memory doth betray me, my integrity shall not."

Derek put a finger to his mouth to keep from laughing and rolled his eyes at Jeremy who gestured with his weapon downward before dropping it and fell to his knees. Derek mimicked him.

Captain Adalar looked back and forth from Kazrack to Beléar.

"I remember these gnomes fondly. I trust them with my life," Beléar said, gesturing to all the dwarves. He also dropped his weapon and got down on his knees. The dwarves all followed suit, some more grudgingly than others.

Ratchis looked over at Beorth who was simply looking down at the ground eyes closed as if in prayer. He dropped his hammer and knelt, even as Kazrack did the same.

The gnomes came among them all and collected the weapons and looked at them all closely.

"Oh! Hi Beorth!" said Obenhammer, picking up the paladin's sword. "Oh yeah, uh... don't move or anything okay?" The rosy-cheeked gnome winked and tugged on his own silver beard.

Captain Fistandalus leaned his heavy silvered warhammer on his shoulder and walked over to Ratchis and Kazrack, standing where he could easily see Martin and Beorth as well. Even with Ratchis kneeling the captain only reached his shoulder.

"It is good that you have returned. Many things have happened in your absence," he said. "You may stand."

The Fearless Manticore Killers and the dwarven companions did.

"We will bring you back to our home and you shall be our guests again as we tell you all of what has happened and what it means for our people," Captain Fistandlus said. "You will have to be blind-folded, but I think we can do without the binding of hands this time.

"Is your Interim Chief there?" Ratchis asked, tensing.

"The Interim Chief is no longer among us," Fistandlus replied.

"I trusted you last time, Captain. I will trust you again," Kazrack said, Jeremy furrowed his brow in response.

The dwarves grumbled as they were blind-folded, but soon they all were being led slowly along.

“This time we will not take such a circuitous route,” the Captain said. “You were closer than you probably think.”

“Hey Martin!” the Watch-Mage heard a familiar high-pitched voice from beneath his blindfold. “It’s me Briendel!”

“Briendel, I am glad to know you are all right,” Martin replied.

“Yeah, but a lot of bad stuff has been happening,” Briendel said, sadness entering his voice. “Uh, you are coming up on a tree root on your right, step carefully.”

“I’m just glad you’re alive,” Martin told the gnome who had trained him some in the illusory arts, and who had traded spells with him.

“Yeah, but a lot of good gnomes aren’t,” Briendel’s voice trailed off.

Obenhammer was marching near Beorth and said, “Yeah, we aren’t supposed to tell you much, because you know the current leader has to decide about you and stuff, but that battle was terrible.” The gnome shuddered.

“New leader?” Beorth asked, puzzled.

“Well, I’m really not supposed to say, heck I don’t even know who the leader is *today*.”

Beorth was even more puzzled, but Obie did not elucidate.

They marched for some time, at least part of which was underground, but as opposed to the overnight affair the last time the party was brought to the gnome community of Garvan, they had barely walked three hours, when they were told they could remove their blindfolds.

Once again they in the middle of four hills carved with terraces, balconies and plateaus, and scores and scores of gnomes peered from every corner looking down at the Fearless Manticore Killers and their dwarven companions.

The central area was not several feet deep in snow as it had been when the party was last here, now it and the hills that made it were dotted with small colorful flowers, and birds of many kinds, both songbirds and chickens of golden plumage were everywhere, chirping and clucking away. Somewhere, a dog barked.

Captain Fistandlus called out to his people, “Garvan! You remember our friends Kazrack, Jeremy, Martin, Beorth, Ratchis and the wise rune-thrower, Beléar. They have returned and will be staying with us briefly.”

The gnomes cheered and clapped, and soon the party and companions were being ushered into the quarters they had stayed at before. The home of Distelbowden and his little nephew Cornelius. The dwarves were all led to the upper rooms just beyond the common area, where Beléar had stayed before.

As the others bustled in the common area, getting ready for a meal Distelbowden was going to serve them, Jeremy paused at a familiar door. It was the room that Jana and Chance had spent so many passionate nights and lazy mornings together.⁸⁵ He placed a hand on the door and thought of his two dead friends. He looked up and saw Martin looking at him from the common area. The Watch-mage frowned slightly.

The dwarves were rambunctious. Happy to be in rooms and tunnels carved out of the earth for the purpose of warmth and shelter and comfort like their people did, not for some foul purpose. The smell of food came wafting from the kitchen and the energy in the room rose with anticipation.

“Will we have time to talk tonight?” Martin asked, Briendel who was joining them. “And will your brother be joining us?”

⁸⁵ Chance was killed by Mzek Steamwind as a demonstration of his seriousness in session #17. Jana’s very essence was absorbed into the body of an extra-dimensional amorphous creature in session #35.

Briendel's face grew mournful, and his usual smile turned into a tight little 'o' atop his dimpled chin and beneath his bulbous nose. "Socher was killed in the battle," he said.

"I...I'm sorry," Martin replied, putting a hand on the gnome's shoulder.

"I'm gonna see if old Distel needs help in the kitchen" Briendel said, hopping to his feet with a slightly forced smile.

Martin turned to Ratchis, "Could you have some healing magics ready for me?"

"Huh?"

"I am going to take off my ring,"⁸⁶ Martin replied. "And I am afraid all the effects of not eating would hit me all at once."

"I don't know that even the curing miracles of could repair that," Ratchis' furrowed his brow.

"No harm in trying if it means I'm going die anyway."

"Why take it off?" Jeremy asked, walking over.

"I just... I need to... I need to eat something and so does Thomas. I may not be hungry, but there is something comforting mentally about food, and Thomas is having a really hard time because it is harder for him to understand, but it is not picnic for me either," Martin replied in a rush of annoyed words. The smell of the food was mocking him.

"Maybe we should get some food in front of you first," Ratchis suggested. "Wait a moment."

The half-orc ducked into the kitchen and came out with a bowl of soup and some bread and butter. Martin could hear Distelbowden playfully cursing in gnomish back in the kitchen, understanding a few of the cuss words from things Briendel and Socher had called each other at times.

Ratchis placed the food before the watch-mage and Martin grabbed the ring between two fingers.

"Here goes everything," Martin quipped and slipped it off.

Suddenly, Martin coughed and then gasped, and then the gasp was echoed by the others in the room as they saw a great change overcome him. The very flesh on his body began to wear away before them, as if time had sped up. The doughiness of his boy-like cheeks shriveled down until his face was gray and sallow and his eyes were rheumy and seemed to bulge. The bit of extra girth he carried around his middle was gone in a moment, and his robes drooped down as they suddenly became very baggy. He threw his head back and then collapsed forward with a wheeze. Thomas' shriveled form came falling from Martin's collar. The squirrel seemed like naught more than a raggedy piece of gray leather.

"Martin!" Ratchis dropped a cloth napkin in the soup and leapt over the table, and tilting the watch-mage's head back, began to drip soup into his mouth.

Derek scooped up Thomas and held him up, as Jeremy dripped honey into the little squirrel's mouth.

They lived but would need days of rest and careful tending.

"It seems to me that he will need to rest and be fed for several days," Beléar said to Kazrack when he emerged from the watch-mage's room, where Ratchis still tended him. "And to never put that foul ring on again."

Kazrack shrugged his shoulders, as if to say he had long ago given up trying to convince the others to do anything.

⁸⁶ Martin's magic ring, *Lacan's Demise* sustains him without food or drink and he feels no hunger, but also makes it so he cannot enjoy food or drink if he does try to eat it.

The meal was served, and the dwarves dug in with great appetite. They seemed more jovial than when out on the road and were soon making boasts and promises about what they would do when they returned to Abarrane-Abaruch. They treated the gnomes with friendly deference, behaving as the perfect guests for their earthy cousins.

“Lord Distelbowden, I heartily thank you for this meal, and am grateful for your generosity especially after such a battle as was fought by your people not so long ago,” Beorth said, wondering if he had been as careful to learn everyone’s name *before* he had lost his memory. Nowadays everything he learned he was certain to remember; pages of parchment filled with notes were wadded in his pack.

“Battle? Who told you about a battle?” asked Ashkenbach, who had joined them for the meal as well.

“Obenhammer,” said Beorth looking at the gnome, who turned a bright red beneath his gray-brown skin.

“Hmmm,” Ashkenbach shot a disapproving glance over at Obie. “He’s not supposed to speak of that. Only the leader can. I was the leader two days ago, but I’m not anymore.”

“Huh?” Beorth was puzzled again.

“Let me explain,” said Distilbowden, filling mugs with more steaming *kafka*. “We had to go to the ‘new law,’ which is really the old law we used before going back to the new law which was renounced with the return to chiefdom. It was declared that the return to the old law would incorporate the ‘new law,’ if by the customs of old law the chief were not present to choose an interim chief.”

“I think I need to echo Beorth’s ‘huh?’” Jeremy laughed.

“Basically, when the chief is not around to choose an interim chief, we go back to the law that replaced the use of a chief which had been abandoned in place of a chiefdom,” Obenhammer said.

“So, what is this *new* old law?” Kazrack asked.

“People take turns every few day being the leader, and all decisions go through them,” Ashkenbach explained.

Kazrack eyes widened in disbelief.

“You all take turns?” Jeremy was incredulous.

“Well, a few days at a time and if someone wants, they can just give the responsibility to someone else for the day,” Ashkenbach said in a tone that said he thought everyone knew this. “That is how the line of chieftains was first picked, they were given leadership more often than anyone else.”

“So there’s not going to be a fight, right?” Captain Adalar.

“Uh, I don’t think so,” Ashkenbach shrugged his shoulders.

“It is better that we did not have to fight,” Beléar said.

“So what happened to the Interim Chief?” Jeremy asked.

Ashkenbach and Obenhammer looked at each other and then former said, “You have to wait for whoever is leader to tell you, or for them to tell the captain that he can do it.”

“So, Captain Ironhammer is not the leader?” Ratchis asked, walking into the room.

“No, but people give him leadership often,” Distilbowden said.

“Well Captain Fistandlus deserves the honor,” Kazrack said. “He always struck me as a wise and dedicated leader.”

“And if it comes to war, these gnomes are going to need one,” Ratchis said.

Everyone looked at him.

“War?” Little Cornelius asked, looking scared. Distilbowden looked at Ratchis with disappointment.

“It could come to that,” Ratchis said.

“The breach gnomes would hold anyone out,” Obenhammer said, winking at Cornelius.

“What’s a breach gnome?” Derek asked, speaking for the first time since arriving. He was overwhelmed by the fact that he was actually in a gnomish town. He had never experienced what the others had become so used to.

Cornelius stood and left the room. He seemed upset, and Distilbowden still looking disappointed went after him.

“What was that about?” Jeremy asked, and Adalar sneered at him for not acting as if it had not happened, as a good guest should do.

“He’s just upset because I’m a breach gnome,” Obenhammer said.

“What’s a breach gnome?” Jeremy asked, echoing Derek’s question.

“Let it lie,” Beléar said, sternly.

A gloom had come over the room and the normally cheerful gnomes. For a long time, the only sound was that of people eating.

“With Mozek dead, it just *may* come to war,” Ashkenbach said.

“Ash!” Obie cried out, surprised. “We aren’t supposed to...”

“Oh, they were going to find out anyway,” Ashkenbach said, and he cleared his own dishes bringing them into the kitchen.

Ratchis raised an eyebrow, but Kazrack smiled broadly, “It is both happy and amusing that what we’ve worried about for so long turns out to be not a worry after all.”

“Yes, now instead of having to kill a half-fiend gnome, we only have to stop the kingdom we are contractually bound to serve from going to war with our hospitable gnome friends here,” Beorth said.

“Don’t think I would hesitate to take the side of gnomes,” Ratchis said. “If it comes to that.”

“We can’t let it come to that,” Kazrack said, and Beorth nodded.

“That’d be pretty terrible,” Jeremy chimed in.

“Maybe that’s what Mozek wanted,” Beorth theorized. Obenhammer, the only gnome left in the room began to look distressed. “Uh, now I remember why we’re supposed to keep quiet. Best you let the Captain explain it all to you first chance he gets before you go concocting stories.”

Cornelius came back into the room with Distilbowden, and Obenhammer stood.

“I have to go back on duty,” he said, and tussling Cornelius’ hair he bid them all farewell.

After the meal, Kazrack suggested the Fearless Manticore Killer retire to the public house to discuss the information they had gained and their options for preventing war.

“Why would you go to the pub to discuss?” Cornelius asked in a puzzled voice. “It’s for singing and dancing and drinking.”

“Pub!” Golnar, Tolnar and Jolnar said at once, and though they had to wait until after they helped Distil with the dishes (by order of Captain Adalar) they soon hurried over to raucous pub across the way.

The others made their way over in time.

“Wait ‘til you see this place,” Jeremy said to Derek. “Be ready for the headache of your life tomorrow!”

Ratchis and Beorth checked on Martin before going over.

As Kazrack and Beléar left the ‘guest burrows’ to go to the public house, the elder dwarf said, “You know to the humans, the Mountain Wars were long ago, but to us, people of earth and stone, it was not so long ago.”

“It was in my grandsire’s time,” Kazrack nodded.

“If it comes to it and these fine gnomes are attacked by human forces then old treaties and alliances will be remembered. Even if Abarrane-Abaruch is too busy with its own problems to help, they will send heralds to other strongholds calling for aid to the gnomes. This could have very big consequences if not handled correctly.”

Kazrack nodded gravely. “I am sure when Martin wakes up, he’ll figure something out. He is good with human diplomacy and law and custom. He’ll be able to talk the human king out of doing it. I have faith in him.”

“You put your *faith* in a human mage,” Beléar sighed. “Kazrack, you never cease to amaze me.”

“The world of our creator is an amazing place. I am due no credit.”

Beléar let out a deep belly laugh and slapped Kazrack on the shoulder with avuncular affection.

There was a grand time to be had at the public house that night. There was much dancing and singing, and even Jeremy took a turn swinging around, showing the gnomes a Neergaardian dance he had learned as a boy. And all the while the dwarves sang along and drank endless amounts of mead and ale, barking at each other in slurred dwarvish and laughing a great deal.

Both Ratchis and Beorth left early, but Kazrack remained with his brethren and Jeremy and Derek were happily drunk and watching the mayhem as Jolnar, Tolnar and Golnar began to have wrestling matches against some of the burlier gnomes. They laughed drunkenly as they slammed into each other and held each other in tight armlocks. The gnomes cheered each move, and one gnome began to call the matches in high-pitched and drunken voice.

Isilem, 23rd of Prem – 565 H.E.

Kazrack spent the day working in the great gnomish smithy and could see that they were preparing for war, making a great number of helmets and shields and axes and other weapons. Workers were tirelessly pinching together chain shirts. The heat rose up in visible waves. While he was there, he found out that the armor Beorth had ordered when he was last here was completed. The paladin would now have a suit of splint mail to wear.

Martin spent the day in bed, but Briendel kept him company. The gnome was able to dispel the ward on the two remaining books found at the Necropolis that had not been opened, and as suspected they were spell books with dark necromancy spells in them of up to the 5th House.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ **DM’s Note:** In Aquerra games we try to use as little artificial language as possible when talking about “rule stuff” in game. However, arcane spells are divided into various “houses” depending on the level they are. Thus, a *fireball* would be a spell of the 3rd House.

“Ooh, wow! Look at this one,” Briendel said, pointing excitedly to page. “It lets you send out a wave of death in all directions from the caster! I’ve never seen anything like that!”

“Yes, that will have to be destroyed,” Martin said.

Briendel clucked his tongue, “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

In the evening after the fourth meal, the Fearless Manticore Killers gathered in the common area to talk. They propped Martin up in a cushioned chair, with Thomas cradled in his lap. Most of the dwarves went back to the public house. Kazrack had invited Beléar to come, but no gnomes were present.

“I was thinking that I could get some messages translated into gnomish that I want to send to my fellow Academy mage and perhaps to the Academy itself, and then send them when we get back to town. That way, if they are intercepted it is unlikely anyone will be able to know what they say, but another watch-mage should either *know* gnomish or have access to someone who does,” Martin explained.

“And perhaps we can leave word so that if a message returns for you while we are away with specific instructions as to what is to be done, we can have Finn and his group do it, if it is not too dangerous,” Kazrack suggested.

“We are not going to drag those boys into this,” Ratchis said.

“They are boys no longer,” said Beorth. “I do not remember them from before, but they have the look of those who have killed and nearly died in their eyes; *that* look I know.”

“Let’s attend to the matter at hand,” Ratchis said. “What do you all make of Mozek’s supposed death?”

“I don’t believe it,” Kazrack said immediately and Martin nodded weakly.

Beorth only shrugged.

“He can’t be dead,” Jeremy said, matter-of-factly. “If he were dead it’d just be *too* easy, and if there is one thing I have learned since joining this group is that *nothing* is easy.” Derek chuckled.

Ratchis turned to Martin, ignoring Jeremy. “Do you think it is possible that the demon was inside of Mozek like a possessing spirit? And when the body died the spirit moved on?”

“I don’t know, but we best try to find out *when* it supposedly happened so we can work it out with when we last saw him,” Martin coughed.

“There is a bigger question than any of these,” Beorth said. “We are getting bogged down in details, but the real question is ‘why all of this attention focused here all at once?’ Academy wizards, mysterious monks, demon spawn and drow witches, all here, all now. That is not a coincidence.”

“Hurgun’s Maze,” Martin coughed out. “That’s all it could be. There are things I have read in those books we recovered from the Necropolis that lead me to believe that there is a lot more to it than we even thought before.”

“Those books mention Hurgun’s Maze?” Kazrack asked.

“No, but it speaks of the realm of shadow, what some sages call the ethereal plane and how this whole area of this plane is somehow weakened because of the existence of four nodes of power. The Necropolis was one of them.”

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” Jeremy said.

“And you think Hurgun’s Maze is one of them?” Beorth asked.

“No, actually I don’t,” Martin said. “It pretty much says where the four are but comparing the description to the maps of

the area I made at Aze Nuquerna I think that one of them is where the Pit of Bones is now.”

“Pit of Bones?” Derek asked.

“It is a former dwarven citadel, now a great chasm of rock and bone. Martin was able to discover in the tomes of Aze Nuquerna that it was the last known place where a map could be found that told of the location of Hurgun’s Maze,” Beorth said.

“I thought you lost your memory, but you remember this stuff better than I do,” Jeremy quipped.

“Jana told me much, and I asked a lot of questions and took notes,” replied Beorth.

“I have a different answer for that question,” Kazrack said, smiling and nudging Martin with an elbow. Martin groaned and clutched his side.

“I was even there once, but I only know because I was told and because I found reference to it in my own notes,” Beorth continued, his tone grew even colder than usual.⁸⁸

“So that is where we’re going next,” Ratchis said. “The Pit of Bones. Mozek told us he had already found Hurgun’s Maze, so we need to go after him. We can’t let him have access to the power that is there.”

“But if he already knows where it is then he’d already be there and it wouldn’t matter what we did,” Jeremy reasoned.

“We don’t know how long it would take him to harness the power or even discover how to,” Beorth said. “We can’t *not* try.”

“Another possibility is that he doesn’t know where it is and is counting us to find it for him and reveal its location,” Martin croaked. “We have thought that he was scrying on us before.”

“It matters not,” replied Kazrack. “We are going to have to take the chance.”

At that moment, Captain Fistandlus walked in, followed by Distelbowden and Cornelius.

“I will make you all some tea,” Distelbowden said, hurrying his nephew into the kitchen.

“I have come to speak with you sooner rather than later because I know my people cannot resist the telling of a tale and you will hear a dozen versions before you hear two that match,” the Captain said in his dour tone that was so unlike any of the other gnomes.

“You honor us with you time and attention,” Beorth said, and he bowed his freshly shaven head.

The doughty captain placed his helmet and blade on the table and pulled out a small bench so he could face everyone.

“Where should we begin?” asked Fistandlus.

“Start when we left here last,” suggested Beorth, taking out his scraps of parchment and his quill.

The captain sighed and began.

“After your escape I was imprisoned by Mozek and the last of the old chieftain’s guards were removed. Mozek’s brothers were put in charge of defense. Mozek was convinced that I had arranged your escape.”

Distilbowden came in with a tray full of mugs and a huge steam pot of tea.

⁸⁸ Beorth traveled there with the monks Maynard and Vander, meeting up with Master Hamfast, back in the Interlude before Session #25.

“But I don’t remember you being the one to help us escape,” Kazrack said.

“I didn’t,” Captain Fistandlus said. “I would not disobey my chieftain, even an interim one, even Mozek but when he imprisoned me without calling on a council of peers my fears about him were confirmed.”

“That he’s a demon?” Jeremy asked.

Captain Fistandlus screwed up his face and snorted.

“That he was corrupt, as I had discovered some of his younger brothers to be and had forbade them from being part of the community’s defense or to tend to the wolverine dens; that he was only interested in having power over our people,” he said. “However, little more than a fortnight ago Mozek came to me in my cell. He told me that human forces were marching on our community. He told me that they had already been intercepted by a border patrol and they had nearly been wiped out, and that they were accompanied by a powerful priest of an evil human priest who enslaved the wills of dead men to do his bidding.”

Beorth’s eyes narrowed.

Captain Fistandlus paused. He lifted a mug to his lips and blew the steam away, and then put it back down.

“Mozek went on to tell me that the survival of Garvan depended on our working together and putting our differences aside, and that my skills as a leader and warrior were needed, along with calling those gnomes that had left the community against Mozek’s command against it to come and help, as among them were some of our best warriors and scouts.”

“And he was telling the truth?” Beorth asked.

“Yes, he released me, and we coordinated an attack,” the Captain continued. “It was a more terrible fight than I’ve ever been in. The human soldiers wore black and the heraldry of the human kingdom. We have traveled among them unseen in days past enough to know it. The human priest would make the very men we killed rise again and attack, and the soldiers seemed to be mercenaries, hired, for they were more seasoned than the farmers and tradesmen who fought the Fir-Hargre a bit ago.”

“Did the priest have a holy symbol?” Kazrack asked.

“A serpent,” replied Fistandlus. “The miracles he called down from his dark god were heinous. He killed Mozek and I soon after I killed him. One of the Gothanian lieutenants slew three wolverines, and it took five gnomes together to take him down, and two did not survive the night from the wounds they took. It was no skirmish. This is war. We were forced to kill every one of those men. We did not like it, but if more come, we are prepared to do it again.”

“So you say Mozek is dead?” Martin asked.

“Yes.”

“How many days ago was this?” Beorth asked, looking through his scraps of papers again.

“Three cul-dozens, about,” replied the Captain.⁸⁹

“Ah-ha!” cried Beorth. “We saw Mozek alive one or two days after that.”

“You did?” the captain was incredulous.

“Yes, he came and spoke to us about his mother and his brothers and Hurgun’s Maze and...and...” Jeremy scratched his chin.

⁸⁹ A ‘cul-dozen’ is a gnomish term for a half-dozen, which merchants of other races have picked up in some places in Aquerra.

“Let me explain,” said Martin, and he did just that.⁹⁰

“That is a queer tale,” Fistandlus said. “I cannot accept that Mozek somehow staged his own death and if so, perhaps the whole attack?”

“Did you ever see him display any, let’s call it *demonic* qualities?” Martin asked.

“Never. I heard the rumors, but I do not accept them to be true.”

“They are true,” Ratchis said, flatly. “But it doesn’t matter, what matters now is that more soldiers will come. There was at least one survivor, and as we speak news of this attack reaches the king.”

“Of course it does, he knew about it, they attacked us,” said Captain Fistandlus.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” said Kazrack. “He would risk much to begin a war with you when he has such a dangerous foe to his southeast.”

“Who?” asked Jeremy.

“Menovia,” Ratchis replied for the dwarf and spat.

“Could they be involved?” asked Kazrack, his mind going in a new direction.

“There is no evidence of that or reason to even speculate it,” said Beorth.

“Except for the priest of Set, that kind of clinches it,” said Ratchis, sounding biting.

“It is interesting that Ephraim’s story and Fistandlus’ story do not match up,” said Martin. “It is as if they were in two totally different fights. One side thought it was fighting the other, but wasn’t, and now both sides prepare for war.”

“All you say may be true,” Captain Fistandlus said. “And my heart tells me to believe you, but it doesn’t matter anymore. If the humans come, they come to kill us and lay our hills flat. We cannot allow that.”

“The war can be avoided,” said Martin. “I must think of how to do it, but I will do all in my power to figure out a way.”

End of Session #51

⁹⁰ See Session #39 for the events Martin described here regarding Mozek Steamwind and Hurgun’s Maze.

Session #52

“You see, it is all starting to make sense to me,” Martin added.

“Well, explain it to us, by all means,” Jeremy laughed.

Derek smiled, but Martin frowned and continued, “Briendel translated a lot of that marginalia in gnomish to me.”

“Maraga-whatzit?” Jeremy asked.

“The notes in gnomish in those books we found. Remember I told you about the place of power? Well, there was speculation in those notes that increasing ‘mortal fear’ and ‘chaos’ in the area between those four places of power will weaken the curtains between this world and the realm of shadow. Someone who controlled that power could do a lot of things,” Martin’s pallid face suddenly seemed calm as he confidently explained what he had been able to learn from the complicated notes.

“I don’t get it,” Jeremy said, and Derek shrugged.

“Martin, I believe you need to be more explicit in your explanations,” Beorth said.

Ratchis cleared his throat and nodded.

“The plane of shadow exists in parallel to this world, and it does with all worlds. It touches even the foundation of the heavens and the hellish realms of demons,” Martin said with some passion and then began to cough. He sipped some tea and continued. “If someone could control this connection to the shadow realm, he could then summon things, foul things, and taint animals and monsters with the foulness of darker realms, like those wolverines that Mozek’s brothers had with them.”

The watch-mage turned to Captain Fistandlus and frowned, “And I am sad to have to tell you Captain but the notes in those books pretty much tell the tale of Mozek’s demonic parentage and that of his brothers. Though it does not say how many there were.”

“Thirteen,” Captain Fistandlus replied, and then he let out a long slow breath. “Though the seven that remained in Garvan were killed in the battle.”

“I think Hurgun’s Maze is the key,” Beorth suddenly said. “We have learned it is a planar nexus, correct?”

Martin and Ratchis nodded, and then Kazrack followed suit. Jeremy shrugged, “That stuff makes my eyes glaze over.”

Derek laughed.

“No wonder everyone is so anxious to find out where it is and how to get in,” Beorth went on. “It must be the key to controlling this anomaly, that is probably why Hurgun built it, or the entrance to it, in this area.”

“Seems reasonable,” said Kazrack.

“I believe that creature, you know the one with the pyramidal shape and the horn-like nose and three spindly legs and arms is the key to finding the Maze,” Martin said. “I believe it came from there, and if I can examine it and try to communicate with it we may not need waste our time going to the Pit of Bones.”⁹¹

“It is gone,” Distelbowden said, coming back into the room.

“Gone?”

⁹¹ The strange creature that only said “Haaaahnt! Hooornt!” was first seen in Session #16. It was speculated that it came from Hurgun’s Maze as that was the only part of its language the gnomes could interpret.

"It disappeared the night of the battle. We did not think of it that night, feeling it was best kept safe in its room, but the next morning when we went to give it some exercise and let it wander about a bit, it was gone."

"I would bet anything that Mozek took it," Kazrack said.

"Natan-Ahb does not approve of gambling," Beléar chastised.

"He probably used it to find the Maze," Martin theorized.

"Or killed it to keep us from learning something from it," Ratchis suggested.

"So all we need do is tell the King of Gothanius," Kazrack said. "Explain to him that he is being manipulated."

Beorth shook his head, "Kings and lords of men are often prideful. I do not think he will as easily be convinced as all that."

"Anyway, he wants to expand Gothanius," Derek piped in. "He summoned the dragon-hunters because he plans to bring Greenreed Valley into the kingdom, don't you think he's already considered what he may have to do to accomplish that?"

"His men destroyed the orcs that were near here," Ratchis said.

"Gnomes are not orcs," Beléar said, and Ratchis grunted.

"And he cannot be totally unreasonable," Kazrack said. "He certainly cannot want to fight a war on two fronts."

"Two fronts?" Jeremy asked.

"The Menovians," Ratchis answered. "They would use any sign of weakness or excuse to conquer Gothanius like they did Rhondria."

The room was silent as everyone considered what was being shared and speculated upon.

Finally, Ratchis spoke, "Captain Fistandlus, would your people be willing to send a delegation of some kind to parley with the human king?"

"I don't know," the gnome replied. "And I don't know that I trust this king of men or any of his representatives."

"I could send word to the king so that he at least more fully understands the situation," Martin proffered.

"I have to talk this all over with Hatzel, who is leader today, and then we will bring it before the elder's council," Captain Fistandlus explained. "But I will tell you one thing, if such a negotiation were to occur, we would want Martin present."

"Huh? Me?" Martin was shocked.

"We trust you, Martin," the Captain said. "You have given us reason to, but the kings of men have given us reason not to trust them. My people remember the Mountain Wars as well as Beléar's do."

"We may be away at the Pit of Bones a long time," Ratchis said. "Martin may not be available for such a negotiation."

Fistandlus shook his head. "I'm afraid it will have to be Martin or no one. He of all men I know would not let us agree to anything that was not fair, or if he thought there was some trickery in it."

Ratchis sighed.

"You do me honor, Captain," Martin stood and bowed, and then swaying, for he was still very weak, he fell back into his seat.

Captain Fistandlus excused himself, as he had to return to duty and explained that he had to examine the new armor being made in smithy before turning in for the night.

After he had gone Beorth said, "You know, the gnomes may not let us leave."

"What? Why would they do that?" Jeremy asked, shocked.

"They kept us here last time did they not?" Beorth stood and paced the room. "Jana told me you were here for months."

"Yes, but they let us go then, they'll let us go now," Ratchis said. "They know we are trying to help them."

"Do you think it would be wise for him to let us go so Martin can tell the king about the gnomes' preparations for war?" Do you think this will deter him? Or rather make him more cautious, make whatever war comes more protracted? There are consequences no matter what actions we take. We must choose wisely, but regardless of what we choose the number of souls Anubis must guard over will grow before this is all over."

"No matter what, word must be sent to the Academy," Martin said, weakly. "It is this kind of potential abuse of power and threat to the free peoples of the world that the Academy was formed to stop."

The watch-mage began to cough, his now frail body convulsing as he gasped for breath. Beorth hurried over and kept him from falling, and soon after led the mage back to his room to rest more.

Days passed.

Jeremy and Derek spent their time playing the wild and complicated games the gnomes often played. Derek suspected they made up the rules on the spot, but Jeremy confirmed that what he had witnessed seemed consistent, though the rules of a game could change depending on the day of the week, the color of the sunset, or whether the number of players was a prime number.

"What's a prime number?" Derek asked.

Jeremy shrugged his shoulders.

Martin spent his days recovering and going over the books and spells recovered from the Necropolis with Briendel. They made a list of spells to tear from the books and destroy as Beorth had asked for them to do if they found any spells of black necromancy.⁹²

They also discovered a lot more from the books and marginalia, like how the vampire Ratchis had beheaded was named *Zedarias* and was a necromancer from the late portion of the Third Age and that he worshiped Rahkefet.⁹³ It seemed he had been tricked by a powerful monkey-demon, infected with vampirism and trapped in that sarcophagus. The notes even speculated that the vampire's eternal pain from his undying thirst is what supported the seemingly insupportable chasm ceilings of the chambers below. The monkey-demon was a servant of the same demon-lord that Mozek's mother served. And they learned her name was *Ora-Amira-El*.

The notes in gnomish had been made by Mozek's father, a normal mortal gnome name Zocher, who having discovered the Necropolis, wanted its power and summoned the greater succubus. But the notes were garbled and some of it seemed fractured or mad. Some of it seemed to suggest that Zocher had figured out a way to contact other planes and make deals with other infernal creatures and that he had made just such a deal to get rid of the succubus, but he still

⁹² Necromancy comes in three varieties. 'Black Necromancy' is powered by the negative material plane and regardless of the effect is always evil. 'Grey Necromancy' can be used for good or evil, though they are generally considered a corruptive influence. 'White Necromancy' channels positive energy and is considered innately good.

⁹³ Rahkefet is the son of Set. Known as the God of the Lost and the Astray, he is considered a lost or 'forgotten' power. It is said that in *The Time Before* he was a pharaoh.

feared his own children.

Martin's mind boggled at all this information about the netherworlds he was gaining. The more he absorbed the more confused he became trying to juggle and sculpt speculation and scenarios, trying to figure out the best way to explain it all to the others. He spent his time cross-referencing between the notes and the illustrated guide to fiends he had found. The Academy of Wizardry had taught him a great deal of general knowledge about so-called 'outsiders,' but nothing had prepared him for such an intense immersion in the subject. Put beside the lore of names and planes and summoning, the school of illusion seemed paltry to him. And for the first time in his life, he wondered if he might have been better off studying under the Master Summoner of the Academy.

Beorth spent his days in quiet meditation and getting the final fittings for his splint mail armor. It was beautifully crafted.

Kazrack spent his days alternately working in the forge or studying with Beléar. The dwarves gathered gear and supplies for the journey back to Abarrane-Abaruch. They made their plans and got the blessing from Captain Fistandlus (who consulted with whomever was in charge that day) and soon it was the night before they were to leave.

Teflem, the 27th of Prem – 564 H.E.

Golnar, Jolnar and Tolnar were forbidden to go to the pub that night, as they were likely to get too drunk and they needed march out the next day. They were glum about it.

Captain Adalar was questioning Kazrack intensely about the fighting habits of quaggoths, and for whatever else might be known about the drow.⁹⁴

Jeremy and Derek said quick good-byes to the dwarves, and then went to the pub as they usually did in the evening. Ratchis sat quietly in the common room at Kazrack's request, while different gnomes came in and out all night to bid the dwarves farewell.

Beorth spoke with Beléar.

"Father Beléar, I have been thinking long and hard about the dilemma with these peace-loving gnomes and the human king," he said in his always-serious tone. "I have prayed on it, and I have read over the notes I put together that serve as my memory. I wanted to ask you if your people have a connection to..."

The paladin looked at his notes.

"The Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium?"

"Yes, most dwarven strongholds do," Beléar explained. "It is the lifeline of trade between the vast majority of dwarves and even the towns of other races in Derome-Delem, and to some extent abroad. Why?"

"I remembered Jana mentioning something about this dwarven consortium building a road to Gothanius. The subject also came up when we were trying to decide if and to whom we might send messages about our predicament," the paladin paused.

"And?"

"Expanding his kingdom is important to the King of Gothanius, but so is trade and so is his relationship with the Dwarven Merchant Consortium. Perhaps some pressure from them can accomplish what we cannot and force him to look for a peaceful resolution to this dispute."

Beléar nodded. "You are very wise. They say the blind develop other senses and foresight to overcome their blindness.

⁹⁴ Abarrane-Abaruch was assaulted by scores of quaggoth using great tactics and possessing great skill in battle. It was for that reason that such a small force was all that could be afforded to fulfill the ancient pacts between their races and be sent to help the gnomes. The Fearless Manticore Killers informed the dwarves that returning drow were behind the well-planned quaggoth attacks.

So too have you gained something in having lost connection to your past self.”

“Do you think it will work?” Beorth asked.

“There is hope,” Beléar replied. “When I return to Abarrane-Abaruch I will meet with a representative of the Consortium. I will even send a letter to Mnornthord-Wyrmraugh if I must.”⁹⁵

The night ended with a small meal and a toast.

“We are in your debt,” Ratchis said, lifting his foaming mug of ale out, since he could not lift it up due to the low ceiling that caused him to slouch more than half the time he was inside.

“I more than any,” Kazrack added.

“We have only done what is right; what needed to be done,” Beléar replied. “I only wish that I could accompany you to this ‘Pit of Bones.’ It was once a mighty dwarven fortress, and there will be wonders to behold there.”

“To safe journeys and quests fulfilled,” Kazrack said, lifting his mug. The dwarves and gnomes followed suit.

“Here! Here!” Jeremy and Derek yelled bursting drunkenly into the common area.

The next morning Martin gave Beléar message to be sent via the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium to watch-mages in Bountiful, Ettinos and the Far Shore League. Blodnath pulled Jeremy aside and gave him a set of thieves’ tools as a gift.

“Keep working on it, kid,” he said. “Remember to be patient, and those locks will start unlocking themselves if you wait long enough.”

Jeremy thanked him and rushed to the room he and Derek shared to unroll the black cloth and examine the fine tools.

Ralem, the 1st of Sek – 564 H.E.

It was two nights later that Captain Fistandlus finally got back to them. It was evening, and he came to share supper with the party and Distelbowden and he brought Ashkenbach, Briendel and Obenhammer along.

As was gnomish custom, the Captain did not discuss business he had with the Fearless Manticore Killers until after everyone had finished eating.

“In the past few days we have had many discussions,” the Captain began. “We have agreed that you are free to come and go as you will. You are no longer our guests, but our cousins, and as such you shall be shown the way out and how to find the four hills without escort.”⁹⁶

“We are honored at your trust,” said Kazrack.

Ratchis nodded.

“You will have to take an oath beforehand that you will reveal it to no one,” the Captain said in a very serious voice. “It is considered a grave crime to our people.”

“You can trust us,” Jeremy said, smiling.

“What of the delegation?” Beorth asked, dispensing with the pleasantries.

⁹⁵ Mnornthord-Wyrmraugh (called ‘Rockmar’ by humans) is the headquarters of the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium and the oldest existing dwarven city in Aquerra.

⁹⁶ Gnomes consider all other gnomes their cousins, as they believe they are all related.

Fistandlus sighed, "We have not yet decided if we are going to recognize Gothanius as a sovereign nation to even be negotiated with."

"What?" Jeremy dropped a spoon on the table.

"But recognized or no, you need to parley with any significant force," Kazrack said, aghast. "Unless you want it to come to bloodshed."

"I certainly do not," the captain said, adamantly. "But I must consider all the options, and as they say, gnomes are like badgers it is dangerous to pull us from our holes."

No one knew what to say.

"But," the Captain continued. "Martin could negotiate for us, that is use reason to convince this human king that sending his soldiers against us will do naught but kill more soldiers and bring an enemy into this world that neither one of us want to have to deal with."

"Perhaps we should go see the King right away," Martin suggested to the others. "And then go to the Pit of Bones."

Kazrack shook his head. "What if this king did not let us go? He, too, may want you to advise him and negotiate for him."

"Or think we are in league with his enemies if we come representing the gnomes," Beorth added, delivering his gloomy assessments phlegmatically.

"We have to risk it," Martin said, wide-eyed. "I mean, I don't know what else to do. If only I could get a message through to Alexandra or Barnstable or the Academy itself, then they would tell me what it is I ought to do."

There was a long awkward pause and then they all agreed that they should make their way to Summit and then travel from there to Twelve Trolls and seek an audience with the King of Gothanius.

The next day was spent gathering supplies and bidding farewell to their gnomish friends and the morning after that found them climbing through the craterous valley to arrive at Summit.

Captain Fistandlus and a patrol of gnomish guards escorted them along the hidden path out of Garvan and to the now burned ruin of the traitors' safehouse. It was only a three-hour march.

The shadows were long when then came atop the ridge and onto the streets of Summit. It seemed eerily quiet. The only sound was the wind whipping around the buildings.

They headed towards the Sun's Summit Inn, and in the square, they saw a large pavilion tent pitched across from the town well. Two lightly armored soldiers flanked the entrance, holding spears, and having shields on their backs.

"The *King* couldn't have come *here*, could he?" There was shock in Martin's voice as he stopped in his tracks across the way and examined the large tent.

"The King would not stay in a tent, I think," Beorth said.

"Anyway, don't you know anything, Martin?" Jeremy piped up. "Kings have huge retinues and heavily armored guards, not just some light armored spearmen."

The Neergaardian and snickered.

"Let's go see Maxel," Martin said, ignoring Jeremy. "He'll know what's going on, and I doubt the Alderman is back

yet.⁹⁷

“What happened to you?” Maxel asked, wiping sweat from his brow. The party could see he seemed to be hard at work. There were scores of arrow and spear heads lined up on a table, and several suits of armor in various stages of being put together. He seemed to be preparing to make swords as well.

Martin was puzzled by the question and then realized the smith/constable meant his new leaner and careworn visage.

“Magic,” Martin shrugged his shoulders by way of explanation.

“I hope you killed the evil wizard that did that to you,” Maxel said seriously, but with a smile.

“Ah, if only it were that easy, my dear sir,” Martin replied. “But I am afraid I have not the time tell the tale, I am more concerned about the tent near the alderman’s house and the soldiers.”

“Gerard Prichett,” Maxel replied. “He is the queen’s brother and the Royal Huntsman. He has been sent by the king and the Council of Aldermen to collect the militia here. Riders have been sent to all the alder-villages to announce that fit men and whatever the dragon-hunters choose to help, can come here and fall under his command for the hunt for the vicious gnome menace.”

Martin sighed.

“Actually, he asked for you first thing when he arrived and seemed very concerned about where you were and was quite surprised you were not here coordinating the groups of dragon-hunters, or at least that is what he seemed to think you were supposed to be doing here.”

Martin sighed again.

“I tried to explain to him that you have been busy and that you were very ‘hands on,’ and the we hadn’t even really started on your house yet, though the foundation is set to be laid day after tomorrow, you may want to come by,” Maxel continued.

“I thank you for your help,” Martin replied. “I guess I should go talk to him then.”

“I would just be careful not to go with your friend Ratchis,” Maxel warned. “He was a great slayer of orcs in the skirmishes and it is said he enjoyed it.”

Martin sighed.

Martin asked the rest of the Fearless Manticore Killers to wait and he approached the tent. He introduced himself to a guard, who entered the tent and returned holding open the flap for the watch-mage to enter.

The rest of the group watched Martin enter the tent from across the square and around the corner of a large house.

“We’ll watch from here,” said Ratchis.

“Why should we wait here? Surely you don’t think Martin is in any physical danger?” Beorth asked.

“Because there is no way that evil creatures that look like people are actually half-demon spawn and have infiltrated the humans,” Ratchis replied with scathing sarcasm. He had learned the nuances of languages by spending so much time with humans, but he still used it as a blunt instrument.

⁹⁷ The alderman was called to court about the situation with the gnomes, as were all the aldermen of Gothanius.

“But we have every indication that just might be the case!” Kazrack exclaimed, not getting it.⁹⁸

Inside Martin found the tent to be rugged, but well-appointed.

The Royal Huntsman, Gerard Pritchard, was a tall and broad-shouldered young man, with golden brown tightly curled locks and a well-trimmed beard. He was very handsome, and his green eyes were very alert.

“Martin the Green, esteemed watch-mage of the Crown!” Gerard greeted him with respect and friendliness. “It gladdens me to see you here at last. I pray your duties have not called you too far a field and into too much danger?”

“More danger than I care recall, actually” Martin replied. He felt at ease around this gregarious man immediately. He was invited to sit. Pritchard called for his squire to bring them wine.

“Well, I hope you can tell me something about these gnomes. I was not shown the letter you sent the King about it, but I did learn through my own means that you did send one,” Gerard said, smiling.

“These gnomes are a peace-loving people,” Martin replied, deciding the truth was the best option with this man. “I believe that both they and the king are being manipulated to bring about a war.”

“Really?” Gerard did not seem surprised. He stood and took the huge skin his squire had brought in. Beads of moisture hung to the outside of the finely crafted bladder, as the Huntsman lifted it, leaning it on his forearm and poured himself a mouthful. He handed the heavy skin gently over to Martin, who grinning uncomfortably took a long sip himself. He was glad he had not put the ring back on. He wiped his mouth with the back of his sleeve and did his best to explain.

Martin the Green told Gerard Pritchard as best he could about Mozek and how the gnomes of Garvan had been led to believe they were being attacked by a force just as horrific as the one the soldiers sent by the Crown has been decimated by.

Gerard Pritchard was quiet for a moment and then took another long swig from the wineskin.

“So, you are saying that evil gnomes born of a demon-woman are trying to manipulate good peace-loving gnomes and the Kingdom of Gothanium into a war?”

“I know it is hard to believe, but. . .”

“No, no. I mean, it is far-fetched, but I think that if you were going to make something up you would not have made something up that is so bizarre. In addition, the description of the gnome attack did not fit with what I know about gnomes. Unlike a lot of people in court, I have traveled some around Derome-Delem. I have nothing against the free people of this island.” Gerard handed the skin back to Martin and scratched his beard. “Now, what does this have to do with the dragon?”

“Nothing, so far as we know,” Martin said, deciding to keep the speculation that the gnomish ‘traitors’ were behind the dragon sightings all along.

“You know, I mentioned to the king at dinner one night, soon after your group brought back that Manticore to be stuffed, that I thought perhaps the *dragon* sightings were this Manticore all along,” Gerard said. “The common folk tend to exaggerate their stories, so it is not so far out of the question.”

“We had considered that,” Martin replied.

“Which mean the Fearless Manticore Killers have already completed the King’s quest,” Gerard said with a smile and a wink, but Martin winced at the name.

“What’s the matter?”

⁹⁸ Dwarven culture never developed sarcasm, and those dwarves who have come to recognize it despise it as a vice and a lie.

“Oh, that name,” Martin replied. “We were saddled with it, but none of us really like it.”

“I’m afraid you are stuck with it until you kill something bigger,” Gerard said, laughing. He stood and called Martin over to a table where he had a map of the area unfurled.

“So these gnomes must live somewhere north of Greenreed Valley, right? Can you point it out to me on the map?” He asked the watch-mage.

“Uh, actually I can’t really,” Martin quickly searched his mind for the smallest lie he could tell.

The Royal Huntsman looked at him quizzically.

“You see the gnomes blindfolded us when they brought us to their village. When we have gone to see them there is uh, a meeting place where they come to us and then guide us from there.”

“I see,” Gerard did not seem convinced. “Well, you know I will not be able to speak to the king on this matter and give him my counsel about the gnomes until I have parleyed with them. The King has entrusted me as his eyes, ears and even hands in this situation and I would be remiss in my duty if I did not look into it myself.”

Martin opened mouth to speak, but Gerard continued. “And I can assure you I was going to go alone. The last thing I want to do is bring a bunch of green militia in among a bunch of gnomes. I have lived among the rangers of Archet. I know how to handle myself in the woods and among other races.”

Martin sighed.

“Can you at least bring me to them?” Gerard tried again.

Martin shook his head. “But my companions and I can return to them and ask permission, or else have them send a delegate to you.”

Gerard nodded. “If it has to work that way I’ll respect it even if I don’t like it, but I don’t want a war, least of all one we’ve been tricked into, and we have a chance to stop it now before it goes any further and royal pride becomes involved.”

The huntsman cocked an eyebrow when he said that and looked Martin right in the eye.

“Yes, yes, of course,” stammered the watch-mage. “I will go gather my companions and let them know and we’ll return to the gnomes on the morrow, for it is too late in the day to do so now.”

Ratchis didn’t think so and insisted the party return immediately.

“We didn’t even see Finn and those guys and have a drink,” Jeremy complained.

“You just saw them a few days ago,” Beorth said. “And we will be returning soon enough.”

However, Martin initial estimate was correct. They had barely made the burned down safehouse before it was too dark to continue with much effect.

The Fearless Manticore Killers made camp there once again, and Martin sent Thomas off to retrieve the gnomes.

“Be careful,” Martin said. “Watch out for owls.”

Thomas gulped and ran for it, leaping from tree to tree.

Osilem, 3rd of Sek – 565 H.E.

“The gnomes are coming! Hurrah! Hurrah!” Martin the Green heard singing in his head as his squirrel approached upon Ashkenbach’s shoulder.

The sun shone brightly, illuminating the tops of the tall trees of this forest and turning their budding leaves golden. A bird called and another answered from across the forest. The taste of spring was on the still frosty air.

Soon a doughty gnome arrived with a dozen of his kinsmen and a pair of wolverines.

“Had you even left yet? Ashkenbach joked.

“We spoke with a representative of the King of Gothanius, a man responsible for the organizing of the militia,” Martin began to explain.

“So you came to warn us?”

“Yes,” said Jeremy and Ratchis.

Martin frowned.

“There is nothing to warn you of that did not already know, but instead we bring an opportunity for peace,” Martin said. “The king’s man is called Gerard Pritchard, and I think you would like him, and he just wants to parley with you, so he can advise the king that war is not the way to handle this situation.”

“He wants to talk to me? He doesn’t even know me!” Ashkenbach was confused.

“No, I meant, ‘you’ as in the gnomes of Garvan.”

Derek and Jeremy laughed.

Martin explained the huntsman was willing to speak to a representative of gnomes, if he could not be granted permission to come see the gnomes himself.

“This is awful hasty,” said Ashkenbach and the other gnomes nodded. “We expected you to be gone at least a little while to allow us to make some plans and have a referendum about how best to handle the problem with the humans.”

“Humans are hasty folk,” Martin replied. “And that is why you must not tarry too long in parleying, for they will look upon your hesitancy with suspicion.”

“Suspicion! We haven’t done anything to be suspicious of! They were the ones that sent soldiers near our home to begin with,” Ashkenbach grew angry, and Martin was startled. He was not used to such a reaction from a gnome.

“Yes, yes, of course,” Martin said. “I meant no offense.”

“Offense or no, you have a choice and an opportunity in front of you,” Ratchis said gruffly.

Ashkenbach sighed.

“I must return to Garvan,” he said. “I must get the counsel of Captain Fistandlus and other elder gnomes of our community, but you can tell this general or whatever he is that we will send someone soon.”

“How soon?” Martin asked, nervously, remembering that gnomes had a unique definition of ‘soon’.

“As soon as possible.”

“Hasty!” a gnome in the patrol chastised.

Remembering his gnomish manners, Martin the Green invited Ashkenbach and the other gnomes to have lunch with them in the circle of trees before returning to Garvan.⁹⁹

The subject of how gnomes and humans see time different came up during the meal.

“Why are humans always in such a rush to do everything?” Ashkenbach asked, almost rhetorically.

“I think it is because of their long legs,” Kusiel, one of the gnome patrol, said. “They are used to getting everywhere fast so they think everything should be fast. They probably complain that the wind doesn’t blow fast enough.”

The gnomes all laughed.

“Well, a human on a ship might think that,” Jeremy said, screwing up his face as if offended.

“Oooh, I’d love to see a ship,” said one of the other gnomes.

“How long do you live?” Ratchis asked Ashkenbach.

“How long do *I* live? Who knows that? What am I, a seer?” Ashkenbach looked confused.

“No, he meant, how long does the average gnome live?” Kazrack explained.

“Hmmm... Well, we’d have to check the birth and death records of the council and then consider years with war or famine,” Ashkenbach scratched his wispy white beard, and tugged on it twice when thinking hard. “You know, that’d be fun to figure out, but kind of morbid.”

“Can you make a guess?” Ratchis asked, becoming annoyed.

“Hmm, maybe 350 winters,” the gnome replied.

“Humans live 60 winters, maybe a little more, sometimes less,” Kazrack said. “It is for that reason that they are always in a hurry.”

“I’ll be lucky to reach 40 winters,” Ratchis said, shrugging. “And I will be an old man by then.”¹⁰⁰

“I promise to make sure you are buried properly when that time comes,” Beorth said.

“It may come a lot sooner,” Ratchis replied, gloomily.

The mid-afternoon found the Fearless Manticore Killers making their way back up the ridge to Summit once again.

There Martin the Green told Gerard Pritchard that he should be expecting a visit from the gnomes soon and that they would likely come clandestinely for their own safety and from keeping the skittish locals from panicking. He also tried his best to explain that gnomes sometimes took a long time to make up their minds and explored things from every angle, so he should try to be patient with them.

Pritchard agreed and shook Martin’s hand firmly thanking him.

⁹⁹ Traditional gnomes never consider a business deal or other contract fulfilled until the involved parties share a meal. In addition, many gnomes refuse to do anything of substantial importance without sharing a meal with the people involved first.

¹⁰⁰ Orcs are a short-lived people. They reach full maturity by 12 or 13 and even if lucky enough to die of natural causes rarely make it past 30 or 35. Half-orcs inherit their lack of longevity from their orc parentage, sometimes making it to 40 or 45.

“And where do you go now?” the Royal Huntsman asked. “I will have to tell his majesty of your exploits and intentions when I next correspond with him.”

“We are going to the southwest to seek out information that will help us stop the demons I told you about in a long abandoned dwarven citadel,” Martin explained.

“It sounds like quite the adventure,” Gerard smiled. “You and your companions are brave men, Martin the Green.”

Martin smiled weakly and said his good-byes.

The party spent the night at the Sun’s Summit Inn, having a meal with Finn and his crew and discussing what supplies they might need for their trip. The gnomes had given them food and water, and they had replaced some clothing and Beorth had new armor, so they had went for little. They hoped the elves of Aze Nuquerna would be able provide them whatever else they needed for their journey for they planned to stop there on their way south.

Balem, the 5th of Sek – 565 H.E.

The Fearless Manticore Killers reached the elven enclave by mid-morning. They waved to the sentries atop the squat, covered towers of lacquered logs that stood with the rest of the huge structure atop a foundation of gray carefully cut weathered stone blocks.

Ethiel met them at the gate and greeted them without smiling. He led them to a parlor to wait, and an hour later returned with two other familiar elves. They bowed and brought in a lunch of light airy bread with a taste of lemon with slices of squash marinated in buttermilk and spices.

Over the meal the party shared news with their elven host, telling him of the Necropolis, Mozek’s claims, and about the Circle of Thorns and Jana’s death.

Ethiel nodded solemnly, and shared his own news.

“Arion has left less than a fortnight ago to a forested valley west of here, where Tirhas Tesfey was spotted,” he said.¹⁰¹

“Tirhas was spotted?” Jeremy nearly leaped out of his seat upon hearing the elf maid’s name, he had been licking the spicy strawberry sauce from his fingers, from where it had dripped from a slice of pear smeared with a soft white cheese.

“Who?” Derek looked at his friend.

“I’ll explain later,” Jeremy said quietly when Ratchis threw him a dirty look for interrupting Ethiel. The elf did not seem to care.

“Yes, some woodsmen of Archet went hunting that way and the rumor is among them of an elf woman and strange spirits in the wood,” Ethiel explained. “The place is the site of a battle that happened long ago to the counting of *your* races.”

Kazrack grunted disapprovingly, but again Ethiel did not seem to notice or perhaps care.

“There was an orcish fortress there, at the time when the blood of the One-Eye was still strong in that broken race.”¹⁰²

Now it was Ratchis’ turn to grunt.

“We should go help find her,” said Jeremy, eagerly.

¹⁰¹ Remember, it was discovered that Tirhas had been possessed by one of the drow witches’ spirits.

¹⁰² According to legend, Ashronk One-Eye, god of the orcs spit his blood across his people and those it landed upon grew in strength and cunning.

“We are going to the Pit of Bones,” replied Beorth, flatly.

“Is it on the way?” Jeremy tried again.

“No,” Martin replied.

“I want to save her, too Jeremy,” Ratchis said as gently as the orcish brute could make his voice sound. “But the bare-faced truth that finding Hurgun’s Maze and stopping Mozek has a priority over that. It is more pressing and more dire.”

Ethiel nodded solemnly, “Arion is well-trained for her retrieval, though if it were not for the wedding I could have sent a detachment of elven archers with both him and you, to give aid in your quests.”¹⁰³

Teflem, the 6th of Sek – 565 H.E.

The next day found the Fearless Manticore Killers marching further south than they had been during their whole time in and around Gothanius. Down here the forests were small tight clumps of trees separated by narrow fields of tall crabby grass that swelled and gave way like the sea in a slow-coming storm.

Ahead and to the right they could see brown hills dotted with green rising out of the earth, and not soon after stopping for lunch they found themselves walking through stony eroded hills, that created tall gullies.

“This is a good place for an ambush,” commented Ratchis.

“Don’t worry, no one knows we are coming down here, except the gnomes and the elves,” Kazrack replied.

“And whomever is scrying on us,” Martin said with his usual pessimism.

“Just stay extra alert,” Ratchis said, moving ahead to take point.

But less than an hour later Beorth leaned over to Kazrack and said, “Do you see that?” The paladin pointed off to the right, just behind a low outcropping of igneous rock that had hardened in the shape of a long claw from the gully wall that flanked them. “It looks like someone is hiding behind there...”

“And not very well,” Kazrack added, seeing the small figure. The dwarf called out to Ratchis and pointed.

The half-orc spun around surprised for he had walked right past it not seeing, but he saw it now.

“It is a gnome!” he called out.

Ratchis held up a hand to make the others wait and he crawled quickly towards the diminutive figure, just out of its sight. He hopped up quickly, holding a javelin, and ready to throw it if it turned out to be Mozek or one of his brothers, but what he saw was even more surprising.

The gnome had not moved; not one inch. He stepped closer and could now see it was not a gnome at all, but a statue of one. It seemed to have been carved with great skill and detail and was in a position as if jogging, one hand pointed in the air, a warhammer in the other. The mail was incredibly detailed, every link perfectly carved, and even the subtle bulge where it was bunched up from running.

Ratchis signaled for the others to come closer, “But not too close I am looking for tracks.”

¹⁰³ The king of Tempestatas, the isle of elves, is marrying the Queen of the Sylvan Elves to mend a thousands year old schism. The wedding is to happen sometime this elven stellar year and elves from all over Aquerra are traveling for the associated parties and games, which had already started last solar year. An elven stellar year varies in length according to elvish astronomical theory, ranging from as little as four and a half years to as many as 17.

“Wow, that is amazing craft,” Kazrack said, seeing the statue. “A dwarf must have made it.”

“Why would a dwarf make a statue of gnome out in the middle of nowhere and then just leave it there?” Martin asked.

“Maybe it is a marker of some kind,” Derek conjectured.

“No, I think it is real,” Martin replied. “I mean, I think it was once a living gnome and has had a spell cast on it.”

“What? No. It’s a signpost of some kind,” Jeremy said, agreeing with Derek. “There is probably some other gnome village around here.”

“There were no statues of this kind in Garvan,” Martin explained. “From what I learned of gnomish culture while there, I do not think this is what you claim it is.”

Ratchis came back from searching for tracks.

“Several gnomes were around here perhaps three or four days ago,” Ratchis said. “There is a small cave or tunnel going into this rock wall behind us, it seems this one came running from there. There are also some kind of flightless bird tracks.”

“What kind of bird?” Beorth asked.

“Something with a heavy tail that is not feathered,” Ratchis said, shrugging his shoulder. “Perhaps the size of a wild turkey, slightly larger.”

“So what do we do now?” Derek asked.

“We go search the cave,” Ratchis said, turning and heading towards it.

“Too bad it is too early to find a place to rest,” Kazrack said. “A cave would be nice.”

Derek looked at the dwarf as if he were insane.

Ratchis entered first, followed by Kazrack and then Beorth. Jeremy took up the rear, with Martin before him and Derek behind the paladin.

The cave had a low ceiling, so Kazrack squeezed ahead of the towering half-orc, who had to squat low to make it through. All the humans had to lower their heads to one extent or another, though Derek, being the shortest of them, only barely so.

“More bird tracks,” Ratchis whispered.

“There is light from up ahead,” Kazrack said, moving forward. The cave turned to the left and the dwarf could see that the cave was really a small tunnel that cut through the igneous rock and to an open area encircled by the gully walls.

The dwarf turned to Ratchis, who was trying to squeeze past him to leave the cave first and explore the area beyond. “Are we trying to catch this bird for our evening meal? If not, perhaps we should leave and not get sidetracked with this.”

Ratchis grunted, “We are still looking for a group of gnomes to learn the fate of gnome chieftain who originally left seeking the elves’ help, remember? This could be a clue.”

“Or fool’s gold,” Kazrack said, shrugging.¹⁰⁴ He scratched his beard and let Ratchis past.

Just beyond the cave opening was green field of cut grass, interspersed by clumps of half-buried reddish stones that

¹⁰⁴ *Fool’s Gold* is the dwarven equivalent of the expression ‘red herring’.

ranged in height from a foot or two to six or more. These stones, along with two large clumps of trees near the center of the field obscured vision of the far wall.

“What place is this?” Beorth asked as he came into the tiny valley behind Ratchis and Kazrack. The half-orc moved around some stone and could see a well-tended garden was off to the right.

“Here’s another one,” Kazrack called. He had found another stone gnome behind one of the tall stones, looking as if it had been squatting and peeking out from behind it. This one was female, and the stitches of her studded leather armor were so perfectly dimpled Kazrack began to consider Martin’s hypothesis as more likely.

“Bwock Greeeeet!” There was a severe bird-like squawk above them and behind on the ridge wall.

“Well, maybe we *will* be having fowl for dinner,” Kazrack said, hungrily.

“Do you hear that?” Ratchis turned to the others, and gestured for them to hurry and take positions, while he looked up and around to get sight of the bird.

“Skraaaaw, Greeeeet!” the bird creature said hopped up on a rock from behind it. It had dirty golden feet, but a body like a long and sinewy great big turkey, with a gray gilet and patches of mangy looking brown and magenta feathers on its brown and red mottled and dimpled skin. It dragged a long heavy tail behind it, that was bereft of feathers, but instead had a lizard-like hide covering it. The bird’s eye was open wide, and its head turned to look down at Ratchis, its head jerking nervously, as it took in the entire scene.

“It is only a bird,” Kazrack laughed.

“Quiet, if you want to have it for dinner,” Ratchis was reaching for his bow on his back, when the thing hopped up again and flapping its stubby nearly featherless wings to slow its decent swooped down pecking at the half-orc viciously.

“Brawnt! Greeet!”

Ratchis side-stepped out of the way, dropping his bow and going for his warhammer.

Derek came rushing out from the safety of the mouth of the cave and brought his battle axe down at the thing, but it screeched again and hopped backward. The axe grazed the fowl with an ineffective blow, but Derek felt his arm shake as if he had hit something harder.

“It feels like stone!” he complained, leaping back to avoid the viscous-looking beak. Kazrack hurried forward to support the young woodsman, while Jeremy looked for a flanking position. The Neergaardian noted yet another gnome statue as he came around a squat stone.

“What’s going on?” Martin the Green asked with some nervousness in his voice. He craned his head to look out from the cave entrance where he hid.

“Derek! There is another!” Kazrack cried out as he turned seeing another of the monstrous birds hop out from behind a rock. He barely was able to fend off an attack of its beak with his halberd, shoving the haft in the bird’s face.

It jerked its head around to get a good view and squawked.

The first bird seemed distracted by the presence of new targets and the arrival of another of its kind. It swung its head to gain a better view with its vacant eyes on either side of its head, and Ratchis did not hesitate. He slammed it in the head with his warhammer, and it cried out shrilly in pain and confusion. It pecked him while hopping backward out of reach. Its beak was bloody, and a bunch of feathers were flying about where it had been.

Ratchis grunted as the sharp beak scratched his arm deeply. He looked at the wound for half a second and saw it was not as deep as it might have been, but the wound tingled for a moment, and he felt his arm begin to stiffen a bit. He flicked his arm vigorously and the sensation went away.

“These are poisonous beasts!” the half-orc warned his companions.

Derek didn't need to hear more. He chopped ferociously into the bird that had leapt down at him and Kazrack and gritted his teeth as the shockwave of the blow came up his arms. The bird cried out weakly, and black blood spurted out from the slash in its side.

By now Martin had emerged from the cave and seeing the second beast cried, *Lentus!* and the jerking of the thing's head and defensive flapping of wings and ruffling of feathers slowed down.

Kazrack thrust his halberd into its neck, and whipping it back out of the dying bird's corpse, hustled over to aid Ratchis.

Martin and Derek decided to go the other way around the tallest stones as Jeremy had. The blonde warrior came around and shoved *the Right Blade of Arofel* deep into the first bird-beast, and it shrieked again. But as the watch-mage and the ranger made their way around the earth suddenly shook, and pebbles and dust went flying between the larger stones where the fight was happening.

Boom, there it was again.

They looked and saw a great figure emerge from beyond the two clumps of trees. It was a humanoid nearly twice as tall as Ratchis, broad-shouldered, with gray stony skin, no hair, and a chiseled profile. It wore a kilt of wolf hides and leather and had a strap of fur and decorated with stones over one shoulder. At its side was a pouch the size of a huge sack. It bulged and bounced against his thigh as he ran towards the where the party was. With each step the ground shook, and his steel gray eyes scanned the melee.

Ratchis finished off the remaining bird-beast with two heavy slams of his hammer. It had tried to get away from Jeremy and had come right back into his range.

“What's happening to my chickens!?” the giant hollered angrily in a deep deep voice. Derek could see that the giant held a huge stone club in his left hand, and he hefted it to his shoulder.

“Who is that?” Ratchis whirled around to see, but Beorth had already seen and crying out to Anubis to grant him *divine favor* went hustling to the huge figure with sword at the ready.

Derek hung his axe on his belt and calmly pulled out his bow and prepared to pepper the giant with arrows.

Martin climbed up on a stone behind Derek and pointing at the giant, chanted “*Sagitta Igneum!*” and a great arrow of fire came flying from his hand and roared as it flew towards the giant, exploding into a ring of flame as it hit.

Kazrack cried out, filled with the fury of battle and hustled after Beorth towards the giant.

“What are you doing?” Jeremy cried after them with alarm. “Run! The *other* way!”

The giant stopped and spied Kazrack headed towards him. He cocked his head back in the direction that he came from while reaching into his sack to pull out a rock nearly thirteen inches in diameter.

“Perika!” He cried. “We got ‘venturers killing our chickens!’” He flicked the rock with his right hand, and it slammed into Kazrack's left arm. The dwarf spun around and fell. Groaning, he tried to get up, but found his arm was numb and useless.¹⁰⁵ It felt rubbery and covered in pins and needles.

“Nephthys, grant me your strength so that I may protect my friends,” Ratchis called to his goddess, and felt strength surge through him. He moved towards to close the gap between him and the giant.

Meanwhile, Derek was having a hard time piercing the giant's hide and Martin spoke a word and suddenly there were

¹⁰⁵ **DM's Note:** Kazack suffered the following critical hit result: *Arm Struck, Apply Crit Multiplier to Damage Roll (and armor DP damage) – Fort Save (DC 10 + ½ damage) (+10 to save if shield) or Arm Numbed, -4 to hit for 1d10 rounds.*

four of him dancing atop the rock, blurring in and out of each other and mimicking each other's movements.

Kazrack finally made it to his feet, leaving his halberd on the ground and grabbing for his flail. At that same moment, Beorth and the giant met.

"What are you all doing? Do you want to die? That's a giant!" Jeremy simply stood and yelled at his companions.

The giant was able to reach Beorth with his club before the paladin's blade could reach him. There were two resounding blows and the crunch of metal and Beorth was down on the ground, holding his sword before him and trying to drag himself away and to his feet.

Ratchis moved in to cover Beorth's retreat and the paladin laid hand on himself and called on his god to close his nearly mortal wounds.

"I think this has been a misunderstanding!" Ratchis called up to the giant, raising one hand up at him.

"Ratchis! There's another one," Jeremy warned. And sure enough, they saw the head and shoulders of another giant appear above the treeline all the way on the other side of this enclosed area. They could tell this giant was female by the swell of her breasts, but she too was hairless and stony.

Derek tumbled through the giant's legs and tried to take a swipe with his axe as he did. It leapt up deftly to avoid the attack but was off-balance when trying to keep Kazrack away from him, batting at the dwarf with his club. Kazrack ducked in and moved to flank the thing. Distracted by so many foes, the giant was unable to keep Jeremy from slipping under his reach and stabbing him.

Jeremy grimaced as he felt the tough hide try to resist his blow, but gray-black blood oozed from the wound.

But the giant only grunted and spun around his club stretched downward. Jeremy ducked, but Derek caught the club in the shoulder and was knocked down.

"Ho! Ho!" the giant called out happy about striking the little man, but his joy was pre-mature and laughter turned into a cry of pain as Ratchis slammed the huge figure's kneecap with his hammer.

Martin spoke the word, *Lentus!* again and this time it was the giant's turn to have his movement and reactions *slowed* to half his normal pace.

Beorth was on his feet and took a place in the ring about the giant as well, but the club came down and parried the blow.

However, the giant was now not moving fast enough to deal with the wolfpack tactics of the Fearless Manticore Killers, and Derek was on his feet shaking off the pain and hacking into the giant's hip with his axe. The stony skin was hard to break through, and blows that would have killed a man, only made narrow cuts in the giant.

Martin remained outside of the melee, certain that even one blow would crush him like a bug. Instead, he cast *shield*, and kept an eye on the other giant which had disappeared in the trees while approaching.

Kazrack and Jeremy both rained blows on the flailing giant. It struck out frantically and struck Beorth with the end of the club in the face. The paladin went down again, but immediately scrambled to his feet as a blow from Ratchis distracted the giant once again.

"Why are you doing this?" the giant asked, sounding as confused as he was angry.¹⁰⁶

End of Session #52

¹⁰⁶ This adventure is based on the adventure *Flesh to Stone* from *Dungeon* issue #85. (*Damn! They sure don't know how to name adventures in Dungeon Magazine anymore!*)

Session #53

“Get out of here!” Jeremy cried to his companions, when the giant blocked yet another blow from Derek. “I’ll slow him down.”

Kazrack got feeling back in his arm and swinging his flail in front of him, he grabbed his shield off his back and turned deftly as to not present a large target.

The giant turned toward the dwarf and Jeremy found the opening he was waiting for. The point of *the Right Blade of Arofel* did not pierce the hide, but he whipped his long sword with great viciousness across the giant’s thigh twice. The giant bellowed and lowered the club towards Jeremy, who leapt away. The mighty blow slammed into Beorth instead. The paladin’s helmet crunched as the club struck it, and he fell down and slid painfully across the grass, blood blooming from a deep gash across his brow. However, that was not all. Kazrack had expected a blow from the other direction and did not see the blow come over his shield having lost no momentum from striking the collapsing Ghost-hunter. The dwarf’s head was suddenly ringing with pain. He staggered to his right, but amazingly did not fall.

The club continued to swing around and Ratchis barely pulled back, his blows going out of alignment.

Derek thought he saw an opening and had his axe above his head when there was a surprising shadow over him. He flinched as something struck his axe and then slammed into his head. He barely kept his feet and looked up to see the second giant appear at the further clump of trees, hefting a rock in her other hand.

“Fall back to the trees!” Kazrack called out, thinking the closer clump would give them cover from the giants’ rocks and blows.

Martin was tracing a multi-colored pattern before himself as he faced the male giant from atop a large stone. So far, it seemed to be of no effect. He had to throw himself flat against the stone to avoid a rock that came flying at him from the giant-wife.

“WHY DON’T YOU LEAVE US ALONE!?!?!?” The giant-wife half-asked, half-commanded. The bass of her voice echoing.

“Someone grab Beorth!” Jeremy cried frantically, working his blades in a frenzy of parries and thrusts trying to keep the slowed, but no less strong, giant occupied. He could see the paladin’s blood flowing readily from his vantage point. Beorth was dying.

The Neergaardian stepped forward feigning a thrust with his long sword and his foot landed on a muddy spot in the ground where the giants’ great and stony feet had torn up the grass. He fell painfully to his rear-end, jarring his backbone.

The giant turned from the fallen warrior towards those that still posed an immediate threat. Kazrack’s shield crunched and slammed back into the dwarf’s face when the giant whipped his club across his front. The dwarf went flying back and landed with his shield over his face. Blood flowed out from underneath and into the grass.

The violence of the blow shocked Ratchis and he did not have time to react before he felt the club slam into his hip, taking him off his feet. He landed painfully on his side. But Ratchis did not hesitate, he rolled over on his stomach and pushed himself to his feet, using his momentum to strike the giant with a powerful blow to the chest.

Wheezing, the giant teetered for half a moment and then fell over; a wash of gray-black blood splattering down from his many wounds. Jeremy barely rolled out of the way and up to his feet.

“RUMMMBULLL!” the giant-wife cried in horror and dismay. Her face seemed to harden into a snarl as she looked at each of the standing members of the Fearless Manticore Killers in the eye.

“Wow, she’s pissed,” Derek said under his breath, as he hung his axe on his back and took up his bow again, fitting an arrow to it.

Martin thought quickly as he saw the giant woman begin to clear the trees.

“*Imago Majorca!*” he cried, and around the giantess erupted a ring of fire 10 feet high. She cried out and put her hands to her face and hesitated, looking around for an escape. She could feel the heat pouring off the flames.

“We didn’t want this fight,” Martin called out to her. “Leave us be and we’ll spare your husband!”

“Somebody help Beorth and Kazrack!” Jeremy said, turning to hold the line if the giantess were to approach. He held his swords up and ready.

Derek stepped over to look at the dying giant. Blood flowed steadily from him, creating a thick black pool around his huge crumpled form.

“GET AWAY FROM HIM! GET AWAY FROM HIM!!” the giantess shrieked and covering her face with her arms leapt through the illusory fire hoping her stone like skin would protect her some.

Ratchis squatted down between the giant and Beorth, and reaching over to the bleeding paladin beseeched Nephthys to grant him her healing graces. Beorth’s wounds closed.

Derek tried to fire an arrow but was smashed by the giantess’ last boulder. The young ranger collapsed in a bloody heap.

“I said, move away from him!” she cried, her hurried steps shook the ground. Martin leapt off his rock and ducked behind it.

Jeremy sheathed his blades and made broad motions with his arms trying to get her attention. She looked over hurried. She now stood above Derek, her own club hanging above his bleeding head. She looked around confused and scared.

“Let us take care of our friends and you can take care of your husband or whatever,” Jeremy called up to her. “Look! I put away my weapons.”

Sweat poured off his brow, as he stole a glance over at Derek’s crumpled form below the looming giant.

“Back away from Rumble,” she commanded Ratchis, pointing to the stone giant on the ground.

“If you don’t let us take care of our friends your husband is going to die. *You* back up,” Ratchis retorted. He held his hammer above the bleeding giant’s face.

The giantess looked down at her bleeding husband, and tears welled up beneath her pupil-less steel-gray eyes.

“Have at your companions,” she said, and got down beside her husband to tend to his wounds, leaving herself open to a blow from Ratchis. She pulled furs from a bag on her back and began to tie off his wounds.

Ratchis hurried over to Kazrack and healed him with a spell. The dwarf began to cough, and his eyes fluttered.

“I think this fight is over,” Martin said, gaining confidence with every word as if he were trying to convince himself. He walked out from behind the stone.

“Jeremy, you get Beorth. He can be moved,” Ratchis barked. Kazrack sat up and shook his head.

The giantess held her husband’s head in her lap and was holding him close. She looked up at them, her face growing rigid with anger again, “You owe us for our chickens!”

“Whu-what?” Jeremy’s jaw dropped, as he made to grab Beorth by the shoulders to drag him off.

“You killed our chickens!” she accused.

“What about the gnomes your chickens killed?” Martin spit back, forgetting himself for a second. All the death he had

witnessed in less than a year's time weighed heavy on his green shoulders when he allowed himself to think on it.

"Your *chickens* attacked us, and the little ones are our friends. *We* want to know what happened," Ratchis asked her, as examined Derek after having stabilized him with a spell.

"If they hadn't come into our home uninvited and set them free, they would not have been attacked, and the hole in coop would not have been there for them to have escaped once again and attack you when *you* came here *uninvited*. The gnomes decorate my garden now." Her disgust for them was apparent.

Rumble coughed and a bubble of blood burst at his lips. Perika wiped it away with the hem of her fur and leather dress.

Kazrack grumbled and then offered to heal the giant. "That will be payment enough!"

"Payment enough!?! You were the ones who attacked him, and now we should owe you for that?" Perika sneered.

"What would you have us pay you with? We have nothing to give you that you could use, I'm sure," said Martin, calming down.

Kazrack grumbled about his dishonorable it was to trade with giants.¹⁰⁷

"We will take coin," the giantess said, looking up. "We trade with the woodsmen north of here and can use the coin to buy goods and supplies we cannot make or find ourselves."

Ratchis stood and sighed, wiping his hands on his greaves.

He walked over to the two giants. "May I?"

Perika nodded, and the half-orc lay his hand on the giant and spoke to Nephthys, recalling pieces of the tale of Bronthro, the stone giant who had been won over to serve Fallon, goddess of healing.

Rumble took a deep breath and moved his great head back and forth, but did not wake. Perika admonished the party to stay where they were while she carried Rumble away to their cave.

"I'll not pay for those chickens!" Kazrack sputtered, his anger rising.

Jeremy shrugged his shoulders, "I have some coin."

"I am not paying for..."

"Kazrack, we have to," Ratchis acquiesced.

"These filth frokkin' giants!" Kazrack spit and wrung his beard in his hands. His face became flush.

"Ratchis is right," Martin said, walking over. "We need to negotiate with her, since violence is out of the question. We may be able to get the gnomes away from here."

"What? How?" Kazrack asked, but Ratchis hushed him, for the giantess was returning.

"Three hundred pieces of silver per chicken will be adequate," Perika told them. She had washed her face with water, but her eyelids were so puffy they looked like a jagged piece of coral.

Kazrack tried to speak but could only make a "Pfa-Pfa" sound, over and over again.

"We have nowhere near that much money," Martin exclaimed, and the rest of the group glared at him.

¹⁰⁷ Giants and dwarves are ancestral enemies.

“Wait... For *each* chicken?” Jeremy was stunned.

“That is what ‘each’ usually means,” Ratchis scowled.

“Why are these birds so valuable?” Martin asked.

“They provide us with eggs, which we use and also trade with the hunters,” Perika explained.¹⁰⁸

The four conscious members of the Fearless Manticore Killers huddled up and gathered their money. In the end, they offered her fourteen pieces of gold and a ruby. She examined the ruby closely but accepted the offer.

“Now that we’ve gotten that taken care of,” Jeremy said, smiling. “I wanted to ask, since the gnomes got stoned by your chickens, can you cure them?”

Perika looked at him slyly. “There are cures. But why would I want to do that? They decorate my garden and they only got what they deserved. The little sneak-thieves stole into here and let the chickens free and tried to take stuff without asking. Do they not kill men for that among your people, blood of orc?”

“Watch your tongue!” Kazrack admonished.

“Uh, but Kazrack, it’s true,” Jeremy looked at the dwarf like he was touched, and wished Derek were awake to share in their game of catching Kazrack at being Kazrack-like.

“You are aware of the great reputation of gnomes as generous of spirit,” Martin tried a different tact.

“No,” Perika replied shortly.

“Well, they are.”

“Gnomes are like gnats or other insects,” Perika sneered. “If they get in the food stores you have to stomp them out. But in stone form they look so lovely among the tomato plants, and one by that littlest of holes as a warning to other little things that might come crawling through.”

“The ‘warning’ had an opposite effect,” Martin replied. “It is what drew us here.”

Perika huffed. She still had her club resting on her shoulder.

“The gnomes are our friends,” Martin continued. “If you freed even one, he could go to his people and get recompense for whatever inadvertent damage they have done *and* bring something to decorate your garden.”

A constant grumbling stream of incomprehensible sounds came shooting from Kazrack’s tightly closed lips. He was visibly shaking with anger.

“And the gnomes are a friendly and industrious people,” Martin continued. “The show of good will could lead to a new and valuable ally and trading partner.”

Perika frowned, but finally assented to curing one.

This was followed by a long discussion about which gnome to return to flesh, while the giantess retrieved the means by which she planned to affect the cure.

Finally, Kazrack threw the stones to decide, but even the gods seemed unwilling to make a choice. So, it was decided any was as good as another. The one outside the cave, outside of the wall was chosen.

¹⁰⁸ Female Cockatrices lay eggs seven to nine months out of the year, laying one large one every three or four days. The eggs have a hard stony shell, which is difficult to break open, but by not being fertilized they keep for weeks or even months, remaining edible.

Perika left the valley home by the true exit, meeting the party back outside of the gully wall. She held a stone sliver a little over a foot long. It looked tiny in her hand. Speaking a word, she tapped the gnome on the head and in a flash, he was flesh again, collapsing to a shaking and sobbing heap.

“Wha. . .what happened to me? Who are you?” the gnome cried out; his voice full of fear. He grabbed for his axe, but Ratchis plucked it away. When the gnome saw the ugly half-man he screamed.

“Stay out of my home.” The giantess commanded, ignoring the shrieking gnome the party tried to calm. “If you should return come around to the northwest and knock on the door like a civilized being. And... remind that gnome of his debt and kin.”

She stomped off.

When it was explained to the gnome that he had been rescued, and the party knew Captain Fistandlus and his people, he finally calmed down, though he still seemed skeptical that the party would have free access to the village of Garvan.

“What year was it when you happened upon the giants’ lair?” Martin asked him.

“The Third Year of the Grey Wash,”¹⁰⁹ the gnome replied. His name was Moische Nimblewyck, he explained.

Martin nodded, knowing that was what the gnomes called the previous year.

“How long since you have been to Garvan?” Martin asked.

“Are you one of Greddadiddlerun’s people? Because he is dead and your people are leaderless,” Ratchis informed him crassly.

The gnome began to sob, buried his face in his hands; his large nose honked every time he took a deep sobbing breath in.

“I don’t know what to do! What am I to do? I can’t do it alone,” the gnome said through wracking sobs.

“Take your time,” Kazrack said, putting his arm around the gnome’s shoulders with compassion. “We have time. This is all over-whelming.”

“What brought you around here to begin with?” Ratchis asked, after a moment.

Moische shook his head. “I can’t say. I shouldn’t say.”

The party was taken aback.

The gnome leapt to his feet suddenly. “I have to go!”

“Wait! You cannot just leave!” Kazrack protested.

“I have to see someone about something and find some people,” Moische said cryptically.

“Other gnomes?” Martin asked.

“The chieftain?” Jeremy asked. Moische’s gaze shot at the Neergardian.

“I cannot say... Do you have any food?” Moische rubbed his belly.

“Can you write it down? I mean, write down what it is you are doing here and what you leave to go do?” Martin was

¹⁰⁹ For such a mathematical people, gnomes have colloquial and local ways of counting years, based on weather cycles, astronomical phenomenon, and the rules of famous gnomes.

desperately curious.

“No...no, she’ll see,” Moische replied, softly.

“She? Who is this ‘she’?” Kazrack furrowed his brow, but Martin shot him a look of disdain.

“I think I understand,” the watch-mage said. “Say no more.”

“Surely you don’t mean to just let him go, do you?” Jeremy interjected.

“We cannot hold him against his will,’ Ratchis said. “But I feel like we deserve to know what is going on.”

“You asked me to trust you, now I must ask you to trust me,” Moische said, meekly. “If you are truly friends of my people and care for their welfare you will give me that much. If you do not let me go others of my people will suffer.”

Ratchis sighed. “Good luck on your journey,” he said to the gnome.

“We will be resting an hour before moving on,” Kazrack said. “Why not stay with us and share a meal and we’ll see what supplies we might spare you?”

Moische Nymblewyck agreed.

Afterward Moische asked them to give his love to his family if they should return to Garvan before he does.

“That’s not where you are going?” Kazrack asked.

Moische looked around nervously and shook his head.

Kazrack grunted with frustration.

“May Fezzik watch over you,” the gnome said, shaking all their hands, with a sad and scared look on his face.¹¹⁰

“And you,” replied Martin.

Moische took off for the north.

“What was that all about?” Kazrack asked Martin angrily.

“I think maybe we should follow him at a safe distance,” Ratchis suggested. “I should be able to track him.”

“No, I don’t think that is a good idea,” Martin shook his head. “He said ‘*She*’—and I think that could mean either the Mozek’s mother the succubus, or perhaps one of the escaped drow witches.”

Derek groaned, finally waking up from the wounds he had suffered at the hands of the giants.

“I heard some of that,” the young ranger said. “I was thinking, how many gnomes left the village with the chief when they left to go get the elves’ help?”

“About a dozen, maybe slightly more,” Kazrack replied. “Less than a score from what I can gather.”

“And you only found one of them in the elf place, right? He could be one of them since they are mostly unaccounted for.” Derek posited.

The party could not move far from the giants’ lair, for Beorth was still unconscious and too heavy and weak to be carried along for very far. In the morning they would continue their journey southward, along with their speculation

¹¹⁰ Fezzik Istvan is the chief of the gnomish gods.

about yet another mystery.

Anulem, 7th of Sek – 565 H.E.

A night's sleep on the cold hard ground was not what Beorth needed to recover. So, in the morning, both Ratchis and Kazrack tended to the paladin with the blessings of their respective gods.

“Did everyone survive?” was his first question.

“Yes,” Martin replied, not liking the look in the paladin's eyes.

Kazrack explained to Beorth about the deal with the giants and the freeing of the gnome named Moishe, and how he seemed scared and uncertain, but not because of the giants. The decision to leave the gnome to his own devices seemed to weigh heavily on the dwarven holy warrior.

Dark clouds rolled in quickly from the southeast as they packed their gear and began the march southward as fast as they could.

The rain was light, but constant and by the time mid-day approached it seemed more like dusk, for the low dark clouds were only intermittently lit up by flashes of distant lightning, followed by powerful thunderbolts.

Visibility was low, but in the flash of a lightning bolt they could momentarily see some what looked as if the earth had exploded, sending shafts and panels of stone into a haphazard network of slopes, caves, passageways, and jagged towers.

As they approached, they could see this broken land was huge. It went as far as they could see in each direction, and according to the map the Pit of Bones should be somewhere within or just beyond this place. It was awe-inspiring, as if the foundations of the earth had erupted long ago, with shades of gray, brown and black making striations on the long side of the huge stone pieces.¹¹¹

The rain picked up and the sound of echoing torrents resounded from the place before them, like the predatory purr of a great dusky lion. Ratchis tried to climb up on one of the outlying tall rounded stones to get a better view, but the stone was too round and too wet to get atop it. Frustrated, he signaled for the rest of the group to stay where they were so he could check for tracks in the muddy and grassy field that led to an entrance to the broken land, where two huge tables of stone leaned on each other, jagged ends pointing askew.

The rain made it too difficult to find anything.

Ratchis walked back and dropped his pack and his quiver of javelins, keeping only his bow and his hammer. “If I don't return in six hours come up with another plan,” he told the others.

“Where are you going?” Kazrack asked.

“To check things out quietly on my own,” the half-orc said.

Martin shrugged his shoulders and granted the half-orc a ward against arrows, ‘just in case,’ and with that the Friar of Nephthys hustled off to the damp darkness of the place on his own.

Torrents of water fell hither and thither, in spidering trickles, in broad rolling sheets, in great cascades through openings made by slabs of stone leaning on each other, and dripping endlessly through cracks, making all the stone surfaces slick and shiny in the places the dying light of the sun made its way through cloud and mist. The sound of water echoed from

¹¹¹ **DM's Note:** By way of comparison, after I described this place to the players, I told them to envision a dirty black and wet version of the Fortress of Solitude in *Superman: The Movie*.

all corners, making Ratchis unable to even hear his own breathing, though he could see the misting of it in the cold dampness of the air.

The broken stones that had long ago erupted from the earth, made a huge chamber not thirty feet in, but its shape was haphazard, and in places the half-orc could not see the ceiling, for it reached shafts beyond even his darkvision. Creeping forward he chose a passage to the right, after hearing the lapping of water coming from a passage in front and to the left. The passage he chose climbed upward, and the hulking ranger struggled to keep his grip as he pulled his muscled bulk up from stone to stone. He crawled on his belly through pounds of bat guano.

It was a long dangerous climb, and he rested on every large ledge he could find, to catch his breath before continuing. He thanked Nephthys for his magical boots, because even through their protective enchantment, the cold of the slick stones nearly numbed his thick calloused fingers.

More than eighty feet above where he had come in, a slanted shaft made by three cracked slabs gave way to the open air. He pulled himself up onto a narrow ledge, that had a drop far beyond his vision on the other side of it. The black and gray stones of the broken land went off as far as he could see, and he blinked his eyes to keep the cold rain out.

Suddenly, there was flash to his left, someone hastily put out a fire beyond his vision, for a second, in the light of the dying embers he thought he saw a hunched form climb down. There was no way to reach that plateau from where he was, and the water here came down like a river over stone. Climbing further would be hard for him and impossible for most others, except perhaps Jeremy. He climbed back down to find another way.

The floor of the more central path gave way to jagged stairs that tumbled down to an even damper darkness. Beneath his feet Ratchis felt gravel and sand give way, and then his boots squished in mud, all the while going further and further down. He held his hammer in one hand and put a hand to the wall of the narrow passage to lend balance. Eventually it opened into a large flooded cavern. There was a small beach-like outcropping, but the water smelled of death and minerals. Ratchis touched a drop to his tongue and spit it out. It was foul.

He noted tracks of sandaled feet in the sand and the tell-tale sign of a small boat that had been dragged up on the beach several times and then pushed off with an oar. He could not see the other side, but hopping it was shallow enough and knowing his boots protected him from the cold he waded in. He had barely gone out five feet when the bottom gave way plunging him in above his waist. He paused and considered going back when he felt strong hands grasp both of his legs. Lurching backward he looked down to see rotting dwarven forms trying to pull him down to a watery doom. One twisted his leg with such strength, he felt himself getting pulled under as it gave way. He shuddered in pain.

Ratchis leapt back, grabbing his chain of scored links in his left hand, and calling to his goddess. The undead dwarves let go and melted into the darkness of the water. Ratchis hurried back out to the first chamber, breathing hard.

The passage to the left was broader than the first two, and while it started by winding down further into the earth, after several turns it began climbing by way of oddly angled plateaus that might have been steps for giants even greater than those the Fearless Manticore Killers had recently faced, but these steps had been made by falling stones, and were jagged and covered in bat guano. Despite the littered feces, Ratchis could tell the air here was fresher. He climbed a bit and found the passageway ended a narrow crawlspace, no more than three feet high. Not wanting to go beyond it because of how difficult retreat would be he returned to his companions and described what he found.

“We face another vast army of undead,” Beorth said, when he heard of the undead dwarves. “With a name like the Pit of Bones, we can hardly expect any less. Anubis will be done.”

They walked down to the first chamber and looked around more. Kazrack looked up the shaft which Ratchis had first climbed.

“When will you learn to fly, Martin?” the dwarf asked the watch-mage.

“I don’t know,” Martin replied sounding annoyed.

“I don’t mean to sound like Kazrack,” Ratchis asked. “But you once made a magical dome we could sleep in, could you make a magical boat?”

“I used a scroll for that, and, no,” Martin said. ¹¹²

The way to the left seemed the only way to go.

Martin sent Thomas to climb through first and then described what he saw the best he could. The squirrel described many climbs leading to an open plateau and what he thought might be a way down deeper into the center of the huge slabs of upturned igneous rock.

“Ooh, I see someone!” Thomas cried.

“Hide!” Martin commanded.

“Already have,” the squirrel familiar replied. “I’m coming back.”

“He saw someone,” Martin told the others.

“Like a monk?” Ratchis asked.

“No, he said it was small, like a gnome or a dwarf.”

“Or an undead dwarf,” Ratchis said.

“Could the monks be commanding these undead?” Kazrack asked.

“If they split from Beorth’s order, they should have no power over the undead,” Ratchis speculated.

“I do not think Anubis would support this,” Beorth said.

“But another god or power might,” Martin said.

“If these monks have turned from Anubis and now flaunt his edicts so boldly as to command the undead they will die on my sword,” Beorth said, without a trace of emotion. “But we should try to take them alive to learn the truth before we dispense justice.

Ratchis nodded.

The crawl was not as long as they feared, as they moved beneath the tons of rock on their bellies, dragging their packs with ropes behind them.

After that was more of the ‘giant steps.’ Some were only a few feet, but some were as tall as eighteen feet, Jeremy and Ratchis would climb up first and pull up the others with a rope. Kazrack was hurt leaping across a shallow pit, when he did not quite make it.

Jeremy and Derek laughed.

Up and up they went, winding in broad arcs ever to their left. Finally, they came upon flat plateau of black stone. It was shaped like triangular wedge and divided by a perpendicular wall of cracked stones that seemed forced up through the sheer rock floor. Coming out of the ascending passageway, a narrow stone outcropping blocked their view on their left, but on the right were great mottled overhangs of stone. Ratchis could see great pieces of ice on the upper stones, cracking and melting.

Coming around the outcropping, they were above a great opening created by a broad lip of great stone slabs shoved up out of the earth at sharp angles. Ratchis went forward and saw they were over a hundred feet, perhaps as much as one hundred and twenty feet, above the upper portion of the area below, a whole swath to the right was even deeper and

¹¹² This was back in the Honeycombe. See Session #24

shrouded in darkness. Jagged stones covered everything, giving the place the appearance of an immense maw with rows of countless jagged teeth.

There was a very steep ramp covered in places by splotches of the black jagged stones that ran parallel to the face of the plateau they stood on and that hung over the great chasm. Getting down would be treacherous, Ratchis saw.

He looked back and saw that Derek and Jeremy were the first to climb up the last small 'giant step' and come out on to the plateau and Beorth was close behind them.

Suddenly there was a commotion below. Ratchis looked down to see a small, probably gnomish, figure go dashing across the black upper slab. The sound of his chain shirt jingling echoed in and out if the sound of the lapping and dripping water, and it was clear he held some weapon in his hand.

Less than a moment later another figure appeared below them. Both were running in the direction the party faced so their backs were to them. This one was a tall lanky human man with a shock of silver hair. He wore armor as well but had a hand and a half sword held over his head as he poured on speed to cut down the more diminutive figure.

End of Session #53

...continued in "Out of the Frying Pan" – Book Three: Fanning the Embers (part two) - THE FEARLESS MANTICORE KILLERS & THE PIT OF BONES...

AQUERRA