

## *Out of the Frying Pan – Book II: Catching the Spark (part two)*

### Interlude<sup>1</sup>

#### **Balem, 26th of Nuiet – 564 H.E.**

It was after breakfast, that cold morning and Beorth sat in the quiet solitude of his room at the Golden Plough, while the others ran errands about town.

He was sitting on the floor and thinking over the recent events and about his troubling dreams, always involving the walking dead.

There was a knock at the door.

Beorth quickly rose and answered the door. He was surprised to find two baldheaded figures dressed in the heavy woolen black robes of Anubis. Neither monk seemed dressed for the cold weather since they are both wearing sandals.

One of the brothers stepped forward, he was swarthy and had deep sparkling green eyes, and he was no taller than five feet seven inches.

“Beorth, it is good that we have finally found you. I am Maynard, and this is Phlan,” The other monk was very tall and gaunt. He was paler, with black circles beneath his brown eyes. “Our Master saw you in a vision and asked us to find you immediately. It is urgent that Master Hamfast speak with you.”

The paladin was shaken by the arrival of two members of his sect, but the hard-learned lessons of growing up in the monastery had not been undone by a few months on the road, he knew not to question them on this matter.

“I am sure that this must be a serious matter indeed if I am being summoned by one of the brothers. I was unsure if there were any members of our sect in Derome-Delem. I will prepare quickly for the journey.”

Beorth turned to pack his belongings but was stopped by Maynard. “There will be no need for you to bring too many belongings, nor will you have any need for your weapons. You will be safe in the hands of Anubis.”

Beorth donned his fur cloak, grabbed his staff and stepped toward the door. He checked his breast pocket to be sure that the amulet he carried was still there. “I am ready.”

The two monks led Beorth out the backdoor of the Golden Plough, and southeastward to the bluff, and down, and then followed the enormous shelf of land southwestward. Soon they were wading through snowdrifts and winding their way between hills.

When they stopped at mid-day to rest and eat, the monks folded a single slice of bread in their mouths and drank mouthful of water. Phlan never spoke a word.

“I did not know there were monks of Anubis in Derome-Delem. Does Master Hamfast run a monastery here?” Beorth asked Maynard as the three of them began their march once again.

“Master Hamfast is the head of a small monastery on the western edge of an area called ‘*The Outland*’ here in Derome-Delem. We had a dangerous journey arriving here,” Maynard explained. “As for why we are in this area, there are places and things left unattended while our brothers are at their convocation.<sup>2</sup> We are looking after them. I am sorry, but we are not at liberty to tell you more but Master Hamfast may be able to tell you more clearly.”

Beorth was quiet for the rest of the day, remembering that monks of Anubis preferred to keep their minds focused on one thing at a time whenever possible, even simple things like talking and walking.

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<sup>1</sup> **DM’s Note:** These scenes were played out via email while Beorth’s player was unable to attend several game sessions.

<sup>2</sup> In the winter of 563 H.E. a message appeared on Verdun’s infamous Dwarf Wall, calling all monks of Anubis to a grand convocation in the Archduchy of Wallbrook, where the grandmaster of the entire order resides. The subject of the convocation was not made clear, but all were required to attend or lose their rank and title in the order.

At nightfall they made rough camp under a tree. Phlan went out for firewood and returned bearing more than Beorth thought possible for a man of his build.

They traveled the entirety of the next day, making slow progress through the deep deep snow.

### **Anulem, 28th of Nuiet – 564 H.E.**

Two days after leaving Ogre's Bluff at around mid-morning, Beorth and the two monks made their way up and around a hill covered in many small stones that made for treacherous footing, especially where the snow was deep and the round smooth stones concealed.

Around the side of the hill, which was low and bald, and in the shadow of much steeper shelves of rock, there was small cave entrance.

Upon entering the cave, Beorth noticed small stones with strange runic inscriptions on them arranged in neat rows and though Beorth could not understand the writing, he did understand that this was a graveyard

Phlan stood by the cave entrance as Maynard led Beorth further into the cave. In the rear was a side passage that was curtained off. Maynard held the curtain open and allowed the paladin of Anubis to walk through first.

Behind the curtains was an area transformed into a rough shelter, with straw mats on the hard floor, a rough stone hearth, a warped wooden table and several small wooden benches.

A short old man was doing a kata back there. Though he moved like a dancer, his hand and foot movements were anything but gentle. He ran through a series of blocks, punches, and kicks, before looking up. He stopped and bowed.

He was totally bald except for a triangle of gray hair in the back of his head. He had no shirt on and was very muscular. He had multiple tattoos of goats and rams on his chest, back and arms.

"Brother Beorth. It was essential that you come and speak with me. It is Anubis' will you came here, for you are not officially part of the order, though sworn to defend its principles, and its very principles are in danger." The old man said.

Beorth bowed deeply to Master Hamfast but cast a curious glance at the strange tattoos.

"As always, Master Hamfast, Anubis' will is my own. Maynard has spoken to me of troubles in the area that have prevented you from attending the convocation. These troubles must be grave indeed if you are here and not involved in this required meeting. What exactly is amiss?"

Hamfast looked at Maynard, who bowed to both Beorth and the old master and then slipped back out through the curtain.

Master Hamfast grabbed a simple woolen cassock from the table and slipped it on. "My brothers and I are here tending to the concerns of Anubis, not discussing matters of politics as are the rest of our *order*."

The last word hung in the air as if he has spit it out with such force it defied gravity. He continued, "I have called you here so that you will understand what is occurring at the convocation. The Grandmaster himself is calling for changes to the sect and his changes are weakening the Fist of the Jackal Headed God."

"The fist of the Jackal Headed God?" said Beorth, under his breath, but then spoke up. "Surely you do not think that the convocation will result in the lessening of the influence of our sect in Aquerra? The power of death negates all power in this life and surely the Grandmaster himself must be aware of that. How does his will differ from that of Anubis?"

"What difference does it make if the sect's power is weakened? It is Anubis' will that must be obeyed and the Grandmaster forgets whose laws he must ultimately answer to." Hamfast paused for a moment and looked hard at Beorth. "Have you ever considered becoming a full brother?"

Beorth looked at one of the benches.

“Please, sit,” said Hamfast.

Beorth took a seat and a deep breath and then replied, “Master Hamfast, I do not believe that I could ever become a full Brother. I believe that I will serve Anubis best as a warrior. I swore many years ago to fight the undead and I believe that I must remain a fighter to be able to accomplish that oath. I have however discovered that the power of Anubis is now flowing through me and that I can, with his guidance, achieve feats that were not possible in the past. I have struggled alone to learn how to harness the divine energy that is within and I believe that I am growing closer and closer to him every moment. Anubis' power is the power of death and the power of life. I learn a little more each day, but I know that in many ways my knowledge is lacking. I have encountered undead in the past and have been unable to handle them. They do not tremble before the power of Anubis and I do not know the best way to do battle with them. It seems that this knowledge was lacking in my early training. Perhaps you could share what you know of the undead and how best to fight them? My confidence has been shaken by my inability to fight them.”

Beorth lifted his eyes to meet Master Hamfast. “The dead even haunt my dreams.”

Beorth removed the necklace from his pocket. It was the green fang of malachite pendant that the party had gotten from the crazed man that lived beside the abandoned mastaba.<sup>3</sup> It was about two and half inches long.

“I believe that the Dead can communicate with me through the power of this amulet,” Beorth explained to Hamfast. “They urge me to lead them and to command them. I have sought to destroy the amulet, but no one seems to be able to tell me how to accomplish that. I know that I do not have the power, but perhaps you do...?”

Beorth held out the necklace for Master Hamfast.

Hamfast took the amulet into his hands and examined it briefly. “I do not have the power to destroy this necklace. It is a token of great power.”

He handed it back to Beorth. “Have you tried using it?”

“It is the teaching of Anubis that the dead shall find rest, and I do not believe that this amulet allows the dead to find their peace in the Duat.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, I believe that this amulet performs an evil function. The power that this amulet offers is not of the sort that I desire.”

Beorth tucked the amulet back into his clothes and scanned the cave, looking for evidence of anyone else that might be here, or another way out.

“I will discover the truth of the amulet, however, and as Anubis' will desires, so shall be done. I swear that it will be so,” he added.

“But are the dead in question not already in a state of unrest? If you can use that amulet to keep them at bay, keep them from hurting the innocent—have them flee—your faith augmented by its power? Perhaps you are wise to be trepidatious but consider my words. . .” Hamfast said, calmly.

“I have thought of using the necklace as you speak but have never done so. I have encountered the undead before and I believe that though this necklace could be used to control the undead to protect the innocent it would also corrupt me and seek to undermine my beliefs. The undead deserve the rest that our Father Anubis can bring to them and to control them is not the same as granting them that rest,” Beorth spoke with wisdom and confidence.

He paused and then changed the subject.

“So why is it that you sought me? And what tasks are you performing for the Brotherhood that prevent you from attending the convocation?”

“I did not go to the convocation because I knew what would happen there, that the ways of Anubis would be perverted and

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<sup>3</sup> See Session #8

<sup>4</sup> The “*Duat*” is the name for the state of peaceful waiting a soul is in while in Anubis' Realm.

that those who spoke out against the Grand Master would be taking their lives in their own hands - and while I do not fear death, someone needs to lead those monks who hold true to the traditions. There is one of our order who is doing so, and I have pledged myself to him and to Anubis in order to help him. And thus, I am here, warning you.”

Shocked by the information and the sudden increase in importance of the already apparently crucial convocation, Beorth let out a flood of questions, “Who have you pledged yourself to? What exactly does the Grandmaster believe that is not in keeping with the teachings of Anubis? How long have you been following this individual? Are there others who believe as you do?” When did the markings of the goat and the ram get placed on your body and for what purpose? And do you know who is buried in the graves within this cave?”

“You suddenly ask strange questions, young Master Sakhemet, and many of them as well,” Master Hamfast asked wryly, but did not smile. Monks of Anubis never smile.

Hamfast stood and paced over near the wall.

“The tattoos on my body remain from my violent and undisciplined youth. As for our temporary leader, until one is chosen by Anubis himself to replace Grandmaster Asaph, he is called ‘Adder’.”

He cleared his throat and went back to the previous topic without segue.

“If you believe yourself so weak that the amulet will corrupt your spirit then it is well you do not use it. I can sense that you are suspicious and do not believe what I am saying of the convocation. That is fine. I tell you to remain suspicious. It may be some time before your loyalty is tested and you will have to decide if you stand with the Order or with Anubis himself. When the Order abandons what it stands for and seeks to bring the death of some over others, when the Order turns against other priesthoods of the gods of Ra's Pantheon... You need not believe me now. But it will happen. . .”

Hamfast paused and walked over and sat again. He continued.

“However, if you seek evidence beyond my word then I say seek out Adder himself and speak to him. Have you ever heard of Hurgun's Maze?”

“I must apologize, Master Hamfast, for my skepticism but I have seen much since I left the monastery. I have encountered many creatures and beings that are not as they seem,” Beorth explained. “It is definitely strange to find another member of our order so far into Derome-Delem. And, I *have* heard of Hurgun's Maze, but no one has really been able to describe it or to tell me the history. I suspect that Hurgun was a wildly powerful wizard at some point in the past. Do you know the story of the Maze?”

Hamfast stood again.

“There are some legends of it in Derome-Delem, among dwarves and gnomes, but in Verdun only scholars are likely to have heard of it, let alone know what it is...”

He walked over to a table and began to prepare a meal of cold meats and bread. He gestured for Beorth to come over and take a seat on one of the small barrels that served as chairs.

Hamfast studied Beorth for a moment, and the young paladin could feel the old man's eyes searching his face for some expression. They seemed to almost draw out his worries, concerns and fears to his normally placid face, but he resisted.

“Hurgun of the Stone was the kind of wizard known as an Elemental Savant. He was said to have been very old and a founder of the now defunct *Elementalists' League*,” he continued.<sup>5</sup> “He is renown not only for his great power, but for being prolific. For centuries now magical items and scrolls of his spells can be found far and abroad,” Hamfast passed Beorth a plate with three pieces of meat wrapped in bread and held together by thin splinters of wood. He continued,

“During the Mountain Wars, when the Kingdom of Herman Land attempted to conquer Derome-Dele, much of the heaviest fighting took place in this general area. Other kings might have been satisfied to conquer the shores and slowly move their

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<sup>5</sup> The *Elementalist's League* was established sometime in the Third Age and was one of the first wizardly organizations in Aquerra. However, it was disbanded not too long after, as few of these wizards could agree on a common agenda and method of operation.

people in and conquer over time but not King Herman XII. He sent his troops to where the races and peoples of Derome-Delem lived and demanded those people surrender or flee. The warring was some of the most vicious this world had ever seen—that is why so many of the undead can be found here—but that is beside the point. I do not judge his strategy as good or evil—that does not concern me—what does concern me is this: during the war, a combined delegation of gnomes, dwarves and elves sought out Hurgun's stronghold, called Hurgun's Maze and petitioned him for help against the invading armies. He replied that he would not get involved. Representatives of the Herman Land army also sent word asking for help and he did not reply.”

“And then legend says, he 'closed' the Maze. We are not sure what that means but we do know that its exact location, said to be some days travel north of here, was lost but the Maze itself is said to be a planar focal point. . . It draws energies from many other worlds—including those of the gods. It is there that we plan to commune with Anubis and find out what his will truly is. It is that place that Adder searches for and that the Grandmaster's agents will try to keep us from finding.”

He stopped talking.

“Now let us eat.”

Beorth quietly pondered what Master Hamfast had said while eating his meal. In many ways it helped to explain the creature that was found with the gnomes. Beorth waited for Master Hamfast to finish his own meal before speaking.

“Is it possible that the Maze could somehow be ‘open’ again? Much of the information you have given me seems to bear directly on a creature that my companions and I discovered while staying with a group of gnomes. It seems that the gnomes found a very curious creature and were detaining it. It was shaped like the temples during *The Time Before* are said to have been shaped.<sup>6</sup> It had four sides, each triangular in shape with an eye and an arm on each face. And although it was made of flesh, it seemed to be almost like a moving statue. When I gave it a spoon, it immediately started to dig with the spoon. Almost like it would use a shovel. Perhaps it is some sort of magical construct that Hurgun created to help build his stronghold... The gnomes mentioned Hurgun and the Maze as a possible source for the creature. I wonder if the creature did not come from inside the Maze.”

Beorth paused for a brief time and collected his thoughts. “In either case, Hurgun's Maze seems to be a location of great importance, especially if it contains a focal point for the planes. Perhaps Adder could use some help finding the Maze. And if that creature *did* come from the maze, its location must be somewhere near the gnome village that we were staying in.

“The opportunity to speak directly to Anubis is one that should not be missed. And by discovering Anubis' will, perhaps a schism within the brotherhood could be avoided,” Master Hamfast replied.

“Do you know more about what lies within the Maze?” Beorth asked, hoping to find some of the answers that his companions were seeking.

“What lies within the Maze, and if it truly even is a maze, is a complete mystery. All that I know of it aside from what I have already told you is that many have sought it for centuries and either failed or never returned. It would not be jumping to conclusions to say that the place itself or the way to the place is fraught with peril,” Hamfast explained. “But let us rest now. Tomorrow I want to take you to a place nearby here and show you a graveyard we uncovered. You might find it interesting.”

Still focusing on Hurgun's Maze, Beorth continued, “Indeed the Maze sounds like a terrible place, but surely those of strong will and faith should be able to overcome any obstacles standing in the way...”

Beorth looked around. “Where is it that I should bed down?”

“You have strong faith, Master Beorth,” Hamfast said, as he led him to some mats on the cold cave floor. “You may sleep here.”

As Beorth drifted off to sleep, he could hear Hamfast and the others talking in low voices, and then the regulated breathing and occasional grunts of martial arts.

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<sup>6</sup> In *The Time Before* it is said the gods were much more directly involved in mortal life, and most of the world was a sea of sand. In that time, there were many more pyramids than can be found in Aquerra today.

## **Ralem, 1st of Dek – 564 H.E.**

*There is the sound of heavy breathing in the darkness and sandals on stone. Someone is running. . . Beorth tries to open his eyes, but they feel heavy, difficult to open—and even when he finally manages it, very little light comes to him. He feels flattened against a wall, unable to move anything but his eyes, back and forth, but very slowly. He is in a huge vaulted chamber, with a raised dais and a throne and he can see a figure bearing a torch coming in followed by multiple silhouettes.*

*Suddenly, the earth shudders and a crack runs up a column that supports the chamber.*

*“Hurry!” the figure cries to the silhouetted figures that finally come more clearly into view.*

*A dozen shambling men, their flesh rotting, their eyes glowing with malevolent unlife come bearing a litter. Upon the litter is a huge animal that looks vaguely familiar, but Beorth cannot see it clearly from where he is trapped. The zombies and the man are wearing clothes similar to those depicted in the wall paintings of the tombs beneath the Monastery of Anubis in Verdun. The man with the torch wears a pharaoh's headdress. He hands the torch to one of the zombies and from the wall behind the dais brings a huge sword of the ancient mode, a falchion.*

*The figure speaks a word and the sound of stone against stone fills the room, as a huge block of stone is raised from the floor and the zombies place the litter upon it. The earth shudders again, and the figure leaps upon the stone bier and speaks another word and it begins to lower itself into the floor, as pieces of the sandstone ceiling begin to fall. One of the zombies is crushed.*

*As the stone sinks, Beorth sees the face of the animal finally, it is a huge ram, greater than the size of most horses, tied down to the litter. As it disappears below the floor level, its sad but majestic eyes meet Beorth's gaze.*

*The earth begins to shake again, and this time it does not stop. Columns collapse, there is screaming, and all is black.*

Beorth awoke with a start.

“It is morning,” said Maynard. “Master Hamfast awaits you outside.”

Beorth sat up quickly and looked around the cave, trying to catch his bearings. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and shook his head trying to clear it.

He dressed as quickly as possible and headed out to the mouth of the cave. He tapped his breast pocket to be sure that the amulet was still with him.

Beorth exited the cave and stepped into the light of morning. “Master Hamfast, I am sorry to have kept you. Which direction are we heading? And what is the history behind the burial grounds that you wish to show me? Do you know?”

Hamfast turned in silence and headed directly toward the sun. The light streamed down on Beorth's face. A few moments later they stood looking down at a gully between two nearly barren hills holding nothing but melting snow.

“Down there is the Pit of Bones,” Master Hamfast said. “During the Mountain Wars this was the scene of a great battle between humans and dwarves. During the battle, there was a sudden earthquake (some say caused by one of the powerful dwarven priests present) and the whole area collapsed into a fissure in the earth and hundreds of scores of men and dwarves and their mounts died.”

Beorth was silent. He looked down at the depression filled with snow and stones, and the occasional bone sticking out of the earth.

The wind moaned through the stones below. “The place is filled with the bones of the dead never put to rest. It is a major task excavating this place and setting up a proper and respectful tomb of stone for all these that died here. The spirits here and the bones here are not at rest and it is troubling work. This is what we are doing here. Silently toiling at Anubis' work

while our kin travel on ships to far off lands to discuss philosophy.”

He turned and looked at Beorth.

“Beorth, this place was long hidden, and I am only showing it to you as a sign of faith and trust. Tell no one else of this place. There are those that would seek to excavate it for other reasons. It is said that ancient magics are buried here. For yes, this new philosophy of the Brotherhood of Anubis would say that the items interred in a tomb are best used! Can you imagine, those promised to fulfill his will violating it so blatantly?!? The arrogance of such an attempt. I want you to promise me that you will defend the knowledge of this place with your life and that when you are free to do so, you will return and help establish a monastery here and retreat for warriors of Anubis to guard this sacred site.”

Beorth did not reply but continued to look down at the pit.

“Do you promise?”

“It is sad that so many souls have not been able to find the rest that they need. The Mountain Wars are long past, and these souls must surely be in need of peace,” Beorth said absently. He turned to face Master Hamfast. “There is much work that must be done here and if I were not sworn to other tasks right now, I would stay and help you. But as you say, I can return after I have tended all my other duties.”

Beorth paused again.

“I *do* swear to return here to establish a monastery. This area would be ideal for a monastery where I could train others in the ways of Anubis. I can only pray that Anubis will give me the wisdom and strength to accomplish a goal as great. It is truly in his name that I work. Is there any aid right now that I could give you? I could give you some of my time today if you think it would be valuable.... Or perhaps a bit of silver could help in some way.....”

Beorth reached for his money but stopped when he heard Master Hamfast speak.

“We could use your help for the rest of the day, pulling bones and items from the topmost layers and bringing them carefully to the shrouds we have set up, and then tomorrow I will have Phlan and Maynard guide you back to Ogre's Bluff. But again, I must warn you others may be looking for this place to despoil and exploit it. You cannot ever tell anyone where this place is or guide them here.”

“I swear in Anubis' name that I will tell no one of the location of this site. If the powerful magics that you speak of are located here, then many would come to disturb the sanctity of this grave site. I would that these spirits find the rest that they have needed for all this time. A caretaker for these souls is exactly what the Pit of Bones needs. In the future this place will be a place of peace and I will make it so. I swear this to you and to our Father Anubis.”

Beorth looked to see if the other monks are around.

“What tasks would you have me accomplish today? And where should I begin?”

Master Hamfast led Beorth down into the pit and they worked the rest of the day uncovering bones and bits of armor and weapons and other artifacts and placing them on shrouds for proper burial.

Along with Hamfast, Maynard, Phlan, there are three young acolytes, who carted off dirt and wrapped up the shrouds when they were full and took them to the cave for safekeeping.

That night, Beorth slept better, exhausted from the long day's work in the cold.

In the morning he bid Master Hamfast adieu, and with the aid of Maynard and Phlan headed back to Ogre's Bluff.

## **Tholem, 4th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

And after marching for two days and camping out two nights, they parted ways just below the bluff in the shadow of the many caves that led into the Honeycombe. Beorth climbed up the steep icy path that led to town and made his way back to

the Golden Plough.

The common room was mostly empty, with a few figures talking loudly around a table in one corner by the hearth, and a few local shepherds at the bar sipping their mulled wine.

Beorth asked the inn-keeper about his friends and received the note Martin had left for him, explaining that they had left for the elven enclave. The paladin of Anubis decided not to wait and would go and try to find them that very night.

He was about to open the door when someone came in from the outside. It was Martin. The watch-mage's red hair was crusted with dirt, and there were spots of blood on his face, hands, and robes.

"Thank Isis!" Martin cried. "Beorth, hurry. We need your help!"

AQUERRA

## Session #25

“Martin! What is wrong?” Beorth asked, worried.

“The others are waiting by the caves on the edge of town. We are all wounded, but Ratchis and Jana gravely so,” Martin explained. The young watch-mage looked around the common room very quickly for any town guards but could not see any. “Let’s go.”

They hustled out of the inn and through the town to the cave where the others waited, shivering in the cold.

“Kazrack, what happened?” Beorth asked as he saw the unconscious forms of Jana and Ratchis, and the dwarf’s arm in a sling, and his beard caked with blood and dirt.

“Yeah, what did happen?” Jeremy asked, with a hint of sarcasm.

“Against all expectations, we managed to get out of there alive,” the dwarf said. “I hope Jana will be okay. She sacrificed herself for me, you know.”

Beorth looked over at Tirhas who looked back meekly. The beautiful elven warrior looked tired, cold, and miserable.

“We have to get you out of here,” the paladin examined the two fallen companions, and then laid his hand on Jana’s head. “Anubis, send your healing light to this brave young woman.”

Jana stirred.

After a few moments she was able to walk with Martin’s help while Jeremy and Beorth carried Ratchis. The party made their way to the top of the bluff and the edge of town.

“This is where we must part ways once again,” said Tirhas. “I do not think it is a good idea for me to be seen in town. I will return to Aze-Nuquerna and spend my time in the library there learning what I can about the witch sisters.”

As they walked back to the inn Kazrack’s mind was working as he looked down at his broken arm. “Jana, do you think you could set my arm, so I’ll be able to use a shield?”

“That doesn’t sound like a good idea,” commented Martin.

“It’s definitely not a good idea,” Jana concurred. “You have a good chance of breaking it again, and it would not heal very fast, and if it doesn’t heal properly you run the risk of not being able to use your arm again. That being said, if that’s what you want to do it’s your life.”

“No, I’ll take your word for it,” Kazrack said, disappointed.

The few people in the Golden Plough stared with open mouths as Jeremy and Beorth carried in Ratchis’ unconscious form. Martin and Jana led the way and Kazrack came in last.

The innkeeper, Wilson, came rushing over. “What happened to your friend?”

“The Honeycombe,” said Martin solemnly. “We need rooms.”

“I still have that one room held for you,” said Wilson. “You can put him in there until I get someone to prepare the other rooms.”

From a corner of the common room near the hearth and below the great mural of the golden ram pulling a plough while a farmer and his family watch from the foreground, a voice rang out, “Hey guys! It looks like you almost lost one of yours. Too Bad!”

It was Gunthar. His face was flushed with drink, and he was dressed in dirty sailcloth shirt and black leather breeches.

Beorth and Jeremy did not stop, carrying Ratchis straight upstairs to bed.

“You look all broken up about it,” Martin replied to the loud-mouthed Neerguardian with sarcasm.

“Hey, we had some trouble, too,” Gunthar said with affected sensitivity. “The other guys are upstairs sleeping it off.”

Kazrack could see that the stocky barbarian in the wolf hood and the tall man in heavy armor were at the table. The tall man, Aldovar, had curly black hair and a well-kept beard.

Jana and Kazrack took a seat at a table and called for Wilson to bring them some stew.

“I think I’ll take that bath now,” Martin sighed.

“I will have someone draw it for you,” Wilson said, always friendly.

“Wait, we should use the tub to clean out Ratchis’ wounds and such first,” Jana suggested.

“Good idea,” Martin acquiesced and sat down heavily. He ordered some stew and bread as well.

Wilson brought over a tray with bowls of stew, some mulled wine, mead, and a large hunk of bread.

He turned to leave, but then turned back and addressed Martin, “Oh, there was something...”

“A message for me?” Martin inquired.

“Yeah, that’s it!” Wilson said with a broad smile. “That young fellow, one of the guards that works on the alderman’s estate who just lost his uncle, he came by here and left word that there is a message waiting for you at the alderman’s house.”

“Lost his uncle?” Martin asked.

“The dragon, according to rumor,” replied the innkeeper.

“I will have to stop by the alderman’s house once I am done eating,” Martin commented.

Upstairs, Beorth and Jeremy placed Ratchis in bed, the half-orc’s legs hanging off one end, and stripped him of his dirty and bloody clothing. Covering him with a blanket, they headed back downstairs.

“Beorth,” Jeremy said.

“Jeremy.”

“Where have you been?” Jeremy asked, as they made their way down the narrow rickety steps.

“I was summoned by a member of my order,” replied the ghost-hunter.

“We thought it was something like that,” Jeremy said.

“More importantly, where have you been?” asked Beorth.

“Oh, I’ll let Kazrack and Jana tell it,” Jeremy said.

“Yes, I think we need to sit down as a group and talk all this out,” said Beorth.

The two companions re-joined the others at their table, the common room echoed with Gunthar’s loud re-telling of his conquests.

“Beorth, it is good to see you,” Kazrack said. “Where have you been?”

"I was called away by a member of my order," Beorth said again.

"I beat you to it," Jeremy said with a smile. "I already asked him."

"So, even though she was playing coy I was able to get her up to my room and I give her the ole Northrop special!" Gunthar said loudly and followed it with a laugh and chugged a pint of ale.

"What did he just say?" Martin asked, looking at Jeremy.

"The old Northrop Special," Jana said, with a look of confusion.

"Jeremy, isn't your last name..." Kazrack began.

"Shush!" Jeremy said, as he saw Gunthar coming over, he was staring lasciviously at Jana.

"Hey, hey, I heard you mention the Northrop Special," Gunthar said to Jana with a broad smile. "Wanna firsthand example of what it is?"

"Why don't you just tell us?" Jeremy said, his voice full of rancor.

"The 'Northrop Special' is a special way the men in my family have with the ladies," Gunthar explained. "They love it. Noble women swoon and whoers give it up for free. My father had it, and I have it!"

"You're a Northrop?" Martin asked, finding it hard to suppress a smile, despite his disgust for Gunthar's manners.

"Yeah! I'm Gunthar Northrop," he said, with a slight drunken slur.

"I thought Northrop was a village or something," commented Kazrack.

"So, is he related to you?" Beorth innocently asked Jeremy, and the young Neergaardian's eyes opened wide.

"No, not all Neergaardians are related," Jeremy said, tersely.

"Yeah, we're not related," said Gunthar, taking a seat at their table. "When I first saw him clear I thought he might be my missing little brother, but he's not even from Neergaard."

"What was your brother's name?" Beorth asked.

"Jeremy," replied Gunthar.

"Hmmm, Jeremy Northrop?" Beorth's eyes darted over to Jeremy.

"Yep," Gunthar said, signaling to Wilson for another ale. "But that was just wishful thinking on my part. What a sod-sucking sentimental horse-humpin' pansy-pooof I am... but I just always wanted a little brother I could show the ropes to and stuff. My dad, that salty son of a bitch, great man he was, used to tell me all about Jeremy when he'd come visit me and me Ma in Earthsea City.<sup>7</sup> I was a root-sucking illegitimate little bastard, but when Jeremy died he took me as he rightful heir."

"What happened to him?" asked Beorth, his eyes widening as he heard a tale of death.

"They had sent him to be squire to a knight, and uh, his master's body was found in a place overrun by hobgoblins. It was assumed the hobgoblins took off with him and did whatever bloody ogre-sack rubbin' hobgoblins do to a young boy, you know the old bow-wow and poking holes they make with spears first with their hobbo doo-dads...."

"Please! There is a lady present!" Jeremy protested. The others had rarely seen him so angry.

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<sup>7</sup> *Earthsea City* is perhaps the most infamous city in the Kingdom of Neergaard, known for its dangerous streets, black-marketeers and swift and bloody justice.

“Oh yeah, don’t worry I’m not forgetting,” Gunthar winked at Jana.

“It’s okay, Jeremy. I have dealt with his type before,” Jana said, smiling.

“Oh, I bet you have, sweet thing,” Gunthar said smiling. “Can’t wait to get a taste of you.”

Kazrack cleared his throat.

“So, my dad took me and recognized me as his heir, and I came to live with him on the estate with his wife and his daughter. He’s a noble ya know,” Gunthar continued.

“Why didn’t the daughter become heir?” asked Kazrack.

“Women can’t own property in Neergaard!” Gunthar said astonished.

“Neither can dead people,” said Beorth.

“That’s a good rule anywhere,” Jeremy added.

Jana rolled her eyes.

“Oh, my sister Eriana she’s so flithin’ great!” Gunthar said, the look on his face losing lasciviousness for a moment.

Jeremy listened very intently, his mouth open just a little bit.

“She’s a fine piece, if ya know what I’m saying, beautiful, but she’s my half-sister so don’t get ideas,” Gunthar grinned. “I look after her because that is what brothers should filthin’ do. I killed a man for her.”

Jeremy sat bolt upright.

“What’s the matter with you?” Gunthar said, eyeing Jeremy suspiciously. “You never kill a man?”

“Nothing, and yes, better men than you,” Jeremy replied.

“What in the sweaty ass-hairs of hell is that supposed to mean?” Gunthar asked, gritting his teeth.

“He’s tired. Ignore him,” Martin said, raising a hand and calming the situation.

“Yeah, yeah, so listen to this. This is a great story, how I killed the dough-assed Baronet bastard that had the nerve to try to force himself on my sister: I heard her cry out and I came running into the room and grabbed him by the ears and slammed him into the wall, and as he struggled to get up I grabbed my sister’s brass chamber pot which was filled with her business and slammed it on the little Baron’s head, again and again and poured the stuff on his bloody face and smashed it again and again until his own filthy rotting whore of mother with festering baby carcasses falling out of her crack wouldn’t recognize him.”

“Good,” said Jeremy under his breath.

“That was the reason why I had to leave so fast,” Gunthar continued. “My father arranged for me to get a job aboard a ship, and that is how I started traveling.”

“What about your mother?” Jeremy asked quietly.

“Well, she stayed back in Earthsea City. I think part of the deal was that she stay out of the picture, bad enough father had to friggin’ admit in front of everyone that he had been poinking me Ma all those years, and sending her money for me so she didn’t have to put it out on the street as often, if you know what I mean.”

“I meant, the other mom,” Jeremy said, his voice soft. “You father’s wife.”

“Oh her? Crazy as a gnome in a jewelry store,” Gunthar said laughing. “She took to bed soon after Jeremy died and wouldn’t get up for much. She hated me I think She often insisted that Jeremy was still alive, I think that is where I got the idea in my head, because I always wanted a little brother, like I said before—but I should just filthin’ accept it already. He’s dead.”

Gunthar paused and looked almost misty-eyed, and then suddenly stood, “Well, I must be either too filthin’ drunk or not horse-humpin’ drunk enough, because I’m blathering when I should be thinking of ways to get in your little friend’s drawers,” he pointed at Jana and laughed. “Later, all.”

He stumbled back to his table.

Their table was silent for a time, but Gunthar immediately fell to telling his companions about how his captain had gotten a rotting disease from a whore in Paragraine.<sup>8</sup>

“I didn’t know you were nobility,” Kazrack said, with a smile. “I would never have guessed.”

Jeremy grunted.

“So, when are we bringing you back?” Kazrack asked.

“Back where?”

“Back home. I’m sure your poor mother is pining away,” Kazrack said.

“Look Kazrack, just stay out of this, okay?” Jeremy said angrily.

“But your family thinks you’re dead,” Kazrack continued. “Don’t you want to let them know the truth?”

“You know, Kazrack, as much as I like see to Jeremy squirm, I think we should drop the subject,” Jana said, and emptied her mug of ale, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“I agree,” said Martin.

“That being said, it leads to some interesting speculation, and to some possible interesting situations,” Jana said with a smile.

Beorth stood, “I’m going to go check on Ratchis.”

“I’ll join you,” said Jana, standing as well.

“I’m in the room at the end of the hall,” Gunthar called over to Jana. “Drop by anytime tonight. Rondar’s unconscious in there—but I’ve always wanted to test my father’s assertion that the ‘Northrop Special’ can make a woman wake the dead!”

“Don’t hold your breath,” Jana chided back, and she and Beorth went up.

Kazrack turned to Martin and spoke very softly, leaning forward, “I’ve been thinking about that voice Ratchis heard in the Honeycombe, do you think it was Rahasia?”

“There is no way to know for certain,” Martin replied. “But I am going to change my robes and wash up and go see the alderman and see what I can find out about the dragon killing someone. Maybe someone saw it clearly.”

The watch-mage left the table.

“I think an early sleep is a good idea for me,” Kazrack said. “My arm is throbbing.”

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<sup>8</sup> *Paragraine* is the capitol of the Black Islands Barony.

The dwarf looked to Jeremy, who was looking intently into his mug of ale, and shrugged his shoulders.

Jeremy sighed and sat alone at the table for some time and then went over to the bar and bought a pitcher of dark ale, which he then carried over to Gunthar's table.

"Mind if I join you?" Jeremy asked.

"Sure kid, sit down," Gunthar said, licking flecks of beer foam from his blonde mustache.

Jeremy sat down and immediately felt the eyes of the barbarian sit upon him heavily. Debo, was nearly a full head shorter than Jeremy, but his shoulders were significantly broader. He had coarse black hair and random patches of stubble. The other man was Aldovar. He still wore his splint mail armor, and his mouth was always a perfectly horizontal emotionless line set in a well-groomed curly black beard, and with bright eyes that seemed to flicker with a green flame.

"So, what's up with your group?" Gunthar asked Jeremy.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you're traveling with a pig-fucker, a grubber, a doughboy..."

"Who's the doughboy? Oh, Martin?"

"Yeah, a pig-fucker? They smell like crap! And the grubber? Do you count your coins every night? And what's with the bald guy? Pale as death!"

"He follows Anubis," Jeremy explained.

"Eh, a wanna-be Jackal-Ghoul,"<sup>9</sup> Gunthar quipped. "And what about the piece? She your girl?"

"Jana? No way," Jeremy said,

"Oh, come on, you never gave her a little bit of the old heave-ho?" Gunthar winked.

"Will you please stop talking that way?" Jeremy said, growing angry again.

"Oh, well, just means I won't have to filthin' kill you when she gives me a little bit of the ole sweet stuff and you get angry. You know what we need? Shots!" Gunthar got Wilson's attention. "Five shots of foul spirits!"<sup>10</sup>

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Martin walked out of Ogre's Bluff to the west, following the narrow paths cleared of snow towards the Alderman's house. He still ached from the ordeal in the ogre caves, and he shivered in the late evening cold, but he knew that the message awaiting him, and any information about the dragon he could gather would be invaluable.

At the alderman's estate the young guard, Bryce, seemed annoyed to see Martin the Green.

"I need to see the alderman," Martin said.

"Yeah, well he's likely very busy," Bryce said.

"I'm afraid I must insist," Martin replied.

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<sup>9</sup> Monks of Anubis are often colloquially called "Jackal-Ghouls," as people have the impression that they actually love death, and associate them with the misery and sadness of dead love ones, as they are the ones that traditionally collect and inter corpses. Of course, few people have the guts to call them by that name in their presence.

<sup>10</sup> *Foul Spirits*, a very strong wood alcohol popular among sailors for its inebriating qualities, and by warriors for its effectiveness as a polish for armor. It is clear and slightly viscous.

“Of course, you must,” the guard said crankily. “Maybe you people should insist on hunting the dragon. All these people hunting the thing and yet it is able to show up here and kill my uncle. Typical.”

“Did you see it?” Martin asked, but Bryce had already walked towards the house, making the watch-mage wait in the cold.

Ten minutes later, Martin the Green was in the entrance hall speaking with the butler.

“Unfortunately, the alderman is indisposed right now,” the butler said. “However, I can pen you in his schedule for tomorrow afternoon.”

“That would be fine,” Martin replied. “But perhaps we can arrange for me to interview the staff about the dragon before that.”

“Well, only two people saw it,” the butler explained. “Brochard, and the alderman’s daughter. She has taken to her room since and has not emerged.”

“Well, I will speak to Brochard then, and if possible, Miss Silvestri,” Martin said. “Oh and I was told there was a message for me?”

“Yes, it came from 12 Trolls via Summit a day or two ago,” the butler said, passing the watch-mage a sealed envelope.

Martin thanked Dormast and headed back to town. Impatient, Martin tore open the letter and read it by the light of a lantern hanging over the manor door. It was Daniel, the palace steward in 12 Trolls.

*Dear Martin the Green (and companions)*

*A matter of great urgency and secrecy, vital to the stability of the kingdom has arose, that requires your attention as Watch-Mage of Gothanius, and that your companions might also find beneficial to help with, in terms of their own position in the nation.*

*I would have you meet me in the Alder-Village of Three Trees at the Golden Apple on the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, or 20<sup>th</sup> of Dek (though I will be leaving there on the afternoon of the last day). I will be staying under the name Barnabus of Earthport, for my identity is best kept secret when abroad, especially when dealing with this matter.*

*If you cannot make any of the specified dates please send word to the inn (to the name I gave you) or at the castle (in the guise of a regular report) and mention some place and date where I or one of my agents can meet you.*

*I cannot tell you in this missive how important this matter is.*

*Yours sincerely in the King’s Service*

*Daniel Ortun  
Steward of Castle Gothanius*

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“Oh yeah, choosing which princess to marry when we slay the dragon is going to be very tough,” Gunthar was saying. “But I’m the leader of the group so I get first choice.”

“Who do you think you’d choose, if you slay the dragon?” Jeremy asked, taking a sip of ale hoping it would cool the burning in his throat and stomach from the two shots of foul spirits he had already had.

“What do you filthin’ mean, *if?*” Gunthar laughed. “We are going to slay that dragon. We have a foolproof plan.”

“You should not underestimate the tenacity of a fool,” Aldovar said in his creepy monotone. “But I must admit it is an excellent plan.”

“What is the plan?” Jeremy asked, leaning forward.

“Like we’d tell you,” Gunthar said. “Anyway, part of me would want to pick Princess Selma—big and strong—but I think it’d be Tracel, she seems the softest and most obedient, good qualities for a wife. Anyway, sisters talk and once the other princesses find out about the ‘Northrop Special’ they will all be visiting for a firsthand look.”

Gunthar smiled and took a long sip of ale.

“Don’t you think that’d be dangerous?” Jeremy asked.

“Naw, nobility pretty much can do whatever the filth they want to do,” Gunthar said. “Look at what my father got away with, and there are others that do much worse and everyone acts like they can’t see the cock strutting amongst the hens, if ya know what I’m saying.”

“Debo take the strong one,” the barbarian said in his bark-like voice. “Debo will bring her to my people and make an alliance between this soft kingdom and Debo’s tribe, which Debo will rule when Debo return and kill the chieftain and take control. Debo be son of king and use Gothanius soldiers to conquer all the other tribes under Debo’s.”

Debo made the frightening grimace that passed for a smile.

Jeremy leaned over to Gunthar and whispered, “You haven’t told him that this won’t work, have you?”

“Shut up,” Gunthar said, glaring.

“Debo strong and smart,” Debo said.

“Your strength shall be tested,” Aldovar said. “Only the strong prevail in this world and the weak serve or die. It is the simple the reality. My lord would not tolerate the weak or the meek to gain through luck what can be taken by strength.”

Debo grunted.

“I am going to mediate on the dark flames of my lord,” Aldovar said, standing.

“Remember not to abuse those powers,” Jeremy said jokingly.

“They are not to be wasted on the weak,” Aldovar said, turning towards the stairs.

Jeremy turned to Gunthar, “Did he just say we are all weak?”

“No, he just means that Frederick and Rondar are weak,” Gunthar said. “Speaking of which, I don’t think Rondar is going to last too much longer, if ya know what I mean, and you seem like an okay guy. I like your fighting style, if you want to drop them filthin’ losers you are traveling with you can join up with us.”

Jeremy was taking a sip of ale and ended up spitting a bunch out in surprise.

“Uh...” he paused. “Thanks, but I kind of have a commitment to those guys.”

“Whatever you like,” Gunthar said. He stood and sucked his flagon dry. “Good filthin’ night to you.” He turned to Debo. “Debo, go to bed soon. Stay out of trouble.”

Debo grunted.

Now only Jeremy and the barbarian were left in the common room.

It was silent for a long time. Jeremy’s stomach gurgled, and his mouth was dry. He tried to last longer than the barbarian, but in the end, his head was too cloudy and the aches of the wounds he had suffered the last few days were too much to ignore, and he went upstairs to bed.

## **Balem, 5th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

The next morning the party gathered for breakfast, except Ratchis who was still unconscious upstairs, recovering from the nearly fatal wounds he suffered in the Honeycombe.

Sipping teas, and eating eggs on toast with sausage, the party said little to each other, until finally Martin spoke, “I visited the alderman’s last night. It seems that someone in the town was killed by the dragon while we were gone, in addition to the head guard over at the alderman’s estate.”

No one replied. Kazrack nodded as he shoved three chunks of yoke-dipped sausage in his mouth getting the orange stuff all over his beard.

From the stairs they heard Gunthar’s blaring voice, undaunted by the cold and dismal morning, “Come on you nasty onion-string of a turd, get yer arse down there!”

The tall lanky man, Rondar, came stumbling down the stairs. He was stooped over, lugging a heavy pack on his back and looking bleary eyed. He had a visible bandage on his neck, and the way he walked betrayed that he had other wounds that had not yet completely healed.

“I don’t understand why we can’t wait another day and rest some more,” Rondar said crankily.

Gunthar came down behind him, poking him roughly in the back. The others in Gunthar’s group followed as well.

“The filthin’ dragon has been spotted,” Gunthar said. “We have work to do.”

Frederick the Amazing, the group’s bard, also looked tired and bruised, but not nearly as bad as Rondar. He ordered a whiskey and downed it.

Gunthar asked Wilson for one as well, as the rest of his group made their way outside. The loud-mouthed Neergardian, turned to the party’s table.

“Well, good luck to all of you,” Gunthar said, raising his shot glass in the air. “I’m sure we’ll run into each other again. Oh, and Jeremy, the offer still stands.”

He winked and walked out.

“What offer was that?” Kazrack asked.

“What do you think?” Jeremy said, annoyed. “He asked me to join his group.”

“Why would he do that?” Martin the Green asked.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Jeremy said, with sarcasm. “Maybe someone actually acknowledges what I have to offer. But don’t worry, I owe you all a life-debt. Literally.”

“What did you say?” Beorth asked.

“What do you think I said?” Jeremy said. “I owe Ratchis, Jana, Martin and Kazrack my life. I have to help them with their quests. I don’t welsh on debts. Anyway, I don’t know if you noticed, but those guys don’t seem exactly trustworthy.”

“Yes, they are going on with one of their number gravely injured,” Beorth said. “He won’t last long.”

“And thus the opening for Jeremy,” reasoned Kazrack.

“Their healer doesn’t seem interested in helping the injured or helpless,” Jeremy explained. “He says he cannot aid the weak in service of his *dark lord*.”

“So, last night Jana explained to me some about that drow witch you were after in those caves,” Beorth said, cleaning the corners of his mouth with a cloth napkin. “What is the next step?”

“I don’t know,” Kazrack said. “I’m afraid that the trail is probably cold.”

“Maybe Tirhas will learn something in the library of Aze-Nuquerna that will help us find her,” Martin hoped. “I’d give almost anything to look through their library myself.”

“So, were you at least able to secure the elves’ aid for the gnomes?” Beorth asked.

“Uh, no. The gnome leader never made it to the elves. We found a dead gnome there, but we don’t know if it was the chieftain,” Kazrack said.

“And what about Richard the Red?” Jana asked. “Are we trying to stop him? Do we think he is with the drow?”

“We have no way of knowing,” said Kazrack.

“We were so close to catching her,” Ratchis said, suddenly appearing at the table. He looked very tired but was able to walk without help. He lowered himself to a chair. “I think the quaggoths are a sign that the drow are going to use the Honeycombe as a staging ground for an invasion of Derome-Delem.”

“That won’t happen,” Kazrack said, an edge of righteous indignation entering his voice. “I swear that if anyone retakes Derome-Delem it will be its proper owners, not the drow.”

“What, the dwarves?” Jeremy asked.

“Yes, of course,” replied Kazrack.

“Well, we should get going,” Martin said. “Jana, will you accompany me to the alderman’s?”

“Yes,” the young witch replied.

“Two sets of ears are better than one,” Martin said, and then he added with a sly smile. “We can say you are my apprentice.”

Jana rolled her eyes. Martin moved to stand.

“Wait,” Beorth said. “I have some information to share with all of you. It comes from the brotherhood of Anubis, and it concerns *Hurgun’s Maze*. I have reason to believe that the maze is the key to all of our problems.”

Beorth retold the story of Hurgun’s Maze and the Mountain Wars, as it was told to him by Master Hamfast.

“Hurgun was an elemental savant?” Martin asked Beorth.

“Yes,” the paladin replied, and Martin let out a low whistle. “I believe that many of the strange and powerful creatures running around this part of the world have something to do with this maze.”

“If this maze is an opening to other planes, this is bad, real bad,” said Jana solemnly.

“Master Hamfast said it was a ‘planar focal point,’ so I am assuming one can reach different planes from there and vice-versa,” Beorth said.

“We can talk about this more later,” Kazrack said. “The drow should be our priority, but you might as well find out about the dragon as that might give us a clue as to the location of the gnome chieftain or the gnomes he brought with him.”

It was decided that Martin, Jana, and Beorth would go to the alderman’s to interview the staff and talk to Silvestri himself. Ratchis would accompany them in order to look for any tracks the dragon might have made. Jeremy would go to the general store to buy some more gear, while Kazrack remained in the inn in order to rest.

The bell above the door jingled cheerfully as Jeremy walked into the packed general store. The proprietor's dog, Noah leapt up on him happily, and Jeremy patted it on the head and scratched it under the snout.

He looked up and saw someone waiting in front of the counter. The proprietor did not seem to be around. The figure wore a long gray fur cloak and a hood. Jeremy walked up behind him.

"Excuse me, do you know if the proprietor is a..."

The figure turned around and his hood slipped off. He wore Academy robes of varying shades of red, and had a well-kempt beard and shoulder length red hair in a ponytail, and held a staff. It was Richard the Red.

"You!" Jeremy cried, reaching for his short sword.

"Hold," Richard said, holding one hand out, and amazingly Jeremy obeyed, though no spell had been cast.

"What are you doing?" Jeremy asked, his mouth agape.

"Buying some equipment," Richard replied casually.

"You are coming with me!" Jeremy said sternly.

The dog looked back and forth between them, drooling.

"I don't think so," Richard said with a laugh. "You and your friends mucked everything up. I think we're even. You know my plan would have worked, but now only one of the drow are free and that is much more dangerous than all three, in the long run."

At that moment, the store's proprietor came out. "Oh, hello!" he said to Jeremy, and then turned to Richard. "I checked and you were right there were rations missing. Funny how I did not remember the girl being here until you mentioned it."

"How much did she buy?" Richard asked, grimacing.

"About four or six weeks' worth," he said.

"Thank you very much," Richard said to the shopkeeper and passed him some coins. "For your troubles."

Richard turned to leave the general store, but Jeremy stepped in his way.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Jeremy asked.

"There is nothing more to say," Richard replied. "She was here, Karellena. She is likely trying to make her way to the Plutonic Realms with the help of those quaggoths that showed up."

Richard stepped around Jeremy, but the Neerguardian reached out to grab his arm, "You have to talk to Martin!"

Richard looked right into Jeremy's eyes, "I will. When the time is right."

"So, you said, that drow witch was here?" Jeremy asked.

"Yes," replied Richard the Red and he left the shop.

"Can I help you, sir?" the shopkeeper asked, but Jeremy did not reply, running out of the store after the watch-mage.

"Wait! You can't leave me like this!" Jeremy called after Richard who spun around on his heels.

"Don't be a fool!" he said. "No, I forget, you can only be a fool."

Again, he turned and began to walk eastward down the streets of Ogre's Bluff.

"Where are you going?" Jeremy called.

"To find her," Richard said, not looking back. "And fix your mistake."

Jeremy turned and ran to catch up with the rest of the party. It was a twenty-minute walk to the alderman's house and it had been less than ten since they left, he knew he could catch them before they could get there.

He overtook them about five minutes from the estate.

"I just saw Richard the Red in town," Jeremy said, out of breath.

"What?" Martin was astonished.

"He was in general store, asking the shopkeeper about Rahasia. She has been to town and was buying some spelunking equipment and provisions for a trip to the Plutonic Realms," Jeremy explained.

"Did you talk to him?" Ratchis asked.

"Yes, I tried to hold him, but he wouldn't come along," Jeremy said. "He said he would be coming to talk to Martin 'when the time is right,' but I think we should go find him now. He was headed for the Honeycombe."

"Yes, Let's go, maybe we can catch up with him if we hurry," Martin the Green said.

"What do you hope to accomplish by this?" Beorth asked.

"Talk to him, kill him, I don't know," Martin said, sounding exasperated.

"The man is deeply involved in all of this. He knows more than we do, and we need to find out what that is," Jeremy said, showing a rare bit of insight.

"I am still too exhausted to run," Ratchis said.

"Then you start walking and catch up to us when you can," said Martin, and with that, he and Beorth, Jeremy and Jana ran back towards town.

They ran between the many buildings, and past the constable's office. Jeremy saw the constable give them a long look of suspicion as they hustled past.

They came to the eastern edge of the bluff and looked down at the many caves that pocked its surface and listened to the sounds of dripping water that made a distant knocking sound as it fell into this opening or that.

There was no sign of Richard anywhere. All they could see were some shepherds grazing their goats on the plain below, in spots where the snow had melted or had been cleared.

"I'm going down to see if they saw him," Jeremy said.

"I think it is a waste of time," said Jana. "He is gone."

Beorth and Martin nodded.

"I didn't come all this way for nothing," Jeremy said, and started making his way down.

It took Jeremy over twenty minutes just to make his way down the icy paths and gain the attention of one of the shepherds.

"Excuse me, sir," Jeremy called to him as he approached. Some goats stubbornly stood in Jeremy's way and he clapped his hands loudly to frighten them off. They still did not obey, so he had to walk around a clump of them through a deep

snowbank.

“Um, sir, you haven’t seen a man in red robes, like a wizard, baring a staff?” Jeremy asked. “He also had a gray fur cloak.”

“Nope, I ain’t seen no wizards,” the shepherd said, shivering. He had some frost in his dark brown beard and was wrapped in many layers of woolen clothing.

“Aren’t you worried about grazing your herd over here within sight of the ogre caves?” Jeremy asked, looking over his shoulders at the many ominous cave openings above them.

“We had to start bringing our herds down here, what with the dragon being around here and all,” the shepherd said. “Old man Carson got his sheep killed, his house burned down and now he’s dead. I want to avoid that if possible. At least you can run from ogres.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Jeremy said. “Well, thanks for your time.”

Jeremy made the slow progress back up to Martin, Jana and Beorth,

He relayed to them what the shepherd had said.

The group headed back towards the Alderman’s estate and caught up with Ratchis who was barely making any progress, as he was feeling so run down.

“I guess you didn’t find him,” Ratchis sighed.

“No,” said Beorth.

“We should warn the elves that he is still around,” Ratchis said. “He may be trying to get back to Aze-Nuquerna to free the other two.”

“He said he was trying to catch Rahasia,” said Jeremy.

“Regardless, Ratchis is right. It doesn’t hurt to be safe,” said Jana.

“We still need to interview those who saw the dragon at the alderman’s house,” said Martin the Green.

It was decided that Martin and Ratchis would continue to the alderman’s house. Martin would talk to the staff, while Ratchis looked around for tracks. Beorth, Jana and Jeremy would return to the inn, alert Kazrack and get the group’s equipment ready for traveling back to the elven enclave. They would then meet near the alderman’s house and leave from there.

Jeremy ran right upstairs ahead of the other after they had trudged back to the Golden Plough. Beorth and Jana, feeling hungry stopped to grab a quick bite and a drink.

Upstairs, Jeremy was stopped by Wilson, the innkeeper.

“Oh, Master Jeremy,” he said. “I had forgotten to tell you. Someone came by to see you while you were gone.”

“Who?” Jeremy asked suspiciously.

“You know who,” the innkeeper said mysteriously. “You know the one whose name we should not say aloud because it’d get *her* in trouble.”

“Who?” Jeremy asked again, clueless.

The innkeeper leaned in close and whispered, “You know. The alderman’s daughter.”

“Oh!” Jeremy said. “Yes, I should go talk to her if I can. Thank you.”

He passed the innkeeper a handful of copper for his troubles.

Downstairs, as Beorth and Jana munched on thick slabs of buttered bread at the bar, they heard someone clear their throat behind them.

They turned.

The constable stood there. He looked to be nearly middle-aged, with graying hair, and creases etched by years of toil and worry around his eyes and mouth. He wore chainmail and had his hand on the pommel of his long sword.

Instinctually, Jana looked to the door and saw that two more guards were standing just outside of the inn.

“Are you called Jana?” the constable asked.

“Yes,” Jana said, hesitantly.

“Jana of Westron?”

“Yes,” she replied again.

“I’m taking you in,” he grabbed her arm roughly and spun her around keeping one hand behind her back. She did not resist. “You see we do not take kindly to murderers around here.”

The constable manacled Jana’s hands behind her back.

“What’s going on?” Beorth asked shocked. He fought down an urge to try and stop the constable.

“Murder is murder,” the constable said. “Doesn’t matter where you committed it. It will catch up to you in time.”

He led her out of the inn, and the two guards at the door fell in line, bringing her to a cell in the constable’s office.

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Ratchis decided to head back to the inn after the others, leaving Martin to handle the interviews at the alderman’s house alone. He was still exhausted and figured that if it were the dragon it would likely not have left any tracks, and if it were an illusion (as they often speculated it might be) it would definitely leave no tracks.

He would go and rest, and if Martin discovered anything, he could return that night.

Meanwhile, after waiting nearly thirty minutes of waiting in the foyer, Martin was able to talk to with Brochard, the guard who had seen the dragon kill his uncle.

“I am sorry for your loss,” Martin said to the sad-faced young man.

“It was quick, at least,” Brochard said. “You want to see where it happened?”

“Yes, please,” Martin replied and followed him outside and around the large house. “Also, a priest of Anubis travels with us, perhaps it would be permissible to allow him to examine the body?”

“He has already been buried,” Brochard said.

“Well, then that is no longer an option,” Martin said.<sup>11</sup>

They stopped on the opposite side of the house. A large section of snow was cleared from the roof and lie in a big pile on

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<sup>11</sup> There are very strong taboos against exhuming the dead in Aquerran culture. It is only allowed to be done by Monks of Anubis, and only under the direst circumstances.

the ground, below a window.

“And you saw the dragon here?” Martin asked. “Could you tell everything as it happened?”

“Well, I was inside, and I heard a loud blow against the roof, and I was on the ground floor!” Brochard said, his voice cracking a bit. “And then I heard my uncle cry out, so I ran out the front door and around the house, the way we just came. And there it was, on the roof. Even as it came into view I heard its inhuman voice. It seemed to be asking my uncle something, but I couldn’t make out what it was. I guess my uncle didn’t know the answer or said the wrong thing, because as it came into clearer view it bit down on my uncle, rip... ripping the head right off his shoulders. My uncle’s body slid off the roof, and then the head followed. I ran forward. There was... There was blood everywhere, and then the thing just took off. It flew across the top of the house, towards the woods and disappeared.”

Martin gave the guard a moment to compose himself.

“And what did it look like?” he asked.

“Well, I never saw the whole thing, except from behind and from afar, but it was over thirty feet long, and it had black bat-like wings over twenty feet wide, and it was bronze and golden colored, and it kind of shimmered,” Brochard said.

Martin made a note in his journal, “Thirty feet long? Did that include the tail?”

“No, the tail added another fifteen feet or so, and it had spines along its length,” Brochard added.

“And who else saw it?” Martin asked.

“Well, we think that Miss Jasmine, the alderman’s daughter saw it,” Brochard said.

“You think?” Martin asked, puzzled.

“Well, she has not left her room since it happened, and her window would have given a clear view of the thing scooping up my uncle and the falling body,” Brochard pointed up to the window.

“Hmmm,” Martin thought for a second. “Did it land anywhere else?”

“Not that I know of,” Brochard replied. “My brother and I looked around and didn’t see any other sign of the creature.”

Martin thanked Brochard for his time and wished him his condolences once again. He noticed that the others had not caught up with him yet, so he decided to head back to town and meet up with them on the way.

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Back at the Golden Plough, Beorth was unsure what to do next, so he went upstairs and told Kazrack about Jana’s arrest.

“What?”

“I said, Jana’s been taken into custody and Richard the Red, whoever that is, is on the loose in town, or something,” Beorth repeated.

Kazrack sighed, “Why was she arrested?”

“I don’t know,” Beorth replied. “The constable said something about murder. Perhaps one of us should go to the constable’s office and see what we can discover.”

“Well, they don’t like my kind here,” Kazrack said. “They might lock me up just for asking. Martin should do the asking. He’s the only one with a semblance of authority around here.”

“Asking what?” Ratchis asked, coming through the door, and sitting on the bed.

Beorth explained to the Friar of Nephthys what happened.

“Perhaps they misconstrued her use of magic,” Beorth speculated. “I don’t know.”

“I hope it wasn’t something Jeremy said when he went by there a few days ago,” Ratchis said, angrily. “We are supposed to meet up with Martin on the way back to the elves. Beorth, could you go see if you could find him and bring him back here so we can discuss this while I go to the constable’s office and see what I can find out.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” Kazrack asked.

“I guess we’ll find out,” Ratchis said, and left the room to head over to the constable’s office.

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Ratchis entered the office just after pulling the hood of his cloak up to shadow some of his more monstrous features.

The constable looked up from his desk, where he was writing something.

“Can I help you?” he looked Ratchis up and down, and peered into the hood, catching a glimpse of the half-orc’s wide protruding jaw.

“I am here to inquire about Jana of Westron,” Ratchis said. “Would it be possible to see her?”

“No,” the constable said, looking back down at his work.

“Would it be possible to find out why she is being held?” Ratchis asked.

“Yes.”

There was a long pause.

Ratchis sighed. “Why is she being held?”

“Westron,” the constable said. “Looks like she was on the lam, and I was just the one to bring her in.”

“Who did she supposedly murder?” Ratchis asked.

“Some girl,” the constable said. “An official from Herman Land came here looking for her and told us to look out for this Jana person.”

“Who was...”

The constable cut him off, “I am very busy. Please leave now.”

Ratchis grunted his grudging assent and headed back to the inn.

Beorth had gone to meet up with Martin and bring him back when Ratchis returned. The half-orc told the dwarf the little he had learned.

“Do you think she really did that?” Kazrack asked. “She used to do things like that, before we changed her.”

“There have always been more sides to Jana than meets the eye,” Ratchis mused.

“Maybe we can buy her freedom,” Kazrack said. “I’m sure she’s innocent. She may be mixed up, but I don’t think she’s a murderer.”

Ratchis put a reassuring hand on Kazrack’s shoulder.

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Beorth met Martin on the road. The watch-mage was shivering from the cold. He was surprised to see Beorth alone.

“Beorth, where are the others?” he asked.

“Jana’s in jail,” Beorth said simply.

Martin dropped his pack in shock.

“What?”

Beorth lifted Martin’s pack for him and slung it over his own shoulder, “I’ll explain the little I know on the way back to the inn.”

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Jeremy knocked on the door to Kazrack’s room.

“There you guys are,” he said by way of greeting. “I thought we were going to meet Martin at the alderman’s and then go to the elves.”

“Jana’s been arrested,” Kazrack said. “Did you say something to the constable?”

“Huh? What would I say?” Jeremy said, sounding offended by the accusation. “What was she arrested for?”

“Murder,” Ratchis replied.

“Did she kill old man Carson?” Jeremy asked.

“She killed old man Carson?” Kazrack said puzzled. “Who is old man Carson?”

“She killed someone in Westron,” Ratchis said, annoyed. His wounds still ached. “They sent someone to find her.”

“What did she kill the king or something?” Jeremy asked. “I mean, must have been someone pretty damn important for them to send someone all the way from Herman Land here.”

“Well, we need to warn the elves that the witch is around, and Richard the Red is around, and they may be trying to get back to the compound to free the others,” Kazrack said. “We need to do it as soon as possible.”

“I also need to talk to the alderman’s daughter if I can,” Jeremy said. “She came to see me again while we were gone, or so the innkeeper told me. I went to go find her, but all I found was the cook. I passed a message to her through him. She had told me last time he was trustworthy.”

“When did you do this?” Ratchis asked.

“Just now,” Jeremy said. “I just got back. I didn’t see Martin. He must have been inside the house.”

“What did you tell the cook?” Ratchis asked, worried about the Neergaardian being too free with information.

“Oh, just to tell her we are trying to help her friend,” Jeremy said. “But when I get to tell her I guess I will tell her the bad news that her friend is probably gone forever.”

“I don’t think we should tell anyone anything. What’s the point of telling her when it will upset her?” Ratchis said.

“She came to me for help,” Jeremy said earnestly. “I thought I should be honest with her, but maybe you’re right.”

Beorth and Martin returned.

“What do we do now?” Jeremy asked.

“I am going to go to the constable’s office and see if I will be allowed to see her,” Martin said.

“I already tried that,” Ratchis said.

“Perhaps as a watch-mage I will have better luck,” Martin replied. “I will find out from her if she is guilty.”

“If the murder was justifiable, I will fight to free her,” Ratchis said, his usual zealotry coming to the surface.

“Yes, well, let me find out what I can first,” Martin said, with a bit of dismissive tone.

“Shall I accompany you, Martin?” Beorth asked.

Martin nodded.

The two of them walked over to the constable’s office while the others waited.

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Meanwhile, the constable was paying a visit in her dirty little cell, which was one of four cells in the back of the building. The rest were empty.

“If you think that you can murder someone and get away with it by coming here, you got another thing coming,” the constable said to the young girl behind the bars.

Jana did not respond.

“Well, that fellow who was sent after you should be back in a few days,” the constable added. “He went looking for you in the nearby countryside, and maybe some other of the towns, but he said he’d be back.”

“And he is?” Jana asked, softly.

“He said he was called Rindalith,” the constable said. “Enjoy your stay, it will be a long trip back to Westron. Do they hang people there?”

He turned to leave the holding area, chuckling to himself, but turned back one last time, “And don’t bother trying any of that witchcraft stuff. He warned us about it. Heh, hanging? Maybe burning would be better for your kind.”

He left to find Martin the Green and Beorth entering his office.

“What?” the constable asked, rudely.

“I am here to inquire about your prisoner, Jana of Westron,” Martin said, calmly. “The nature of the charges against her, and to make sure she is being treated properly I would like a chance to meet with her.”

“What are you supposed to be?” the constable asked, incredulously, eyeing Martin’s emerald robes.

“I am Martin the Green, watch-mage and emissary of the king,” Martin said, putting on air of superiority.

“Watch-mage, eh?” the constable said. He pointed at Beorth. “What about him?”

“I am Beorth Sakhemet, warrior of Anubis,” Beorth said.

“Warrior of Anubis, eh?” the constable was obviously sizing them up. “So, what do you want to know?”

“The nature of the charges against Jana of Westron, whom I might add is here as one of the dragon-hunters invited to

Gothanius by the king himself, and how you came to know of these alleged crimes,” Martin said.

“Heh, well... She is wanted for the murder of a young girl in Westron, and a Mister Rindalith was sent here to retrieve her when they found where she had run to; picked the wrong place if ya ask me. He had all the proper paperwork and should be back in a few days to bring her back to the Kingdom of Herman Land. Of course, it will be up to the alderman to decide if she will be, what’s the word? Extradited.”

“Did this Rindalith say how he knew to look for her here?” Martin asked.

“I guess he trailed her,” the constable replied.

“Very well, may we see her now?” Martin asked.

“No, not both of you anyway,” he pointed to Martin. “You can go. The warrior of Anubis waits here.”

Beorth stood by the door, while the constable led Martin the Green into the rear where the holding cells were. He told Jana to step away from the door and let Martin into the cell and then locked it.

“You have twenty minutes, and don’t try anything stupid,” the constable said.

“I assure you sir that I have nothing but the most honor...” The constable had walked off. Martin grimaced.

“Martin, what are you doing here,” Jana asked.

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” Martin replied. “The others sent me to talk with you. They are waiting at the inn.”

“You should not worry about me,” Jana said, sitting on her low bunk. “We have important things to take care of, and it is up to the rest of you to get them done.”

“But what about you? You have to do them, too. You haven’t forgotten the promises to Osiris?” Martin said.

“Of course not. But what are we to do? I am here awaiting someone who is not what he makes himself out to be, because I have to, but the rest of you are free to go and warn the elves and fulfill your promises and help the gnomes.”

“Not what he makes himself out to be? And you are still going to go with him?” Martin asked.

“I did not say that,” Jana replied, cryptically. “But I do have to face him eventually. However, the group’s priority should not be with me. Do not let them do anything stupid, Martin. You have to make them continue with the quests.”

Martin was astonished by her resoluteness.

“Did you kill that girl?” Martin asked.

“I am not saying anything,” Jana replied, giving him a look that suggested that they were probably being listened to.

They were both silent for a time.

“Perhaps I will be able to speak to the alderman and get you freed to my custody, or I can write to the king,” Martin suggested.

“That is all well and good, but do not delay on my account,” Jana continued to insist.

“Do you think your life is in danger from this Rindalith person?” Martin asked.

“It is very possible,” Jana said, she looked down. “But you can’t run forever.”

Martin sighed.

“You need to give me something, tell me something to help us help you,” Martin tried again.

“There is nothing to be said,” Jana replied. “Go back and tell the others what I said.”

“But. . .”

There were footsteps in the hall. “Time’s up,” the constable said.

Martin turned back to Jana, “I will tell the others. Good luck.” And with that he left the cell, as the constable had opened it up, despite the fact that he was certain that the allotted time had not passed.

He and Beorth returned to the Golden Plough, where the Watch-Mage told of his conversation with their young companion.

“She was very specific about priorities,” Martin said.

“Ours or hers?” Ratchis asked.

“Ours.”

“Putting ours over hers?” Jeremy asked, incredulously.

“Yes.”

“That doesn’t sound like her,” Jeremy said, he was polishing his mithral short sword, and admiring the beauty of its make.

“We may have to break her out,” Ratchis said.

Beorth cleared his throat.

“Beorth, what is your opinion?” Ratchis asked the bald pale holy warrior.

“I think for the time being Jana’s fate is in someone else’s hands and sitting here to wait and wait does no one any good. We need to do what is best for the most people,” Beorth replied.

“I take it that means you are for going and warning the elves, and continuing with what we need to do,” Kazrack tried to clarify.

Beorth nodded.

“If only she would talk, and tell us what happened,” Kazrack said, confused by Jana’s behavior as he often was.

“I think she’d talk to Beorth,” Ratchis suggested.

“But her reason for not talking to Martin probably applies to Beorth as well. She is likely afraid anything she says to them might be used against her if they are called to testify. I think you should talk to her,” Kazrack said.

“But she doesn’t like me,” Ratchis said. Jeremy laughed, and everyone looked at him.

“I need to continue with Jana, or continue without her, but either way I need to continue,” Kazrack said. “We need to come to a decision by morning.”

“There is the matter that Jana said that this ‘Rindalith’ is not who he makes himself out to be,” Martin said. “He is not really an official of Herman Land.”

“Who is he then?” Jeremy asked.

“I don’t know, but Markle mentioned his name to me,” Ratchis said. “When we were back at the castle, when he was warning me about Jana endangering our lives. He probably meant that this Rindalith is dangerous, and likely doesn’t care

what he has to do to get her.”

“That means this man is bending the law and using it to his own ends!” Kazrack suddenly cried with great ardor, standing. “I will not see the law perverted! And plus, she is a friend. I say we free her!”

“She said to leave her and not do anything stupid,” Martin reminded the dwarf.

“If a friend is about to drink poison would you let him, even if he said that was what his wishes were?” Kazrack said. “I think not. I do not think even Ratchis with his belief in freedom would allow someone to do such a thing.”

The half-orc shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, “If and when that situation were to ever arise, I’d make my choice then.”

“Well, perhaps her creature can help,” Martin suggested.

“Her creature? She has a creature?” Kazrack asked, befuddled.

“Yes, a familiar. A small lizard,” Martin explained. “It was always on the chimney at the gnome settlement, staying warm.”

“Oh, that thing?” Kazrack said. “I thought it belonged to the gnomes.”

“Well, it is not around,” Ratchis said. “And I need to go downstairs and see if the food I asked the innkeeper to prepare for tonight is ready. It is the second night of the *Malar Days*.”<sup>12</sup>

Ratchis left the others and began to make his way down the stairs, when he saw Jana making her way up the stairs.

She smiled weakly.

Ratchis closed his mouth, which had dropped open in surprise, and took her by the arm bringing her back to the room.

“Jana!” Martin cried.

“Woo-hoo!” said Jeremy, standing and smiling.

“What’s going on?” Kazrack asked, surprised.

“Richard the Red set me free,” Jana said, as if she barely believed it herself.

“He did what?!?” Martin cried.

“The constable came and unlocked my cell and brought me out to the office, and Richard was there, and he said he had ‘arranged’ everything with the constable and I was free to go,” Jana explained.

“So, the constable *saw* you go?” Beorth asked.

“Yes,” Jana replied.

“Why would Richard the Red help us?” Kazrack asked.

“Well, he did say that he enjoyed the fact that I was now in debt to him,” Jana said with a sigh.

“Martin, did you think he used foul magic to free her?” Kazrack asked the Watch-Mage.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Malar Days*. Celebrated from the 4th of Dek to the 12th of Dek, this series of meals commemorates the escape of Malar (considered by many to have been the first Friar of Nephthys) from the Minions of Set, during his nine-day flight, hiding in the homes of loyal families. The holiday is celebrated by a series of increasingly spartan meals (beginning with a fine meal) each evening (with nothing else to eat). At each meal, a glass of wine is passed around and each guest takes a small sip, with a small sip left for Malar each day. It is considered a bad sign if the wine is accidentally completely drained. Friars of Nephthys usually celebrate this holiday at the home of a family loyal to the cause of freedom, and it is considered an honor by such a family to host a friar.

"I'm afraid it is very likely," Martin replied.

"The constable did not seem strange, but that doesn't mean it was not magic," Jana said.

"Or, it could have simply been coin," Ratchis said. "Sometimes all it takes is the right amount money to have the same effect as a charm spell."

"Perhaps we should leave now, and go to the elves," Kazrack suggested.

"Yeah, they might change their minds," Jeremy said.

"But when we get there, I would like a full explanation of what is going on," the dwarf added, giving Jana a stern look.

"Yes, like who this Rindalith really is," Ratchis added.

Jana nodded. "He was my mentor in Westron," she said softly. "But let us go."

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The party already had their things packed, and Ratchis had Wilson the Innkeeper pack up the food he had ordered for the holiday meal, and a special goblet and bottle of wine he had bought for the occasion.

They slipped out the inn's backdoor, and made their way westward, going slightly southward, led by Ratchis.

The wind was cold and bit at any portion of exposed flesh. Jana's familiar tucked herself into the witch's armpit to stay warm. The cold sapped them of energy, except for Ratchis whose boots kept him comfortably warm despite the fatigue brought on by his wounds.

Jana shivered and stumbled as they trudged through the snow that was crusted over with ice. Ratchis, who walked atop the snow as easily as if it were solid-packed soil, paused and waited for her to catch up.

"Nephthys! Protect this woman, and I promise I will get to the bottom of what she has been doing!" the half-orc called to his goddess, and she was better able to fight off the elements.

They trudged onward as the last of the sun's light disappeared behind the looming mountains before them in the distance. Jana spoke an arcane word and touched the end of Beorth's staff, and it gave off light for them to walk by.

After they had been marching nearly two hours (and still nearly an hour from Aze-Nuquerna), Ratchis heard the sound of the flap of leathery wings. He looked up.

"Shh! Listen!" He hissed at the others, who cocked their heads to hear.

A huge bat with a wingspan of over eight feet flew silently above them at a height of over twenty feet. Only Ratchis saw it with his darkvision. Kazrack was looking in the wrong direction.

"A monstrous bat!" Ratchis said, when it passed.

"That's Rindalith," Jana said, matter-of-factly.

"It was like the thing we saw at the castle, Martin," Ratchis said, and immediately took off running in the direction it flew in.

"Your master can turn into a man-bat?" Kazrack asked, aghast.

"Yes," replied Jana.

"Yes, just like the man we saw on the towers at the castle the night that Markle and the others tried to rob the treasury," Martin explained.

“No one told me they saw a man turn into a bat!” Jana said, annoyed.

Ratchis returned. “It was moving too fast. We had better get to the elves as quickly as we can.”

The party arrived at Aze-Nuquerna soon after and were allowed in after calling to the elves on the lookouts. They were escorted to a room on the lower level where they could sit and talk by a hearth and have the meal that Ratchis carried with him. They were told that Ethiel would come see them soon.

“I’m hungry. Are we going to eat now?” Kazrack asked.

“I prefer we wait until after we have done talking, as there is a set tradition in terms of the meals eaten on these days,” Ratchis explained.

Kazrack sighed, “Okay,” He turned to Jana. “Rather than play questions and answer, perhaps you should just tell us your story?”

Jana paused, and then stretched her arms, and grabbed another of the big pillows they were all sprawled on. Beorth threw more wood into the fire, and it crackled and spat.

She cleared her throat. “While I was learning magic in Westron, Rindalith was my mentor. I don’t want to go into details, but bad stuff happened...” Her voice trailed off.

“I think we need details,” Kazrack said.

“You will not get them,” Jan said sternly.

“Maybe you should have said that from the start,” Jeremy said glibly.

“Let’s just say that he had another student, and she walked in when she should not have; when I was contacting a token creature,” Jana said.

“So, what did you do?” Ratchis asked.

“Well, someone else is dead,” Jana said simply.

“Did you kill her in self-defense?” Kazrack asked.

“This is going to sound weird, but partly; partly not,” Jana replied.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Jeremy asked.

There was a knock on the door, and then Ethiel walked in. Behind him entered another elf. This second elf took any words from all their mouths. He was over six feet tall, and his skin had the luster of porcelain. He had strong, defined features, that still had a delicacy to them that was reinforced by his soft smile as he looked over the party. He had shock of hair like flaming copper that stood up and back at an angle like frozen lightning. He was dressed in crimson and gold, and the pommel of a long sword was visible from over his shoulder.

“Greetings,” Ethiel said in his typical emotionless tone. “I am glad that you have returned.”

“We are happy to have your hospitality and that of your people,” Kazrack said.

“However, we do have bad news,” Martin added. “As I am sure Tirhas has already told you, we were unable to find the witch, Rahasia, and the Honeycombe seems to have been invaded by creatures called quaggoths.”

Ethiel looked startled.

“Unfortunately, there is other bad news,” Ethiel said.

“A lot of that today,” Jeremy murmured.

“Well, they say it comes in threes,” Ethiel said. “In fact, when we found this out we feared that you might never return.”

He paused.

“This is Aríon,” he gestured to the tall elf. “He is from the far west, from another enclave of our kind in the area of Derome-Delem humans call the Outland.<sup>13</sup> He is much more learned in the lore of the drow and of witchcraft than any of us here are and he was able to determine something that we had not.”

He paused again.

“When we found out that Karellena had been freed, we used the little means at our disposal to check the stones in the Chamber of the Three. We found that there were spirits there and of course, one was the girl, Rahasia’s. But what we did not realize until Aríon arrived was that one of the other stones no longer had the spirit of one of witches in it. It was someone else,” Ethiel paused. “It seems that another, even more powerful of witches also escaped into the body of someone else. And we are afraid it could have only been one other elf.”

“Tirhas,” said Martin.

“Yes, Tirhas,” Ethiel said, sadly.

“But why would she help us?” Kazrack asked.

“Yes, and she seemed to remember of our previous time together,” Jeremy added.

“It is unclear how much of the memory of the host body the witches have when they possess them,” Aríon said, speaking for the first time. His voice was like a hypnotic song that seemed to equally echo in the heart as it did in the air. “However, it is known that despite occasionally working together, the three witches were fierce rivals always seeking to discredit the other before their dark goddess in order to gain more favor and power. It is possible that she hoped to help you find and destroy her sister, and to use you as a buffer between the world as it exists now and how she remembers it. You must remember how intelligent they are and how crafty.”

The entire party let out a long breath at once without meaning to. It was a soft grudging groan as if yet another stone had been piled up their already nearly crushing burden.

“You should not be fooled by her present guise,” Aríon went on to say, his voice taking a graver tone. “Drow are evil. They know not love. They know not kindness. They know not mercy. They know not generosity. They only know selfishness, and power and cruelty.”

The room was silent.

“If they hate each other so much, if they somehow heard that their third sister was being released would they not come to try to stop it or destroy her?” Jeremy suggested.

“It is possible,” said Ethiel. “It is also possible that such a thing would only hasten your return to your jackal god’s realm.”

“Huh? Return?” Beorth asked confusedly.

“Jeremy died,” Kazrack said to the paladin.

“Yeah, I died,” Jeremy said, as if it were something as simple as visiting a shop.

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<sup>13</sup> *The Outland* (or “Outlands”) is an expanse of hostile wilderness between the western shore of Derome-Delem and the central spine of mountains that makes up the heart of the huge (by Aquerran standards) island. It is said to be inhabited by particularly dangerous monsters such as landsharks, giant insects, and man-eating plants.

“He was brought back by a vessel of Osiris,” Ratchis explained.

“We each had to make a promise in return for his life,” Jana added.

“Or forfeit your life to Osiris?” Beorth asked, solemnly.

“How did you know?” Kazrack asked.

“That is how those things usually work,” Beorth replied with a sigh.

**End of Session #25**

AQUERRA

## Session #26

“We found out some information about the Circle of the Thorn for you,” Ethiel said. “They can be found in a wood north and west of here called ‘*Dybbuk Akvram*’.”

“That sounds like old dwarvish,” Kazrack said. “It means something like, ‘bruised spirit’?”

“Yes,” Ethiel said. “Men called it ‘the Forest of the Blood Sap’.”

“Well, that sounds warm and welcoming,” Jeremy said.

“Ethiel, I was hoping that on the morrow I might get a chance to examine some the works in your library, and perhaps look at some local maps,” Martin asked politely.

“I am sure we can arrange something,” Ethiel replied. “The way to the Circle of Thorn can probably be found in the trading post called ‘Archet’. It is only a couple of hours march north of here, and the hunters there know this area better than anyone.”

There was a long pause, and Ratchis’ eyes wandered over to the basket of food waiting for their celebration of the second night of the *Malar Days*.

“One last thing, and then we will leave you to rest and discuss your options,” Ethiel said. “While we are happy to extend our hospitality, we must ask that you do not stay here longer than three days. The final witch may become desperate if she can sense that her two sisters have escaped. And while under normal circumstances we doubt she’d try to possess a human, we cannot be too careful. Jana cannot stay here too long.”

“Yes, we understand,” said Martin.

Ethiel and Arion bid them good night and left the room.

“Well, looks like our welcome is going to wear out,” Jeremy said. “Where do we go next?”

“I don’ think any of us planned to stay three days anyway,” Kazrack said.

“Are we ready to have this meal?” Ratchis asked, eagerly.

“I think we still have a lot to talk about,” Beorth said flatly. “And I would not like to interrupt the reverence of the occasion with talk of our troubles. Best we do our talking first.”

“Agreed,” said Ratchis.

“I think we should start at the beginning and go over everything that has happened and that we have learned in a systematic way. I will take some notes,” Beorth suggested. “Let’s start at the beginning.”

“Well, back when I was six years old...” Jeremy looked at the unsmiling faces of his companions. “Never mind, just a joke to break the tension.”

“Well, here are our tasks,” Beorth began, ignoring Jeremy. “Find a dragon, defeat the drow, find an extra-planar gate of some sort...”

“Does that include the stuff about the urn?” Jeremy asked.

“Don’t forget to include the gnomes as well,” Kazrack added. “And the true intentions of the king.”

“How’d that happen?” Jeremy asked, as he grabbed an extra pillow and propped it up against the wall and leaned back comfortably.

“What?” Kazrack asked.

“How’d the list get so long?”

Kazrack looked over at Beorth who was busily jotting down notes about their adventures and goals on separate sheets of parchment.

“I never trust paper for recording important things,” Kazrack said.

“We don’t have time for you to chisel it all down,” Jeremy said, sarcastically.

“I wasn’t thinking of etching it in stone. Maybe clay, but not stone.” Kazrack gave a rare smile.

“Do we really think King Brevelan really plans to sell the dragon-hunters into slavery?” Martin asked.

“I think he is up to something,” Ratchis grunted. “I trust that man even less than I like him.”

“Oh, don’t forget the amulet and the need to destroy it,” Kazrack said to the paladin.

“Don’t worry, no way for me to forget that,” Beorth said. “The real question is, we have all these tasks, but which is the most important to deal with first and where does each one take place so we can plan a course of action?”

“I’ve actually been visited in my dreams, I guess by Osiris, indicating that my task in return for Jeremy’s life must be done soon,” Kazrack said.<sup>14</sup>

“Interesting,” Martin said.

“Really?” Jeremy said softly, slightly awed by the idea that a god was sending dreams because of him.

“I think in terms of the dragon hunt, we need to find a way to determine one way or another if the dragon is real or an illusion,” Kazrack said.

“Well, if it really landed on the roof of the alderman’s house, it might have left claw marks on the shingles,” Martin suggested.

“Could it have even landed on the roof without collapsing it?” Kazrack asked.

“Well, dragons are magical so that could explain it,” Martin mused. “But also, we don’t really know how large it really is. The various accounts of its appearance have varied in size, shape and coloration.”

“Have the elves reported seeing the dragon?” Beorth asked.

“No, they have not seen it,” Ratchis said.

“Speculations at this point are not helping. We should try to get a detailed story from someone who has seen the dragon and who we think we can trust to have observed it well, and go from there,” Jana said.

“Well, could Rindalith change into different forms?” Kazrack asked Jana. “Could it have been him I saw fly across the moon?”<sup>15</sup>

“He could never change his form at all that I knew of in the time I knew him,” said Jana. “So, I don’t know.”

“It is very possible that there are two dragons,” said Beorth. One that is an illusion, and one that is not a dragon, but is being mistaken for a dragon. The house that burned down could have been burned down by a gnome.”

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<sup>14</sup> Kazrack dreamt that he was forging an item in a clearing in a dark forest at night, and the perimeter of the clearing was alive with eerie glowing eyes that watched hungrily.

<sup>15</sup> See Session #19

“Yeah, but we also heard it ate sheep,” Jeremy said. “Hmm, maybe we can set a trap for it.”

“You want to buy sheep?” Kazrack asked.

“The logistics of such a plan make it difficult to undertake,” said Ratchis. “We have no way of knowing the dragon—or whatever it is—would come for our sheep.”

“Well, how did we find out that the dragon might be an illusion? Mozek told us,” Beorth said. “Why would he tell us that if it were true or untrue? What is his relation to the dragon?”

“All we know about him is that he is some kind of demonic creature,” Kazrack looked to Jana. “That is not a lot to go on. But I do want to say that I think we should go help the gnomes, even if that means ignoring the tasks for Osiris and going to back to the gnomes first.”

“Well, it seems to me that if we tried to confront the gnomes now we’d die,” said Ratchis, speaking the unfettered truth. “I think that if Hurgun’s Maze is the key to all this and the source of some great power, that the drow witches might seek it out. We already know there is some connection between the gnomes and the Maze because of that creature we saw there.”

“Well, how do we find this place?” Jeremy asked.

“That is the question,” Beorth said. “From what I have learned people have been searching for it for over a hundred years to no avail.”

“Well, we have no reason to think that the drow witches even know about this place,” Kazrack said.

“Wrong,” said Jana scathingly. Everyone turned to look at her. “Don’t forget we told Tirhas *everything* we know about Mozek, and the gnomes and the creature and the little about the Maze we knew then. She knows a lot more than she did before and is probably smart enough to start putting things together.”

Jeremy sighed.

The party contemplated their predicament.

“Let’s not forget that we’re in a community with knowledge and legends that date back to the Mountain Wars,” Beorth said. “Perhaps when Martin looks in their library, he can look for information on Hurgun’s Maze as well. Now, what else is there to do.”

“There are the quests that we’ve taken to bring Jeremy back to life,” Kazrack said. “There are four of them. I have to make sickle for the Circle of Thorns and Ratchis has to do some task for them.”

“So those are the prices you have to pay,” Beorth said, shaking his head. He seemed disappointed.

“They never asked if I wanted to be brought back,” Jeremy said, a hint of sadness in his voice. “Of course, I’m glad to be back. I supposed that in a different world I might have been not glad.”

“The burden of carrying the dead back to the land of the living is a heavy one,” said Beorth, solemnly.

“So, would you have done it?” Jeremy asked the paladin of Anubis.

“No,” Beorth replied without hesitating.

“Well, thanks for being honest.”

“I think it was a fool’s mistake,” Beorth looked at each of his companions in turn.

“Ok, can we stop talking about this now?” Jeremy said, he leaned his head back against the pillow and closed his eyes.

“Well, this is as good a time as any to mention that I would like to go by Summit, if at all possible, and reclaim my spellbook,” Martin said.

“But you have been summoned by the King, and if you do not respond to the summoning there may be difficulties,” Ratchis said.

“I think we have enough time before the meeting time to go to Summit, and I can always send word that the meeting needs to be moved somewhere else or at another time. The message gave me that option. Let’s add this to the list,” Martin replied. “And of course, my task for Osiris, to retrieve the *Book of Black Circles* from the Brotherhood of the Lost, whoever they are.”

“I think I know who they are,” Beorth said. “I have had visions of their activities. I believe they are related to the schism in the worship of Anubis.”

Beorth turned to Jana, “And what is your task?”

“It’s kind of personal,” said Jana hesitantly. “I have to learn to use the pure sources of magic through Isis.”

Both Martin and Beorth smiled broadly.

“So, the gods have taken an interest in you personally,” Beorth commented.

“So, it would seem,” Jana replied.

“Jana, when the pull on you grows strong, I will take you to Nikar. I know it is far out of our way, but we have all taken an oath,” Ratchis said. “There is a temple of Isis there.”

There was another pause. Ratchis’ stomach growled.

“So there are four groups interested in this area: the humans, the elves, the gnomes and the dwarves,” said Beorth, making a note in his papers.

“You’re forgetting the drow,” Martin said.

“Oh yes, and the drow,” Beorth added. “Now, what do we do first?”

“I say we go to Summit,” said Jana.

“Thank you,” said Martin.

“...if only because we know where Summit is, and we don’t know where Archet is, and I really think Martin should get his spellbook.”

There was a knock on the door, and then it opened. The dog Kwa came bounding in, leaping at Ratchis and licking his face. An elf stood at the door, “Your canine companion returned, so we brought him to you.”

Ratchis thanked the elf, who then left.

“Please keep him away from Thomas,” said Martin.

The dog ran around the room in a frenzy, sniffing and licking everyone. It then began to sniff at the basket of food. Ratchis pulled him away. “Sit!” the half-orc commanded, pushing down lightly but firmly on the dog’s haunches. It laid down.

“We still have not finished talking about this murder you committed,” said Kazrack, glaring at Jana. “We would not want to forget about that.”

Jana rolled her eyes.

“Perhaps if we can present some evidence that Rindalith is not who he says he is and that you only acted in self-defense,” the dwarf continued.

“Your faith in the judicial system is exemplary, but misplaced,” Jana twisted her lips.

“Well, to be honest, what I am most interested in is whether you have any regrets for what you did, and if these regrets on a moral level or a pragmatic level,” Kazrack said.

“Yeah, that is the kind of question you’d ask,” Jana replied.

“Maybe what she meant by what she said before was that she was not in control of herself when she killed that person,” Jeremy said.

“I was not possessed by any demon, if that is what you’re implying,” Jana said.

“So?” Kazrack asked.

“So, what?” Jana replied.

“You have not answered my question,” the dwarf said.

Jana sighed, “I am not sure you are going to like the answer, but I guess it’s both. On a purely intellectual level I regret that it had to be done, but...”

Kazrack interrupted, “But do you think it was wrong?”

“There is a difference between killing because you have to and killing because you can,” Jana said.

“So, did you have to kill her?”

“No, and that’s the problem,” Jana said. “I don’t think there is anyone here who would understand...the rush...”

“I think it is very arrogant of you,” Kazrack said.

“And it is arrogant of you to sit there in judgment of me,” Jana snapped back. “But if you want me to be blunt, I’m upset because I liked it. I liked the killing.”

“Oh,” Martin covered his mouth, but his eyes did not stop staring at the young witch.

“Jana, you have the ability to kill, but you also have the ability to heal. How do you feel when you heal people or help people?” Beorth asked, looking at her imploringly.

“It depends,” the girl answered.

“On who they are?”

“Yes, I guess,” Jana replied. She looked over her companions’ faces. “Listen. I just have to ask that if it comes down to Rindalith confronting us that you take no action and let me deal with it.”

“But you have made it sound like he may try to kill you,” Kazrack said.

“He may, but nevertheless, I do not want you involved or risking yourselves,” Jana said.

“I cannot agree to that,” said Ratchis.

“It’s okay, we’ll just make a secret pact to protect Jana, and she won’t have to know,” Jeremy said.

“Well, it is too late for that now!” Jana said.

“Ok, I take it back. There won’t be any secret pact,” Jeremy said, but then he winked at Kazrack.

“You know, I still don’t understand the lot of you,” Jana said exasperated.

“Well, I don’t understand you either. We’re a mystery to each other,” Kazrack said.

Kwa’s tail began to thump against Ratchis.

“I think we should have the meal now,” Ratchis said. “And honor Malar and thank Nephthys. We can talk more later, but I think we can use a respite from our troubles.”

Ratchis began to pass out the fish and greens the inn-keeper had prepared for their meal, he then filled the goblet he had purchased with wine and held it up.

“Now we shall share of this wine,” Ratchis said. “We shall each take a sip and then pass the goblet, until there is but one sip left and that will be left in honor of Malar.”

They ate in silence, allowing the aching of the day’s journey to settle into their fatigued bodies.

“And now, traditionally someone would tell the part of the story of St. Malar of the Nine Days that corresponds with this day of the holiday,” Ratchis said. “As I think I am the only one here that knows it, I will tell it.”

And so, he did.<sup>16</sup>

Afterwards, Kazrack asked, “Was Malar the first priest of Nephthys?”

“Yes,” Ratchis replied.

“Did Malar use a spear because it is the weapon of Nephthys?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“An old man in my village once said that Nephthys is the goddess of freedom because she was once married to Set and had to free herself from him,” Martin said.

“Yes,” Ratchis said. “She disobeyed her husband, and aided Isis in recovering the pieces of Osiris’ body that Set had scattered about the world during *The Time Before*.<sup>17</sup> It is because of Nephthys that I had the strength to free myself from own bondage.”

“I’ve never heard that before, about your past. It must be a horrible thing to be a slave,” said Martin with sympathy.

“Yes, and there are still many in the world who are slaves to others,” Ratchis said.

“You know one can be a slave to the past as well,” said Kazrack, looking at Jana. “And by admitting our sins and errors we can free ourselves.”

Jana sighed. “Are you still going to go on and on about this?”

And they did, arguing semantics way into the night until Jana had carefully crafted her expression of regret in a way that satisfied the dwarf, without requiring her to explain too much,

By the time they were done, Martin was rubbing his throbbing temples, and Jeremy was gently snoring as Kwa licked grease from the Neergardian’s fingers.

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<sup>16</sup> This story was reprinted in *Thoth’s Libram*, the official ‘zine of Aquerra.

<sup>17</sup> *The Time Before* is the name for the period of time before the First Age, when it is said the gods lived among men and were a lot more involved in their affairs.

They made their way to their cells and called it a night.

## **Teflem, 6th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

The next morning the elves served them breakfast. It was some kind of thick soup made of red fruit with petals of white flowers floating on top, and buttery biscuits that melted in their mouths. Kazrack made faces the whole time he ate.

They were joined by several elves, among them Arion and Ethiel.

Martin and Ethiel politely discussed spells, while Jana and Ratchis spoke with Ethiel about the route to Archet.

“Do you know of Hurgun’s Maze?” Beorth suddenly asked.

The elves all stopped talking.

Arion spoke first. “That would have been when I was just learning to walk,” he said dreamily, as if he had a clear picture of the memory in his mind. His voice was mellifluous, and the candles on the table seemed to burn brighter. “When it was closed.”

“You mean during the Mountain Wars?” Martin asked.

“Yes... It is a dire place, and it is now sealed. None may enter or leave,” Arion said, ominously.

“We have reason to believe it is open again,” said Ratchis, a flower petal flapping from where it was stuck between his front teeth. He picked it out.

“The gnomes we told you of found a creature they said may have come from there. I have seen it, and it does not come from any place in this world,” Martin explained.

Arion took a deep breath, and began a tale, “During the Mountain Wars, the elves, dwarves and gnomes who joined together to fend off the invasion sent a group of emissaries with a personal guard and a small troop of dwarven soldiers to Hurgun’s Maze. They begged him to intervene on their side, and to help stem the constant flux of humans that seemed to be arriving on the shores daily and making their way into the mountains. Hurgun would not listen. He closed the gates and sealed the Maze. But then tragedy struck, spies of the crown of Herman Land had learned of the Maze. They too came to entreat Hurgun to help them, and to stop the emissaries. The small troop begged to be allowed in the Maze for shelter, for the arriving human army vastly outnumbered them. But Hurgun had sealed the Maze. He would not listen. They fought bravely, but they were slaughtered, some say outnumbered 10 to 1. However, the details of this battle are hazy at best, for all we know of it has been learned since through scrying. The human army never returned either and the entrance to the Maze disappeared, apparently forever. Until now.”

“Do you know where Maze might be found?” Beorth asked.

“Hurgun’s Maze is not in Derome-Delem,” Arion replied.

The tall elf surveyed the puzzled looks on everyone’s face.

“How do you mean?” Martin the Green finally asked.

“Hurgun’s Maze does not wholly exist in this world, or in any other, but in several at once,” Arion tried to explain.

“So, are you saying there could be more than one entrance?” Martin asked.

“Yes, very likely that there are at least ways in through the elemental planes,” Arion said.

“Well, I do not think we are going to have access to such places any time soon, so we need to discover some other option,” Martin replied. “Perhaps my time in the library today will shed some light on the matter.”

After breakfast, it was decided that Kazrack, Ratchis and Beorth would take the stairway to the Honeycombe on the lowest level (as they had done before) and retrieve the gold and gems they had seen piled on that stone at the bottom of the stair.<sup>18</sup>

Ethiel led them down to the stairway, speaking the word that opened the door. He stationed two elves to await them at the entrance, while he brought Martin to the library. It was reached by means of another of the arched passageways off of the chamber full of garbage.

Martin gasped as he walked in. The only place he had ever seen so many books was at the Academy of Wizardry library, and there most books were off limits. Here everything was wonderfully open and within reach. Books, scrolls and maps were piled on tables and shoved on shelves in no order that he could tell off hand. Everything was covered in elven script. Martin reached out to grab a book.

“No, not those,” Ethiel said. “Unless you can read our script.”

“No, I cannot,” Martin said, disappointed.

“Here are the books in common,” Ethiel said, leading Martin to the rear of the chamber. There was a small bookcase with less than a dozen books. Near it was a table full of maps. Martin’s mouth went dry with anticipation.

“I will return for you later,” Ethiel said.

As Beorth, Kazrack, and Ratchis retrieved the treasure without incident (smashing the altar-like stone by shoving it off the tall stone platform), Jeremy was running about the complex practicing handstands against the walls and sneaking around practicing not being seen or heard. Several times elves would walk by and ignore him, and he wondered if they had seen him and just thought him crazy, or if he was really improving his skills of stealth.

Jana spent the day sleeping and lazing around, taking the opportunity to rest.

Beorth, Ratchis and Kazrack emerged from the caverns beneath Aze-Nuquerna carrying sacks of coins, obleks, gems and other items of precious metal. Of course, Kazrack carried less than his two companions, as his arm was still splinted and in a sling. Ethiel was there with the elves he had stationed to wait for them.

He looked through what they had brought up.

“We will simply take the gold pieces and call it even,” Ethiel said.

Kazrack frowned. Beorth frowned at the dwarf’s frowning.

“Oh, you wanted some of this?” Kazrack asked, trying to sound polite, but failing.

Ethiel cocked an eyebrow, as if to say, “Typical greedy dwarf.”

“We will count it out and try to appraise some of this stuff and then give you a share we think is fair,” said Ratchis, trying to hide his annoyance.

“That will be fine,” said Ethiel.

Beorth asked Ethiel to bring him to the library as well so that he could help Martin with his research. Ethiel agreed to do so.

In the library, Beorth found Martin painstakingly making a map of the surrounding area from several other maps and trying to trace elven letters where things were not labeled in common. On the table beside him he had a stack of books in common he hoped to look through, but he passed them to Beorth to do so as he continued his cartography. He also hoped to make a map of the entirety of Derome-Delem as well.

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<sup>18</sup> See Session #23

Among the books in common was a book on herblore, the journal of a Librarian of Thoth who journeyed in Derome-Delem about 60 years after the Mountain Wars, a ledger that had mostly been used by a general from the Black Islands during that war to keep track of elven, dwarven, gnomish and halfling prisoners. There was also a three-volume set in stilted language covering “the entirety of human life and culture,” written by an elf, and finally a travelogue written by some unknown traveler about his journeys in the Freetowns of Derome-Delem’s eastern shore about thirty years before current time.

Beorth looked through the books until dinner time, and then had to pull Martin away from the maps to join the others for the meal. They met up with Jeremy in the hall to the dining room and walked with him to join the others.

“So Beorth, what have you learned thus far from the books?” Martin asked, as they saw Jana, Ratchis and Kazrack awaiting them.

“I’ve discovered a possible route to Hurgun’s Maze,” Beorth said, addressing the others as well as he sat.

“How do we get there?” Jeremy asked.

“It starts at a place called *The Pit of Bones*,” Beorth said, quietly.

“Oh, yes I found that on one of the maps I was copying,” Martin commented.

“It seems that there was some kind of compound or fortress there at one time and in a map room of some kind was the location of the Maze,” Beorth said. “But now the place is less than a ruin. It is a crater full of the buried, but unconsecrated dead. At least, I hope it is unconsecrated.”

“Why do you hope it is unconsecrated?” asked Kazrack.

“I was there,” Beorth said, sadly. “I helped to move remains out, as the monks looked for the map.”

“So, do they know where it is?” Jeremy asked. “I mean the map.”

“I’m afraid my order knows exactly where it is,” replied Beorth.

“Are you afraid because you don’t think they’ll give it to us?” Kazrack asked.

“Or are you afraid because you think they will?” Ratchis added.

“I am afraid because there seems to be a schism in the brotherhood, and I fear that one is moving away from the will of Anubis,” Beorth replied. “And yet, I must obey...”

“A man cannot serve two masters,” Kazrack said.

“My true master is Anubis. I must decide whether the monks at the Pit of Bones are acting in the true interest of Anubis, and then my course will be clear,” Beorth said.

“The Pit of Bones was the site of a great battle,” Ethiel said. “It happened right around the same time Hurgun closed his maze.”

“Well, I guess we know where we are going after we are done with the Circle of the Thorn,” said Kazrack. “Unless Jana or Martin’s quests interrupt.”

“We should leave tomorrow,” Ratchis said.

“Ethiel, that being the case would you mind terribly if I continued with my work in the library after dinner?” Martin asked the elf.

“Of course not,” Ethiel replied.

“We should leave the *Urn of Osiris* here,” said Jana. “We would not want anything to happen to it.”

“We will happily guard over it for you,” said Ethiel.

The others agreed.

“Perhaps we can skip Archet and go straight to *Dybbuk Akvram*,” Kazrack suggested.

“No, we should go to Archet and ask around about the druids there, so we know what to expect,” Ratchis said. “They might shoot intruders on sight or something.”

“But we should stop in Summit first to get the things we left behind,” Martin interjected, sounding more like a question than a statement.

It was agreed.

Ratchis told the tale of the third night of Malar’s flight from the Minions of Set, and everyone retired soon afterward – Except for Martin who sleepily finished copying his maps way into the night and was wakened the next day slumped over the table in the library, a corner of the map he worked on smudged by his drool.

### **Anulem, 7th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

The next morning found the party marching northward through the woods, well west of Ogre’s Bluff. The party marched through some deep snow drifts, as Ratchis, with the help of *Uller’s Boot*, walked upon their surface as if it were packed sand. Birds twittered in the distance, and sunlight danced in icicles hanging in bunches on tree boughs. Kwa leapt around in the snow happily barking at each party member in turn. Several times Ratchis stopped to firmly hold the dog’s snout closed and say “No!” He was soon walking more calmly, at least most of the time. Thomas eyed the dog nervously from his occasional perch on Martin’s shoulder.

Just after midday, after stopping to munch on some rations, they came to broad clearing. They could not see the other side, and to the east and west the tree line could barely be seen. Ratchis began to lead the way across.

“This isn’t on any of the maps,” Martin commented to whomever might want to listen.

As they made their way across the clearing, they could see a ruin of some large building or several smaller buildings up ahead. Even from their distance they could see the crumbled walls scarred with black ash, and the black of the roof shining in the sun against the backdrop of snow.

Behind them there was the sound of birds suddenly bursting from the tree line and cawing loudly. Beorth turned and pointed. The others glanced seeing the flock of black birds move to the east at a fast pace right above the trees.

Kazrack continued to walk without looking, concentrating on getting his short muscular legs above the snow as much as possible.

Suddenly, they heard the cracking and rustling of something moving rapidly through the tops of the trees, clearly swaying from nearly a quarter-mile away.

“I think we better run,” said Beorth.

Ratchis looked again, and Jeremy cocked a head over his shoulder as a humongous form burst out of the trees. It flew about twenty feet off the ground. It was hard to see what it was exactly at that distance, but it had four legs, a tail curled over its body, and long bat-like wings of over twenty-five feet in length.

“Run!” Ratchis roared, but everyone had already started.

The party ran as fast as they could, their boots crunching loudly on the frost-covered snow that sparkled up at them in the midday sun. Soon, Beorth and Kazrack began to fall behind, so Ratchis adjusted his speed to match them. Kwa leapt about them barking happily, not realizing the great danger they were all fleeing from.

“Let’s try to get to the house!” Kazrack called to the others. “Keep running! Don’t look back!”

The ruin bobbed up and down in their field of vision, getting ever closer, but spying over his shoulder Ratchis saw the winged form was approaching with greater speed.

“If it gets too close be ready with missile weapons,” Ratchis cried out, he fumbled for his heavy crossbow on his back while he ran.

And on they ran. Jana made it to the embankment first and pumped her legs with all her might to get up to the shelter of the ruined walls. Martin was right behind her, but Jeremy’s wind gave out and he began to slow, allowing Beorth, Kazrack and Ratchis to catch up.

Ratchis stole another look, as he was not working as hard to keep up his speed as the others were. He could see the huge form more clearly now. It had a huge leonine body covered in a bronze and black fur, long bat-like black leathery wings. It had a large human face with a black beard streaked with rust, but a mouth full of jagged teeth. Above its body, its tail was full of long spines.

“It’s not a dragon,” Ratchis cried. “I think it’s a manticore!”

“A what?” cried Kazrack.

Jana made her way to what looked like had once been an outer building and turned, and watched as the monster flew in lower, now only eighty feet behind her companions. She pulled out her crossbow and began to load it.

“Try and find a spot with some roof left,” Kazrack suggested, as he finally got to the embankment, running even with Jeremy who scrambled up. Martin also began to load his crossbow. He stood separated from Jana by sharp rubble on the ground, his back to a crumbling wall. Kazrack stopped at the top of the embankment, while Beorth ran past and stood beside Martin. Ratchis climbed to the right and placed his back to the wall of the outer building, as Jana had. Jeremy hustled to the corner of the outer building and turned. Kwa stood beside Ratchis, barking nervously at the manticore.

Ratchis leaned over to Kazrack and laying a hand on the dwarf’s shoulder said, “Nephthys, please lend your divine strength to this dwarf so that he may aid me in the fight for freedom.” Meanwhile, Kazrack was petitioning Rivkanal to lend him her protection against evil, but casting spells with his broken arm was difficult and the pain broke his concentration.<sup>19</sup>

Beorth called to Anubis to infuse his sword with divine energy to better defend himself against the approaching monstrosity.

Martin stepped back in a space between two crumbling walls, the area behind him littered with wooden beams and shingles, and fired his crossbow at the thing, but the bolt went wide.

“Are manticores evil?” Kazrack asked.

“From what I’ve heard, I think so,” replied Ratchis.

“They eat people,” Martin called out.

“So do bears,” replied Kazrack.

Martin groaned, as Jeremy prepared his own crossbow.

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<sup>19</sup> **DM’s Note:** At this time in the campaign, spell-casters were required to use both hands to perform somatic components. Since he has a broken arm that is still healing, every time Kazrack attempts to cast a spell with a somatic component he must make a concentration check. This house rule has been dropped since for the sake of simplicity.

The manticore slowed its progress and gained some height, its tail whipping around wildly. The cold air swirled around him and his wings buffeted a strange sulfur smell from its hide. Its eyes were bright red circled with black.

“Watch-mage!” It cried in a deep and inhuman voice that seemed to reverberate in their heads. “Give yourself up and the others may live.”

In reply, Jana let a crossbow bolt fly, but as it struck the creature it seemed to disintegrate into a puff of acrid smoke with no effect.

“But I don’t want to give myself up,” Martin said softly.

“Martin, get cover!” Kazrack said and moved back to shield his wizard companion while successfully calling his gods’ blessing on his light flail (which he was forced to use in his off-hand).

“Nephtys, Bless my weapon that I may affect this foul beast that has been sent from the deepest pits of hell!” Ratchis called out, channeling his goddess’ power into his hammer.

“You have three seconds to comply,” the manticore intoned. It snapped its wings and gained a bit more height and came forward some more.

“Help!” cried Martin and he dashed behind the partially roofed ruin of the small outer building for cover.

Jeremy fired his crossbow at the thing, but the shot was too low.

Jana made ready to run if it got closer, but instead it turned slightly to the right and its tail whipped in their direction.

“My patience is done with,” it said, and as it whipped its tail six long spikes like thick metallic insect hairs came down in a flurry.

One of the spikes went flying at Kwa, but the dog leapt towards Ratchis and the thing embedded itself in the wall behind the dog instead. Ratchis ducked and heard the crack of stone as one of the spikes struck behind him. Kazrack was not as lucky, moving out of the reach of one, just to have another puncture his chain shirt at the shoulder painfully; blood was pouring down his left arm. Beorth leapt awkwardly to avoid the things, but only managed to ensure that he was hit by two, one in the hip and one in the thigh. The paladin could feel his leg going numb but was immediately moving, feeling it begin to throb again as he joined Martin under the cover of the partially collapsed roof.

“Get cover! It is going to pepper us from a distance!” Kazrack cried, with a curse. “Foul creature!”

Beorth lay his hands upon his injured leg and said solemnly, “Father Anubis, lend me your aid,” and he felt the healing warmth move through him.

Ratchis ran around the corner of the crumbling wall and lay a hand on Kazrack calling for Nephtys to cure him, while Kwa ran leaping over the rubble deeper into the ruin of what they could now see was once a fine and large house at one time. Kazrack slammed into Ratchis trying to push him by force under cover, but the hulking half-orc did not budge.

Jeremy stepped away from the wall he was near and fired his crossbow again. This time there was the slightest spurt of ichor from the thing as the bolt disappeared into a puff of smoke.

The thing began to fly past them from above and to the right.

“Your life and death mean nothing to me, but your suffering, that will bring me pleasure,” it said in its inhuman voice.

As it swooped over them, its tail moving to fling spikes down and into the sheltered area, Martin stepped forward and cast a spray of swirling colors at it, but it had no effect. Jana followed suit with her word of blindness, but she found her spell blocked before it even touched the thing.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> **DM’s Note:** It had spell resistance (18).

“Nephthys, hide us!” Ratchis cried out and brought down an obscuring mist that blocked their view of the entire area, including the monster.

They heard the distinct snap of the manticore’s leathery wings as it pulled away. The party all waited in breathless silence for a moment, listening, and keeping their weapons at the ready.

After a minute, they relaxed a bit. Jeremy began to make his way towards the others by following the wall and the sound of their whispering voices.

“I don’t have a ranged weapon, so the only way I can fight this thing is if it comes down,” said Kazrack, frustrated.

“Martin,” Beorth whispered into the mist. “Why does this thing want with you?”

“Don’t ask me!” Martin said, his voice filled with fear. “I’ve never seen it before!”

Kwa began to whine as he sniffed and made his way to Ratchis, who patted his head and cooed to calm the dog.

“Martin, perhaps if you summon strong winds you can knock it to the ground where we can all attack it,” suggested Kazrack.

“I cannot do that,” said Martin, annoyed.

“Oh,” replied the dwarf and went back to thinking.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Jeremy asked, coming around the wall and feeling ahead of him for which what to go.

“Get under here!” called Kazrack.

“Under where?” Jeremy said.

“Come towards my voice,” Kazrack said. “We have a roof over our head.”

“Did you do this?” Jeremy asked the dwarf, motioning to the mist that obscured the very motioning he made.

“Make what?” asked Kazrack.

“All this,” Jeremy repeated his gesture.

“I made it,” Ratchis said, flatly.

Jana passed her loaded crossbow to Beorth.

Again, they listened. The mist swirled in patterns of gray dispersing slowly in the occasional whispers of wind.

They waited and waited, and finally, after a few minutes that seemed like an eternity, the mist dissipated.

They all looked around frantically for signs of the monster.

“Martin,” Kazrack hissed. “See if Thomas can smell it coming.”

“Thomas, can you smell it?” Martin asked his familiar.

“No,” Thomas chittered. “The wind isn’t right.”

Suddenly, there was the snap of leathery wings as the thing came swooping down towards them from the left, between the crumbling outer wall of the house, and the partially collapsed outer building most of the party was trying to hide in. It was coming in about twelve feet off the ground, and Ratchis roared and charged it, leaping up to strike it heavily with his hammer. He felt the impact vibrate down his arm and knew such a blow would have crushed the skull of any man or beast,

but the manticore did not even grunt, even though black blood seeped from the wound.

Jana stepped clear of the wall and cast her *blindness* spell again, but again it could not penetrate the thing's resistance to magic.

Kazrack stepped forward, readying himself if the manticore came close enough to strike at, but instead it gained altitude as it passed them. Martin and Beorth both fired at it, but their bolts went wide.

Ratchis dropped his hammer and ran towards the fleeing monstrous form while pulling out his already loaded heavy crossbow. He let a bolt go, which embedded itself deeply into the thing's rear haunch before it vaporized. This time the manticore actually roared in pain.

Again, Jana frantically tried to blind the creature, but she just was not able to make her spells affect it. Martin hurriedly reloaded his crossbow but was so anxious to lift it and fire he ended it up tossing it away from himself. The bolt ricocheted off some rubble. Beorth also reloaded and fired, but his lack of hand-eye coordination made him miss once again.<sup>21</sup>

They could tell now that the manticore was not that deft a flier. It flew away and banked in a wide turn to come back around.

Ratchis continued to run; mimicking its wide circle around the right side of the ruin, while Martin carefully stepped through the sharp rubble to retrieve his crossbow. Jeremy hustled into the ruin itself, past a partially collapsed stair that stood beneath the open sky and towards a pair of double doors that seem to lead to the still covered entry hall.

"Ratchis!" Kazrack called running to the left of the ruin, figuring the manticore would come back around from that side. "I have an idea, and I need your help!"

"What is it?" Ratchis called, pausing in his pursuit to reload his heavy crossbow.

"It's circling around!" Jeremy warned from his new vantage point, through the broken double doors of what had once been the front of this house.

"We can use my grappling hook," Kazrack said.

"Well, get it out!" Ratchis said, continuing his run, which took him away from the rest of the group.

Kazrack scrambled to get his grappling hook and rope from his nearby pack with one hand, while Jeremy reloaded his crossbow.

"I think there is shelter over near Jeremy," Kazrack called to Jana, Martin and Beorth.

"Should we follow?" Martin called.

"Yes!" and with that he began to make his way past the crumbling wall. "It is pretty close. I don't know if we'll make it."

Martin and Jana began to hustle around the crumbling wall and through the ruin in the direction of the doorway into the entry hall where Jeremy stood.

The manticore swooped back to the left of the ruin, and looked down at Jeremy, who felt a sudden elation, as if the boundaries of human possibility had fallen away. He nearly swooned but shook his head clear of the euphoric feeling.

Ratchis finally made his way around the far side of the ruin, bringing the low-flying manticore directly into his sight. He brought the weapon up to his eye and fired, but the bolt plummeted into the snow way short of its flying target. He dropped his crossbow in disgust.

Meanwhile, Kazrack moved to intercept the manticore's course, and readied his flail in case it passed low enough for him to strike.

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<sup>21</sup> Beorth has a Dexterity score of 7.

Martin's progress toward the shelter of the entry hall, however, was delayed by his stepping on a huge rusty nail that impaled itself in his foot. Jana followed close behind but managed to avoid the sharp shards of the former house all over the place.

Jeremy took his shot and cried out in joy as he saw his bolt actually do some damage before it burst into smoke. Kazrack was also in range now and he swung his flail down on its side with his weaker off-hand. The blow did not have the weight needed to slow the thing down in the slightest.

The manticore flew past them and retaliated with a barrage of spikes. One struck Jeremy soundly in the side, while three impaled Kazrack. He swayed, but kept his feet, his clothes and armor awash in dwarven blood.

Beorth came around the wall and fired Jana's crossbow again, and again he missed.

Ratchis continued his run after the monster, while Martin finally made it under the cover of the entry hall. Jana passed by the watch-mage and fired a ray of sickly green light at the manticore through the open doorway. The ray struck the thing squarely, but her spells did not seem powerful enough to affect it. Kazrack caught up to the slow flying manticore and swung again, but the blow missed completely as it picked up speed again.

The monster looked back at the dwarf and suddenly Kazrack felt a great elation, as if he were ten feet tall and as strong as an ogre, but he shook off the drug-like feeling.

Beorth, however, finally was able to make a bolt find its target and cause some black steaming ichor to come hissing from the manticore.

Pulling a bit of wool from his cloak, Martin spoke an arcane word as he looked out the door. In the air before him hovered an illusory Richard the Red.

"Halt your attacks creature! I am Richard the Red, Watch-Mage!" the false Richard called to the monster. "I am the one you seek!"

"Let's regroup under the roof!" Kazrack called, as he dropped his flail and turned to chuck a dagger at the manticore. It missed its mark.

Again, Jana tried and failed to *blind* it, as Jeremy came running out to the front of the house as Ratchis passed.

The manticore turned widely again, and flicked its tail sending painful spikes at Ratchis, Beorth and Kazrack. The half-orc cried out as one pierced his forearm clear through. Kazrack grunted as two bit him as well. Beorth grimaced through his own pain and fired the crossbow once again, but his aim was not true.

Roaring with frustration, Jana pointed her finger at the thing again, sending another ray of green light at it, but it had turned and gained height. She missed. Jeremy adjusted his crossbow's aim upward and saw the bolt hit the mark, but fizzle away before doing any damage.

"Curses!" he cried.

Kazrack picked up his flail and moved towards the doorway. The manticore turned, moving parallel with the open doorway, but over the open roof. It looked down at Jeremy, and once again he felt a great elation, and this time he realized that it was okay to feel it.

"I am a hero, and an adventurer," he thought. "I can't lose. I am the best at everything I try!"

"That's right creature," the illusory Richard continued to taunt the monster. "Fly back to your masters lest I banish you to the pits from whence you came!"

"It matters not," the manticore replied not even looking at the new watch-mage. His voice chilled their bones, except for Jeremy who decided it was a perfect time to climb to the roof of the entry hall to get a better shot at the monster as it fled from him in terror of his mythic heroism.

End of Session #26

AQUERRA

## Session #27

“You know,” the illusory Richard the Red called, now floating about twenty feet in the air. “It’s not too late for you to switch sides. I’ve always got a use for a creature like you in my organization. All the human flesh you can eat! Think about it!”

Ratchis loaded his crossbow once again, as he kept the handle tied to a leather thong so when he dropped it would remain at his side. Jana stepped back to the open doorway, while Kazrack picked up the front door by the doorknob, which lay flat in the snow, and hefted it on to his back.

“Use me for cover!” he cried.

“Somebody bring that thing down so I can finish it off,” Jeremy cried, reloading his own crossbow, but taking a moment to shake his fist at it. “Come back here!”

The manticore made its wide turn going far out past the other side of the ruin and back along the front again, to make another pass.

“What do you plan to do with door?” Beorth asked the dwarf, with a hint of a mocking sneer.

“I can’t fire my crossbow so I’m going to try and provide cover,” Kazrack looked up at the pale paladin from squatting under the door. “We could tie it to me, and two people could walk on either side with cover.”

Beorth raised an eyebrow. Ratchis turned and fired at the approaching manticore.

“I wanted to stay behind it since it banks so severely, but it moves too fast,” said Ratchis, hustling between them and to the doorway.

Martin saw the manticore coming in their direction once again and ducked for cover in the entry hall, but not before having the illusory Richard the Red say, “Come now, surely we can come to some form of agreement. Just tell me what you want. I’m sure I can supply it.”

The manticore said nothing.

Beorth stepped into the thing’s path and fired Jana’s crossbow once again. He saw the bolt bury itself deep in the creature’s shoulder before hissing away into nothingness. The manticore grunted.

Ratchis began to load his heavy crossbow once again, as Jeremy stepped out on to the roof of the entry hall.

“Whoa!” he cried as his foot followed by his leg came crushing through the roof. Martin and Jana leapt back startled.

“They sure don’t make roofs like they used to,” quipped the confident Jeremy, a smile on his face, so certain of his victory.

Beorth loaded the light crossbow again and fired, but the manticore changed its course and gained a bit of altitude.

Ratchis fired not a moment after, but he too missed, and he ducked under the doorway. Jeremy pulled his leg out and fell to one knee firing. The bolt went high as the thing lowered itself again. Now it was only ten feet off the ground, barreling right towards Beorth. Kazrack stepped in front the paladin, pulling the door back in front of himself.

The manticore continued to race towards them. Beorth reloaded and fired again, but again he missed. The smell of the approaching creature came over them in waves, like copper and sulfur mixed together.

Ratchis frantically reached for another bolt, and realized it was his last.

“Jana, give me your crossbow and your quarrels,” he cried, as he loaded.

“I don’t have them. Beorth has them,” she said, shrugging her shoulders.

Martin hovered behind him offering his own crossbow. But Ratchis did not see this, and the bow fell on the floor.

Kazrack looked up at the manticore as it bore down on them and suddenly the thing's eyes shone, and Kazrack blinked. The dwarf was suddenly aware of his own imperfections, shortcomings and likely failures. He knew that he would disappoint his father with his choices, and likely let down the dwarven people, as had so many young dwarven warriors who were so arrogant to think that *they* would be the one to re-unite the dwarven people. He felt useless.<sup>22</sup>

"I've got you now, you ugly son of bitch!" Jeremy cried, firing his crossbow once again, and laughing as the bolt drew a spurt of ichor as it struck in the same place Beorth's had.

Beorth dropped the crossbow with a curse, and drawing his sword charged at the manticore even as it continued to approach, now only a few feet off the ground.

"Anubis! Give me strength and power to smite this evil!" the paladin roared as he channeled the power of his god into the blow.

The manticore slapped its wing down and sent the blow bouncing away, ineffective.

"Beorth! Fall back so we can all get this thing together!" Kazrack called, dropping the door.

Ratchis, seeing the thing was close to landing, dropped his crossbow even as it was nearly cranked all the way back and drawing his war hammer charged. "Nephthys!" he roared.

The blow bounced off the thing as if it were made metal.

Jana stepped through the doorway and fired another green ray from his finger that struck the manticore squarely. Again, the spell could not get through.

The manticore flew past the two attackers, and even with the roof to the entry hall as it turned to make it's wide bank once more.

"Come now! I'll give you one more chance," Martin had the false Richard call.

"That's it! You shouldn't have come that close!" Jeremy said, and in fit of heroic genius he dropped his crossbow and running across the entry hall roof leapt onto the back of the passing manticore.

"What are you doing?" Ratchis cried in horror.

"This thing is mine!" Jeremy cried out in glee. He sat perched between its wings, his fingers rubbed raw against the hide like copper wire that seemed to sizzle softly. The skin on his face and hands stung.

"Jeremy! You're crazy! Grab its legs!" Kazrack cried, running, and leaping to grab manticore, but it was already gaining altitude.

The manticore flew up another thirty feet and then rolled to left, trying to shake off the Neerguardian, but Jeremy held on, his fingers cramping and burning. He risked drawing his short sword, holding on with one hand.

"This one's from Arofel!" he cried, bringing the blade down onto the thing's back, but it lurched and Jeremy was jerked forward, losing the momentum of his swing. The blade struck the thick hide with no effect.

Martin picked up his crossbow with a sigh, while Kazrack walked over to the doorway.

The manticore turned and jerked its body back and forth, while slowing down.

"Maybe this wasn't such a good idea," Jeremy mused aloud, his elation suddenly slipping away as quickly as his grip did,

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<sup>22</sup> **DM's Note:** Kazrack's "discouragement" (along with Jeremy's "over-confidence") led to his having a -1 on all attack and damage rolls, checks and saves.

as he was only holding on with one hand now. He tumbled off the manticore's back from forty feet up.

Jana raised her hands over her head, but Jeremy landed heavily upon her, driving her to the ground, and getting a dark bruise on the side of her face. Jeremy lay atop of her, unconscious and bleeding profusely from his nose and head.

"Oh, I guess Jeremy is dead again," Kazrack mumbled to himself. "The gods are never going to take me, I keep failing my companions."

Ratchis ran over to the unconscious companion, while Jana began bandaging his head. Beorth positioned himself for another shot with the crossbow he had retrieved while Jeremy was riding the manticore, but as usual, he missed.

"Well, if neither you nor your master will parley, I suppose there's nothing more to say," Richard the Red said. "Go back and tell your diseased lord that I'll never work with him and I'll kill him if I see him!" The false watch-mage disappeared with a flick of his cloak.

Kazrack sat in the snow and held his crossbow with his foot while he reloaded with his good arm.

"You know, we're not working together very well," the dwarf continued to complain dejectedly, knowing his actions were futile. "I wonder what I'll look like as a pin cushion."

"Nephthys, give me the strength to prevent Jeremy's death," Ratchis called to his goddess while laying a hand on Jeremy. The Neerguardian was now stabilized.

No longer concentrating on the illusion, Martin stepped out of the doorway and fired his crossbow at the manticore, missing.

"Martin, give me some of your bolts!" Beorth said, jogging over. Kazrack put his loaded crossbow on his back and picked up his flail.

"Nephthys, I beseech you, heal Jeremy again so that he can join us in defeating this foul beast," Ratchis called to his goddess again, casting his *cure moderate wounds* spell.

Jeremy coughed and sat up, "Wha- what happened?"

"This isn't over yet," Ratchis said.

Martin handed over two of his crossbow bolts to Beorth, while Jana moved back under cover, followed by Kazrack who came hustling over once again. Jeremy stood and picked his crossbow up off the ground. Beorth passed through the entry hall and peeked out the other door that once opening into the main hall of the house, looking for the manticore, which was once again on the far end of its loop.

"Is it fleeing?" Kazrack asked, shaking his head and regaining his confidence. "That thing ensorcelled me."

"I think it may come back for another pass," said Beorth, breathing heavily.

Ratchis stepped under cover as well and took up his heavy crossbow once again. Jeremy stepped back against the wall and re-loaded his own. Beorth picked up the door that Kazrack had dropped and propped it sideways across the doorway, creating a three-foot-high barrier to act as cover.

Ratchis dropped the crossbow again and grabbed on to the door, which still hung up by one rusty hinge, and considered ripping it down for more cover.

Martin fumbled through his pack for more crossbow bolts. Beorth knelt behind the door-barrier and fired his crossbow as the manticore came racing towards them once again. He missed.

Ratchis let go of the door and leapt over it pulling his war hammer. He charged the thing, hearing the crunch of bone as the blow struck its back.

Martin reloaded his own crossbow and fired, but being worried he might hit Ratchis, missed. Jana risked another *ray of enfeeblement*, but this time it missed completely.

Ratchis grunted as he felt the rake of the manticore's clawed paw across his chest. The half-orc's armor was hanging on by just a few links, barely absorbing any damage anymore.

Kazrack barreled right through the door barricade and swung his flail with all the might of his off-hand. He missed.

Martin dropped his crossbow and stepped through the doorway and reached into his red magic bag of animals with a whispered prayer to Isis. He pulled out a ball of fur that he tossed at the manticore. It expanded into a badger that landed atop the monster and clawed wildly. Unfortunately, its tiny claws did not seem to be enough to get through its hide.

Jana tried a *daze* spell, and again she found her spell would not get through.

"I hate that thing!" she cursed.

The manticore let out a low rolling growl as it turned to face Ratchis with hatred in its glowing red eyes. Ratchis let out a cry of pain as he felt the sharp cuts of the things claws on his shoulders. Blood burst from the half-orc and splattered on the monster's face and on Kazrack's arm. The hulking ranger fell from the weight of the blow.

Jeremy stepped to the left a bit and took a shot with his crossbow. Remembering the battle with Richard the Red in the Chamber of the Three, he cursed, as he was robbed of the results of his excellent shot once again. The bolt burst into smoke even as it would have buried itself into the manticore's neck. It had no effect.<sup>23</sup>

Beorth ran over and joined the melee, his sword cutting into the manticore's side. The paladin wiped his eyes clear of the monster's spurting black ichor.

Now they had the thing flanked and partially surrounded. Kazrack struck a very hard blow with his flail, and the manticore roared in pain and anger.

Ratchis struggled to his feet, and swung his hammer, but he did not wait to have good footing and his blow was short of the rearing creature. Both Martin and Jana spoke arcane words and flicked their wrists in arcane gestures, but their *daze* spells failed.

The manticore snapped its wings and took to the air. Beorth and Ratchis were able get in last blows before it was out of range, but only Beorth's found purchase. The badger tumbled off the thing and waited for a command from Martin.

"Let's regroup and make a plan!" Kazrack called He fell on his back and pulled his crossbow out and braced it on his foot. The bolt hit the manticore in its hindquarters but burst into smoke ineffectively.

Ratchis dropped his hammer and took up his still loaded crossbow and fired. The half-orc's bolt while hitting, was as ineffective as the dwarf's.

Martin hustled back under cover.

Jana grunted in frustration and fired another *ray of enfeeblement*. It struck and she felt her magic finally get through the monster's spell resistance. Unfortunately, it was still able to shrug off the effect of the spell.

Beorth also ran for the cover of the doorway.

"I think it is really running away this time," Jeremy said, turning to watch it fly off in a straight line. "I mean, fly away."

"Damn it!" Ratchis cursed, but then held on to his belt of scored and broken chain links and called to Nephthys to heal his wounds.

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<sup>23</sup> **DM's Note:** A blow needs to actually deal damage for the critical effect to come into play. Thus, even an otherwise fatal critical result would be discarded if the target's damage resistance brought the resultant damage to less than 1.

Kazrack awkwardly reloaded his crossbow, just in case.

“Maybe that thing is Mozek shape-shifted,” Martin mused aloud. “Okay, badger back in the bag.”

The badger leapt into the air and tumbled back into a ball of fur, plopping into the bag.

“I don’t like that thing,” Thomas chattered in Martin’s mind, referring to the bag. “I don’t like any of those animals.”

“Why not?” Martin asked.

“Because...” was the squirrel familiar’s only reply.

The mantichore disappeared from view.

The party let out a collective sigh.

“We need to keep moving,” Ratchis said. “This may be a ruse and it will be back.”

“We should at least wait for Jeremy to recover some from being so close to death,” Jana said.

“No, we should go,” Ratchis insisted. “Kazrack walks slowly anyway, so Jeremy will not be slowing us down.”

“Yes, we may be lucky enough to reach Summit before nightfall, and before that thing comes back to finish us, unless we wounded it too much for it to risk it,” Kazrack said.

“What was that you said about the mantichore before, Martin?” Jeremy asked.

“I think that the mantichore may have been sent by Mozek. Presumably, it was looking for me, and not for Richard,” Martin explained his theory. He looked at Ratchis. “You know, I may be able to do some minor repair on your armor with a spell I have, but it will take a while.”<sup>24</sup>

“I was going to buy something in Summit. Perhaps I will wear that until you are done working on my chain shirt,” Ratchis replied.

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The party marched northward, coming to the ridge that surrounded Greenreed Valley and following it until they saw sign of Summit above. They made the arduous climb as Ra’s Glory made its descent into the underworld.

They made their way through the gathering gloom of Summit’s one wide street and to the Sun’s Summit Inn. A few shepherds wrapped in fur cloaks and sipping mulled wine milled in the cramped common room. The balding inn-keeper, Gibb, came around the bar, brushing a lick of hair over his bald spot.

“By the gods!” he exclaimed. “I can’t believe you’re still alive! Finn said you were, but I didn’t believe it! Come have a seat, get a load off, you must be cold. I’ll fetch you something to drink.”

The party took seats around a table, while one of the barmaids brought them a pitcher of mead. Jana asked if there has been any more trouble with ‘haunting’.

“Nothing like that night,” she said. “Plus, that hole in the basement was bricked over.”

“Good,” said Martin the Green.

A moment later, Stump the Cook, came out of the kitchen with a tray full of bowls.

“This is something special for you,” he said, passing out a spicy venison stew.

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<sup>24</sup> The *mending* spell will repair one damage point per casting when used on armor.

The door to the inn opened with a howl of wind and in walked four figures. It was Finn Fisher, Carlos, Frank, and Gwar.

“Hey look who it is!” cried Frank with a big smile.

“Hey, don’t we own them,” Jeremy whispered jokingly to Ratchis, referring to Finn and the others.

“We don’t own anybody,” Ratchis hissed.

“No offense! I was just joking. Damn.”

“You know someone was around here looking for you,” Frank said to Jana, as he and the others joined the party at their table.

“They were?” Jana asked.

“Yeah, tall, thin, dark hair, pale skin, mole, dressed in black,” Frank continued. “I think his name was Rin... Rinlar?”

“Rindalith,” Jana said, with a sigh.

“Yep, that was it,” Frank said. “He spent time in the alderman’s house. Don’t know what it was about.”

“Don’t worry, we do,” said Beorth, and Ratchis kicked him under the table.

“So, what’s up?” Frank asked. Carlos and Finn brought stools over, while Gwar motioned for a barmaid to bring by a pitcher and more mugs.

“We have been unsuccessful in finding the dragon,” Kazrack said. “That is the long and the short of it.”

“Yeah, we haven’t had too much luck in our search either,” said Gwar with a wink.

“Yeah, we have decided on the strategy of searching in ever-smallening circles,” Frank added.

“Eventually you’ll be circling the inn,” Kazrack said, and everyone laughed.

“You guys look a little beat up,” Finn said.

“*Si, parece com usted fue atacado por un animal,*” Carlos said, taking a big gulp of wine.

“Um, yes, we ran into some bandits on the way here,” Kazrack said, looking at the others to confirm his lie.

“Bandits!” Gwar exclaimed, a few of the shepherds in the common room turned and looked at them.

“Let’s keep it down, we don’t want to worry people too much,” said Kazrack lowering his voice.

“But your wounds like they were caused by claws or something,” Frank said.

“Oh, they had a creature with them,” Kazrack continued his line of lies. “It was sort of cat-like, wasn’t Ratchis?”

“You saw it better than I did,” Ratchis said, and proceeded to shove huge spoonfuls of stew into his mouth. It dribbled down the front of his tunic.

“Sounds like a... what are those? A smilodon, ain’t it?” Frank said. “Were the bandits gnolls?”

“No,” said Kazrack.

“We fought some gnolls nearby,” said Finn. “We think they may be behind the disappearances around here.”

Martin excused himself to see if he could find the equipment he had left behind. He walked over to the bar to talk to Gibb about it.

“Any other interesting characters around here?” Beorth asked their former traveling companions.

“A couple of monks,” Frank said.

Beorth rubbed his shaved head deep in thought.

“Well, there’s nothing like being in the wilds for a bit to make you appreciate an inn that much more,” Kazrack said.

Martin the Green found out from Gibb that his stuff had been sent over to the widow Beatrice’s since that was where he was supposed to be staying. He walked over there, and the old woman crankily told him that she had sent his stuff to the alderman’s for safe keeping as she had to rent her rooms to “people who are actually around.”

The young watch-mage walked over to the alderman’s house and in a few moments he was sitting in the parlor taking with Henry Horton. Henry’s son brought them a tray of wine, cheese and bread.

The alderman wanted to know what the party had been doing for the last few months, and Martin struggled to sound convincing as he explained that they had tried to discover the source of the “haunting,” but had gotten sidetracked looking for the dragon and fighting off bandits.

“Bandits!” the alderman seemed shocked. “Nearby? We should tell Maxel and get the militia prepared.”

“Oh, um. . .It was not so close to right here,” Martin said. “It was right outside of Ogre’s Bluff.”

“I hope you told the authorities in Ogre’s Bluff,” the alderman said.

“Um,” Martin was trying to think fast, but his lying skills were weak. “Well, it was kind of in-between there and here.”

“So, we can do something about it,” the alderman insisted.

“Well, I think my companions and I are going to take care of it,” Martin said.

“There is no reason to risk yourselves unduly. This is just what the militia is organized for. I will call the constable over so we can discuss how to deal with the bandits, what their method of operation is and their possible numbers,” the alderman said.

“Um, I think it can wait until tomorrow,” Martin said. “I will discuss it with the more strategically minded members of my group, so we can best present this information to you and the constable.”

“I will have Maxel come speak with you in the morning,” the alderman said, looking at the Martin suspiciously.

“Yes, that will work,” Martin said. “Now, I do not mean to be rude, but I was told that my things were being stored here, and I have had a long and arduous day on the road.”

The alderman had one of his sons bring Martin’s things which included to large saddle-bags full of things and the valise that had belonged to the warlock that worked with Devon and Markle.<sup>25</sup>

He returned to the inn to find that the others had retired for the night.

Gibb was cleaning up the now empty common room.

“Hey, I meant to ask you,” Gibb called to Martin as he crossed the inn towards the rear hall and stairway. “I presume there are still seven of you? Where is your red-haired friend?”

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<sup>25</sup> See Session #12/#13

“You mean Chance? He... died along the way,” Martin answered sullenly.

“Oh, so that one room is a double instead of a triple then,” Gibb said, awkwardly. Martin discussed paying to store some of his heavier stuff at the inn and paying in advance. An agreement was reached.

Martin went upstairs.

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In the meantime, Jana and Beorth were talking in the room they shared.

“So, Jana,” Beorth said, unpacking his gear and turning down his bed. “When I happened to mention Rindalith, Ratchis kicked me under the table. I guess you don’t want people knowing about your friend.”

Jana placed her hands on her hips, “He is not my friend.”

“No, I think he’s more your enemy than your friend, but you know what I mean.” He began to remove his scale mail. Jana walked over to aid him with the straps on the back.

“I don’t really know what he wants,” Jana said.

“No, Jana. Tell me the truth. You like to avoid telling us the truth, and I am growing tired of it,” Beorth said, sternly. “He was your teacher?”

“Yes,” Jana replied meekly. She lowered a portion of Beorth’s armor on the floor, and then went and plopped down on her own bed.

“So, what exactly happened when you killed this person?” Beorth asked, turning and looking at the young witch right in the eye. “What was her name?”

“Sonya,” Jana replied, looking down.

“And?”

“Nothing happened,” Jana said, letting out a low breath. “I got out of there. That is how I ended up here. But I cannot imagine that he came after me because he was happy with what I did.”

She lay back on the bed and looked up at the ceiling.

“Sonya and I never got along very well,” Jana continued. “She was always sticking her nose where it didn’t belong and bursting in on someone invoking a token is a dangerous thing. She could have endangered me, and who knows how many other people. I will admit I may not have handled it the best way.”

She looked to Beorth.

“So, do you think he will just want to kill you? Do you think he could just do it?” Beorth asked.

“Well, I am surprised he involved constables,” Jana said. “And yes, I am sure he has the power to kill me easily if that is what he wants to do.”

“So, he wants to circumvent the law, so to speak, by using the law,” Beorth mused. He sat down on his own bed.

There was a knock on the door. It was Kazrack and Martin, and they both seemed to be seething.

“We need to talk about lying,” Kazrack said to Beorth.

“Lying?” Beorth asked.

“Well, we were hoping Jana could help us, she seems to be good at it,” Kazrack said. “It has to do with the story about the bandits we told so we didn’t have to talk about the manticore.”

“You mean the story *you* told,” Jan said, scathingly. “I think it is amazing how the two of you dare to look down at me for keeping things to myself, and trying to avoid saying something when it means I’d have to lie, but when it comes time to make up lies to cover your own mistakes you are more than happy to try to get me to lie for you.”

“I am sorry for the unintended insult,” Martin said, quietly.

“Yes, well I appreciate the fact that you acknowledge my skills,” Jana added dryly. “Now, you told this lie about bandits...”

“Yes, well... I told Frank and Gwar and those fellows, but what are we going to tell the alderman?” Kazrack said.

“We can just say nothing,” Beorth offered.

“I don’t think that is an option anymore,” Kazrack said. “Martin mentioned the bandits to the alderman already.”

Jana sighed loudly.

There was another knock on the door. It was Ratchis.

“What is going on?” he asked. They explained to him the situation.

He sighed.

“Okay, this is what we’ll say,” Ratchis said. “We’ll say that the quaggoths were the bandits and that we have reason to believe that they are hiding out beneath Ogre’s Bluff and that we plan to return and take care of it.”

“Hmmm, that just might work,” said Martin.

“Yes, I agree,” said Jana with a smile.

“It seems that you’re not the only one with a talent for telling stories,” Ratchis said to Jana. He turned to Kazrack. “Now, just don’t let Jeremy leave your room in the morning without making sure that he is in on the story and has it straight.”

It was agreed, and Martin, Ratchis and Kazrack adjourned to bed, leaving Jana and Beorth to finish their conversation.

“I’m afraid I may be leaving the group,” said Beorth solemnly.

Jana looked at him puzzled, “Go on.”

“I have reason to suspect that the monks of Anubis I spent time with many not be following our gods’ desires,” the paladin explained. “Anubis had been registering his displeasure with my actions. And while the rest of the group needs to fulfill their tasks for Osiris, I believe this is the most pressing thing for myself.”

“So, how long do you plan to stay with us?” Jana asked.

“Probably not until...”

“We travel to that trading post? Archet?”

“I was thinking maybe there...” The paladin’s words trailed off into a deep thought.

He began again... “Listen, strangely enough I trust you, but...”

“You do not wish me to share this information with the others, right?” Jana interrupted.

"If the group finds out, they will learn it from me." Beorth insisted. "I do not want anyone ignoring the tasks of Osiris for my sake and they are uppermost in everyone's mind, except mine."

"And mine," said Jana. "I have not felt the pull to accomplish mine as of yet. But you do know the group's propensity for sticking their nose where it doesn't belong. Even if I say nothing, they may insist on following you."

"So, are you saying you would come with me?" Beorth asked, failing to hide the surprise in his voice.

"I would if you asked me to," Jana replied.

"I am not sure what I can do alone against six men, but..."

"Are you sure that you need to do that?" Jana asked.

"You don't understand not only was the place being dug up by the monks of Anubis, but it was also being dug up by me," Beorth tried to explain.

There was a long silence.

"I think I need to discover the truth of what is happening," he said, softly. "I may get myself killed. I may get you killed."

"I honestly don't think my life expectancy is that big to begin with, so that's no problem," Jana said, turning on her side and propping her head up with one hand. "If I can help you I will."

She lay back down flat and pulled a thick woolen blanket over herself.

"Good night, Jana," Beorth said and blew out the lantern light.

"Night, Beorth," she replied.

## **Ralem, 8th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

Morning found Jeremy and Kazrack getting ready for their day. Jeremy got dressed, but left his armor in the room, and only bothered to strap the elven blade to his side. He slid it out of the scabbard and examined the silvery steel with admiration.

"I have to pray," said Kazrack, hefting his prayer stone from his pack. The thing was a cylinder of stone with rounded ends and covered with runes in many places. There was a slight groove from years of Kazrack prostrating himself with his forehead on the twenty-pound stone.

"Don't let me stop you," Jeremy replied and made for the door to the room.

"Wait, before you go downstairs you have to see Martin or Jana," the dwarf said.

Jeremy stopped and turned around, "Why?"

"They have to tell you something," Kazrack said.

"What?"

"They'll tell you when you see them," Kazrack said.

"Do I have to see them both, or can it be one or the other?" Jeremy asked.

"One or the other," Kazrack replied, wiping his stone off, and preparing to press his head against it.

"What if they aren't up here?" Jeremy continued to ask questions, holding the door ajar.

"I am sure they are around," Kazrack replied, exasperated.

Jeremy went down the hall and found Jana. She explained to him about the cover story.

"Oh, is that all?" Jeremy said. "Come on, let's get some breakfast. I'm hungry."

Downstairs was alive with the voices of many men. Jana and Jeremy came into the common room to find the place filled with shepherds, some dressed in old bits and suits of leather armor or ring mail, or with a small shield. Some had short bows or crossbows, but most had spears.

Jeremy and Jana took a seat in one corner, and soon Frank and Gwar came to sit with them.

"What's going on?" Jeremy asked them.

"Oh, the constable called the militia so they can track down the bandits," Frank explained. "They have got it in their minds that these bandits of yours must be responsible for the rash of disappearances around here."

"Disappearances?" Jeremy asked.

"Yeah, we've been looking into them ourselves, a bit, but you should know about them they started before even you guys first got here, by all account," Frank said.

"Is Kazrack awake?" Jana asked Jeremy.

"Yep."

"He's praying, isn't he?" she asked.

"Yep."

"And he's not to be disturbed?" she asked with a mischievous smile.

"Yep," Jeremy began to plow into his bowl of oatmeal.

Upstairs, Maxel, the constable, was knocking on Martin's door. Martin the Green who was only about halfway through preparing his day's spells, sighed and answered the door.

"I have come to see you at the alderman's behest about these bandits," said the man. He had beard growing in and was wearing a suit of chain mail. He had a round shield on his back and a long sword at his side.

"Oh, yes. Well, I was going to go talk to the alderman about that this morning," Martin said, wearily.

"Most of the militia are gathering downstairs and out front," Maxel explained. "We figure the appearance of these bandits and the disappearance of the local people may be connected."

"Oh, no, um... I don't think they are," Martin said, aghast. "Um, you see, the bandits were these hairy bear-like man-creatures, called 'quaggoths'. We think they are hiding out in the caves under Ogre's Bluff and have taken to harrying people in that area."

Maxel looked disappointed. "So, you think they has nothing to do with the local disappearances?"

"I doubt they have spread so far north, and they do not come out by day," Ratchis said, walking over to the door.

"Did you warn the constable and alderman down in Ogre's Bluff?" Maxel asked. Martin looked over at Ratchis who was sitting quietly in one corner, having finished his morning prayers.

"We only realized what was going on with these creatures on our way here, and did not get a chance to warn them," Ratchis said.

“Oh, well then I should get a message sent down there to warn them,” Maxel said.

“Don’t worry, we’ll go back down there ourselves and warn them,” Ratchis said.

“Oh, yes...” Martin jumped back in the conversation nervously. “I will draw a sketch of what they look like and bring it over to the alderman’s so that copies can be made, and people can be warned.”

“Sound like a good idea,” Maxel said, now looking suspiciously at Martin, and then to Ratchis and then back to the Watchmage. “I am heading over there now after I disperse the militia. But you know, your friend, Maria, she left town without paying the widow Beatrice. She might be among the people are missing.”<sup>26</sup>

He bid them good-bye.

“I guess we *should* have warned them,” Martin said.

“Come on. Go get some breakfast, and we’ll tell the others,” Ratchis said, leading his way through the door.

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It was agreed that the party would go back to Ogre’s Bluff. Martin would inform the alderman of the quaggoths under the town and from there the party would go to Archet. Martin the Green went to go see the alderman, while the others packed their things and spent some time talking to Frank and Gwar and Finn and the others.

Martin spent the morning trying to allay the alderman’s suspicions that they were keeping something from him and answering as many questions about the nature of the quaggoths as he could. Maxel excused himself and went back to his shop, where Ratchis and Beorth were waiting for him. Maxel was not only the constable, but the only real smith in the area, and an armorer.

Ratchis got a suit of scale mail fitted to him. He also bought a helmet with a pointed top, with an open face and a nose guard. He had to chop off a few of his natty locks of flaming red hair so it could fit over his big head.

“Wow, that’s some pretty heavy armor you got there,” Finn said later, when he spied him leaving the shop. “I’d hate to fall off a boat in that stuff.”

Beorth paid for a suit of splint mail, a large shield, and a helmet. The splint mail had belonged to Maxel’s brother, and it needed to be let out in the shoulders. It would be ready in three days. The party decided to return for it before seeking out Archet, but after warning the alderman in Ogre’s Bluff.

It was just getting on noon when the party finally began their trek back to Ogre’s Bluff.

They marched through the snow southward and skirted the clearing where they had battled the manticore to a stalemate. They marched hard, trying to get back to Ogre’s Bluff as soon as they could, and when they were close to it, they went around it to the west to go directly to the alderman’s house.

They came up to the main gate and Martin pulled the cord on the bell announcing their presence. A few moments later, Brochard, the older of the two guard-brothers came down the lane.

“Who goes there?” he called, holding up a lantern, and holding a sword in his other hand.

“It is I, Martin the Green, and his companions,” Martin called out. “I have come to see the alderman on a matter of great importance.”

Brochard opened the gate and led them up to the house. He brought them into the entry hall and closed the doors behind

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<sup>26</sup> The party heard rumors of people missing when they first came to Summit (see Session #15)

them. “The butler, Dormast, will come and bring you to the alderman when he is ready to see you,” the young guard said, blowing out the lantern and putting it in a corner by a coat stand.

The party waited.

And they waited. They listened to the sound of snow melting off their fur cloaks and dripping on to the patterned ceramic tile of the entry hall. They watched the shadow against the frosted glass that flanked the front doors grow longer and darker.

Jeremy opened his mouth to begin complaining when he felt it might be a whole hour they had been standing there, but suddenly the doors opened and there stood the butler, his face pruned like raisin. He led Martin inside and asked the others to wait. The guard hung back in the rear hall that led to the parlor. The door closed and the party continued to wait.

Five minutes later the front doors flew open, and there stood five men in studded leather armor with spears, and helmets. They wore dirty yellow tabards with a symbol upon them like the shape of the bluff the town sat upon. Behind them stood the constable, the tips of his hair frosted white as they blew in the wind. He brandished his long sword and cried, “Surrender yourselves peaceably!”

The party was taken aback. Jana tried to step forward, but Ratchis stepped in front of her. She began to go around him.

“I am guilty of no crime!” Ratchis called

“Then you should not resist,” one of the guards called.

“You are wanted for helping a prisoner wanted for murder to escape,” the constable roared, his voice was a loud rasp. “Drop your weapons and your weapons belts. Now!”

Jana stepped to the threshold, brushing past Ratchis who again tried to stop her. Jeremy and Beorth dropped their weapons belts, and Kazrack let his halberd fall from where it was tied to his pack.

“Ratchis, these men are only acting accordingly because of Richard the Red’s use of magic to free Jana,” Kazrack said, reasoning it out.

Ratchis gritted his teeth, bristling at the idea of allowing himself to be taken. He stepped to the left and took a swing at the closest guard, who was ready for him, thrusting his spear forward, but Ratchis leapt back, making his own blow miss its mark.

The guard to the right grabbed Jana by the arm and roughly pulled her out, while the first guard stabbed at Ratchis again, but the half-orc was too quick for him.

Jeremy grabbed at Ratchis from behind, but the ranger leaned forward and avoided the grapple. Using his momentum, he stepped to the right and turned his back to the wall, and then undid his weapon belt and put his hands in the air.

“Idiots,” he muttered.

“Everybody on your knees!” the constable barked. The party hesitated, and then obeyed.

They all had their hands manacled behind their backs.

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Inside, Martin was looking awkwardly at the fine furniture and thinking of his soiled and wet robes and cloak. He waited nearly another quarter hour before the door opened again and the alderman walked in.

He walked absently to his desk and looked through some papers, and then acknowledged Martin, slowly approaching the watch-mage, and letting a string of hollow pleasantries and flattery fall easily from his lips.

“Help yourself to something,” he said, gesturing down to a tray of bread and meat, and a bottle of wine.

“Thank you, sir, but I have something very important to warn you about,” Martin said.

“Oh, really?” the alderman said, looking up with a cocked eyebrow.

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry we failed to warn you sooner, but we just found out ourselves that there is a new danger in the area, in the Honeycombe,” Martin was speaking quickly. “You know, the Ogre Caves? These creatures from the Plutonic Realms called ‘quaggoths’. They killed off the ogres and may be planning to attack the surface. Luckily, we think they do not like the light.”

He took a deep breath.

“Monsters?” the alderman asked incredulously.

“Yes, sir. They are big hairy bear-men,” Martin said.

“Big hairy bear-men?” the alderman walked over to the tray and broke off a piece of bread and slapped a piece of spiced meat on it. “You came to tell me about bear-men? Not to tell me what perhaps you should have told me, which is that you are traveling with a group that not only harbors a fugitive, but that aids and abets her in her escape.”

“Huh?” Martin was taken aback. “What? What do you...?”

“Do you think that you are above the law?” the alderman asked.

“No sir,” Martin replied. “There has been some misunderstanding.”

“There is no misunderstanding that I know about,” the alderman said. “And as we speak your companions are being taken into custody.”

“What?!” Martin turned to the door.

“We are not finished,” the alderman said, sternly.

Martin turned back around.

“What is to happen to them?” Martin asked.

“Well, that remains to be seen,” Alderman Silvestri began to pace the room. “There will be a hearing where the evidence will be presented and I will make a judgment about whether the girl is to be extradited and what penalty, if any, is fitting your companion who set her free.”

“But they did not set her free!” Martin insisted.

“Well, then. You will be allowed to present your own evidence at the hearing. Nothing has been decided yet,” the alderman took a bite of his snack.

“Well, I am glad you have not pre-judged the matter,” Martin said, a trace of sarcasm escaping from him.

“No, of course not,” the alderman looked sincerely insulted, but then he shrugged, and it washed off of him as if it had never been there. “I am nothing if not just.”

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“What is your procedure for trying people?” Kazrack asked the guard nearest him as he and the rest were led back towards town in a single file line. Ratchis was at the front of the line, followed by Jana. Kazrack was in the middle, with Jeremy. Beorth took up the rear.

“You’ll find out when it happens. Now shut up!” the guard replied.

Kwa followed the line of prisoners, whining occasionally, and trying to walk beside Ratchis, but would receive a warning kick from a guard.

Ratchis growled, and then changed his voice to have a kind tone, “Kwa, go! Go Kwa!” The dog cocked his head, and whined again, but then obeyed taking off into the woods.

They marched on, the sky becoming darker and darker as the snow crunched beneath their boots. They finally came to town and brought into the constable’s office. There they stopped as the guards fanned out to surround them, and one guard went to open the door that led to the cells. The captain stood grinning on the right.

“Nephthys!” Ratchis cried calling to his goddess as he stepped back slamming into Jana and the manacles on his wrists popped off. Jana’s and Kazrack’s did as well.<sup>27</sup>

The guard in front turned and grabbed at Ratchis, but the deft half-orc spun to the right dodging his grasp. Kazrack leaned forward to grab Ratchis, but only half-heartedly and so he also missed. Ratchis came out of his spin grabbing at the captain who had his sword drawn and he slashed out. Ratchis turned away from the blade and then back within the reach of the blade pushing the arm away as he grabbed the captain and spun him into a pinning lock. The captain roared and brought all his strength to bear to break free, but he was no match for the brutish Friar of Nephthys.

“Stop now, or this is going to turn ugly!” one of the guards cried, reaching for his crossbow.

Jeremy leaned over and started to surreptitiously try to slip out of his bonds.

Two guards calmly stepped back, and another leapt up on a desk and they all raised their and fired at Ratchis at once. He spun around, holding the captain in front of him and they jerked their bows away, causing the bolts to miss.

Beorth stepped into a corner out of the way. “Ratchis, you are only making matters worse,” he said, calmly.

The captain tried to burst free again, suddenly, but Ratchis was not taken by surprise. He held his grip easily.

“I don’t care if you have to kill me, I want this pig-fucker dead!” the constable screamed, white foamy spittle flying from his flaking lips.

The first guard began to bang on the door to the cell area.

“Escaping prisoner! Escaping prisoner! He’s gonna kill the captain,” he yelled.

Ratchis shoved the constable forward through the line of his companions and then turned to keep his hostage between him and the guards with crossbows. Jeremy continued to fumble with the manacles, but he was beginning to see it would be impossible.

The captain roared again and began to spit and spasm wildly trying to break free. He failed.

Another guard leapt up on a table trying to get a better shot from above. Kazrack pretended to stumble and slipped under the table and tried to jerk it up with his back. The table buckled, but the guard kept his balance.

Jeremy looked at Ratchis slowly backing his way to the door outside, so he stepped over to it and grabbed the knob in his manacled hands and pulled it open. Feeling the cold air on his back, Ratchis smiled, dropped the captain, and spun around hustling out of the door.

By this time Martin had made his way back to town and he came into the center of town to see Ratchis hurry out of the constable’s office with great speed. The captain leapt to his feet and turned around to follow Ratchis, but Jeremy fell to his hands and knees in front of the door.

“Oops!” The captain stumbled over the Neergaardian and out into the slushy ground.

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<sup>27</sup> Ratchis used the spell *Word of Freedom*. This 2nd level spell is part of the *Freedom* domain and is unique to friars of Nephthys.

The opposite door opened, and another guard stepped into the office.

“What is going on?” he cried.

“Help contain the prisoners,” one of the guards cried. “We have an escapee!”

One of the guards turned to run out the door to find Kazrack blocking his path.

“What would you like *us* to do?” the dwarf asked feigning cooperation. He smiled broadly.

“Stay here!” the guard commanded.

“Okay, I’ll stay right here,” Kazrack said, and stood his ground.

“Against the wall!” the guard shoved the dwarf back, and then bolted out the door behind another guard.

Ratchis was already over a hundred feet away when the two guards emerged and was turning to put a building between him and sight of the office. The constable scrambled to his feet and began to chase after the half-orc while the two guards fired their crossbows, one of the bolts bit into the dirt instead of into half-orc flesh, but the other nicked him in the thigh. Ratchis poured on the speed, and soon he was out of sight and beyond being caught up to. He made straight for the woods to the west of town.

The constable stopped and began to walk back towards the office. Martin jogged over.

“Captain, in Ra’s name, what is going on here?” Martin asked, out of breath. The constable was seething; Martin almost thought he saw steam rising from his skin.

“Get out of my way,” the constable growled. “I got prisoners to see to, and a pig-fucker to kill.”

The constable stormed past his men and into the office. “Put the prisoners in their cells. I’m calling out the militia. We’re gonna have ourselves a pig-roast like in the old days.”

Jana and Beorth were placed in cells next to each other, while Kazrack and Jeremy were across from them.

The constable walked over to the inn, and was followed by Martin the Green, who was trying to figure out what to do.

“Attention everyone!” the constable called to the people in the Golden Plough’s common room. “I want to announce that there is a fugitive orc loose in the area. He is unarmed, but savage and very dangerous. He is wanted alive, but if you have to kill him, so be it—though I prefer a chance to do it myself. He is a killer, so caution is recommended.”

Martin cleared his throat, “A killer? Whom has he killed? I do hope sir that that you will not take justice into your own hands and circumvent the proper trial anyone is allowed.”

The constable brought his gray eyes down to meet Martin’s blue ones. “You had better stay out of my way,” he growled. “You may be a Watch-Mage, but I’m not afraid to lock you up if I have to. No one is above the law in my town.”

“I will be organizing groups to search for him,” the constable added, speaking to the crowd present. “A savage like that will be heading towards the woods to root around like an animal, I’m sure.”

And with that he left the inn.

Meanwhile Ratchis made his way to Aze-Nuquerna.

**End of Session #27**

## Interlude<sup>28</sup>

Martin sighed and went up to his room in the Golden Plough and lay in bed considering his options.

Snapping awake, he gathered his clothing and brought them downstairs to be laundered. He then ate a light meal and went to sleep.

## Isilem, 9th of Dek – 564 H.E.

Martin awoke very early the next day, before the sun had come up—and not feeling particularly hungry.

He simply sat around for a while and thought, while scratching Thomas, under the chin.

After an hour or three spent poring over maps and journals, interspersed with bouts of staring off into the distance, he went downstairs to pick up his laundry and arrange for a bath. After cleaning and grooming himself, he headed over to the alderman's manor to speak with Silvestri. It was mid-morning.

Martin found the place to be very quiet. He rang the bell at the gate, and it took a good ten minutes before Bryce (the younger of the two guards/brothers) came out.

“Morning. What can I do for you?”

Martin took a deep breath. Standing tall, he raised his chin slightly and looked the guard straight in the eye. “Good morning, Bryce,” he said, his voice firm. “I wish to speak to Alderman Silvestri immediately.”

As he spoke, he brushed at a fold in his robe with one hand, subtly calling attention to the King's medallion.

The guard looked Martin up and down. “I doubt he'll have time, what with his preparation for the hearing. But I will ask Dormast to inquire.”

He allowed Martin to enter the gate and led him to the front hall. The doors beyond into the house proper were open, and the warmth of the large hearth in the chamber beyond felt good.

Martin the Green waited about fifteen minutes when Dormast came to retrieve him.

“The master will see you in the parlor,” the butler said leading the way.

The desk against the far wall in the parlor was covered with some books and many scrolls. The alderman stood and smiled.

He turned to Dormast. “Bring us some tea and something to nibble on, Dormast, and be quick about it.”

“Martin, good day,” Silvestri said. “I pray you are finding your stay at the Golden Plough to be satisfactory.”

Martin nodded. “Thank you, Alderman Silvestri,” he replied. “My stay has been satisfactory. It must, however, be brief. I shall be leaving town at noon, and I shall require an escort. You will make two of your guardsmen available to me for the journey to Twelve Trolls and back.”

The alderman looked at Martin with a raised eyebrow of incredulousness. “You presume to tell me what to do? Your own position in all of this is not exactly clear, so perhaps you should step lightly.”

Martin blinked. “I am entirely aware of my position in this matter,” Martin said. “I am the eyes and ears of His Majesty Brevelan III in the Alder-villages of Gothanius. And I have a great deal to report. You should appreciate this; your fellow Aldermen have spoken well of your intelligence and flexibility.”

The alderman smiled again.

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<sup>28</sup> This scene was played between sessions using AOL instant messenger.

Martin's palms were already growing sweaty on his staff, but he carefully controlled his breathing.

"Please sit," the alderman suggested. "I will be unable to spare even one guard right now, let alone two, but perhaps in a few days, after the hearing and we know better the future of your companions, I may be able to spare two or even more."

Dormast brought in a tray of tea and biscuits.

"Ah," said Martin. He cast a brief glance at the butler, then continued. "I fear, Alderman, that you misunderstand the situation. They will not be tried here. It stands for His Majesty to determine their fate."

"That is for me to determine once I have heard the evidence. I still have jurisdiction over my lands and the people found within their bounds, at least last I checked. Perhaps, I will send them to 12 Trolls, perhaps it is too small a matter to bother the king with. We shall see."

The butler poured two cups of tea, bowed and left.

"Mister Silvestri. I have received clear and unambiguous instructions from the capital that His Majesty requires a service of these specific individuals. While he may not yet be aware of the situation here, he shall surely be made aware of it in my report. At that point, I am sure that he will take an interest in resolving the situation. And His Majesty's authority exceeds yours within this jurisdiction... at least, last I checked." Martin had to concentrate to keep his lip from quivering.

"Well, then if that is the case, I suggest you delay your leaving and present your evidence at the hearing in two days' time. Of course, no matter what happens one of your companions, the half-breed, is still at large and wanted for assaulting the town guard—a very serious offense."

Martin shook his head. "The half-breed is hardly relevant here, as he is not in custody. As to the rest, I shall return from Twelve Trolls immediately after my audience with His Majesty. I would recommend that you suspend your hearing until the King has had the opportunity to determine what is to be done with them. I shall not force you to act one way or the other..." He shrugged. "His Majesty's authority only extends so far as the loyalty of his subjects. Isn't that so, Alderman?"

"Aye, but one must wonder at the loyalty of those who are not his subjects, and their agendas."

The alderman cleared his throat.

"Go if you like, but you will gain no escort from me at this time. The safety of Ogre's Bluff comes first, and with all the strange occurrences lately, I prefer to get all my ducks in a row and take my decisions one at a time. While your letter and seal oblige me to aid you, they do not oblige me at the expense of my original charge. I would suggest that instead you exercise some patience and common sense."

Martin shrugged again. "I understand your desire to assure your town's safety. I respect that. So, I shall travel to Twelve Trolls alone. As to those you hold prisoner, I can only suggest that you show restraint until you have learned the will of your sovereign in this matter."

"One would suspect that you do not trust me to be an impartial judge in this matter. Perhaps I should order you to remain in Ogre's Bluff so that I may hear your testimony, and so that I will also likely save your life from a reckless journey alone across the kingdom, when you can make it more safely in a few days' time, and with my blessing."

After a long pause the alderman added, "But I will not do so."

Martin looked down at the tea and biscuits, and felt no desire to have any. He realized that he had skipped breakfast as well.

"Thank you, Alderman. I shall return in a few days' time. I trust that, in the interim, you will act appropriately. Good day," Martin's face returned to his normal pinched and annoyed look.

"Fare well, I trust your sorcerous abilities will keep you safe on the road and help you find the way," The alderman said, and Martin nodded.

“I shall endeavor to protect myself, though I should be glad of the loan of a steady horse.”

“When are you leaving?” the alderman asked.

“By noon if possible, though I am willing to wait a few hours, if necessary, to acquire a mount.”

“Well, the only horse I can spare you just returned from a hurried trip to Summit at my behest. Perhaps if you can delay your departure until tomorrow mid-morning or noon at the latest; It is almost noon right now.”

Martin smiled. “Thank you, Alderman. I shall depart as soon as the horse is fit to travel.”

“I will have it brought to the inn tomorrow, by noon,” the alderman said.

Martin sighed. “Alderman Silvestri, I cannot brook any unnecessary delay. If you would be so kind, please have the horse brought to the inn this evening, so that it may be ready to bear me off tomorrow morning.” He smiled again, thinly. “I shan't run the poor beast into the ground, I promise.”

“I prefer to keep my horses in my own stables, thank you. One wonders whether they took any time to teach you to be thankful at that Academy of yours,” He seemed really angry now. “The horse will be brought over at my convenience and that of my servants, not a moment sooner. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to finish preparing for the hearing.”

“Very well,” said Martin with a shrug. “As you will. Thank you for your hospitality, Alderman Silvestri. As to your... business... I hope it was worth it. Good day.”

Martin turned and walked to the door. The butler who was waiting outside the door saw him out.

Martin headed back to the Golden Plough and managed to make it a good thirty yards down the road before he started hyperventilating.

Back at the inn, Martin asked the innkeeper whether anyone in town might have a horse for sale, rent or trade.

“Could be,” Wilson replied, laconically. “I'll send a boy around to inquire.” After a long pause, “How much you willing to pay?”

“That depends on the quality of the horse. I only want to travel to Twelve Trolls and back, so renting a horse would be best, if possible. I'll be in my room if you hear anything.” Martin smiled, friendlily. “Thank you, Wilson.”

“Tis nothing,” the innkeeper replied. “Will you be having lunch in the common room or should I send something up?”

“No need,” says Martin. “The Alderman already offered me food and drink. Most hospitable of him, really.”

Wilson nodded and went back to his business

Martin went up to his room, and spent the afternoon looking over his maps and his journal and his spell book. He finally took the time to cast the *Comprehend Languages* he had prepared from his recently regained spellbook and translate the names of places and features on his map that he had traced over in elven. Labels like “City of Ash”, “Dragon Spires of Death” and “Little Folk” piqued his interest.

The day waned. The shadows grew long, and still he felt no fatigue and not a bit of food or drink had passed his lips. He had been lying awake in bed for over an hour when he realized, *Lacan's Demise* had kicked in!<sup>29</sup>

Martin leapt out of bed, relit a candle and sat to pour over his spells, maps and journals some more.

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<sup>29</sup> **DM's Note:** *Lacan's Demise* is the name of the ring that eliminates all need for food and drink after it is worn for one full week, and as long as it remains on. It also grants a +4 enhancement bonus to Constitution from the moment it is put on.

## Interlude II<sup>30</sup>

That same evening, as Martin was poring over his books and maps, Ratchis was leaving Aze Nuquerna. He had arrived, tired, late the previous night. Taking a circuitous route back to the elven enclave, in case he was followed, but not worrying about tracks as his boots made him trackless in snow. He had met up with Kwa in the wood and brought him to the elves.

Ratchis rested the whole next day, and then took off west into the woods long after the sun had gone down, waiting for the very still of the deep night. He did this to do some hunting, clear his mind and put some distance between himself and Ogre's Bluff before going back and seeing what fate would befall his companions. He left Kwa behind, asking the elves to take care of him.

Ratchis went jogging over the tops of snowbanks easily. It was the first time he remembered having "fun" since he left Nikar.

Moving through the shadows of the trees, he thought about Kwa whining as he left, and looked forward to a day when his canine companion could be trusted to accompany him.

Ratchis slowly rose in elevation, seeing a series of broad forest-covered plateaus, as he crossed a wide stream, frozen in many places. He took his time to hop from rock to slippery rock, and then continued onward.

By the time the Ra's Glory began to climb in the east, he had reached a high enough elevation to see the entire forest by Ogre's Bluff below him, and the dark ridge of Greenreed Valley to the northeast.

Ratchis took note of the tell-tale sign of the droppings of wild goats, and he knew he should find them very soon, slightly higher up, where stubborn razor-sharp blades of tall grass poked up out of the deep snow and craggy rocks.

Several hours later, Ratchis came back down the steep snowy embankment dragging a large goat behind him to find a lower place where he could build a sheltered fire that would be less likely seen from below, but he stopped as the smell of death filled his nose.

At first, he thought it was a injured or old animal, left behind by its flock and now dead, but as he stood upon a tall abutment of rock wrapped in the exposed withering roots of a gray leaf-less tree he looked down to see in the mid-morning light the upper portion of a humanoid corpse sticking out from snow and shrubs further below. It had brown fur and was dressed in the remains of studded leather armor. It had a face and muzzle like some kind of cat-like dog, or maybe a dog-like cat. It was a gnoll.

Stopping to listen, he heard nothing but the wind, and distant birds dipping in and out of view in tightly packed flocks of black specks in the trees below.

He crept down to the brush. The fur of the gnoll's face was still moist, wet with the froth of death. He appeared to have been impaled right through the chest, probably by a long sword or bastard sword.

The smell down there was much stronger, too strong for just one gnoll that appeared to have died the night before.

Getting up, Ratchis craned his head around the side of the shrub, and now saw eight gnolls, or rather, their remains, scattered across the lower embankment. A cursory glance gave him the impression they had surrounded someone and were all killed by sword blow, or by losing their balance and tumbling down the mountain headfirst.

Dropping the goat and carefully looking around the scene of the battle, Ratchis searched for some clue about the person or persons who had done the slaying. He looked for a trail of blood leaving the scene but found none. As far as Ratchis could tell only gnolls were wounded or if the killer was wounded it was so lightly as to not leave a trail of blood in the snow.

He did find deep tracks in the direction of the small plateau he first found coming from the south east. They moved towards a thick clump of trees three hundred yards or so to the northeast. Ratchis followed them, but they suddenly stopped way before reaching the trees (about 250 yards away) however, it is obvious that just before disappearing whomever had made the booted tracks had begun running.

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<sup>30</sup> This scene was played between sessions using AOL instant messenger.

Ratchis could tell the gnolls came from somewhere further up the mountain, north of where he hunted the goat. He made his way back to the scene of the battle and decided to deal with the goat before investigating this further. He tied the thing by its rear legs to the barren tree and slit open its throat. The goat's blood splattered, steaming on the cold and snowy ground.

And then, tying off its neck, he made his way back down to the trees.

It was treacherously steep and icy, but between taking his time and his magic boots, he made it to the trees without falling once.

Within the area of tall firs, shadows cast southwestward muted the sunlight. This made looking for tracks more difficult, but Ratchis' skill overcame the obstacle. After searching a bit, he found tracks similar to the gnolls' above, but deeper as if running from the edge of the wood back over its own tracks deeper in the wood.

The muddied track that went over itself ended twenty feet in, ending in a five-foot crater in the snow and was followed by a third set of tracks that were hard to read because of all the collapsing snow about them. There Ratchis found the body of yet another gnoll, its spine cut nearly in half by a sword blow. The bloody sword had been wiped clean with snow, and then fifteen feet deeper into the woods he found the booted prints again, going even deeper. Ratchis looked around and then up at the sun. The killer was going north by northeast.

Following the track brought Ratchis deep into this area of trees, which was broader than he originally thought it was. He came to a narrow band of fir trees that seems to cut into a cleft in a tall rocky out-cropping.

Sneaking along, Ratchis spotted the tell-tale sign of smoke drifting up from around the corner of the cleft.

The rocky out cropping was close to 30' high and very steep, the far wall of the cleft seemed to be sheer, and trees obscured the entrance to it.

The trees were too thick to look past, shielding the area within the cleft.

Ratchis decided to wait until perhaps the person in there moved on or fell asleep. He knew when the smoke thinned significantly, he would get his chance.

After waiting about an hour the smoke began to thin...

Ratchis considered climbing a nearby tree just right of the cleft, but growing right against the stone itself, which he figured would give him the perfect view down into it. However, the snow and ice falling from the tree as he ascended would probably have given away his presence.

Waiting and listening just a little long, Ratchis finally gave in and getting down on his belly to crawl over to the trees, he immediately sank into the crunchy snow - realizing that in this position his enchanted boots did not function.

Face and hair full of ice, he shook it off his head, and got up on his hands and knees. Crawling on his belly in over a foot of snow was going to be loud and messy.

Sighing, he got up and squatted like a duck walk, dripping cold water from his locks and tried to quietly move over to the edge of the cleft, keeping behind a tree to minimize the chance of being seen.

Ratchis looked around from behind a tree. Just inside a small nook in the farther side of the cleft were the signs of a camp. A small fire had just burned itself out, and snow was pushed away from a ten-foot area near a small tree. Many more trees of varying sizes covered the back wall of the cleft, which went up to the top of the 40-foot incline like jagged stairs.

Duck walking some more to the right, Ratchis' shifting weight crunching on the snow, he saw the cleft curved to his right, meeting at a narrow point that had what appear to be rough natural steps leading to the very top of the outcropping (where it was flanked by two small trees that look like they'd provide cover from the other side).

There appeared to be no one there.

Ratchis moved into the cleft and examined the fire. Obviously, it was left to burn out.

Looking for tracks, Ratchis circled around the small camp a few times because it was all stamped down very well.

Finally, the half-orc noticed a depression in the snow on the embankment behind the camp that had the trees of varying sizes going up the side. The depression looked similar to the one he had seen earlier before the gnoll body at the edge of the wood.

Ratchis looked up at the tree directly after the impression, as if by instinct. There he saw a lanky figure crouched in the limb of a tree twenty feet above. He wore green and white, and a shaggy cloak of dirty white fur. He pointed a nocked arrow in his bow right down at the top of Ratchis' head.

"Careful," he said in a soft sibilant, but confident voice, strands of white hair wavering across his bright green eyes in the wind. There was the glint of a sword wedged across his lap.

"In these huge tracts of wilderland, who would have thought we would be traveling in the same small area." Ratchis said, calmly and steadily looking back up at the man.

The man did not answer, and the arrow did not move from its mark.

Ratchis was silent, and simply returned the gaze.

"I can do this all day and all night, if I need to," the man said. He did not raise his voice, nor did it waver. "What are you doing sneaking up on me?"

"When I saw the gnolls I knew you would either be friend or foe and I wanted to find out which," Ratchis replied.

"The third choice being that I am neither," he said in a flat tone. "However, I will tell you that it is dangerous to travel alone in these parts."

"As a Friar of Nephthys, I tend to get one reaction or the other." As Ratchis said this he readied himself to get behind another tree for cover. He knew some might attack a Friar upon recognition.

"Sometimes one makes enemies by seeking them out," the man replied.

"I sought for the answer to a question. I may not get an answer but that doesn't stop the question from being asked. I have a goat here if you wish to eat with me, or I can go about my business," Ratchis changed tact.

"I recommend you take your goat and leave. This place is not safe, and soon enough something will be feeding on you if you tarry too long," he said ominously.

He never let the arrow have any slack in his bow.

Ratchis shrugged his shoulders. "Have it your way," he said and backed away, and then turned and hustled off. He retrieved his goat, and then moved back eastward.

He found a sheltered place over a mile away, beneath an old rotten tree that had snapped in half under the weight of ice and snow, and he cooked the goat, after taking strips of its hide to make leather straps. He then spent the afternoon hiking around the forest in circles and spirals, learning the general terrain, and checking for human or humanoid activity. He then went back to the old rotted tree and covered himself in a wool blanket and shook snow from the tree above on to himself. And there he slept, kept warm by his boots, and waiting for night to fall, and then he could slip into Ogre's Bluff under cover of darkness.

## Session #28

### Osilem, 10th of Dek - 564 H.E.

The next morning Martin the Green had already been up for three hours (after only two hours of sleep) when there was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” Martin called through the door.

“Breakfast,” said a muffled voice.

Martin walked over to the door and unbolted it. He opened it to find a tall figure standing there. He wore robes of various shades of crimson, and had matching hair, and a well-kept beard and bright blue eyes that off-set his rugged good looks. He held a tray full of eggs, strips of fatty bacon, biscuits, butter, and goat’s milk. It was Richard the Red. He smiled.

“Why Richard! Why don’t you come in?” Martin said resignedly. He felt as if nothing could surprise him anymore. He turned and walked back into the inn and pulled a chair from the table. “Please, sit down.”

Richard walked in and set the tray on the table. “No, thank you. I am more of the standing type.” The red-robed watch-mage’s smile broadened.

“And how have you been?” Martin asked. “Well, I hope.”

“Do you really?” Richard the Red almost laughed. “Well, I am worried that you are *not* doing well. You look like you are not doing well at all.”

“What makes you say that?” Martin utterly failed to bluff.

“It’s okay Martin, we’re fellow watch-mages. We can talk to each other honestly.”

“Of course we can,” Martin said, returning a big fake smile.

“Listen, I was where you are once. I know what you are going through,” Richard said with real sympathy in his voice. “It takes a lot to get from where you are when you graduate and where I am now. But you too will make that journey.”

“Yes, and then I’ll be able to free drow witches of my own,” Martin replied, sarcastically.

“Oh, I guess you still haven’t seen the light on that,” Richard said, picking up a biscuit from the tray and ripping it in half. “I guess we are just going to have to agree to disagree on that one. I am not exactly happy with the mess you and your companions made and now I’m going to have to help clean it up.”

“I’m not sure that this is the kind of thing one can simply agree to disagree about,” Martin said, folding his hands on his lap, as he watched Richard smear butter on the two ends of the biscuit, and then fold an egg and a piece of bacon between them.

“Look, I am here to help you,” Richard said, gesturing with the egg sandwich. “Being a watch-mage is not easy. You cannot be expected to get the hang of it right away, but the truth is, I think you are doing a really pathetic job.”

Richard the Red took a small bite of his sandwich.

“Kind of you to say so,” Martin said, standing.

“I’m just being honest, Martin,” Richard said. He took another bite and offered the sandwich towards Martin. “You should eat something.”

“I am not hungry,” Martin flatly.

“Doesn’t matter. It’s good to keep your strength up. Today in an inn, tomorrow under a tree, and the next in a damp cave,

that is what our life is, and what your life will be from now on,” Richard said, gravely.

“I am not hungry,” Martin repeated.

“Suit yourself,” Richard the Red replied. “So, I have come here to offer you a deal.”

“Humph,” Martin shook his head, as if he knew it was coming. “I’m not sure that a deal with you would be in my best interest, Richard.”

“But it is your best interest that it most concerns,” Richard said, smiling again. “Look, just to show you I mean you no harm, I will give you one for free.”

“One what?”

“One piece of advice,” Richard said. “I get your friend free, and for that she owes me, but I was really trying to help you out, so you can go on your way and do the important things you have to do.”

“But you charmed the constable,” Martin exclaimed.

“Yeah, and?” Richard cocked his head. “Sometimes these things have to be done. It harmed no one, but now all your companions are imprisoned, except for one who is on the run and what are you doing? You are sitting around doing nothing!”

“I am not doing nothing,” Martin replied, insulted. “I am waiting for a horse, which I plan to take back to 12 Trolls and see the king and get this thing sorted out.”

“Oh, so you have a death wish, too?” Richard cocked an eyebrow. “The roads are dangerous to one who cannot travel unseen.”

Martin was silent.

“Anyway, what I am trying to tell you is that a watch-mage’s greatest asset is his ability to talk to the common people,” Richard said. “The common person is in awe of us. They are either scared and respectful or polite and respectful, but either way you need to use that to your advantage. You can gain your most powerful tool. Information.”

Martin nodded hurriedly.

“I’m sure you know Alexandra the Lavender,” Richard said.<sup>31</sup>

“Yes, I met her on the way to Gothanius,” Martin replied.

“Well, some folks might see a simple woman living among simple farmers in some backward place, but do you think I’d ever mess with her? No way,” Richard looked Martin in the eye. “And do you know why? Because she is connected. She knows more about Derome-Delem than you or I could ever hope to know, because she talks to everyone in her town, and every dwarven caravan that passes through, and every group of adventurers, and every wandering stranger. You think that talking to aldermen, kings and constables is going to get you all the information you need? Talk to the people. They are more observant than you think. They may not comprehend what they see and be able to put it together, but you sure as hell are smart enough to be able to.”

“This is your free advice?” Martin asked.

“Yes,” Richard said, with a wink. “And there is more where that came from if we can come to some kind of agreement.”

“What kind of agreement?” Martin asked.

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<sup>31</sup> Martin the Green met Alexandra the Lavender on his way to the Kingdom of Gothanius in the village of Bountiful, where she is watch-mage.

“You only stand to benefit from what I have to offer,” Richard said. “Basically, in exchange for full disclosure between us in terms of everything we learn about what is going on around here, and that means I tell you what I know as well, I will take you under my wing. I will show you the ropes about what it really means to be a watch-mage. Think of this as your post-graduate education.”

“And you *benefit* from this, how?” Martin asked, skeptically.

“We are watch-mages. We are supposed to help each other. Especially a senior watch-mage like myself and a neophyte like yourself—you have everything to gain and nothing to lose.”

“And what about the drow witches?” Martin asked.

“What about them? I already told you I plan to clean up that mess,” Richard said. “Of course, I hope eventually you and your companions might help.”

“And when the time comes when you want to do something else that I find morally reprehensible?” Martin asked.

“As you learn more, such a thing is less and less likely to happen. And at any time you can simply walk away, of course,” Richard said.

Martin contemplated the offer.

“I do not expect you to make this decision immediately,” Richard said. He walked towards the door. Martin stood to see him out. “Let’s discuss it again over lunch. Think well, Martin. Your entire career as a watch-mage may rest on this one decision.”

He left.

Martin flopped down on the bed and buried his face in his hands.

AQUERRA

Morning found Beorth, Jana, Jeremy and Kazrack waking achingly from the lumpy cots of their cells. A guard was passing bowls of thin brown gruel through the tiny shelf space in the metal bars of the cell.

“Wake up!” the guard called. “Breakfast!”

“Thank you very much for the meal,” Kazrack said, rubbing his eyes. “It is kind of you to give us such fare.”

“Well, you’re in a good mood today,” Jeremy said to the dwarf, sniffing at his bowl of gruel and grimacing. “Yuck. This is the same whipped dung they gave us yesterday for dinner.”

“They are only doing their jobs,” Kazrack replied. “No reason to be rude to them.”

Kazrack slurped down the gruel hungrily.

The guard left out the door at the bottom of the hall.

“I hate this place,” Jeremy said. “We came all the way here just to end up in jail, when we were trying to avoid that in the first place.”

“We were?” Beorth asked, he still had not decided if he was going to eat the gruel.

“Yeah, I mean, then why did we leave town the way we did?” Jeremy asked.

“If you want out of here so bad why didn’t you go with Ratchis?” Kazrack asked.

“I was restrained,” Jeremy said in a tone, as if to imply that the dwarf was dumb.

“Were your feet restrained?” the dwarf asked, he slurped bits of gruel from his beard.

“Well, ya know what?” Jeremy was flustered. He slammed down his bowl. “No, never mind.” The blonde Neergardian sat on his cot and sulked.

“I think we just need to explain that Jana came to us in the inn, and we didn’t know anything about her being broken out of prison,” Kazrack said.

“Which, while true…” Jana began.

“I think it needs to be emphasized that there are quaggoths in the Honeycombe underneath the town,” Beorth said.

“And maybe we should let the authorities know about the drow,” Kazrack added.

“I think that might endanger the elves,” Jana said.

“Yes, but I think at this point it is best for us to simply tell the truth,” Kazrack said.

“Ah-ha!” Beorth said.

Kazrack looked over at the paladin annoyed, but then craned his head to look at Jana. “Did you know Richard used magic to break you out?”

“No, I did not ask what he did,” Jana replied.

“Why didn’t one of you magic guys say that this was a possibility?” Kazrack asked.

“Well, it is too late now,” Jana said.

“Well, it isn’t even guaranteed that we will stay in jail or even that this fellow will get to take Jana away,” Jeremy said, laying back on the cot. “I mean, they have to have evidence, right?”

“Evidence?” Jana exclaimed. “Where were you raised? The *justice* system doesn’t work like that.”

“Well, how did we allegedly break you out?” Jeremy asked, sitting up again. “There were no dead guards or anything, right?”

“The fact that there were no dead guards means nothing when you realize that several representatives of the law witnessed Ratchis free himself, Kazrack and Jana with a single word,” Beorth said, plainly. He took a spoonful of the gruel and then put the bowl down. Even the monks’ tasteless paste he had had for breakfast most of his life was better than this stuff.

“So we tell them how desperate the situation is,” Kazrack said. “We explain that we were trying to save the town if not the kingdom, or even all of Derome-Delem from an invasion of drow.”

“Uh-huh, that will work,” Jana said, sarcastically.

“As far as I see it, the people here do not have the resources or the wherewithal to go after the elves anyway,” Jeremy said.

Everyone contemplated the chances.

“As far as my situation goes, I am screwed, totally screwed,” Jana said with a sigh.

Beorth and Kazrack were taken aback by her use of language.

The guard returned to collect the bowls and spoons. He paused by Jana’s cell. “You know that guy that was looking for you is in town,” he said to her.

“Uh, Rindalith?” Beorth asked, overhearing.

“He’s a really nice guy. He bought all the guards drinks and the inn last night,” the guard continued.

“Yeah, that’s the kind of thing he does,” Jana said, and sat on her cot.

As the guard left, Jeremy got on his knees by his cot and folded his hands in prayer. “Hey, Osiris! I know you brought me back and everything, but if you could see your way clear to send me a little help right now, I’d really appreciate it.”

Jana laughed, and Kazrack grumbled.

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Meanwhile, Martin had decided to give Richard the Red’s advice a chance...

“Wilson, there may be a horse sent over for me this morning,” Martin the Green told the innkeeper. “Please keep it for me until I return, I may be delayed.”

“Yes, sir,” the innkeeper replied.

Martin turned to leave, thinking he’d spend the morning pressing the flesh and seeing what he could learn from the locals, but turned back suddenly.

“Wilson?” he asked.

“Yes, sir?”

“What have you heard about what is happening with my companions?” the watch-mage asked.

“Oh, well sir,” Wilson began, combing his graying mustache with his little finger. “Only what the constable said the day before last, all about your one pig-fu---, I mean, the half-breed escaping and beating the guards senseless with his inhuman strength.”

Martin had to keep himself from smirking.

“They have a posse looking for him now, but they haven’t been able to find any sign of him. It is as if he flew away,” Wilson continued. “I hope that pig-fu--, I mean, half-orcs can’t fly now because they cause enough evil as it is.”

“But you have met Ratchis, do you think he is evil?” Martin asked.

“Well, as the products of rape and slavery I can understand why they may do some of the things they do,” Wilson said, philosophically. “Some of them must be okay, I mean, they *are* half-human.”

“That’s very open-minded of you,” Martins said patronizingly.

“Hey, thanks!”

Martin made his way to the door, making sure the royal emblem on the medallion was visible against his emerald robes. He had his staff at his side, like a classic watch-mage of his station. As he came to the door he stopped, for the barmaid was coming in from dumping out the pails.

And he stopped her and asked what she might know the recent events in town, and she apologized to him because she had been called to testify at the hearing the following day.

“To say what?” Martin asked.

“The truth,” she said, meekly. “That I saw you and your companions slipping out the back door in the evening on the same day that the young miss had gone missing from her cell.”

Martin thanked her.

Smiling and feeling confident, Martin began to walk through the early morning streets of Ogre's Bluff, if streets they could be called. They were more like narrow alleys of cleared snow between buildings built in clusters, leading to a series of wider openings in the middle that made up the town square.

Martin greeted people on the street. He talked to shop-keepers, old widows, a brick-layer and a baker. He had to grudgingly swallow down some cakes that might have been dry even when he could still taste food, and sip a few cups of scalding hot tea, but he learned a few things. Among them was that the constable's wife and children had been killed by an orc raiding party while he was misdirected looking for it elsewhere.

Martin also heard a tale that told of the constable catching bandits in the woods a few years back and them letting them go and then shooting them in the back as they ran.

The alderman was deemed fair by most of the people the young watch-mage spoke to, but also very stern and wise. Martin heard from more than one mouth how things had improved since the alderman had been assigned his post by the king.

Martin hurried from the general store, where he had learned from Margun the Shopkeeper that the older of the two Oldhall brothers who worked as guards on the alderman's estate was smitten with Rahasia, the alderman's daughter's handmaiden. Ra's Glory had reached its apex and was glistening in the dripping icicles that lined the eaves of all the houses. He skidded to a stop in front of the Golden Plough and smoothed over his robes.

He was approached by a young lad with a horse, "From the alderman, sir," the boy said.

"No, please, return it with word to the alderman that I will be staying for the hearing," Martin said, with an awkward smile. He patted the kid on the head. "Can you remember that?"

"Yes, sir," the boy said, annoyed.

Martin slipped him two copper coins and stepped into the inn. Richard was being shown to the table by the mousy barmaid. He made some whispered joke that Martin could not hear, and the barmaid tittered, covering her mouth and turning red. Richard smiled as he saw Martin enter.

"Better make that a whole pitcher of the mead, sweetheart," Richard said to the barmaid. "And, um, another hunk of the old roast beef for him as well."

"No, thank you. I have already eaten," Martin said. He was forcing the corners of his mouth down as to not smile.

Richard's smile broadened. "Please, sit," he gestured to a chair, and Martin obliged him. Only two other tables in the place full. One had two shepherds, but in the corner by the hearth was a table for four town guards in their armor, their spears leaning against their chairs, drinking, and laughing while being addressed by a tall pale and lanky man, with black robes and long straight black hair. He had a mole the size of dime on his left cheek right above his lip.

Martin took note, and then looked Richard right in the eye as the older watch-mage sat.

"Why should I trust you?" Martin asked.

"Because in your heart you know that we are both watch-mages and want the same things and were trained by the same good-hearted people not to do evil and in both our cases the lesson has stuck," Richard said.

"What about freeing the drow witches?" Martin asked.

"I am not making a concerted effort to free the other two witches," Richard said.

"Are you making a concerted effort to free even one?" Martin snapped.

"No," Richard sighed. "The whole plan is ruined because of you and your companions and now is time for damage control."

Even if I could free the other two, it would never work now. The only thing to do is to catch her.”

“Of course,” Martin cocked any eyebrow.

“So, you have contemplated my offer?” Richard asked. The barmaid poured them each some mead from the pitcher she brought over. Richard pinched her and slipped some coins in her apron with a wink.

“Yes, I have,” Martin said. He did not touch the mug.

“And?”

“I am leaning towards accepting it,” Martin said, hurriedly.

Richard smiled and leaned back in the chair, taking a long sip of the mead, and then wiping his mouth and beard with the back of his hand.

“Good! I knew you’d come around,” he said.

“You are going to help free my friends by testifying at the hearing tomorrow about how you freed Jana,” Martin said, his voice wavering only slightly.

Richard laughed.

“If you want help freeing them just ask, that is what this partnership is all about, but don’t propose such absurd plans. I have a better way to get them free.”

“I don’t suppose there would be anyway to accomplish this without magic?” Martin said, defeat in his voice.

“That would be much more difficult, and...”

“I’m sure you have all manner of watch-mage business in the area and don’t have time to do things the hard way,” Martin said.

“Yes, but I’m not sure which to do first, after helping you that is,” Richard replied. “Got to find a way to work the system.”

“Some might find this whole process unethical,” Martin said.

“We are traversing gray and murky waters, my friend.”

“Nice metaphor,” Martin said sardonically.

Richard folded a chunk of bloody roast beef in a wedge of bread and stood.

“Well, I have some planning to do. I’ll be...”

“Reading Gothanian law?” Martin asked, expectantly.

“Um, no,” Richard smirked. “I’ll see you in the morning. Keep your eyes open for an opportunity.”

“Opportunity for what?” Martin pushed his chair back and looked up.

“Anything, Martin. Anything at all,” Richard took a big bite of his sandwich and walked out the door.

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Martin spent the afternoon going over his notes and maps, and then he visited the alderman again to make sure he had received the message. He learned that the hearing would be held in the common room of the Golden Plough the next morning.

Meanwhile, back in their cells, Kazrack, Beorth, Jeremy and Jana were trying to figure out the best way to approach any questioning they might receive at the hearing.

“They did not take my runestones from me,” Kazrack said to his imprisoned companions. “They were hidden beneath my shirt. I can use them to seek council from my gods as to what the best course of action may be.”

“Why bother asking your gods when I can tell you that only the truth will set us free?” Beorth said.

Jeremy rolled his eyes, “He is going to tell the truth, but he wants to know how it might be received.”

“Unless you have a better idea of what to ask my gods’ guidance for?” Kazrack said, looking directly across at the paladin.

“Perhaps a better question to ask would be what will happen to people if...” Beorth paused. “I don’t know, Kazrack. I don’t know.”

“Just throw your stones, Kazrack,” Jeremy said.

The dwarf nodded and sat on the floor, cleared the flagstones of as much dirt and dust as possible. He took the bag of stones from around his neck and hefted their weight in his right hand. It was reassuring. He took a deep breath and cleared his mind of everything, but his question. He could see the dwarven runes that spelled out what he wanted to know glowing in the darkness of his mind’s eye, and then switching the bag to his left hand he let out a low chant and scattered the stones on the floor.

The question was: *With the exception of Jana, will our captors free us upon hearing the truth?*

He moved the stones around with a hand and grouped them some, making connections and letting his intuition guide him.

This was his interpretation: *“The truth is a weight like a stone, that in this case, will be passed on for someone else to bear.”*

Kazrack was relaying his interpretation of the stones when the door to the area the cells were in burst open, and in marched the guard on duty.

“Are you gonna yammer all day?” he roared.

“Is that against the law now, too?” Jeremy asked, his smarminess reaching new levels to match his level of discomfort and annoyance.

The guard stepped right before his bars, and slammed them with a club, “Around here what I say goes!”

“We are going to be quiet, sir,” Kazrack said, trying to make peace.

“You’d better be or one of ya is gonna be visiting the hole,” the guard sneered, and marched off.

The group was silent for a few minutes.

“Now, what was that supposed to mean?” Jeremy asked of the runestone reading.

“I think it means that Jana and/or Richard will have to bear the brunt of the consequences for our telling the truth,” Kazrack.

“Probably, just Jana,” Jeremy said.

“Sounds like my luck,” Jana mumbled.

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That evening Ratchis emerged from his hiding spot, and brushed the snow from his furs, shaking off like a bear waking up from a brief hibernation. The moon hung in the night sky like a wafer with a smooth bite taken from it.

Ratchis jogged towards town. He took a broad course southward, and then slipped between the trees on the edge of town, watching and waiting in the shadow of a clump of trees. In time he saw the coming and going of the night watch. He could see how one lantern bearing guard came up the central group of streets and then turned southward to complete his circuit, while another came from the north and turned east through the center of town.

They came by about every forty-five minutes, and about ten minutes part, meeting about every fourth rotation. When the first guard had passed and the next was ten minutes away, a cloud passed over the moon, and Ratchis took his chance. He hustled between the buildings, slipping from shadow to shadow and crawling beneath windows until he reached the back of the inn.

He squatted down again, and looked at the windows of the inn. The fact that a light still shone in one on the upper floor helped him decide which one was Martin's. He waited until he saw the easterly moving guard go by at the end of his vision and then he climbed up the side of the inn. He tapped on the shutters and pulled one open just as Martin had stood to stretch his legs after studying. (He thought he might be close to breaking open the secrets of the *Change Self* spell.<sup>32</sup>)

He was startled as the shutter opened itself and a hand reached in. He stepped back looking over to where his staff leaned on the desk, but then saw Ratchis' face come into the light, and he hurried to ineffectually help the hulking half-orc through the window.

"Where have you been?" Martin asked.

"Hiding out and wandering around," Ratchis said, slipping his quiver of javelins from his side. "Waiting for things to cool down before coming back to see what's going to happen to them."

"There is going to be a hearing tomorrow to see what will happen and if Jana will be sent off with Rindalith," Martin explained.

"Okay, so depending on what happens at the hearing we'll decide if we'll have to take the extreme option of breaking them out," Ratchis said.

"Beorth would never go along with that and Jana said she would not flee Rindalith," Martin said.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it, but first we need a sign from you that tells me if they were freed or if they are being imprisoned," Ratchis said. "We'll make it a pillowcase in the shutters, and if that is the case it means they are freed and I will meet you all at, um... those ruins where we fought the manticore. You think you could find that place?"

"Yes, but let's make it candles in the window instead of the pillowcase. One candle means they were freed and two means they are going to remain in prison," Martin suggested.

"Sounds good to me," Ratchis said.

"How would we break them out if it came to that?" Martin asked.

"I have some ideas, but no plan is foolproof, and we have several of those to deal with," Ratchis said wryly. "I have to sneak back out of town, but it would be easier to get around unseen if I were not so big. Can you make me into a raccoon?"

Martin chuckled. "I could not make you a raccoon. I am afraid that is beyond my powers, Ratchis."

"Why does he want to be a raccoon?" Thomas chittered in Martin's mind. "He should be a squirrel! Maybe he'd be a really strong squirrel."

"I thought you could create illusions?" Ratchis asked, skeptically.

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<sup>32</sup> **DM's Note:** Wizards in Aquerra are not guaranteed spells each level. Instead, players announce spells they are working on (based on notes and theorems) and then may roll a spellcraft check two levels later to gain the spell (modified by the spell's level and rarity).

“Yes, but only ones that can stand alone,” Martin explained. “Creating illusions that are bound to a person or object is different sort of magic.”

“Anyway, I should get out of here before the guards come back around,” Ratchis said, walking towards the window. “If you see anything untoward happening to me as I leave here, I hope I can count on you for a distraction. And remember, one if they’re freed, two if they’re not.”

“Yes, okay.”

Ratchis poked his head out the window for a quick look around and then sprung out catching the lip and lowering himself down. He crept back among the buildings and out to the edge of town, just missing one guard as he dove into the underbrush and snow. He lay still for twenty minutes and then slipped back to his little shelter and went back to sleep until morning.

Martin, having no need for more than two hours of sleep (and actually having not even having the ability to do so if he wanted to), studied the rest of the night, laying down an hour before dawn, with Thomas curled up on his chest.

### **Tholem, 11th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

The next morning Martin came down to the common room to find one of Wilson’s servant boys arranging chairs after having moved most of the tables to one side. There was one long table set up near the far wall across from then entrance with a chair behind it and another beside it facing the rows of chairs.

Soon, people began to file in. Martin recognized several regulars enter and take seats near the back rows of chairs, followed by two guards who took up positions near the door. Someone came in for breakfast, but Wilson shooed him away. Martin sat by the bar, watching everyone as they came in. A tall gaunt pale man in his forties with long black hair, and a black hairy mole on his face came downstairs from the rooms above. The guards at the door waved to him with a smile, and he smiled and waved back and took a seat in the second row of seats.

“Who is that dark fellow over there?” Martin the Green asked Wilson, cocking his head towards the man who had just entered the room.

“Oh that?” Wilson said. “He was looking for your friend.”

“Who?” Martin was momentarily confused. “Oh...” It was Rindalith.

Meanwhile. Beorth, Jana, Jeremy and Kazrack were manacled by their wrists and by their ankles (with a chain long enough to allow for steps at a medium stride) and escorted by four guards and the constable over to the inn’s common room for the hearing.

Despite how much she had tried to steel herself for seeing him again, Jana blanched when Rindalith turned to see them enter the inn. The gaunt man smiled gently and tucked his hair behind one ear, as she had seen him do a thousand times.

The guards sat the prisoners in the front row, on the left of the aisle that ran down the middle of the chairs. The constable looked down at them.

“I have faith you will remember how to behave properly when being addressed by an alderman?” he asked, scowling.

“Have no fear, Captain,” Beorth said. “We shall go through these proceedings with nothing but respect for the law and authority.”

Kazrack nodded, and then noticed the tall pale man walk over.

“Good day, Captain,” Rindalith greeted, his voice was tenor that resonated from the back of his throat and long Osiris-applied neck. “I was hoping it might be possible to speak with my would-be prisoner in private?”

“Well, I think that could be arranged,” the constable said, without showing a hint of emotion.

“Your prisoner is in danger!” Kazrack cried.

“Shut up, ya grubber!” the constable said, and two of the guards hurried over and pushed the struggling dwarf back.

Kazrack stopped moving. “Okay.”

“Get her up and bring her to the kitchen,” the constable said to one of his men, pointing to Jana.

One of the guards (named Relaford) pulled her up to her feet and gently led her towards the kitchen. “Wilson, we need the kitchen for a moment,” he said, and the innkeeper nodded and gestured for him to go right in.

Relaford led Jana into the kitchen and Rindalith followed, picking at his cuticles as he walked. The large sleeves of his billowing black robe slipped back to reveal his long white fingers, and the many small burns and scars on his hands and wrists.

Relaford turned and addressed Rindalith. “Here ya go,” he said, going back out into the common area. “I’ll be right outside the door if you need me.”

“I’m sure Jana has no intention of trying anything stupid. Don’t you, Jana?” He looked her directly in the eye for the first time, and she felt a queasiness in her stomach.

“No,” she replied quietly.

When Kazrack saw the guard come back out of the kitchen, he cried out, “Your prisoner is in danger! You can’t leave her alone with him!”

“I said, ‘shut up!’” the constable roared.

Martin looked to Kazrack and cocked his head toward the outer door, and made a face that was supposed to mean, ‘I’ll check it out.’

Amazingly, the dwarf understood and was quiet once again. Martin hurried out of the inn, and went around the corner, hoping to find a window.

In the kitchen, Rindalith just looked down at Jana with unblinking black eyes. He was silent for a long moment. Jana felt as if she could hardly breathe.

“Oh my sweetness,” Rindalith suddenly said, his voice purring like a golden cat made of honey. “You know it pains me so to see you like this. Why did we have to come half a world for this?”

Jana felt her confidence return when she heard his voice again. It was if the months of not hearing it had made it lose its polish or had given her the chance to hear the echo of its falseness.

“So, what do you intend to do about this,” she said, shifting her weight to one hip and looking him right back in the eye. She clucked her tongue while she waited for his response.

“You know if you had a problem with Sonya you could have told me. You *should* have told me!” he said, brushing her hair back from her face to see it more clearly. He brushed her cheek.

Jana was silent.

“I did not want to have to involve the local authorities, but after I lost your trail for over a month it became the only option,” Rindalith said. “I had to leave behind some plans I had, some great plans that I planned to share with you, but alas, it is too late for those particular plans. However, thankfully, serendipitously, there are things in this place that make it all worthwhile.”

He paused.

Outside, Martin found the shuttered window and the side door, but he could not see what was going on inside. He kneeled by the door and tried to listen, but they spoke in low voices. He could only make out the murmur of their talking.

“Thomas? Could you slip under the door and tell me what you see?” Martin asked his familiar, who was tucked into the hood of the watch-mage’s cloak.

“A lot of smells in there,” Thomas replied.

“Yes, food,” said Martin. “Maybe you’ll find some nutbread in there.”

“I’m not hungry,” said Thomas.

“Are you okay?” Martin asked astounded. He had never known his familiar to ever turn down food.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” the squirrel replied sadly.

“What will you do if you don’t eat?” Martin asked.

“I don’t know, but I haven’t been very sleepy lately either,” Thomas replied. “Just kind of bored. I’ll go under.”

“Try to not be seen, Martin cautioned.

“As if you have to tell me that,” Thomas chided.

Thomas crawled under the door and scurried over behind the large chopping block.

“He doesn’t seem to be hurting her, just talking,” Thomas said. “I think he likes her a lot. He seems to be nice to her.”

Rindalith continued to talk to Jana.

“I thought you were more grown-up than you acted regarding this whole thing,” Rindalith said. “What was it, jealousy? She was never anything like you to me. And afterward, did you have the nerve to confront me with what you had done? As I had always taught you to do? No, you had to go and run away like a little girl. You are not on the streets anymore, Jana. You can’t just run and hide from everything.”

Jana shifter her weight to the other leg.

“I thought you’d be angry,” Jana said.

“Oh, and I was angry,” Rindalith replied with a smile. “Angry that you did not trust me to understand. I want to let you know, Jana, that I have no intention of bringing you back to Westron. This is just a ruse so I could find you. And I know you might fear for your own safety, but I would never hurt you. I care about you too much for that.”

He stroked her hair, lovingly.

“So what happens next?” Jana asked, suspiciously. “You tell these people that all is forgiven, and we walk off into the sunset? I don’t believe that crock of shit.”

“Oh my sweetness,” Rindalith said, his smile broadening. “You can believe me when I say I am not angry that Sonya is dead. And to prove it I will tell you this much. I was planning on killing Sonya myself!”

Jana closed her mouth, as it had dropped open of its own accord.

At that moment, Relaford poked his head into the kitchen and said, “Constable says times up.” Rindalith stroked Jana’s cheek once again and then marched out. Relaford pulled Jana back into the common room.

Martin returned to the common room as well, but they all waited impatiently before the Alderman finally arrived. As he entered, Margun the shopkeeper stood from his seat in the front row and asked everyone to rise. The prisoners were pulled to their feet.

After the alderman sat behind the table, Margun came before the gathered people and spoke, "I would like to thank the alderman for appointing me to his bureau of courts, even though I ... am the whole thing."

Someone stifled a laugh. He smiled awkwardly.

"We are here to hear evidence against Jeremy Brighthelm, Kazrack Delver and Beorth Sakhemet who stand accused of helping one Jana of Westron escape from her fair and lawful incarceration while waiting on the alderman's dispensation in terms of her extradition to the Kingdom of Herman Land for crimes she is wanted for in that fine sovereign nation from which our fore-fathers sprang." He paused meaningfully and turned to the alderman who nodded.

"I will call the first witness," Margun said, and the hearing began.

One after another Margun called up witnesses, starting with the barmaid, who said she saw the party slip out the back door soon after the sun had finished setting, and then Wilson who testified that Ratchis had specifically asked him about a back way out several days before.

Then the constable was called to sit in the chair beside the alderman's table. He explained how he had gone in to put out the lights in the cell area and that the prisoner was gone. He also explained how this was not too long after Martin the Green and Beorth Sakhemet had come to inquire about her, the former having an audience with Jana.

"Also, the fact that they were all traveling with a half-breed orc of great violence and strength shows the kind of people these really are, with no respect for decency or the law," he said with some vehemence. "It was this half-breed scum of the earth that assaulted my officers and escaped."

Martin, who had passed on chances to question the previous witnesses stood to ask the constable some questions when Margun was done.

"Sir, did you actually see Beorth, Kazrack or Jeremy break Jana of Westron free?" Martin asked the witness.

"No, I did not," he replied.

"And was there any sign of a forced entry? Did any of your guardsmen see the accused trying to free her?" Martin asked.

"No, but they have been known to travel with one who can use magic by trade," the constable shot an evil eye at his questioner and cocked an eyebrow.

"Baseless accusations and wild theories do not evidence make," Martin snapped.

"Martin the Green, that is not a question," the alderman said, speaking for the first time. "Please limit your comments to questions now, you get a chance to make a speech later if you so wish."

"Are there any more questions for the constable?" Margun asked Martin, looking and sounding apologetic.

"Not at this time," Martin replied.

"If not at this time, then not at any," the alderman said, angrily. "I will not be made to sit here all day while you waste the court's time."

"You have to do a better job than that," Jeremy hissed to Martin. "You may not be in prison, but some of us are!"

"Shut up!" one of the guards said, cuffing Jeremy.

"If one of the accused speaks again without being addressed I want them removed from the court," the alderman ordered.

“And taken to the hole,” the constable added.

Margun cleared his throat, “The next witness called is Rindalith of Westron, agent of the Courts of Westron in the Kingdom of Herman Land.”

Rindalith stood. He was the tallest one present and his long thin legs seemed to cross the distance to the chair in two smooth strides. He sat and looked at Jana the whole time he spoke.

“Mr. Rindalith, do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you Ra?” Margun asked.

“Yes, and all the other gods,” the words rolled off the warlock’s tongue.

“Can you tell us in your own words the charges against Jana of Westron and why you have been sent to find her?”

“Of course,” Rindalith said. He smoothed his robes with his ivory hands and began to tell the tale. “In what looks to have been a love triangle gone wrong involving the daughter of an influential judge in Westron, an older gentleman of some means and the accused, Jana of Westron stands accused of killing the young girl and trying to pin the crime on the object of her scorned affections. She had what we might call ‘an unhealthy obsession’ with the older man. Now, it is true that this man behaved inappropriately as the whole affair was without the father’s permission, but regardless, this girl’s murder cannot go unpunished. I only seek to bring the accused back for a fair trial before the magistrate of Westron for her alleged crimes. Furthermore, relations between Gothanius and the Kingdom of Herman Land will doubtlessly improve with the setting of this precedent of extradition between our two fine kingdoms.”

“I assume you have the proper documents that prove you are who you claim to be?” Martin asked, grasping at straws.

“Why yes, of course,” Rindalith never took his eyes from Jana. “These papers have already been presented to the constable and filed with the alderman.”

Um...” Martin was hoping to stretch things out until he could think of questioning strategy that might work, but his mind drew a blank.

“Well, if that is all, I believe we can leave the alderman to make his decision,” Margun said, gesturing for Rindalith to take his seat in the audience again.

“Wait!” Kazrack cried. “Don’t we get to speak in our own defense?!”

“Didn’t we tell you to shut up?!” the constable growled. He motioned to two guards who yanked the now struggling Kazrack by his manacles and dragged him out of the inn. “Let’s see if spending a night in the hole might teach that dwarf some manners.”

“I will now take an hour recess to determine what shall happen to those who stand accused,” the alderman said, standing.

“All rise,” Margun cried, and everyone obeyed. The alderman left the inn.

Wilson and his barmaids immediately hurried to put out trays of pastries and pitchers of dark ale.

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It was a long hour.

However, eventually the alderman returned accompanied by a mop-headed brown-haired man who appeared to be in his thirties.

“I have given this case a lot of thought and have decided two things,” the alderman said. “Firstly, that however, much I personally would like to improve relations between our own fine nation and that of Herman Land, the setting of such a precedent as extradition should be left in the hands of the King himself. In addition, these other three who stand accused are only in Gothanius at the general call and request of the King in these dark times. So, I will leave their fate as well in the

hands of the Crown.”

The alderman paused and then gestured to the man he returned with. “This is William Turnkey. He is one of the king’s marshals, a position created by the king to help keep continuity of law in this kingdom and to bring criminals to the dungeons in Twelve Trolls. I will leave it to him to arrange travel for the accused from here to Twelve Trolls in two days hence. Mr. Rindalith and Martin the Green may also accompany him to the capitol to make their case before the king.”

Rindalith’s face showed no sign of emotion, but Martin breathed a sigh of relief. He preferred his chances with the king than with the arrogant leaders of these alder-villages.

“All rise!” Margun cried, and the audience obeyed. The alderman left and people began to file out as Wilson and his servants returned the chairs and tables to their original positions. The guards led Jana, Beorth and Jeremy out, followed by the constable who was speaking with William Turnkey, and then by Rindalith himself.

Martin returned to his room and wrapped his arms around himself until the shaking stopped. He sat and wrote in his journal, “I will never be a lawyer, but better a delayed outcome than a bad one.”

Back at the guard house, Kazrack had been lowered into a hole in a back room. The dank dirt cellar was only five feet high, but this did not bother the dwarf who could still stand up straight and not hit his head. No, what bothered him was the smell of human sweat and urine and the dirt-encrusted feces in the corners of the hole.

Covering his nose and mouth with his beard, Kazrack clawed at the dirt walls and floor trying to cover up the excrement and the smell with fresher dirt from below the surface. Eventually, getting very desperate he shoved clods of dirt into his nose and mouth – preferring the smell of soil and stone to the nastiness that surrounded him. He then lay prone and spent his time praying to his gods.

The other three prisoners were returned to the constables office, but only Beorth and Jeremy were put in their cells. Jana was brought to an audience room where Rindalith was waiting.

“You have fifteen minutes, sir,” the guard said to the warlock and then left the two of them alone.

Rindalith sat at one side of a small table and looked up at his former student.

“I had been hoping I would be allowed to take you from this place directly,” Rindalith said. “I am sure you are chaffing against imprisonment, but I should have known that such a small-time politician as Silvestri would simply pass the buck.”

“So what now?” Jana asked. “We go before the King, and...”

“Go before the King?” Rindalith let out the breathy wheeze that passed for laughter. “My dear sweet thing, absolutely not. Passing false credentials to some local yokels is one thing, but even a backwater king might have means at his disposal to determine a fraud. No, I had a brief, yet concerned discussion with the constable about security for the journey to the capitol. He assured me he will be sending up to six but no less than four guards to escort us in addition to this Turnkey fellow. They should pose no problem with one with talents such as ours.”

“And my friends?” Jana asked.

“What about them?” Rindalith looked confused for a second. “Depending on how it goes...” He paused again. “Do you really care what happens to them? Since when have you had any real friends, unless you define ‘friend’ as people you’ll manipulate into doing what you want...”

Jana was silent.

“Don’t worry, sweetness,” Rindalith said, leaning down behind her to place his pointed chin on her shoulder and peck a kiss on her cheek. She froze. “Soon you’ll be free, and we can do whatever you want.”

Jana shuddered.

“Well, I should go. Even this dim-witted constable might get suspicious if I tarry too long here with such a lovely young

girl,” Rindalith came back around and winked.

Jana was returned to her cell.

Beorth came forward, leaning on the bars when the guards had left them alone.

“So, what happened with Rindalith?” the paladin asked.

Jana leaned forward, squeezing her face between the bars where they were close to Beorth’s cell, as to not be overheard by the guards.

“I guess I misread the situation completely,” she said. “He doesn’t want to kill me, that’s for sure. He has other uses for me.”

“So, if you make it to Twelve Trolls you will be able to get free of him?” Beorth asked. “Perhaps tell the King he is not who he says he is?”

“He plans to spring me before that,” Jana said, the slang of the streets of Westron coming back to her readily.

“But if you escape you’ll be fugitives, and if we escape with you so will we and we won’t be able to enter any towns for fear of arrest and it will greatly hinder our progress,” Beorth said, stating the matter flatly. “Or do *you* plan to leave with him?”

“In any case, leaving or not leaving is a moot point if we can’t do what we need to do for Osiris,” Jana snapped. “We can only wait and see what happens when it happens. It is outside of our control. At least I am not in any personal danger from Rindalith. However, his ideas on what our relationship is supposed to border on... how did he call it? ‘unhealthy obsession’. The bastard!”

Back at the inn there was a knocking at the door to Martin’s room. Not getting up from where he had his head laying on his folded arms at the desk, Martin called, “Come in.”

The door opened and in walked William Turnkey, the king’s marshal.

“Hello Mr. The Green, I have come to discuss with you the logistics of the journey to Twelve Trolls.”

Martin turned his head to look at the man with farmer’s tan and the grizzled skin of recently trimmed beard.

“Good to see you again, Richard,” Martin said, by way of greeting and then buried his face back in his arms for a moment before sitting up straight again.

“Ah!” William Turnkey said, as his features slowly melted away into those of Richard the Red and his clothing shifting and billowed in red robes. “A keen eye. It is a useful tool.”

“So, I wanted you to remind you to be alert for the opportunity when it comes,” Richard said, walking over and leaning on the desk and folding his arms across his chest.

“Opportunity?” Martin asked.

“To escape,” Richard said, matter-of-factly. “There will only be four to six guards, hardly any real threat.”

Martin sighed. “I will not allow any harm to come to those guards.”

“Who said anything about harming them?” Richard replied with a smile.

“And what about Jana? This Rindalith fellow will be wanting to take her with him,” Martin explained.

“Well, she is more of a liability than an asset,” Richard said. “Perhaps we should just let him take her.”

“I supposed you can look at people as liabilities or assets, but...”

“Is there any other way to look at it?” Richard asked frowning. “As alumni of the Academy we have a grave duty, and one must begin to look at everyone and everything in terms of whether it helps or hinders us in this duty.”

Martin did not respond.

“Regardless, we will deal with him when the time comes, just be ready,” Richard said. He reached into the folds of his robes and withdrew a scroll case. “This is a scroll with a spell that will protect you from most normal projectiles. I am giving it to you as a sign of good faith, and to show you that I have nothing but your safety and success in mind.”

Richard the Red handed Martin the Green the scroll tube.

Martin took it gingerly and turned the hardened leather tube over in his hands.

“Thank you,” he said, meekly.

“I have preparations to make,” Richard said. “So, if you’ll excuse me.”

With a flick of his cape, the elder watch-mage disappeared.

“Richard? Are you still there?” Martin called to the thin air, but there was no response.

Later that afternoon, Martin the Green made his way over to the constable’s office and requested a chance to speak with Beorth.

“So, you’re gonna plan your little break out attempt?” the constable asked with a sneer.

“I will not even dignify that with a response,” Martin said.

“Too late,” the constable quipped. “Though I do wish that pig-fucker would reappear to try to free your companions. I’d love the chance to watch him bleed up at my feet.”

“Lovely,” Martin said..

He was led to the room where Jana and Rindalith had had their meeting and soon after Beorth was brought in.

“So the situation looks pretty grim,” Beorth said, sitting down.

“It could be better,” Martin replied. “They are treating you okay, I hope?”

“As okay as it can be locked in a cell all day,” Beorth replied. He leaned forward and whispered, “Rindalith came to speak with Jana. He plans to free her during the trip to 12 Trolls.”

Martin sighed. “This is getting complicated.”

“Well, Jana does not plan to allow Rindalith to take her,” Beorth added.

“Are you sure? She seemed pretty willing to accept her fate in regard to her old mentor a few days ago,” Martin said.

“I guess when she discovered he did not mean to kill her the alternative did not seem as attractive in comparison.”

“Alternative?”

“Having to remain with him,” Beorth said.

“Interesting,” Martin said. “Well, I just wanted to make sure you were being treated well and so if you had learned anything new, which you have. All I can say is to be ready for anything.”

Martin left the constable’s office and return to the inn. Very late that evening, he placed three candles in the window for Ratchis to see.

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It was well after midnight when Ratchis climbed through the window of Martin’s room. He had spent the day in hiding and was frustrated with Martin’s deviation from the plan of one or two candles.

“Why the hell did you put three candles in the damn window!?” Ratchis asked angrily. “Either they were freed, or they weren’t. I wanted to avoid having to climb back in here, that was the whole point. It is too much of a risk.”

“I didn’t know what else to do,” Martin replied. “They were not freed, but they are being brought to Twelve Trolls for the king to decide.

“That is bad news,” Ratchis said. “I do not trust the king.”

“I think the mercy of the king is our best bet since we are supposed to be doing some special mission for him anyway, according to the message I got from the Castle Steward,” Martin said.

“We may still want to consider freeing them before they get there,” Ratchis said. “How many guards will there be?”

“Four to six, but there are other complications,” Martin added.

“Of course,” Ratchis said, warming himself by the small hearth in the room.

“Jana’s former mentor, Rindalith, plans to free her on the way to Twelve Trolls,” Martin said. “He plans to dispose of the guards, perhaps literally.”

“Does Jana want to go with him?”

“Beorth seems to think she has changed her mind on this matter,” Martin explained. “She will likely fight him.”

“Then that means we will have to as well,” Ratchis said.

“Well, then there is the matter of Richard the Red,” Martin continued. “He has offered to get rid of the guards and facilitate our escape as well. I, of course, said, ‘no’.”

“When do you leave for Twelve Trolls?”

“Day after tomorrow, first thing,” Martin said

“Okay, I am going to try to follow behind as close as I can without being seen,” Ratchis said. “If and when Rindalith makes a move, I will need for you to make as loud a sound as you can. Yell, scream and holler if you have to and I will come running.”

“Okay,” Martin said.

“You won’t see me until then,” Ratchis said. “I may come up with my own plan before then, just be ready for anything.”

“I know...” Martin’s voice trailed off.

Ratchis waited until he thought it was clear of the all-too-predictable guards and then slipped out the window again and went off to find a spot to hunker down for a day or so.

Martin, who thanks to his ring, was not feeling sleepy, sat down to study the scroll Richard the Red had given him and learn the *Protection from Arrows* spell.

### **Teflem, 13th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

Very early two mornings later, Martin found himself in front of the constable's office as guards chained Jana, Kazrack, Beorth and Jeremy to a wagon pulled by two oxen. Jana and Beorth had their manacles locked to one chain (with Beorth taking up the rear), while Jeremy and Kazrack were chained to the other (with Kazrack taking up the rear).

Kazrack looked miserable, his beard was caked with dirt and he smelled even worse than usual. He winced as his still broken arm was stretched to connect to the chain.

At that moment, William Turnkey appeared from down the street. He wore a long leather coat lined with rabbit fur and a red kerchief around his neck. He had tall work boots and woolen breeches; his curly brown hair waved wildly in the cold wind.

"Can't you see this dwarf is wounded?" He yelled angrily and shooed away the guard (named Valentine). "You can't have his arm outstretched like that all day!"

William Turnkey freed Kazrack's broken arm and slipped it back into its sling and then manacled the wrist to the sling.

"There that should hold you more comfortably," the king's marshal said, winking at the dwarf.

"Um, thank you," Kazrack said.

Rindalith came out of the inn and walked over, sneering at Jana affectionately.

"Okay, let's get going," Relaford said, taking charge of the expedition as the constable saw them off. "The Watch-mage and Mr. Rindalith can ride on the wagon with Marshal Turnkey."

And off they went, flanked by two guardsmen on either side, and one more taking up the rear. They left town by the southern path and then turned north and east. They were following a track of shallower snow where wagons frequently passed.

"How long until we reach Twelve Trolls, Marshall Turnkey?" Martin asked, the man he knew was really Richard the Red.

"Oh, we should make Earthport by late afternoon, and stay there one night and reach the castle by noon the next day," William Turnkey explained.

In less than an hour's time they came to a fork and Turnkey left the wagon to lead the oxen over to the right so they could turn east through deeper snow towards Earthport.

Rindalith leaned over to Martin. He was wearing black-dyed wolf's fur. "So, do you know Jana well?" he asked, his voice sliding out of his sallow cheeks like a python.

"I don't think anyone knows Jana well," Martin replied.

"What about your other friend? The one that died?" Rindalith asked, referring to Chance.

"Oh... I didn't know him well either," Martin said, and looked away from the imposing man.

William Turnkey leapt back into the wagon. "This is the long part," he said.

And on they went for hours, none noticing the lone figure that popped out of the snow just north of the fork and that followed at a great distance, knowing where the wagon went because of its fresh wheel ruts, as it bobbed in and out of view at the end of his vision.

They stopped at mid-day to rest and eat. The area was clear of any trees or shrubs, so Ratchis merely waited behind a snowbank, nearly a quarter-mile behind them. To the north they could see the jagged border of the Ogre Scar.<sup>33</sup>

William Turnkey came over to remove the prisoners from the longer chains to allow them to sit and eat, though their wrists and ankles were still manacled.

“I’ll assume I can unchain you for a little while without you doing something...unwise?” William Turnkey said to Kazrack, as when the dwarf was not connected to his chain freeing his broken arm would be very easy.

“Yes, thank you,” Kazrack responded. “I am beginning to think that we may get a fair trial.”

“Of course you will,” Turnkey said with a smile and threw a wink at Martin.

They ate dried meat and fruits in silence, the guards looking unhappy about being out there, looking at the distant Ogre Scar occasionally.

As the prisoners were being re-chained to the wagon, Martin the Green pulled William Turnkey aside. “Is there even a real William Turnkey?” he asked.

“Excuse me?” said Turnkey.

“Did you make him up out of whole cloth or are you impersonating someone real?” Martin whispered.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” William said with a smile and went back to his duties.

And on they went into the afternoon, the wind whipping up from the south across their path making the chains and ox-harness rattle, and those who could holding their hoods down to protect their face from the bite of it. Of course, the prisoners just suffered.

Ratchis continued to follow at a great distance.

Over an hour had passed since lunch when suddenly the usually stoic oxen bellowed in near unison, and one stopped and then stepped forward faster than usual.

“What are they doing?” William Turnkey asked no one in particular.

For a second the wind stopped, and from the north could be heard a low whistle punctuated by an occasional sound like great pieces of snapping leather.

Martin turned and looked just as the guards on that side of the wagon did.

“Look at that!” cried Valentine.

Martin could see it as well. It was a huge quadrupedal winged beast, with a body like a lion’s. He did not need to see the details of the face surrounded by a shaggy mane to know what it was.

“Oh no...”

“Martin, do you know what that is?” William Turnkey asked.

“It’s a manticore,” he said, looking around nervously.

“A what?!” William’s voice changed in that instance, it became more of a tenor than a bass, and it was filled with surprise.

Jeremy started to cry out, “In Ra’s name, you have to free us! We’re sitting ducks! It’ll kill us all!”

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<sup>33</sup> *The Ogre Scar* is a craggy canyon in the center of the all the alder-villages of the Kingdom of Gothanuis. It is avoided as several tribes of ogres live there that only stop their constant feuding to kill humans that wander near there.

“Quiet down you!” Relaford ordered the prisoner. “Men, load your crossbows and grab cover!”

“Hide behind the wagon,” Kazrack called to the guards on the north side of the wagon, who were frantically getting their heavy crossbows off their backs.

“Behind?” Beorth replied. “Get under the wagon!”

William Turnkey stopped the skittish oxen and hopped off the wagon to the right. Martin followed and immediately began to bellycrawl beneath the wagon. “Everyone must get cover!” he cried.

“William! Free me and I will help you fight this thing!” Kazrack called to the King’s Marshal, as Jeremy yanked on his manacles trying to pull them free.

“C’mon! C’mon!” the Neergardian cursed. “I didn’t come all this way to die again!”

“Martin, you’ve got to tell me about these kinds of things,” William chastised, watching the manticore approach. “What is it?”

“What is this all about? What is that thing after?” Rindalith asked, still sounding calm, as he stood at the front of the wagon.

Beorth moved forward, gaining slack on the chain, getting right behind the wagon.

“We need these chains off!” Jeremy called. They could now make out the impossibly large human face on the monster, and the copper and brown patches of color that was his fur.

Rindalith looked at William Turnkey and waved his right hand open and made a grasping gesture. “*Fascinere!*” he intoned. “Friend, why don’t go free the others?”

“Yes, but not because you asked me to,” William replied, taking the ring of keys off his belt.

Meanwhile, Jana was bidding her time. She knew her *blindness* spell would likely not work, but it only had a verbal component and was the only spell she could cast with her hands bound. As the manticore came into range she spoke the arcane word and felt the magic of the spell leave her and hurtle towards the beast. However, as had happened in the last encounter, she felt it blocked again.

“Damn!”

“Watch-mage!” the manticore said in his inhuman voice.

The Relaford and two of the guards on the left side of the wagon, fired their heavy crossbows as a team, but their bolts passed a flurry of spikes coming from the monster’s tail and did not meet their mark. The guards were not so lucky. Each of the guards cried out as they were pierced by the super dense insect-like hairs. But they did not fall.

“Regroup on the other side of the wagon,” Relaford called.

Under the wagon, Martin had begun to awkwardly load his own crossbow, when William Turnkey tossed him the ring of keys striking him in the head. “Free the others,” he commanded. Martin dropped the crossbow and fumbled for the keys.

Rindalith, unlike everyone else, did not seem the least bit flustered. Instead, he pulled a tiny bag from his belt, and slipped a candle with in and shook it three times saying, “*Rufen sie mich ein moss, ein hieb von der hölle zusammen!*” He began to circle his arms over his head and continued to chant the words.

Kazrack and Jeremy began to yank together on the chain holding them to the wagon. They could hear the old wood creak and moan as it resisted. They hurried under the wagon and kept pulling.

Beorth seeing the manticore flying straight in his direction now, got down on his hands and knees and tried to crawl under

the wagon, pulling Jana with him, but with the was not having it. She held her own and the paladin was denied cover.<sup>34</sup>

Jana planted her foot in the ground and tried her *blindness* spell again, and again it failed. So, changing her mind, she scurried behind Beorth and slid under the wagon.

The guards turned and ran to get behind the wagon, but the manticore let go another volley of spikes. This time one struck Beorth, while two others struck fleeing guards. The sudden burst of adrenalin from the proximity of the fiendish monster allowed Jeremy and Kazrack to yank the chain off the wagon.

While Martin fiddled with keys to get the manacles off of Jeremy's ankles, Beorth stood and reached blindly under the tarp that covered all their gear for transport. He hoped to grab any sort of weapon at all.

"*Fascinere!*" William cried, pointing at the manticore, but there was no visible effect.

"*Rufen sie mich ein moss, ein hieb von der hölle zusammen!*" Rindalith cried one last time and his arms traced out a circle of fire that hung in the air and from within it flew a huge bat. It had reddish-black fur and left a trail of wispy smoke behind it as it came screeching out. Its wings seemed to flicker and crackle like flame even as they flapped the thing towards the manticore.

Jana tried yanking Beorth beneath the wagon, but now it was his turn to resist, as he finally felt like what might be the strap to a backpack.

The fiendish dire bat and the manticore began to struggle against one another. The bat, being a superior flier dogging the manticore with swooping attacks as the monster tried to bite at Rindalith's summoned beast.

Martin managed to free Jeremy's hand, having found the correct key and the Neergaardian rolled out to the wagon's side. Kazrack followed, though his ankles were still chained together. He had been able to easily free his arms because of the bad job William had done fastening him.

Rindalith leapt off the wagon on the left side and called out, "Jana, come to me!"

Nearly 400 yards away Ratchis had been the first to notice the flying form approaching the wagon and had begun to sprint in the direction of the melee. He knew it would take him nearly a minute to get there, and a minute was a long time in a fight.

"*Ravis raene,*" chanted William Turnkey, waving his arms wildly, and thick nearly impenetrable mist began to billow out from his sleeves and out from under his pants and out the collar of his shirt, until in less than a second there was an obscuring mist surrounding the wagon, and stretching beyond the path and into the deep snow on both sides. Only those within a couple of feet of each other could see one another.

Beorth yanked Jeremy's pack from the wagon and tossed it underneath. The Neergaardian's chain shirt was tied to the pack and so he grabbed it.

Martin now unlocked Jana's hands, and Kazrack fumbled around in the wagon looking for his gear. He found Beorth's pack instead. Jeremy began to hurriedly put on his chain shirt.

"Martin, what is its weakness?" Richard called through the mist, no longer bothering to hide his voice.

"I think Richard is here!" Kazrack cried.

"I don't know, maybe its wings?" Martin was out of ideas.

"Martin, free Beorth next!" Jana said.

At that moment, Kazrack looked over his shoulder at Rindalith who let out a snort and leaned forward. His arms began to lengthen and thicken as they touched the ground, though his legs were still straight. Rindalith's back began to arch and

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<sup>34</sup> **DM's Note:** Jana with her Strength score of 10, beat out Beorth (with his score of 17) in an opposed strength check.

lengthen and thicken, as his hair began to grow and attach itself to his neck and back. The ends of his hands and feet began to harden and turn black, as his face began to stretch, his eyes moving to either side of his head, and his nose stretched down, the nostrils flaring, until it nearly met his mouth.

“Get out of my way! I don’t want to die!” screamed one of the guards diving under the wagon and pushing Jana aside.

Martin followed the chain that had been attached to Jana out from under the wagon and reaching up unlocked Beorth’s hands.

Kazrack found his chain shirt, at the same moment that Beorth found his scale mail.

There was the sound of a horse whinny, and when Kazrack looked there stood a great stallion where Rindalith had once stood.

“Where is it? Where has it gone?” Relaford called out, only caring about the manticore.

“Quiet, or it will track you by sound!” Martin advised.

“What do we do? What do we do?” the guard beneath the wagon hid his head beneath his arms and shook.

“Just be quiet and stay where you are,” Martin the Green commanded.

“Where did it come from?” another of guards asked aloud.

“Martin, pass me the keys, my ankles are still chained!” Jana called.

“In a minute,” Martin replied, and began to unlock Beorth’s feet. Beorth began to hurriedly put on his armor.

Kazrack found his pack and his flail and pulled them out of the wagon.

Martin ran around the left side of the wagon to get at the chains at Kazrack’s feet and saw the horse standing there calmly, “Where in the Nine Hells did this horse come from?”

Above and about them they heard the roar of the manticore and the screech of the dire bat as the two creatures did battle in the skies. The mist made it impossible to tell exactly where they were.

Kazrack shoved his flail into his belt and began to rummage through his backpack for his grappling hook.

“I am not free yet!” Jana cried, stumbling towards Martin and yanking the keys from his hands.

“Our lives are in danger and you are going to leave us?” Martin said, gesturing to the horse, as he made the connection between it and Rindalith.

“Let me free myself,” was all she said, turning her back to the horse. “I am not going anywhere.”

“All right, I’ll trust you,” Martin said with a sigh.

“Give me your crossbow,” Kazrack said to Martin.

“I left it under the wagon,” Martin replied shrugging his shoulders.

Jana unlocked her feet, keeping an eye on the horse, which stepped forward and nudged her with its snout.

Kazrack continued to rummage in the wagon for a ranged weapon.

Martin decided that this was a useless place to stand so he stumbled to the edge of the mist and began to follow its perimeter to the right, looking for the manticore and for signs of Richard the Red (aka William Turnkey) as there had been no sign of him since the mist appeared. He saw the manticore and the bat still locked in combat, but the bat was flying

awkwardly now, one wing hanging lower than the other. It continued to attack but seemed to be doing so without real desire to do so.

The manticore tried to pull away from it.

“It’s over here, banking west!” Martin called to everyone else, and then moved clockwise around the perimeter, looking for Richard.

“Jana, help me don my armor!” Kazrack said, holding up his broken arm limply. Jana did not hesitate and began to do her best to help him slip it on. “Martin! How long can we expect this mist to last?”

“A few minutes, no more,” Martin called back.

“Jeremy, get up on the wagon and find our crossbows and start loading them,” Kazrack called to the Neergardian that he could not see. Jeremy did not hesitate. He leapt on the wagon and started rummaging, finding all the crossbows tied together. He pulled them apart and began to load.

The horse began to change again. It reared up on its hind legs and immediately shrunk down and grew thicker fur. Its head collapsed into its chest and became rounded. The forelegs became long disproportionate muscular arms.

Kazrack looked over. It appeared to him to be something similar to the small monkeys he had occasionally seen for sale in the market in Verdun, or as part of the act of the local hurdy-gurdy men, except it was larger than a man, with a broader shoulder and chest. It looked very strong and fearsome.

Beorth’s mouth dropped open as the huge ape loped towards him and then leapt up on the wagon.

“Ahhhh!” Jeremy cried out, dropping the loaded crossbow in his hands. It did not go off.

Beorth covered his eyes with his right hand and put his left hand out towards the ape-creature, “Anubis, grant me your divine vision so that I might peer into the heart of this beast and discover its true intentions.”<sup>35</sup> Beorth uncovered his eyes and could see the faintest aura of blackness coving off the gorilla as if it were smoldering.

“Evil!” Beorth cried.

Martin clambered awkwardly off the path and through the deep snow, still on the edge the mist to provide himself with cover, when stepping on something he looked down.

“Aah! Aah! It’s got me! I don’t want to die!” It was one of the guards who had tried to hide by burying himself in a snowbank.

“Shh! No, you’re fine. Just be quiet,” Martin said.

The ape spotted Jana moving from helping Kazrack to move towards Beorth and it leapt off the wagon, scooping her in one arm and holding her tightly to his chest. Jana tried to break free with all her might, but it was not nearly enough.

Rindalith, in gorilla form, began to hurry down the path back in a westward direction, clutching a writhing Jana.

## End of Session #28

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<sup>35</sup> **DM’s Note:** In Aquerra, *Detect Evil* only detects immediate evil intention, not alignment. It also detects outsiders from evil planes, or those mortal beings who had completely immersed themselves in the undertaking of repeated evil action, like a powerful priest of an evil god, for example. It is impossible for a paladin to use his *Detect Evil* ability without the subject of it noticing.

## Session #29

“Toss the crossbows down,” Kazrack called through the mist to Jeremy who was frantically loading his second on top of the wagon.

Jeremy dropped the unloaded crossbow to the ground, and Kazrack kicked it under the wagon to the cowering guard. “You under the wagon! Make yourself useful and load this thing.”

Martin emerged from the mist on the western side of it and saw the ape loping off with Jana.

“It’s Rindalith! Quick, he’s got Jana!” he yelled to alert his companions. Kazrack moved towards Martin’s voice. Beorth found his hand gripping the hilt of his sword as he rummaged around in the wagon for his gear, abandoning his attempt to don his armor. He hustled past Martin and after Rindalith, sword above his head.

Martin stepped after the paladin and speaking an arcane word and pulling a clump of wool from his cloak he made fiery hawk appear that took off fluttering close to the gorilla to distract it.

Jeremy, with the loaded crossbow in hand leapt off the wagon and towards Martin’s voice, but bumped into Kazrack as they both reached the edge of the mist.

“Whoa! Watch it, little guy!” Jeremy quipped, and the dwarf scowled, and hopped to the right around the Neergardian to try to catch Rindalith.

“Hey! I didn’t see that thing before,” Jeremy said, gesturing to the gorilla with his crossbow. “Where’d it come from?”

“Martin says it is Rindalith,” Kazrack explained.

But by now Beorth’s speed and persistence made him catch up with the lumbering ape that carried off his companion. However, as he brought his sword down with all his might to carve the spine from the warlock-turned-beast, the gorilla spun around to face him, and the blow glanced off Jana’s shoulder. There was a spurt of crimson and she shrieked.

The gorilla dropped Jana suddenly as if the spray of blood surprised him and began to melt back into human form. The folds of Rindalith’s black robes emerging from the fur, and the hair receding from his face to reveal his normal pale features.

“Huzzah!” he cried, whipping something gray from the folds of his robes. It disappeared in the air and a wave of fear washed over Beorth and Martin who was stepping even with the paladin.

There was no room in Beorth’s heart for fear as his faith in Anubis held him firm in the face of all dangers, but Martin was not so steadfast. The watch-mage let out a shriek and took off in the opposite direction.

Jana struggled to get to her feet, her own blood staining the soft blue of her blouse beneath her fur cloak.

Martin did not let the mist slow him and slid under the cart and buried his head under his hands, shaking.

“Is it gone? Is it gone? What’s happening?” the guard that still hid under there asked. He had however, loaded the crossbow.

Martin made some unintelligible sounds as he quivered. Outside of the mist, the fiery bird illusion disappeared.

Jeremy stepped to his left and let a bolt go, grazing Rindalith in the shoulder. The warlock made no sound and betrayed no emotion.

“Let’s see what you have in your bag of tricks now, Mr. Wizard!” Jeremy taunted, as he moved over to where Jana laid.

Kazrack readied his light flail and stopped just short of Rindalith.

“We should put aside our differences and deal with the manticore,” the dwarf offered.

“What differences?” Rindalith said. “There shouldn’t be any.”

Rindalith took a cautious step backward and, shrugging his shoulders, Kazrack whacked him heavily with his flail on the hip. Rindalith cringed a bit, but turning to his left he took a step up into the air, and began to ascend as if there were invisible stairs beside him. Soon he was fifteen feet up.

Trying to focus through the pain, Jana brought her arcane energies to bear and cast her *blindness* spell at Rindalith, but it failed.

“You should know better than to think that would affect me,” Rindalith sneered at Jana.

Ratchis was still running towards the melee, and could now see what the others could not; the manticore was swooping over the mist towards them as the fiendish bat disappeared into a puff of smoke. “Behind you! Behind you!” he yelled, but not one could hear him.

Jeremy loaded his crossbow and fired up at Rindalith. The bolt got caught in the warlock’s robes, only scratching him. Kazrack ran for the “invisible steps” hoping he could chase Rindalith up into the air, only to have his foot come down through nothing. He barely managed to keep his balance.

Beorth stepped between where Rindalith now floated in mid-air and Jana, and kneeling down invoked his god’s power, “Anubis, give me your power and energy to right my mistake!” He laid a hand on Jana, and her shoulder wound closed a good deal. “Stay behind me,” the paladin added to Jana, but she did not obey stepping to his right and pulling a dagger from her boot. She let it fly at Rindalith, and it slammed into his gut heavily, but handle first.

“Jana! How could you?” Rindalith said, his voice dripping with affected sorrow. “You don’t know how much it hurts my heart for you to try and hurt me this way.”

“Yeah, yeah,” was Jana’s reply.

“Give me the Watch-Mage,” the manticore’s inhuman voice boomed, and they all turned to see it appear from over the mist to the east.

The manticore flicked its tail and a hail of spikes came down on Jeremy and Jana.

“What the...?” Jeremy was surprised as he felt the sudden pain of two spikes in his leg. One tore his calf muscle, and he knew he would not be able to move as fast.

Jana also felt the bite of two spikes.

“Get in the mist! Get in the mist!” Ratchis now commanded from about sixty feet away. He stopped and fired an arrow from his short bow at Rindalith. It grazed the warlock’s ear. He continued forward.

Jeremy fired his crossbow again. This time at the manticore, but it arced too low to find its mark.

At that moment Richard stepped out of the mist, and Jeremy saw him from the corner of his eye, “Ra! They are coming from all directions!”

Richard the Red now looked like himself, but he still had a short sword at his side. He looked up at the manticore going past him and intoned, “*Fascinaere monstrum!*” and then followed it up by pointing at Rindalith and saying, “It is the flying one that keeps you from your prey. Get the flying one!”

Kazrack scooped up a handful of snow and stepped between Jana and the Manticore.

The manticore roared and its eyes moved across the crowd of combatants below him and then his vision settled on the one flying at the same height as him.

“If that’s the way it must be, then that’s the way it must be!” Rindalith said, calmly, and punching out in the direction of the

manticore with his left hand there was a suddenly flash of light and the crackle of burned air, as a bolt of lightning shot from his fist and struck the manticore dead on.

Jana's jaw dropped open as she saw the bolt emerge from the manticore and move at a ninety-degree angle to strike Richard the Red who cried out and was knocked on his rear end; his crimson robes steamed.

The lightning bolt, however, did not stop there.

It leapt from Richard and struck Kazrack full on in the chest. The dwarf stumbled back a step but did not fall as he let out a holler and his beard hairs shot straight out like a porcupine. It then leapt to Jeremy who tried to lay flat, but it did no good. He felt the jolt throughout his body like a thousand needles of ice and he fell face down, not to get back up again. And still, the bolt continued, striking Beorth who stumbled backward and fell with an "oof." He seemed to avoid the worst of the blow, but the bolt was still not done, leaping at a thirty-degree angle to strike Ratchis who had run up just in time to be knocked back into the packed snow, listening to the sizzle of his furs.

"That is just a taste of my power," Rindalith mocked.

Kazrack spun on around on one foot to face the warlock, feeling his body revolt at continuing to act. He felt close to death. "I've had my fill."

"Jana, surrender and your friends can live," Rindalith offered.

"I won't let you," Ratchis grunted, struggling to get up on one knee while still holding his short bow.

Jana responded by trying to blind Rindalith once again; again, she failed. Ratchis fired again but missed as Rindalith was yanked out of the way by the force of the manticore's attack. It bit deep into the warlock's thigh, and he was jerked around for a second like a rag-doll before pulling free. Torrents of blood poured down the warlock's leg.

Richard the Red crawled back out of the mist and pointed at Richard once again. "Finish him! Finish him!"

Beorth stood, and looked around, not sure of what to do.

While Rindalith ascended into the air as if there were still steps adjacent to him. The manticore bit at him again, but its maw lined with jagged teeth clamped down on nothing.

Kazrack threw his snowball at Rindalith. It powdered to no effect before striking him.

Jana hurried over to Jeremy to wrap him in blanket before he died from going into shock.

Ratchis drew and fired again, while Beorth helped Jana with Jeremy. Kazrack stepped over to shield the witch and the paladin as they did this. He stood with his back to them, watching the manticore and Rindalith. The dark figure rose further into the air and the half-orc's arrow arced well below him.

Ratchis ran to keep up with the Rindalith who mover further to the north each time he ascended, trying to put more distance between him and the manticore, which was now making its wide arc to the south and was coming back around as fast as it could.

Rindalith began to change again. He spread out his arms, and they stretched downward forming a darkening film that grew leathery, as brown hair grew on his back and his ears became pointed. In a few moments where there once was human man, there was now an enormous bat, screeching as it flew away.

"Go after the bat!" Richard called to the manticore, waving towards it. He then called, "Everyone into the mist. I'll deal with the manticore!"

"We can't leave our companion out in the snow," Kazrack called back, gesturing to Jeremy.

Richard jerked his head toward the manticore, a look of surprise came over his face and he said, "I can't do that!"

Just as suddenly, he jerked his head back and ran over to Jana and passed her a glass vial full of clear liquid.

Kazrack leaned over to Beorth and whispered, “You know we’re going to have to attack Richard when this is over, right?”

Beorth did not respond.

Jana poured the contents of the vial down Jeremy’s throat, holding his nose closed with the other hand.

“Now, just move him into the mist,” Richard said.

“Can we move him now?” Kazrack asked the young witch.

She nodded, and Kazrack did not hesitate. He tried to jerk Jeremy up on to his shoulders but failed because of his broken arm. Instead, he began to drag him, until Beorth grabbed up the unconscious Neergaardian’s legs and helped move him. Jana followed into the mist.

Ratchis kept jogging after Rindalith firing arrows every 10 yards.

Martin burst out of the mist, loaded crossbow in hand and screamed, “I’ll kill that thing!”

He fired the crossbow at the manticore, but missed. Seeing that the manticore was headed back in their direction, he said, “No... stupid...” and stepped back into the cover of the mist.

In the mist, Beorth followed the pull of Kazrack on Jeremy’s limp form to the left, but Jana stepped to the right, bumping into one of the guards.

“Halt! You can’t try to escape!” the guard commanded her.

“We’re not trying to escape, you idiot!” she admonished, and felt her way to the wagon to search for weapons.

Ratchis continued to be drawn away from the path, unhindered by the deep snow because of his boots, but he did still feel the sting of the blast of lightning.

“Nephtys! Heal me of these grievous wounds caused by the evil wizard!” He cried out to his goddess, clutching the belt of scored and broken chain links around his waist. He felt her healing warmth fill him. He could now see that he could never catch up with Rindalith in bat-form, and he stopped to catch his breath, looking back over to where the mist still hung in the air.

“The watch-mage is gone!” Richard called to the manticore as he stood up straight and regained his composure. “I have made him disappear with my magic!”

“Lay him here by the wagon,” Beorth said to Kazrack not waiting for the dwarf to respond to lower Jeremy to the ground and hustle back out towards the edge of the mist.

Kazrack lay Jeremy’s head down gently and made his way to the guard that had tried to stop Jana by going to where his voice had been.

“If you look at the one who was dressed as William, his countenance has changed,” he said.

“Huh?” Relaford was confused by everything going on around him.

Beorth stepped out of the mist just in time to meet the manticore face to face. It swooped down to the ground and pounced forward like a great cat, its jagged teeth clawing at the paladin’s right arm.

Martin stepped out of the edge of the mist clear of Beorth and cast a spray of colors at the beast to no effect.

“Anubis, give me your power to smite this evil beast!” Beorth cried, squinting his eyes in concentration as he focused his faith through his arm and into his long sword. The blade cleaved right into the top of the manticore head, making a sound

like splitting wood as blood rushed down its face. It let loose a horrific roar but did not go down.

Jana found her club in the wagon.

At that same moment, Relaford stepped out of the mist, saw the monster roaring so close and stepped back in “What is that thing? What is that thing?” he asked the dwarf.

Kazrack did not respond but charged out of the mist and swung his flail with his off-hand at the manticore, but the blow glanced off its wiry hide with no effect.

The dwarf received a devastating claw in return and was almost knocked down by the blow. Blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

Beorth was not so lucky. The manticore swiped with his other claw drawing the paladin in close for another deep bite. The ghost-hunter collapsed, dying.

“*Imago creare!*” Martin called, pulling more wool from his increasingly thread-bare cloak. A black shadowy creature similar to the one they had fought months before at the Sun’s Summit Inn appeared on the other side of the manticore.<sup>36</sup>

Richard ran over to the manticore’s right side, but maintained his distance, “Leave them alone! We can negotiate over the watch-mage!”

“I do not negotiate,” the monster replied, his voice booming in their ears.

“Have it your way then,” Richard said, and pointing a finger chanted, “*Asilos sagitta!*”

A shimmering blue arrow appeared before him and raced towards the manticore, striking the monster in the flank with a splash of some kind of liquid that burned that beast. It roared again.

Jana emerged from the mist, club in hand, but seeing Beorth on the ground bleeding out, she dropped the club and crawled over pulling Beorth from the melee.

“Hey you can’t...” Relaford began, but seeing Jana return immediately with Beorth’s unconscious form in tow he did not finish what he had to say

Kazrack struggled to hold off the manticore, but his blows were either short or ineffective.

“Natan-ahb, judge me fairly!” the dwarf cried as he tried to bring the monster down.

Lucky for him, however, Martin’s illusionary shadow distracted the manticore, and it took some time to try to bite and claw it, to keep it at bay.

This left it open for Ratchis’ attack from the rear flank. He came charging into the fray slamming his hammer into the thing’s back. It tried to turn and meet the attack with a claw of its own, but it was not fast enough.

It roared as the acid continued to burn it where Richard’s spell had struck.

Jana pulled Beorth deeper into the mist.

Frustrated by his ineffectual fighting, Kazrack swung with all his might, hoping to crack one of the rear legs of the beast, but instead he only went off balance and tipped over on to his face.

Ignoring Kazrack, the manticore turned to Ratchis and cuffed him across the face and neck, drawing blood. Ratchis fumbled out of the way of the other claw, and the thing’s nasty bite.

“Nephtys, if this may be my last blow, let it strike true and in your name!” Ratchis hollered, as he brought his heavy war

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<sup>36</sup> See Session #14

hammer down on the thing's face.

The manticore shuddered and collapsed in a heap. The acid continued to hiss and spit as it burned deep into the creature's side, but Richard the Red took no chances. Drawing his short sword, he stepped over and drove it deep into the thing's throat. It let out a low final breath and stopped moving.

Kazrack got to his feet, "Guards, the creature is dead. You can come out." The dwarf then turned to Richard, "And you are under arrest!"

He charged towards the watch-mage to knock him to the ground and grapple him, but Richard had his sword drawn and reflexively thrust forward, catching Kazrack under the ribs.

The dwarf fell to the ground bleeding.

Ratchis turned and slammed his hammer into Richard who cried out in pain and stepped backward.

"You are all being so foolish, yet again," he said, as he whipped his cloak closed around him and disappeared.

Relaford stepped out of the mist holding his crossbow trained on Ratchis, "Listen! We can work this out!"

"The fight is over. Everyone drop your weapons!" Martin called, holding his hands out and open. He looked at Relaford who still pointed his crossbow at Ratchis.

A second guard stepped out of the mist hesitantly, and when he saw Relaford covering the half-orc, he drew his long sword.

"So look, I have an idea," Relaford began. "We just let you leave, and we say you all escaped in the chaos of that thing's attack. We could even say one of you was eaten by that thing and then everyone will think you are dead."

Martin shook his head, "We are going to Twelve Trolls."

"Lower your crossbows!" Ratchis barked. The other guard was startled, but Relaford held his ground.

"Why do you have to make this difficult? We are giving you a chance to get away with no trouble and no more blood spilt," Relaford said.

Martin looked over and suddenly noticed the blood staining the snow around and beneath Kazrack.

"Jana! Jana, where are you?" the Watch-mage called into the mist. "Kazrack is dying! You're still here, Jana?"

The young witch came out of the mist.

Ratchis looked at Relaford, "I could heal the dwarf, but I am not going to move until you and your man put down your weapons. His death will be on your heads."

"If we wanted to harm you, we would have done it already," Martin said. "We only want a chance to speak to the king and clear our names."

"I'm going to lose my job," Relaford said, lowering his crossbow. The other guard hesitated, but then sheathed his sword.

Ratchis lowered his own crossbow and walked over to where Jana was calmly binding Kazrack's near-mortal wounds. He leaned over and called to his goddess to heal the dwarf, and in a moment Kazrack's eyes were fluttering as he coughed.

"Whu... where's Richard?" Kazrack coughed out.

"He got away again," Ratchis replied.

"Damn!" the dwarf groaned. "We need to bring him to the king to clear us."

“Well, you don’t have this Richard guy, whoever he is,” Relaford said. “So, you might as well go on your way and we’ll do our best to cover up the whole thing.”

“No, we’re going to Twelve Trolls,” Kazrack said, sitting up.

“Yeah, so we have to…” Relaford’s voice trailed off.

The guards helped the party lift the manticore’s corpse onto the wagon. It was still smoking and smelled to Kazrack like molten copper.

“I’m glad you showed up,” the dwarf said to Ratchis as they wiped their hands clean of the beast’s ichor in the snow.

“I wish I could have gotten here sooner,” the half-orc replied.

“You got here when we needed you, that’s all that matters,” Kazrack gave Ratchis an awkward pat on the shoulder.

“I won’t be going back to Twelve Trolls,” Ratchis said. “No matter what they will be wanting to arrest me.”

“You are probably right,” the dwarf concurred.

“I won’t be going back either,” Jana said, overhearing as she walked over. “Even without Rindalith around they may decide to hold me until they get things straightened out, and we don’t have time for that.”

“If that is how it has to be,” Kazrack said. “But I was thinking we should tell the king the whole thing; the whole truth.”

“I do not trust the king,” Ratchis said.

“Nor do I,” said Martin walking over. “But on the matter of Jana, I fear that you will be a fugitive if you do not hand yourself over with the rest of us.”

“I am not exactly unused to dealing with the law,” Jana said, and walked over to check on Beorth and Jeremy’s bandages, as they had been moved onto the wagon. Kazrack gave her a sideways glance.

“Why couldn’t the manticore have killed and eater her?” Ratchis said with a sigh.

“We could say that it did,” Relaford suggested.

Kazrack, Martin and Ratchis looked at the guard, and slowly nodded.

“That is not a bad idea,” Ratchis said.

It was agreed that this was the story that would be told. Ratchis would not be mentioned and that Jana was eaten by the manticore. Ratchis would take Jana with him and they would wait along the route to Twelve Trolls and then follow the others to the pass overlooking the castle and wait there for a sign from Martin that would tell Ratchis and Jana if the group had been pardoned.<sup>37</sup> Ratchis and Jana would wait a maximum of three days and then move on to complete their tasks for Osiris if there were no word.

“Okay, I need to chain you to the back of the wagon,” Relaford said to Kazrack.

“How come? We have proved we have no intention to escape,” the dwarf replied, indignantly.

“Look, this is how you wanted to handle this, and for no one to get suspicious if we happen upon anyone or when we arrive at Earthport we need to handle things as normal as possible,” Relaford explained.

Kazrack acquiesced.

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<sup>37</sup> The party rested here their first night outside of Gothanius castle, back in session #14

Ratchis and Jana moved off the path to the south and found a sheltered spot where they camped for the night, Ratchis casting *endure elements* on his companion.

The wagon continued on eastward to Earthport. The manticore corpse had a stench hanging onto it like a smoldering rotted carcass, and Relaford and his men walked along either side of the wagon wearily, clutching their wounds and wearing long faces. Martin also walked along side, as the front bench of the wagon had Jeremy and Beorth's still unconscious forms draped there.

It had already been dark for over an hour when they rolled into Earthport. Earthport was built on a large chunk of solid bedrock that was adjacent to a huge marsh that extended as far as the eye could see during daylight, but in the dark all they could hear was the muted sound of toads and insects. The town itself was made up of many small square buildings built very close together creating a labyrinth of narrow streets lined in places with hooded lanterns.

They were brought to the constable's office of Earthport, and Kazrack, Jeremy and Beorth were put in separate cells, while Martin was given a blanket and a bench in the entry room.

### **Anulem, 14th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

The next morning Claude Rhines the alderman of Earthport came by the constable office to see Martin the Green, while the local guards kept the ogling townsfolk away from the manticore corpse. A sickly cold rain fell over everything.

Rhines told Martin about how Earthport was still in danger from the orcs that fled the skirmishes of two years before and into the swamp that lay to the south of town. He went on to imply that Earthport might be just the place for a Watch-mage to settle down once he chose a permanent place to settle in Gothanuis. He explained how there was already a woodsman, a follower of Osiris (but not a druid), who lived in the swamp and hunted the orcs down and helped the local people when he could. Martin asked if he could speak with this man, named Seerin No-Road, but the alderman explained that he had not been seen in some time and that he kept to himself a lot.

Kazrack awoke feeling feverish. He could feel blisters on his tongue and all around the inside of his mouth, and his head felt foggy. He alternated between flushed and pale. The dwarf could barely remember a dream he had had in the night. He was within a circle of trees, hammering at a forge, and all around him he could see and feel glowing eyes watching him from the darkness between the trees. He could hear the whispered chattering of strange voices.

Kazrack moaned, feeling the weight of his need to accomplish his task for Osiris upon his heart.<sup>38</sup>

By mid-morning Kazrack was chained back to the wagon and they were being led out of town to the north. A few miles outside of town, Kazrack was unchained and allowed to use his divine spells to heal Beorth and Jeremy, both of whom were still unconscious from the wounds they had suffered in the battle with Rindalith and the manticore.

Jeremy was further from death, but he did not awaken. Beorth stirred.

"Martin, I don't feel like talking much, can you bring Beorth up to date with what has happened?" Kazrack asked the watch-mage.

"Okay," Martin agreed. "But what should we say to Beorth about Jana?"

"I don't think we should hide anything from Beorth," Kazrack said.

"Good, all these lies have me confused," Martin said with a sigh.

After being healed and awakened, Beorth took some time to give thanks to Anubis and then laid his hands upon the Neegaardian's chest and said, "Anubis, Guardian of the Dead, give me your strength to bring this man back from the borders of death."

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<sup>38</sup> Kazrack was suffering the consequences for a special type of *Geas*. He was suffering a -2 penalty on each ability score for each day he did not make progress towards his goal.

Soon, Jeremy was stirring, and before they knew it the both of them were being pulled along, chained to the back of the wagon.

"I have a question," Jeremy asked, when he became more clear-headed. "Why are we chained? Did we get captured again?"

"Kazrack's their willing prisoner, as am I," replied Beorth.

"So Jana and Ratchis are gone?" Jeremy asked bewildered.

"Yes," replied Beorth.

"They are really gone," Jeremy said, his voice catching in his throat.

"They are still with us," Beorth said.

"Huh? You mean in spirit?"

"No, they live still. They are following, and we will meet with them after our fate has been decided at the king's court," Beorth explained.

"Oh, good...uh, I guess."

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"I'm cold," Thomas whispered in Martin's mind as they crossed over the pass down into the awesome chasm Gothanius Castle rose from like an island.

"Don't worry, we are almost there," Martin reassured his familiar, stroking his head. "Here have some dried apricots... oh wait, never mind."

"Ya know, I want to want them, but I really don't want them anymore."

"I know... don't worry. I'll teach you some more reading tonight. I'll even teach you how to read the word 'nut'. You'll like that," Martin suggested.

"I used to dream about nuts," Thomas replied. "But now I hardly sleep, and when I do, I don't dream about them anymore."

They came through the castle gates a little more than two hours later. Jeremy, Beorth and Kazrack were cold and exhausted. In the west, the sun was beginning to set, and the wind was howling in the canyons north of Gothanius.

"I will need to speak with the king immediately," Martin the Green told the lieutenant of the wall-guard that was on duty.

"I will need to alert the captain of the guard, and the castle steward, sir," the guard said. "But in the meantime, please wait in the guardhouse, while I see that the prisoners are brought to cells. I will also have to take a report from Relaford of the Ogre's Bluff guard."

Relaford shot Martin a worried look.

"Please wait patiently," the guard told Martin and then gestured for one of his men to show the watch-mage to where he should wait. Martin looked back at Relaford and tried to nod reassuringly.

"There is also the matter of the manticores' corpse we brought with us," Martin said.

"It will be stored somewhere safe so that those that have more authority than I can determine whatever it is they might need to determine about it upon examination," the guard said, sounding annoyed and dismissive.

Martin waited over two hours before Daniel the Castle Steward came for him.

“Martin, I am sorry that you had to wait so long, but I needed to take care of some things that your unexpected arrival might have precipitated,” the round-faced young courtier said, putting out his hand to shake Martin’s. “Come with me, I will bring you to your former quarters. I have arranged for meal and fresh bedclothes to be brought there. I am sure you are hungry and tired, but we have much to talk about, especially in regard to the story we got from the guards from Ogre’s Bluff.”

Soon, Martin was relaxing in an over-stuffed chair in a nightshirt and a woolen robe, before a roaring fireplace. Before him was a tray full of strings of roast pork smothered in gravy on a bed of the days bread crusts and a bowl of steaming broth, and a foaming mug of ale.

Jeremy, Kazrack and Beorth were sleeping on moisten dirt floors that smelled of urine, after they had been given a foul white gruel filled with unidentifiable gray chunks for dinner.

Jana and Ratchis were sitting beside a small fire set under an overhang of rock, and within a little nook to shield it from being seen from the castle towers, waiting for word in the morning.

“So, it seems that a lot has happened since we saw you last,” Daniel started. “I feared that perhaps that you were dead since months passed with no word.”

“Yes, a lot has happened, but what has happened most recently is what is of most concern,” Martin said,

“You mean the arrest of your companions?” Daniel said.

“Yes.”

“Well, they are not the first to be arrested,” Daniel said, leaning back in his own chair. “Two other groups of would-be ‘dragon-hunters’ have been imprisoned for taking to waylaying travelers.”

“I assure you that my companions have not been waylaying anyone,” Martin said, sternly.

“Oh, I am sure of that as well,” Daniel said with a smile. “Relaford told us that it all began with the arrest and then escape of the girl named ‘Jana.’ It seems that she was eaten by the manticore?”

“No, she was not,” said Martin with a sigh. “Unfortunately, she did not trust that she would get fair treatment by the authorities and that she would be imprisoned until everything was straightened out, or at worse that she might be handed over to the false representative of the Kingdom of Herman Land.”

“Well, we have no record in the court of any representative or bounty-hunter from the Kingdom of Herman Land being within our borders, and if there is, he is here without the leave of the Crown. And since neither he nor she is here to state the case and I am the one who would arrange the audience with the King, I have the authority to declare it a null matter. She is free to travel in Gothanium but is still subject to the laws and regulations of our kingdom as any visitor or traveler is. I will be sending word to the authorities in the different alder-villages not to cooperate with this man, and to hold him for questioning if he does turn up.”

“Make sure they are warned that he is a very powerful warlock and can assume the shape of different animals, perhaps different people,” Martin added.

“Duly noted,” Daniel replied.

“And my other companions?”

“Well, the other three will be released,” Daniel said. “If Jana of Westron is not to be detained, the charges against them can easily be made to disappear.”

“You don’t know how much I appreciate your quick handling of this entire unfortunate situation,” Martin said, gratefully.

“Have you gathered any news of the dragon?” Daniel asked, looking down at the plate of food that Martin had not yet touched.

“We have heard some rumors, and some seen some signs of something, but it might have only been the manticore that we slew and returned here with,” Martin said.

“Have you fought many such fearsome creatures within our borders?” Daniel’s eyebrows raised up in concern.

“No. No, we have not,” Martin said, moving the meat and gravy around in his plate with a piece of bread. “But we have discovered evidence that scores of these creatures called quaggoths have entered the caves beneath Ogre’s Bluff and might be an advance force for an invasion of the dark elves of the Plutonic Realms.”

“Dark elves?” Daniel laughed, and sat up straight. “But there is no such thing!”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Ortun, but I am afraid to tell you that they are very real and pose a very real danger to the Kingdom of Gothanius, if not the entirety of Derome-Delem.”

“How soon can such an invasion be expected,” Daniel was growing alarmed.

“That is the good news,” Martin said, smiling. “It will likely be many, many years before such an attack were to come to the surface.”

Daniel let out a long low breath.

“There is also the matter of Ratchis,” Martin added quickly.

“Ah, you mean the half-breed woodsman that assaulted the guards in Ogre’s Bluff during his escape?” Daniel asked.

“Well, he did no permanent harm to anyone, and he was being wrongfully imprisoned,” Martin said, meekly.

“Yes, well...,” Daniel cleared his throat. “There is little I can do about him. Even if I send word that he is to be cleared of all charges, his ancestry is not one that is appreciated in Gothanius, and I cannot promise that some group of locals might not take the law into their own hands. While I can assure there will be no official inquiry into his actions, his fate is in his own hands if he returns to areas that have heard of his exploits.”

“I guess that is better than can be hoped for,” Martin sighed.

“Now, you must understand that all of this aid I am giving you must remain between us,” Daniel said, lowering his voice. “It will take quite a bit of string pulling just to get your friends released and get the proper papers filed and messages sent. The king need not be bothered with this matter, all that matters to him is that you do your job for the benefit of Gothanius, and that you have the companions you are comfortable with to accomplish this task.”

Martin nodded.

“However, as you will recall I had sent word to you about a specific task that needed to be accomplished by you and your companions for the sake of the kingdom,” Daniel said. “At that time I was willing to use my influence to get your friends free of the contact they signed, however, since it took all of my influence to get them freed, we will have to assume that that is what I am giving you in return for doing what I am about to tell you.”

Daniel paused, and Martin looked at him puzzled.

“There was a reason why I wanted to meet you away from the castle, but now this cannot be avoided,” Daniel said, lowering his voice. “The king cannot find out about what I am going to tell you, nor can the populace at large for the good of the stability of the kingdom.”

“What is it?” Martin asked.

“It seems that a dark warlock was able to steal a diary belonging to the Queen,” Daniel said, lowering his voice to a near whisper. “Unfortunately, this diary details a dalliance that must not become common knowledge no matter what it takes. Not only can the king not find out about this, but his very fitness to rule could come into question if certain ambitious

nobles were to gain this information. You must discretely re-gain the diary and return it for me to return to the Queen. And no one, not even you, may look at its contents. If it becomes necessary that you need to look in it to confirm what it is, then I prefer it be you and no one else, but even that should not be necessary. It should be obvious what it is when you see it.”

“A dark warlock?” Martin asked, with an edge of suspicion in his voice.

“Yes, our sources say that he is named Rindalith, and has been seen meeting with what appear to be monks of Anubis in both Earthport and Summit,” Daniel said.

“Why, that is the same man who was after Jana!” Martin exclaimed.

“I figured as much, thus my willingness to believe your story about his inauthenticity.” Daniel said.

“So, what now?” Martin asked.

“Your companions will be freed in the morning and then you will be allowed to return to the alder-villages seeking this warlock and the diary and doing whatever else you have to do in terms of the hunt for the dragon and any investigating on this dark elf situation you need to do,” Daniel said. “However, I would like for you to write down everything you know about Rindalith and anything else you have discovered since you were last here and turn it in to me before you leave.”

“Very well, I will do my best,” Martin replied.

Daniel stood and put out his hand. “I want you to know that your efforts for the Kingdom of Gothanius are very much appreciated, and I wish you the best in your endeavors.”

“Thank you, and thank you for all your help, Mr. Ortun,” Martin said, shaking his hand as firmly as he could.

“Please, in private you may call me ‘Daniel’,” the steward said.

Martin thanked him again, and then Daniel left.

The watch-mage spent the night writing the requested record.

## **Ralem, 15th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

In morning, Martin the Green climbed up to a tower and created an illusion of a large colorful bird circling the tower as widely as the spell would allow him.

Nearly a mile away Ratchis saw it.

“They have been pardoned,” Ratchis told Jana.

“Oh? Good,” she replied.

By mid-day, Beorth, Jeremy and Kazrack had been released and had their gear returned to them and were marching with Martin up to the pass where they’d meet their other two companions.

“Hey, so what happened to the manticore’s body?” Jeremy asked.

“Daniel told me this morning that he is presenting it as a gift from us to the king to be stuffed and mounted in the royal trophy room.” Martin explained.

“So, we’re going to get credit for killing it?”

“I guess so.”

Kazrack stumbled along. He now had boils on his face, and the blisters in his mouth were bursting, causing him to spit out

yellow puss that dribbled down his beard. He smelled of rotted meat. His mind felt even cloudier.

“What happened to him?” Ratchis asked.

“He is very sick,” Beorth replied. “The curse of Osiris is upon him for not seeking out to accomplish his task.”

“Hopefully, now that we are going to see the Circle of the Thorn directly, he will recover,” Martin said. “And how is your arm healing?”

“It seems to be healing well, though it still aches,” Kazrack responded, spitting more puss.

“Is the bone healing straight? There was a man in my village who got kicked in the head by a goat. Now he has a permanent dent in his head,” Martin reminisced.

“I hope the druids will be able to heal my arm. I may not be able to complete the task set for me in time otherwise,” Kazrack said.

“We also have another task before us now,” Martin added. “It was something I had to say we’d do in order to assure that you’d be freed, but it seems like it already lies within our sphere of interest.”

Martin explained to the others about the queen’s dalliance and the stolen diary and Rindalith.

Jana snorted.

“Remember, it is very important that we tell no one about the diary,” Martin said, looking at Jeremy in particular. “If we must say anything at all, we can just say we are looking for Rindalith.”

“But looking for him will have to wait until Kazrack and I have fulfilled our tasks for Osiris,” Ratchis said.

“Of course,” Martin said. “But on the way there we can keep our eyes open for evidence of his passing.”

“Of course,” Ratchis replied.

They ate some rations, re-packed their things, and made ready to make the two-day march to Archet.<sup>39</sup>

“Anubis, the path that Ptah has placed before is long and fraught with danger, grant us your strength so that this can complete the journey,” Beorth said, laying his hand on Jeremy’s shoulder as they made ready to leave.

They marched across a gray and white landscape, avoiding contact with whomever they saw in the distance, moving generally westward, hoping to make the ridge that defined Greenreed Valley by evening in order to follow it south and westward to Archet.

However, the driving wind and occasional snow slowed their progress, and by evening they were forced to take shelter beneath some tightly-packed trees. Martin stayed up the vast majority of the night, not feeling sleepy because of his magic ring, but still feeling the fatigue of travel. He woke Jeremy for the last couple of hours of the night and got his required sleep, which was fitful.

### **Osilem, 16th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

The dawn was but a gray light, as a constant slush seemed to move nearly horizontally through the sky. Ratchis discovered that they had been moving too far southward and were not far from the Ogre Scar, so he redirected them north and westward.

Kazrack was feeling a great deal better, but still felt a bit weak and foggy. He hoped that as he made progress towards his goal, he would recover even more.

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<sup>39</sup> Archet is the name of the place Ethiel of Aze-Nuquerna told them they could find directions to the Forest of the Blood Sap.

By late afternoon the sleet had dissipated, and in the distance, they could see the ridge. Atop it they saw the fires of the cottages of Summit. They were less than an hour's march to it, so they decided to stop in Summit and pick up the splint mail armor Beorth had paid for already.

Martin was sent alone to climb the ridge and enter town in case word of their pardon had not reached Summit yet, which it probably had not. He waved to the others and made the ascent while they waited in a nearby copse of trees below.

Martin made his way straight to Maxel's smithy, and the smith/constable was surprised to see him.

"There's been bad word going 'round about your companions," Maxel said, sounding concerned.

"We have just returned from the capitol where it was all cleared up. Word of it should come to the alderman in a few days, in the meantime they wait on the edge of town," Martin explained.

"Good to hear," Maxel said with a smile. "There has been so much bad news of late that some good news is welcome."

"Bad news?"

"More people missing," Maxel said, his grin melting into a frown. "Most recently it was twin girls only thirteen years old, and one of your dragon-hunting friends, um... Gwar."

"Oh." Martin was surprised.

Martin gave Maxel the second half of the payment for the armor and took the bundle with the helmet on top and said goodbye to the smith.

"I may be away for a few weeks again, but my companions and I will return," he said.

Outside, Martin ran into Finn, Carlos and Frank.

"Hey, Martin!" Finn waved. Carlos tried to shake Martin's hand which caused the mage to drop the armor. Carlos picked it up for him, "*Perdona me.*" Martin explained what he was doing there and where he was going. Finn and Carlos insisted on escorting him back.

"I'm going to give the perimeter of the town another turn," Frank said. It was the first words he had spoken "He might have made his way close to town and be too hurt to come the rest of the way."

"Sure, Frank," Finn said, trying to sound reassuring. "Just be careful, go get Josef and bring him with you."

"Yeah, okay," Frank said softly and walked off.

"I take it he is not taking his brother's disappearance very well," Martin offered.

"Who would?" Finn shrugged his shoulders.

Carlos carried the armor down the ridge for Martin, and soon they were all together.

"Glad to see you guys are all right," Finn said, joining the others round the small fire they had burning to ward of the cold. "We heard rumors of a wild half-orc attacking guards in Ogre's Bluff and we feared there might some confusion..."

"Oh, there was no confusion," Ratchis said, wryly.

Finn looked puzzled.

Martin mentioned Gwar's disappearance.

"How long has he been missing?" Ratchis asked.

“This makes two days,” replied Finn.

“*Si, dos dias.* Two days,” said Carlos, looking sad and holding two fingers up.

“We were doing one of our patrols that we do to keep busy and make it look like we’re hunting the dragon, and looking into the disappearances,” Finn said.

“*Digale de los cabezas de perro feo,*” Carlos said, nudging Finn.

“Huh? Oh! Gnolls. We ran into gnolls. Three of them. We killed them though,” Finn half-smiled and half-frowned, as if he were proud of himself, but still did not relish the memory of it.

“You think the gnolls got to him?” Ratchis asked.

“That’s what Josef says,” said Finn. “But I’m not so sure. There would have been a sign of struggle or blood or something, but there was none of that. It was as if he walked away and did not come back. If it weren’t for the fact that he left his girl here in town I would have said he eloped.”

“So, he disappeared from town?” Martin asked.

“No, while we were out on patrol. Sorry, I got side-tracked. There is a hill that sticks up like a big toe just north west of town on the ridge. We go up there and do what we call ‘compass points’ and each take a spot on the north, east, west, and south side of the hill, with one of us on top to act as caller between the four. We do this to get a good clear look around. It’s like a crow’s nest, but better. I found the place, but it was Frank that found the best trail up there. Anyway, two afternoons ago, we were doing ‘compass points’ and Gwar had the eastern one, but he never called or came to the meeting spot. We went looking for him, but he was gone. At first we thought he might have gone to the temple of Bast...”

“There is a temple of Bast?” Martin asked.

“Uh? Oh yeah, just north of town,” Finn said.

“Do you think you could mark its location on my map?” Martin asked.

“Yeah, sure. I can try,” replied Finn. “There is only one priest there, though, and he is not all that reliable.”

“Are you saying he’s senile?” Martin asked.

“No, he’s a young guy like us, and he’s a real priest. He can heal you and everything, but he seems kind of, I don’t know, flaky.”

“Priests of Bast are like cats. They’re like... well, like cats,” Martin said, by way of explanation.

“You mean they lick themselves?” Jeremy asked with a grin.

Martin frowned

Ratchis cleared his throat.

“Oh, yeah, anyway, Gwar,” Finn said. “He wasn’t at the temple. He wasn’t anywhere. Frank is really upset about it, and so is Cynthia; that’s Gwar’s girl. We’ve been searching for him almost two days straight. The rest of us have gotten some sleep, but I don’t think Frank has slept at all.”

“You should be very careful, gnolls are crafty opponents,” Ratchis warned. “I take it you have been practicing your martial skills?”

“It’s more important than ever,” Finn replied.

“*Si, es muy importante. Siempre estoy diciendo que debemos practicar mas,*” Carlos said eagerly. Ratchis furrowed his

brow.

Finn shrugged his shoulders.

“Practice more,” Carlos said through a thick accent, trying to translate what he had just said.

“Well, no time like the present,” Ratchis said, standing. “Come on, Finn. Show me what you got.”

Finn was taken aback. “I’m not sure I want to fight you.”

“Come on, it will be just like the boat,” Kazrack said encouragingly.

Ratchis sparred a bit with Finn and then with Carlos and saw that both of their fighting skill had improved greatly, especially the latter. However, they were still no challenge for the half-orc’s own skill.

Carlos and Finn sat down with the group to have a small bite before they continued en route to Archet.

“I just wanted to let you know that we still plan to pay you back that money you spent to free us from the bounty-hunter,” Finn said. =<sup>40</sup>

“The best payment to me would be for you to simply pass on the help to others whenever you can,” Kazrack said.

“Oh, we do that too, but a debt is a debt and I don’t welsh on debts,” Finn said. “You will get paid.”

“You can pay us by supplying us with information,” Jeremy suggested. “There is a lot going on in these parts and you guys can act as an extra set of eyes and ears for us.”

“Sure thing, but you will still get your money,” Finn insisted. Carlos nodded.

After bidding their former travel companions good-bye (and Martin making sure that Finn marked the temple of Bast on his map), the party continued their journey towards Archet. Beorth packed away his old scale mail armor and donned his new splint mail. It felt heavier than he was used to and did not seem as well adjusted for a long march as his former armor had, but then again, he knew the ins and outs of scale mail, but splint was foreign to him.<sup>41</sup> He wore his large shield on his back, preferring to walk with his quarterstaff in hand.

Ratchis led Beorth, Jeremy, Kazrack, Martin and Jana on another two hours of marching through deep snow and through tightly packed trees along the south edge of the ridge westward to where they were told Archet could be found.

There was some confusion, but eventually Ratchis found signs of game trails and frequent tracks, and was able to lead the party to a small clearing where a large log lean-to was standing.

The lean-to had a very large brick hearth and several wooden benches. There was a large pile of split wood beside the hearth. It smelled of ash, pipe-smoke, and ale, but no one was inside.

“Is this the right place?” Kazrack asked.

“The elves said it was just a small trading post,” Ratchis said, pulling his hood up over his head to hide his heritage, remembering the rumors he had heard about the locals’ hatred of orcs.

“No one is here,” Beorth said, as they all walked in out of the wind. Ratchis began to chuck wood into the hearth.

“Thomas, do you smell anything bad?” Martin the Green asked his familiar. “Any bad creatures.”

“No, but... augh!!! I smell squirrels! Dead squirrels!”

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<sup>40</sup> The party rescued Finn and the others from the bounty-hunter in session #19.

<sup>41</sup> **DM’s Note:** Beorth has the *Armor Focus* feat in scale mail but cannot benefit from the feat in any other kind of armor.

Martin stroked Thomas' head reassuringly.

"I guess we'll spend the night here and see if anyone shows up to ask directions to the druids' place," Ratchis said.

"Lookin' fer druids, eh?" said a scratchy voice from the darkness of nearby trees. It was an old grizzled man, with skin like leather and a white shadow of a beard. He looked the party over with blood-shot blue eyes as he came towards the lean-to. "None of them 'round here."

"Excuse me, sir. We are looking for Archet," Kazrack said, stepping towards the old man. Ratchis got the fire going and then sat on the floor leaning on the wall. He pulled his hood further down over his face.

"Well, lookee that! Is that one them there stone folk?" the man asked pointing at Kazrack. "Don't see them much if ever 'round here, but this here is Archet. You are in it, so to speak."

"*This is Archet?*" Jeremy asked, incredulously.

"Sure it is," the old man replied. "Just a place for the local trappers and hunters to meet and trade their goods. They call me 'Toothless Jabnit' 'cause I ain't got no teeth... Well, I have one left." He opened his mouth and leaned forward. "See? It's all the way in the back. It's all black and stuff."

Jeremy recoiled as a stench as foul as death wafted from the old man's mouth.

"What can I call you?" Kazrack asked.

"Call me what ya like, just don't call me late for dinner!" The old man burst into a laugh like a hacking cough. "Oh, I kill myself!" He slapped his knee and walked over and dropped his huge pack on one of the benches and sat down.

"I am Kazrack Delver," Kazrack said. He then gestured to each of the others in turn. "This is Jeremy, Beorth, Jana, Martin the Green and that lump over there is Ratchis."

"He's a big lump!" Jabnit exclaimed. "He's almost as big as Big Larry!"

The man pulled some salted meat from a sack and began to gum on it. "So, whatcha folks lookin' for around here?"

Kazrack explained that they were looking for the Circle of the Thorn and a wood called "Dybbuk Akvram".

"Don't know anything about that, but Siram proolly does," Jabnit said. "He's as close to an alderman as we get in these parts."

"Where can we find this man?" Kazrack asked.

"He don't live far. I can show ya," Jabnit stood and walked over to the open side of the structure and pointed. "Ya see that tree? Over there. Just call out for him."

As the party walked over to where the old man had pointed, Jeremy hung behind and slipped a silver coin into his hand. Jabnit stuck it into his mouth and tested its authenticity against his sole tooth.

They came to the tree and looked around but could see no sign of a dwelling in or around it. Above them the canopy of fir was so thick that in most places the sky was obscured.

"There! I see some kind of opening up in the trees, but it is too high to reach," said Ratchis.

"Siram of Archet! I am Martin the Green, watch-mage. I beg your leave to speak with you."

A voice called down from above, "What do you want?"

"We were told you could help us. We seek the druids of the Wood of the Blood Sap." Martin replied.

“Oh, you mean the Circle of Thorns! Well, I guess you can come on up, but no more than three of you!” The voice said.

A rope-ladder came tumbling down out of the brush above. Martin, Beorth and Jeremy made their way up. They came through the snow-covered brush and up through an opening in a wooden platform which created a kind of porch to a large hidden tree house. There were two large coils of hemp rope up here, and a perch with a hooded hawk upon it. There was also a large barrel with a drain fashioned from wood beneath it to allow melting snow to drip right into it.

A man appeared in the doorway to the tree house. He was not very tall, but had an air of strength to him, the graying ends of his hair belying the youth in his sparkling green eyes. He wore a long sword at his side, and held a bow in his hands, but no arrow strung in it.

“So what are you looking for the Circle of Thorns for?” Siram asked, looking over his three guests very closely.

“We have been entrusted with tasks for Osiris, and it is there that two of these tasks can be accomplished,” Beorth replied.

“Heh,” Siram said, and stepped back into the house. “Come in.” The hawk on the perch ruffled its feathers.

The interior of the tree house looked very comfortable, with furs on the floor, and wooden fur-covered chairs. One wall had several different long and short bows on display, while over an iron pot-bellied stove were over a dozen pipes of different designs on pegs.

“Well, I wouldn’t recommend you go there,” pointing out two chairs they could use. Jeremy sat on the floor. “No one that goes there ever comes back out.”

“How come?” Jeremy asked.

“It is an immense wood surrounded by a wall of razor-sharp thorns,” Siram explained. “Hunters know to avoid the place as there is no way in there, unless you happen upon one of the mysterious openings that just appear sometimes. But those who have gone in to explore or chase prey have never returned. Not a single word, ever.”

“It does not matter,” Beorth said. “We have to go there, regardless.”

“I had a feeling you’d say that,” Siram smirked. He stood and walked over to the wall of pipes and took down three. “All you need do is go due west until you hit the stream, and then follow it north. On the other side you’ll see a tall ridge with a wood on top. Make your way up there and you’ll be on the edge of the Wood of the Blood Sap. If you had a map, I could show you more clearly.”

Siram walked over to a table and packed the pipes, and passed them out, and then took the map offered by Martin.

He took a few moments looking over the map.

“What is this stuff?” Martin asked.

“It’s a local herb. It helps to clear the mind,” Siram replied without looking up. Jeremy and Martin tried a bit, but Beorth politely refused.

“Hmmm, the Amphitheatre, what’s that?” He pointed to a spot on the map in the northwest corner of Greenreed Valley.

“We don’t know. We’ve never been there. Haven’t you?” Martin said.

“I avoid Greenreed Valley ever since that misty area rose up a few months ago at the start of winter,” Siram said. He looked back at the map. “This place, Westhold, it was wiped out by gnolls eight months ago. There ain’t nothing there anymore, but ruins and ashes. How’d you get this map?”

“I made it from maps I was allowed to study at Aze-Nuquerna,” Martin said.

“You mean the elf place?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t know they let humans in there,” Siram said, still not looking up from the map. “Some of the woodsmen around here trade with them, but it always takes place on the steps. No one goes in.”

“We helped them out of a jam,” Jeremy said. This made Siram turn and look each of them up and down again.

“You guys a group of them dragon-hunters?” he asked.

“Yes, but I work for the king,” Martin said.

“We had a group of them dragon-hunters pass through here not too long ago and piss off some of the locals,” Siram said. “They were led by a guy that looks a lot like you.” He pointed at Jeremy.

Jeremy looked down.

“There was a big fight. It was a mess. They were finally driven away. Some folks wanted to organize a party to track `em down and kill them all but organizing folks against orcs or gnolls is one thing, but human business is human business. I’m happy to mediate some disputes, but fights is another thing. Plus, they had one them northern wildmen with them. He was impaled clear through by a spear and still managed to kill six men. What am I going to do about something like that?”

“You’re lucky he stopped at six!” Jeremy said.

“You know them?”

“We had the unfortunate pleasure of meeting them once or twice,” said Martin. “They seem like an unsavory lot.”

“Well, if you see them again, make sure you tell them not to come back here again.” He handed the map to Martin and gestured for the watch-mage to hold it open and pointed to the top left corner. “That is what you are looking for.” He pointed south of there. “You can find wild ponies in this area but be careful. I heard word of an owlbear hunting in them parts.”

There was a pause as three of them puffed on their pipes.

“Do you have much contact with Ogre’s Bluff?” Martin asked.

“As little as we can get away with,” Siram replied. “We are not an official alder-village, and thus we avoid a lot interference by the king and the aldermen, but that also means we are on our own most of the time, but we like it that way. It was bad enough we had to deal with them during the orc skirmishes. Delagon, the constable is a real son of a bitch. He gives everyone a hard time, like he’s the only one who had his wife and children killed by orcs. That’s happened to half the people around here.”

“Well, thank you very much for your help,” Martin said after he had put away the map. He handed the pipe back to Siram after taking one last long puff. He really liked the taste of that stuff, since the ring’s power had kicked in this was the first time he had tasted something and enjoyed it.

Beorth and Jeremy stood as well.

“Well, if you are going to the Circle I don’t expect to ever see you again,” Siram shook their hands. “Good luck. And if you ever need arrows or the like, I am pretty good bowyer and fletcher, and make extra money that way.

They bid Siram good evening and climbed back down the rope ladder.

“I thought this task was supposed to be the easy one,” Jeremy said, as they came to the bottom.

“This *is* the easy one,” Beorth replied. “We will be welcomed. Our grandfather, Osiris, will watch over us.

“I hope so,” Jeremy mumbled.

The party decided to spend the night in the lean-to where there was shelter. There, Martin and Beorth retold all Siram had told them. In the morning, for better or worse, they'd make their way to the Circle of the Thorn.

**End of Session #29**

AQUERRA

## Session #30

The party settled into the lean-to for the night.

“Maybe in the morning we should see if Siram or someone has bows with stronger pulls for sale, for Ratchis and Jeremy, since they’re the best shots,” Kazrack suggested, laying his bedroll near the hearth.

“I don’t have much coin,” Ratchis said.

“We can pool our resources,” the dwarf said. “We should have enough.”

## Osilem, 17th of Dek – 564 H.E.

Morning came, and there was still no sign of anyone being around; even Toothless Jabnit had disappeared.

Kazrack and Ratchis did their morning prayers while Jeremy and Beorth practiced their swordplay.

“I guess a place like this doesn’t have a market,” Kazrack mused, when he was done lying with his forehead on his prayer-stone for an hour.

“This is the market,” Martin said, just finishing his preparation of spells.

“They probably only convene the market every few weeks,” Beorth suggested.

“Well, it was just that I was curious what Jana needed to acquire to cast a lightning bolt like Rindalith did,” Kazrack said.

“What!?” Ratchis asked with surprise.

“Remember, he had a ring that allowed him to do that,” Jana said.

“I didn’t see that,” Kazrack said.

“I must have been the only one who noticed,” Jana said.<sup>42</sup>

“We can always cut the ring from his hand when we kill him,” Beorth offered.

Everyone turned and looked at the paladin strangely

“Well, that is one way of dealing with the situation,” Jana said, with a smirk.

“My first thought was that it would be useful to be able to do that,” Kazrack said, arranging things in his pack.

“My first thought was that it hurt a great deal,” Ratchis said, wryly and threw his pack over his shoulder, stepping out into the morning sunlight.

Around them was the sound of dripping snow melting off the trees while birds chirped happily.

Kazrack tried to heal himself with a spell, but the pain of his broken arm was too much the first time and the spell was disrupted. He tried again, calling to Rivkanal, dwarven goddess of motherhood, mercy, and protection, “Lady of the Raised Shield, please heal me that I may protect Derome-Delem in your name!”

The *cure light wounds* spell functioned, and the last of the wounds the dwarf had suffered from the battle with Rindalith and the mantichore were gone. He was also free of boils and blisters (even the scars of them were gone), and he felt fit and clear-headed.

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<sup>42</sup> Jana is the only one in a position to make a spot check to notice the ring (at DC 18) that actually made the check.

The party walked over to Siram's tree house to ask him about purchasing strength bows, but no one was home.

They began their march westward.

"How long does a full moon last?" Kazrack asked when they had been marching just over an hour.

"Three days," Martin replied.

"Then I hope we get there within the day," Kazrack said. "The moon was full the last two nights, when it could be seen at all."

"Why do you care about the full moon?" Beorth asked.

"Because my *geas* states that the sickle must be forged beneath the full moon," Kazrack replied.

"Um, can you even make a sickle in one day?" Jeremy asked.

"No," Kazrack said.

"There was something I wanted to make clear to you all," Jana suddenly said. "If we run into Rindalith again, I want you all to know that I would not go with him. He has been known to charm people, so..."

"He won't charm me," Ratchis said.<sup>43</sup>

"So, if we see you going with him willingly, we know that it is not truly your wishes?" Beorth said.

"Yes," replied Jana.

The day was cold, but not the coldest they had endured while traveling the wilds of Gothanius for the previous few months. It was clear and nearly windless. Soon, Ratchis took a lead of a few score yards and led the way northward when they came to broad stream that was frozen in several places.

They marched on for another couple of hours, Ratchis scouting ahead in his magical boots that allowed him to keep on top of the snow and not leave a trail, while the others were forced to blaze a trail through snowbanks of various heights, keeping close to the stream where most of the snow had slipped into the water, and far from the treeline to their right. Most of the time Ratchis was so far ahead that the others could not see him, but it was not long after their break for a mid-day meal that he came jogging back to them.

"There are some travelers or natives to this area across the river, about a hundred yards upstream," the half-orc told the others. "I only saw one person. I think they were filling a skin on the bank, but there could have been others."

"How were they dressed?" Beorth asked.

"Couldn't really tell," Ratchis replied.

"Is it safe to assume it is one of the hunters?" Kazrack asked.

"I have no idea," Ratchis replied.

"Why don't we just go and greet them?" Kazrack suggested, and the party agreed, continuing their march upstream, but with Ratchis keeping with them for now.

However, by the time they got to the spot Ratchis had seen the mysterious figure it was gone. They decided not to take the time to go across and look for signs of the person.

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<sup>43</sup> Friars of Nephthys automatically save against all *compulsion* spells that allow a save and are allowed a save against those that normally don't.

And on they marched. Ra's Glory passed over their head from the right to the left and began its slow descent to the underworld. Soon they could see the tall ridge that ran parallel to the stream came into another taller ridge with a flattened top. They could see a multitude of trees atop it. Here the stream was much broader, but shallower, and there were stones that allowed passage across without getting wet.

Kazrack led the way across, hopping from stone to stone very slowly and carefully.

"Be careful, the stones are very slippery, even a bit icy in places," the dwarf called back.

Jana followed, and soon Martin and Jeremy had made it across as well. However, Beorth had not gone a third of the way across when his infamous clumsiness led to his slipping and splashing into the icy cold water.

"That stone is slippery," Beorth said, weakly.

Jeremy erupted into laughter.

Ratchis hopped quickly from stone to stone to reach the ghost-hunter and help him up, but reaching down he slipped as well and joined him in the water.

Now Jeremy was on the ground holding his stomach as he pointed and laughed.

"Jeremy!" Martin scolded.

"What? That is really funny!" the Neergaardian replied through guffaws.

Ratchis stood in the shallow water and helped Beorth to his feet and then clutching his holy symbol called to his goddess, "Nephthys, please protect this holy warrior from the cold this evening."

Beorth felt the divine warmth wash over him. "Thank you," he said.

Soon enough, they were at the base of the steep climb up to the top of the ridge. It was soon determined that there was not easy way up within sight. They continued to walk north along the ridge in the dimming light looking for a place to ascend. Finally, Ratchis spotted a series of very large stones that made a staggered and immense stairway up the side.

As in most of their endeavors out in the wilderness, Ratchis took the lead, climbing the first stone and then lowering a rope to pull the others up one at a time. They repeated this four times before they were at the top of the ridge, but by that time the sun had finally set, and the moon, full, gray, and unfocused rose, revealing a wondrous sight.<sup>44</sup>

As far as they could see there was a forest of towering pines and firs. The moonlight washed over the snow-capped tops of the trees giving the whole place a ghostly sheen. However, all about the forest was a wall of twisted and tightly packed thorns that reached nearly to the upper branches of the towering trees. There was no obvious way through the thorns.

"That's amazing," Martin said.

"This is quite a sight," Jana added.

"There must be a way in," Ratchis said. "Let's take advantage of the moonlight and try walking north along it."

The party began to walk around the edge of the forest, only a few short feet from the tumble off the edge of the ridge.

They walked for nearly an hour with no sign of an entrance.

"Maybe we should just announce ourselves," Martin suggested.

"How? Start a fire?" Kazrack asked.

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<sup>44</sup> Aquerra's moon is called *Mind's Eie*, is a gray color and appears blurry in the sky for unknown reasons.

“Very funny,” Ratchis was not often sarcastic.

Kazrack stepped closer to the thorns and reached out to see how much resistance they gave, when suddenly one of the thorns was impaled in his hand! He drew it back, as blood pooled in his cupped hand. The dwarf cried out.

“I swear they moved to stick me!” Kazrack said.

“Yes, I saw it move, as well,” said Beorth.

“Well, hopefully that announced us,” Kazrack said.

“Announced us? Looks like we’re not getting the warm welcome from Osiris I expected,” Beorth said.

“I could’ve told you that,” Jeremy said under his breath.

“It is not like we can expect to be welcomed by a marching band,” Martin said.

The party continued walking, most of them feeling discouraged and tired, but Beorth hesitated.

Martin and Jana noticed Beorth peering deep into the thorns as if trying to get a better look at something.

“Ratchis?” Martin called to the half-orc who was still walking.

Kazrack heard and turned to see Beorth and the others standing still, “Ratchis, hold!”

“Beorth, what do you see?” Jana came up beside the paladin and placed a hand on his shoulder.

Beorth was silent for a long moment, and then stepped right up close to the thorns.

“The most beautiful creature I have ever seen in my life,” Beorth said, softly. “A ram...”

“Careful, Beorth, do not allow yourself to be beguiled,” Ratchis warned.

Beorth suddenly held his arms open to the sky and looked up. “Osiris, please grant us passage into your realm. I believe you are aware that my friends and I have a quest to fulfill within these walls!”

There was another moment of silence as Beorth’s companions looked back and forth from looking at each other to trying to look past the thorns to see if they could see the ram the paladin spoke of.

“It is moving this way,” Beorth said and started walking northward again. The others followed.

“What does it look like, Beorth? How can it be that we do not see it?” Kazrack asked, as Beorth s tumbled along, occasionally pausing to strain his vision and then going on. After a few minutes of this he stopped suddenly.

“It will not go further,” Beorth said, stepping towards the thorn wall where it was between two particularly large trees. He did not stop and stepped right into the wall, but it parted for him with a gentle rustling.

“Wow,” said Jeremy, his jaw dropping open.

“We must enter now,” Beorth said walking into an ever-lengthening corridor between walls of thorn.

Ratchis did not hesitate and followed. Kazrack looked at Jeremy and said, “Take the rear.”

He followed Ratchis and then came Martin and Jana. Jeremy was last.

“It is leading us,” Beorth said to Ratchis. “Can’t you see it?”

“Describe it so that we may know what we look for,” Kazrack said, over-hearing.

“It is huge. Larger than any normal ram, almost as if it were what every ram would aspire to be. Its fleece is as spun gold, it is as tall as a man at the shoulder, and even its broad horns are honeyed in color,” Beorth said, as if in a trance.

Ratchis squinted his eyes, and for a second he thought he did see a sudden flash of gold between the thorns that slowly opened for them about sixty feet ahead in the dim moonlight. But then there was nothing.

Behind them, the thorns closed back up.

“Are we sure we are going the right way?” Jeremy asked.

“There is only one way to go,” replied Martin, holding his lantern as high as he could as to not lose sight of Beorth and Ratchis who led the way.

The path opened before them and closed behind them, all along Beorth following the immense golden ram that no one else could really see. It seemed a noble creature to him, moving confidently at the edge of his vision, the thorns opening before him. The path itself wound back and forth from the left to the right and back again, meandering almost as if by random, but definitely taking the party deeper and deeper into the woods, just very slowly.

It was oddly quiet. There was no sound of animals, birds or insects around, just the sound of their boots in the snow.

“If we get attacked here, we’d be sitting ducks,” Kazrack commented.

No one replied.

After meandering for a half hour, the path seemed to straighten again. As best as Ratchis could tell they were going north by northwest. Suddenly, ahead on the right they saw the glow of a large bonfire. The path passed a clearing on the right, which was just on the other side of a few feet of thorns. The bonfire was in the clearing, but they could not determine how large the clearing was through the thorns.

“Hello? Is there someone there? Is someone there? Hello?” a frightened woman’s voice came from inside the clearing.

Beorth stopped and stepped closer to the thorns on the right side and tried peering through. Way up ahead the ram turned left, and the path opened for him as he moved out of sight.

“Hello?” the paladin called into the clearing beyond, as Ratchis stepped up beside him and peered in as well.

They could now see a bier of stone beside the bonfire. Upon the stone was the silhouette of a woman wrapped in a fur blanket. She moved forward on the stone but was stopped by a chain which was connected from her ankle to a ring in the stone.

“Oh thank Ra! You have to help me before the monsters come back!” She began to grow more and more disturbed. “Please. Oh god, please! There has been some kind of mistake.”

Ratchis felt his ire rise in him as he saw the chain on her ankle, and his hand went reflexively to his war hammer.

“She sounds like she needs help,” Kazrack said.

“What would a woman be doing in the depths of the thorns?” Martin wondered aloud.

Ratchis looked around frantically for a way into the clearing, but there was none.

“Beorth, move ahead!” Ratchis commanded, hoping the path would lead them around into where she was.

“Hello, who is there?” The woman called again. “Hurry, before they come!”

“Aren’t we going to help the woman?” Kazrack said, puzzled at seeing Beorth and Ratchis begin to hurry forward past the clearing and make for the bend away from it. The dwarf stepped towards the clearing and looked in to see the woman.

“Gods! Woman, what is going on here?”

“I really don’t think we should meddle in these things. We really don’t know what’s going on here and what we’re getting involved in,” Jana said, but her warning for caution went unheeded. Kazrack turned his shoulder and tried to walk through the thorns, hoping his armor and covering his face with his arms would protect him, but he was wrong. He could feel the thorns squirm and wriggle to make sure he pressed himself against the maximum possible number, and they were as strong as steel puncturing his chain shirt in many places. The dwarf leapt back; his body streaked with his own blood running from numerous puncture wounds.

Ratchis turned when he heard Kazrack cry out, and began to hack at the thorn wall with his sword.

“No! It’s too late they’ve come,” the woman suddenly shrieked, and the party could now hear snarling voices approaching the clearing from the other side. Their voices were goblin-like, but deeper and harsher in tone.

“The ram that Beorth can see must have led us here to save this woman!” Kazrack said, drawing his light flail in his off hand.

“No! The ram led us to the path, not to the woman!” Jana insisted.

“That doesn’t matter, we still have to save her!” Jeremy said, drawing his long sword.

“This is all a nightmare! A nightmare!” the woman began to scream.

“*Gnarish farsche cunndosh fessa!*” One of the goblinoid voices cried in a commanding tone.

“Let’s try and find another way around,” Ratchis cried to his companions when he realized that his chopping was virtually ineffective and that it would take too long to chop all the way through. The thorns moved and re-grew almost as fast as he cut at it.

“Woman, have you met any druids?” Ratchis called.

“No! There are no druids here!” She replied.

“Why are you a prisoner?”

“Just help me! Please help me! Help me!” The woman begged.

“Why were you brought here?” Ratchis continued to question.

“The monsters just grabbed me!”

“We gotta help the lady!” Jeremy insisted.

“Those creatures might be the druids,” Ratchis warned.

“That’s what I think, let’s see where the path leads,” Beorth said, drawing his own sword, and leading the way.

Martin joined Kazrack in peering into the clearing and now both could see two large hairy humanoids, broad-shouldered and with visible fangs. They were covered in long dirty brown fur, and their red eyes glowed faintly in the dim light.

“*Goresh feeshee knach-knache!*” One of them growled.

“I hate to sound callous, but we don’t know what’s going on,” Jana said, following Ratchis who took off after Beorth. “Maybe this is some form of punishment for her.”

“Those are bugbears!” Kazrack cried out. “Bugbears can be druids?”

“*Sumnus!*” Martin cried, casting a handful of sand through the thorn wall. One of the bugbears swayed and fell, snoring

loudly at the feet of his companion.

*“Loxxo Far-geeva karsh!”* the other bugbear screamed, and ran back the way he had come. *“Farna-loxxo! Farna-Orsho!”* he could be heard to yell.

“How long will that last?” Kazrack asked Martin.

“A few minutes,” Martin replied.

“Hopefully that will last long enough. It seems the other one went to get reinforcements. We need to find a way around,” Kazrack said.

“Help! Please! Help!” the woman cried.

“We are trying to find a way around. We’ll be right back,” Kazrack called to the woman, pushing Martin ahead of him. Jeremy took up the rear.

“This doesn’t seem to be going in the right direction, but I don’t see what other hope we have,” Kazrack said, as the path turned right again, leading the party further away from the clearing.

Jeremy paused and looked back. He could hear the woman screaming more and the bugbear voices yelling what he thought were jeers and insults at him and the others.

They walked onward for another ten minutes until the cries of the woman had faded away. The path turned left again. They were moving even further away.

“This isn’t going to lead to her.” Said Kazrack, obviously frustrated.

“It is very possible that that woman is to be a human sacrifice,” Ratchis said, calmly, but not slowing his pace.

Beorth still led the way, and he could still see the ram leading the way.

“That’s horrible!” Martin exclaimed.

“Who would practice such a foul ritual?” Kazrack asked.

“The druids of Osiris, that’s who,” Beorth said, matter-of-factly.

Kazrack stopped dead in his track and hung his head, “Who have I sworn aid to...?”

“Don’t worry, Kazrack,” Ratchis said, trying to sound reassuring. “They only sacrifice prisoners.”

“It matters not!” the dwarf retorted.

“Prisoners who volunteer,” Ratchis added.

“Volunteers I can almost accept,” Kazrack said, beginning to walk again.

“Remember Kazrack, just because you see something in this place doesn’t make it real,” Jana warned.

“Dwarves cannot be fooled by illusions!” Kazrack said stubbornly.

“Yes they can,” Martin said.

“No, they can’t,” Kazrack maintained.

“What about when you heard those false voices when we were attacked by those demon gnomes?” Jeremy asked.

“That wasn’t an illusion. It was voices,” Kazrack would not give in.

“No, that was an illusion,” Martin said, condescendingly.

“Bah!”

They continued to walk. Occasionally, Beorth would lose sight of the ram, and quicken his pace only to find it having turned again on the long meandering course.

“So, we are just going to leave that woman to die?” Jeremy asked, sounding upset.

“If she’s here by her own choice...” Beorth began.

“She didn’t seem to be here by her own choice,” Jeremy snapped. “And if she did come here by her own choice, she chose a bad time to change her mind.”

Kazrack threw his flail down and kicked the dirt. “Martin, what do you say?” the dwarf looked to the watch-mage for direction on the matter.

“I will trust Beorth’s and Ratchis’ judgment in this matter,” Martin replied.

They continued to walk, and Kazrack took up the spot beside Ratchis.

“Will you call upon your goddess to heal the wounds I took while attempting to go through the thorns?” Kazrack asked the friar.

“If you will have an open mind about what we find here,” Ratchis replied.

“I always have an open mind,” Kazrack said, and Jana rolled her eyes.

“I just need you to understand that we may not have the power to do certain things here,” Ratchis said.

“Regardless of whether something is possible, you still have to try it if it is the right thing,” Kazrack said.

“What would you have done? Gone back and shouted at them? That would have been helpful,” Ratchis said, growing more and more comfortable using sarcasm from the months of spending time with these people.

“I’ve bowed to the preference of the group. Is that not enough?” Kazrack said, sulkily.

Ratchis cast a curing spell on Kazrack.

The companions marched for another half hour, their fatigue growing.

“The ram is gone, but it looks like maybe there is something ahead,” Beorth called out. For a moment it looked like the path opened into a clearing, but suddenly a cloud passed over the moon, and Martin’s lantern did not seem up to the job of piercing the ominous dark.

“It’s a good thing we don’t necessarily believe in omens,” Jana said, looking up as the last bit of moonlight disappeared.

“I do,” Kazrack said.

They stepped slowly into the clearing, and found that the “mouth” of it was a bit wider than the path by about ten feet on either side, but beyond it was inky blackness of a much larger clearing that went far past the range of the lantern.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Jeremy murmured.

They heard a grunt from the darkness before them, and then the sound of something crunching through the snow, loudly.

The party let out a collective gasp as a bear stepped into the circle of lantern light. However, it was like no bear any of them had ever seen. It was twenty feet long and taller than a man at the shoulder. It reared up on its hind legs and bellowed.

“By the gods!” Kazrack exclaimed.

Beorth fell to his knees, “The druids know we are here.”

Ratchis put his hand out towards the bear and took a half-step forward. The immense bear let out a breathy grunt and fell back to its four legs and stepped toward the party.

“Ratchis, beware...” Kazrack warned, reaching for his flail. The bear roared again, and Ratchis could see the huge maw open before him. The bear could easily rip the head and shoulders off the half-orc’s body with one bite, but Ratchis did not flinch. Instead, he put his other hand out gesturing for Kazrack to step back.

The bear snorted and began to sniff Ratchis. The half-orc felt the cold and moist nose of the bear on his face, the mucus and saliva of the bear smearing off onto him. He could feel its hot breath, in and out, pulling on his skin, and smell the animal’s stinky breath. The bear sniffed him up and down, the force of his snout knocking the huge ranger back a few feet, but he always stepped right back up to it with no fear. The bear turned its head and looked at Kazrack and yawned. It then turned and walked back to the darkness.

“Kazrack, take up the rear,” Ratchis asked the dwarf. “Beorth, you walk up front with me.”

They stepped forward into the inky darkness of the huge clearing. The light from Martin’s lantern seemed to almost struggle against the night and barely persevere. Suddenly, there was a sound like many feet crunching the snow from several spots up ahead in the darkness the bear had disappeared into.

Suddenly three huge fires lit up, two about sixty feet from the party and third between them, but another ninety feet back. And all about them in a semi-circle were scores of the large hairy goblins. They held spears, and began to speak in their harsh language, their individual murmurs turning into a collective roar.

The party froze in their tracks, outnumbered at least ten to one, maybe even twenty to one.

The cloud rolled away from before the moon, and the crowd of bugbears opened creating an aisle from which emerged several robed figures. At their lead was a tall figure nearly seven feet tall. He wore a brown cloak, with the hood over his head, and at his side he wore the curved blade of a scimitar. At his right side, was the only unclouted figure of those that came forward, it was a huge bugbear (at least a head taller than the others), but his face was shaved showing his pinkish-yellow skin covered in intricate war paint of blue, black and red. This bugbear’s fur was dyed blue and black in places, had a ring through his nose, and he wore a collar of tanned human skin. On the bugbear’s right was another black cloaked figure, but only slightly taller than five feet in height. On the central figure’s left were two cloaked figures of about equal height, but one had a great girth, and the other was tall and lean.

The central cloaked figure raised his hand and the scores of bugbears all quieted suddenly with a sound like a break in a rainstorm. He brought his hands up to his hood and pulled it back, revealing a non-human face. He had a furred muzzle, brown and dappled with spots of black and streaks of white. It was nearly canine in look, but not like any dog any of them had ever seen, except perhaps Ratchis.

“A groll,” Martin murmured.

“Please forgive my actions, lords and lady, if this thing the human god thinks is good is an affront to you,” Kazrack said under his breath, never taking his eyes from the robed monsters before them.

There was an eerie silence only broken by the raspy breathing of the scores of bugbears looking down at the party.

Ratchis took half a step forward, “Do you speak common?” The half-orc had fought and hunted gnolls since before ever becoming part of human society, his knowledge of them was the one constant between his previous life and his life as a Friar of Nephthys, but this was new to him.

“Heh,” the gnoll cleared his throat with a laugh-like grunt. “Yes... You have finally arrived. I guess that gives you plenty of

time to work on the sickle before the next full moon.”

“I guess Osiris told you of our coming?” Ratchis asked.

“We knew of your coming. You are Ratchis?” The gnoll’s eyes did not leave those of the half-orc.

“Yes.”

“That one there,” The gnoll pointed to Kazrack without looking at him. “The Son of Jocham? That is Kazrack?”<sup>45</sup>

“I am,” Kazrack said, speaking up.

“I am Mardak the Elder,” the gnoll said. “My associates and I make up the Circle of the Thorn. It is through us that you shall repay this debt to Osiris, Ratchis and Kazrack. I can sense that the weight of your promise lies heavily on two of your companions as well, though for the girl it is closer than she thinks. We are the servants of the Beast Gods, whom Osiris leads in the Great Council of Beasts.”

“We appreciate that you sent a guide for us,” Beorth said, respectfully.

“We sent nothing,” Mardak scowled. “You will have to wait for the next full moon to finish the sickle, as you have arrived too late to fashion it in time for this one, for tonight is the last night of it but at least now you will have plenty of time to prepare for the next full moon, and have the blade ready in order to do the finishing touches under the pale light of Mind’s Eie.”

“Do you have a forge?” Kazrack asked.

“In the Glade of Henaire,” Mardak replied.

“Can you heal my arm? It is broken,” Kazrack asked.

“Heh. Perhaps by the time of your first blows it will be healed of its own accord. Perhaps not, in which case perhaps there is something we can do. There is no need to be impatient.” The gnoll took no pains to hide his disgust for the dwarf.

“And what of that woman you have prisoner?” Kazrack his own anger and disgust becoming apparent as he asked. “Why do have her?”

“That is none of your concern. All that should concern you is the accomplishing of your tasks well,” Mardak said.

“I must know what you plan to do with that woman, or I will do nothing for you, whether it be Osiris’ will or no,” Kazrack said, stomping his foot.

Mardak let out a grunt, and the painted and shaved hulking bugbear at his side took a half-step forward.

“If you really want to know, we will answer any question, but you must pay us,” Mardak said, putting out a hand to hold back the bugbear. “If you tear out a fingernail for each question. It will please Hezza.” Mardak nodded towards the bugbear.

“How can ask for a such a thing?” Kazrack asked, aghast.

“Oh, son of Jocham? Do you fear a little pain? Does it turn the stomach of your legendary stalwart race? I am shocked,” Mardak’s sarcasm dripped from his maw.

“How many questions will you answer if we chop off a finger?” Beorth asked.

“You need not do that. How will you carry out your tasks ahead without your fingers? We only want your fingernails,”

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<sup>45</sup> *Jocham* is a famous dwarven hero seen now as a saint, who served as the champion of the last unified dwarven kingdom, in the Second Age.

Mardak replied.

Ratchis did not hesitate; putting his index finger to his teeth he ripped out the fingernail with a muted grunt. He stepped forward and handed it to the gnoll. Mardak smiled a gnoll's smile, revealing his teeth in an intimidating grimace. He handed the nail to Hezza.

The rest of the party looked at Ratchis with shock.

"What is your question?" Mardak asked Ratchis.

"How did you come into possession of this woman?" The half-orc asked.

"She is a criminal; a murderess sent to us to perform her sentence," Mardak replied.

Ratchis turned to Kazrack and held up his bloody finger, "Do I need to confirm what they will do to her?"

"No!" Kazrack shouted, his face flushed with anger. He muttered. "If I must do this let it be done as quickly as possible."

"Do you think it is enough to simply accomplish your tasks?" Mardak said. "You must do them and do them well, without hesitations and to the best of your abilities. For you stand now on one side of a balance, and for each mark against you a stone is placed upon the opposite platter, until... you are toppled off Osiris' scale all together. This is a steep debt you have incurred. I do hope it was worth it."

Jeremy gulped, and Beorth turned and glared at him.

"You know Ratchis, do you remember from the map if...?" Kazrack began.

"Do we bore you Son of Jocham?" Mardak snapped. "We will brook no disrespect, and no violation of the laws and rules of this place. It might be in your best interest to pay close attention to all that will be said to you here."

"What will my task be?" Ratchis asked. "I assume that I will not have to offer up a fingernail for the answer to *that* question?"

The small robed figure let out a high-pitched chortle. Mardak snorted.

"Your task is much more straightforward, bastard of Ashronk," Mardak said. "There is a creature you must utterly destroy. It is not of this world, and it does not belong here. It comes from a place where it is the only thing that is, and in this world, it seeks to assimilate everything into itself. It can take on the shapes of the things it assimilates. It is a parasite. It will infect the land with its unreality. It kills the beasts of the woods for no purpose, and it also slays men, but we care not of men as much, for men too must be cut from the world like dead wood, from time to time."

Kazrack snarled.

Mardak looked right into the dwarf's eyes. "Worry not, Son of Jocham, for the sons of stone act ever as our axes and our fires that seed the forest anew." The gnoll druid paused. "Beware of this creature. It can take the form of more than one creature at a time. In time, it will grow so large as to endanger all of Derome-Delem and eventually all of Aquerra. I'm sure by then some other 'heroes' of greater power and renown than any of you shall ever have will deal with it, but we want it stopped before it comes to that." He said the word "heroes" as if it were a profane.

"Elder," Martin said, stepping up to come along side Ratchis and Beorth. "When you say this thing can take many forms, do you mean it can be in two places at once, or that it can take upon itself more than one form?"

"What I said," was Mardak's only reply. "It has recently been seen in an area south of here where wild ponies gather, and it is assumed it can take the form of a pony."

"How can we tell it from the real thing?" Ratchis asked.

"That is for you to figure out," Mardak replied. "And now it is time for you to be brought to where you may make camp

and where you will be spending each night.”

The short figure hopped forward and pulled back his hood, revealing a dog-headed humanoid with dark blue fur and big cute puppy-dog eyes.

“A kobold!” Martin gasped.

“Effner here will guide you,” Mardak said, gesturing to the kobold.

The party picked up their packs and gear, and made ready to follow the kobold who walked over to their left and gestured for them to follow. Two other robed figures moved to follow as well.

“One last thing,” Mardak said, calling their attention back. “We need not even tell you this, son of Jocham, but on the night of full moon in the Glade of Hennaire there may be those that come and try to stop you. Let this be a warning to you. In fact, because of them, this sweet tender morsel,” he pointed to Jana. “Should not be there at all.”

“What are they?” Martin asked.

“You know the price for answers to your questions,” Mardak replied. The party heaved a collective sigh, feeling the darkness of the wood, and the musk of bugbears, gnolls and other typically evil humanoids heavily upon them. They turned and followed Effner.

The party was led to the left across the clearing, and towards the thick woods again. The way they were led was still flanked by tall hedges of thorns, but much wider, and there seemed to be an actual path instead of it opening for them as they walked. Behind them, they could hear the hooting and screaming of nearly a hundred bugbears leaving the clearing.

“I cannot believe this,” Jeremy muttered as they left the clearing. “All of this... because of me!”

“Yes,” Martin said, probably a little more scathingly than he intended.

“Or forfeit our lives,” Beorth added, and Jeremy’s head hung low.

Effner the Kobold brought the party to a much smaller clearing and had a small rocky outcropping with a dead log that had fallen across the top of it, creating a small shelter.

“Knap! Knap!” the Kobold said, prefacing his halting common in a high-pitched yapping voice. “Don’t leave here, until we come and get you. Um, unless you really want.” He smiled and laughed.

He joined the other two figures who had brought up the rear, and then turned back to the party. “Knap! We will come to get you in the morning to bring you to get your gear and then to the forge.”

The three druids left the clearing. The party was left alone. They began to make camp, but Kazrack simply sat in the dirt beneath the rocks.

“I was told Osiris was a good god,” Kazrack said, slipping his chain shirt up over his head.

“Osiris is *not* a good god,” Beorth replied, matter-of-factly.

“You could have said so!” Martin exclaimed.

“He was not there when we used the urn,” Kazrack said, resignedly. “So, I have sworn to help a god that is not good?”

“Yes,” Beorth replied again.

“I think Osiris is a good god,” Ratchis said, dropping his stuff and starting to get a small fire going. “He stands for the balance of nature. I don’t see how else you can describe a being who stands for the very cycle of life.”

“You could also say that he is uncaring with little regard to good or evil,” Kazrack said.

“Yes,” Martin said.

“So it is not ‘good’,” the dwarf reiterated.

“It is ‘good’ to me,” Ratchis said.

“Well, I’m sorry friend, but that’s not good enough for me,” Kazrack said.

“It should be!” Ratchis yelled, getting angry. “We have all worked together for a long time and have saved each other’s lives many times! Don’t you think we should trust each other enough to take each other’s words for things?”

“But we’re dealing with gnolls! And bugbears! And... and gnolls!” Kazrack yelled back, spittle flying from his mouth.

“Hush!” Martin said.

“And, I am half-orc,” Ratchis said, more quietly.

“And you’re half-human,” Martin added.

Jana simply watched the exchange from the over by the small fire, tucked under the make-shift shelter, while Jeremy set up their four man tent.

“And gnolls are evil!” Kazrack insisted.

“They *tend* to be evil,” Ratchis said. “But even I who had an enmity against them my whole life sees that that is not always the case.”

“So, Osiris is not evil?” Kazrack asked Beorth.

“No, Osiris is not evil,” the paladin who serves the son of the nature-god replied.<sup>46</sup>

“And Mardak serves Osiris, so perhaps he is not evil,” Ratchis said, referring to the gnoll druid.

“Perhaps?” the dwarf roared. “This is ridiculous!! I would have never sworn this oath if I had known...!”

Jeremy looked over at the dwarf from where he was putting up the tent.

“Too late for that,” Ratchis said, callously.

“Anything else obvious you wish to tell me?” Kazrack snapped, turning to the half-orc.

“Other than that you’re a pain in my backside? No,” Ratchis said.

“Kazrack? Perhaps I can explain,” Beorth said, stepping between the dwarf and the half-orc with his hands outspread.

“Right now, the only thing that needs explaining is how doing this is *not* betraying my gods,” Kazrack said, his anger increasing.

Beorth took in a quiet breath. “Kazrack, I understand why the fulfillment of your quest causes you turmoil. I have learned a great deal since I left the monastery a few months ago and I have seen much which troubles me, but I have started to understand the nature of the world we live in. Please allow me to explain it to you according to my beliefs.”

“Please, do.” Kazrack answered more quietly, trying to breathe through his seething.

Beorth began to rummage through his pack and pulled out a candle. He lit the candle and its light filled up the darkening

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<sup>46</sup> Anubis – Guardian of the Dead, is son of Osiris and Isis, as are the gods, Nephthys, Set and Horus.

clearing. He sat down before the candle and motioned to Kazrack and Ratchis to join him. They hesitated, but then complied.

“When I meditate, Kazrack, I frequently light a candle. This candle brings light and a focus for my thoughts. The candle represents the Gods of Good—Ra and Anubis—to me. While the darkness where the candlelight does not reach represents the Evil Gods—Seker and Set.”

“It can be said that the people of this world are neither entirely good nor entirely evil. We are each capable of ‘good’ actions and ‘evil’ actions, and that the world is a battleground for both Good and Evil. The Druids of Osiris are pledged to striking and maintaining a balance between those two opposing forces. They operate in this area here.” Beorth stood and slowly began to walk the circular penumbra created by the candlelight and the darkness. “Their actions are always calculated to maintain a balance between the darkness and the light. In some ways, it seems that they are acting in an entirely ‘evil’ manner, “ Beorth took a step further into the darkness and away from the light, “but those actions are only taken to maintain the balance that they are sworn to uphold. “Evil is necessary to prevent Good from holding sway in the world. The same would apply to seemingly ‘good’ actions.”

Beorth paused for a brief moment to be sure that Kazrack is still following his argument.

“When I meditate, I like to face the light of the candle, but I have also faced away from the candle. The candle provides warmth and light and I do not like to turn my back on that. When I meditate on darkness, I can only find coldness and emptiness. I do not find any comfort or solace in the darkness. It is for that reason that I know I must remain faithful to my god and his power. I do not like to be separated from the warmth and the comfort of my god’s power.”

The paladin paused.

“You must have faith, Kazrack, that the Druids are acting according to their faith and that they are only trying to promote a balance between Good and Evil. No matter how much their beliefs seemingly conflict with your own, they are not evil creatures.”

Kazrack stood and turned away from Beorth and Ratchis, who also stood, but then he turned back saying, “The only balance that is good is found in fair trade, and is found in the blade, but to find virtue in the balance you speak of is to deny that things can all be good.”

“You say a blade is good?” Martin asked, coming back into the debate.

“It can be used for good,” Kazrack said. “Or for evil. It is balanced, as I said.”

Martin paused and then tried to remember what he learned in his ‘Parables and Analogies’ class at the Academy of Wizardry, “If a forest grows for 100 years without a fire, when a fire comes the forest will be destroyed. If a nation knows only peace for 10 generations, their swords will rust in the armories and the people will lose all knowledge of war, and when war *does* come, the nation will be destroyed. Do you see what I am getting at?”

But Kazrack did not get a chance to answer, because Jana stood and addressed him.

“You know Kazrack, I am disappointed in you,” she said. “Everywhere we have gone in this kingdom, at least some person has called you names or treated you badly because you are a dwarf, and look at Ratchis, he is descended from the enemy of your people, but I don’t think one of us doubts his good heart, but still you pre-judge. Have you learned nothing in all these months?”

Martin jumped back in, “I do not trust goblins and kobolds, and the like. They always raided the villages of my people when I was growing up, and a goblin raiding party took my father’s hand, but if these creatures are the chosen of Osiris, then I will not question his judgment.”

“And if a sword is not inherently evil, than neither is the sickle you have sworn to forge,” Beorth added, tardily.

“You are correct,” Kazrack said, looking at Jana, and then Beorth and finally at Martin. “I do not wish to be rude, but I must ask my gods for guidance on the morrow.”

Kazrack stepped over to Beorth and reached up to put a hand on the paladin's arm, "You are the most like a dwarf amongst us. I want you to know I honor you for that."

"If only my religion allowed me to grow a beard," Beorth joked, breaking the tension with a bit of humor.

It was decided that Martin would take watch most of the night since he did not need to sleep much (thanks to his ring), and that he would wake Kazrack to take the last watch.

## **Tholem, 18th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

In the pre-dawn darkness of morning Martin used an illusion of the King of Gothanuis to awaken Kazrack for the final watch.

"Was that magic?" Kazrack asked.

"Yes," replied Martin laying in his bedroll, enjoying every moment of the blessed sleepiness that evaded him most of the time. He had never realized before the effect to of *Lacan's Demise* had kicked in what a narcotic and desirous feeling it really was. Thomas was already curled up into a little sleeping ball on the watch-mage's chest.

"I told you dwarves couldn't be fooled by illusions," Kazrack said, getting up.

Martin sighed and rolled over, plummeting into his nightly two hours of glorious sleep. He had begun to look forward to it more than anything else.

A couple of hours later, everyone was awake and making ready for the coming day.

Kazrack approached Beorth as he strapped on his armor, "I'm sorry to disturb your morning rituals, but this is weighing on my mind. I'm not sure of my ability to converse civilly with our hosts, so could you ask them for me what the purpose of the sickle is?"

"Kazrack, I would speak on your behalf if you like," the paladin replied. "But I think your honor would suffer if I were to speak for you. They will not respect you."

"I do not care for the respect of gnolls and monsters. If *you* will respect me less, that is another matter and I will do my own asking," Kazrack said, his sullen and angry mood from the night before did not seem to have passed. He walked over and grabbed his set of masterwork smithing tools that he always carried with him.

At that moment, Efner the kobold druid, and the two robed figures that had accompanied him before arrived at their camp. One figure was nearly six feet tall and wore its cloak so that it completely covered its body, including its face covered by a low-hanging cowl. However, the figure's bare feet were visible. They were not human feet, or even humanoid feet, but reptilian three-toed feet (with one toe pointing backward). The scaly skin was mottled black and dark green.<sup>47</sup> It moved with an awkward gait, and a faintly unpleasant smell emanated from it. The other figure was barely five and half feet tall, and also wore a low cowl, but wore boots and seemed less imposing.

"Knap!" the kobold squeaked to get everyone's attention. "We go cave. Cave get things. Get things to Glade."

The non-reptilian figure stepped forward, and a flowing tenor voice emerged from under the hood, "What my diminutive and excitable companion is trying to say is that we shall guide you to a cave where ore and other resources for your task are stored, which you will then carry to the forge in the Glade of Henaire to begin your work on the sickle."

The party was led away from their camp and back towards the large clearing where they had met up Mardak the Elder the night before. Most of them left their gear at the camp, except Ratchis who always carried his full pack wherever he went, and Martin the Green, who was loathe to leave his spellbooks anywhere after being separated from his for so long while the

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<sup>47</sup> Both Kazrack and Beorth recognized these as *not* being the feet of a lizardfolk, as they both has seen a handful in the Port District during their time in Verdun.

guests of the gnomes.<sup>48</sup> Kazrack only carried his tools.

They skirted the large clearing and followed another trail through the thick wood, but this one was not flanked by the tall thorn hedges. They moved through a series of forks in the narrow path and eventually came to a low squat rocky hill, with a cave entrance a third of the way up. The kobold deftly leapt up the rocky terrain followed by the party and then the other two druids.

“Carry! Carry! Knap!” the Effner cried as he led the way into the cave.

In the cave, Martin and Jana picked up a bunch of extra smithing tools to carry, while the four strong members of the party carried crates of the materials needed to make the sickle and run a forge.

“I wonder how these things got here?” Kazrack said, heft one of the boxes with Ratchis’ help.

“Probably a little bit of fair trade,” Beorth offered.

“I hope so,” Kazrack sighed, with visions of dwarven mining operations being raided and plundered by bugbears and gnolls in his mind.

The smooth-voiced druid took a moment in the cool darkness of the cave to remove his hood; his stark white hair glistened in the sunlight coming through the opening, and his coal-black skin and his shining pink eyes contrasted his delicate elven features.

Kazrack gasped, and almost dropped his end of the crate he and Ratchis bore.

“Yes?” the Novilunistani asked in his mellifluous voice.<sup>49</sup>

The dwarf did not reply.

They carried the things back through the narrow trails and back to the large clearing and then were led to another set of trails, which eventually brought them to the Glade of Hennaire. The Glade was strangely free of the deep snow that was prevalent everywhere that trails were not specifically made. Instead, there were random patches of snow here and there, that appeared to have been the remains of much more snow that had melted away. The sun was bright this day, but the air was crisp. There was no way so much snow could have all melted off so quickly.

The Glade was encircled by a ring of particularly thick trees and one corner of the place was a gentle incline leading to a hilly area beyond. They were led to an area just off center of the glade. Here there were three stone and brick forges set up around an area with a stone platform and a large anvil. There was also a metal rack in the ground for the tools Martin and Jana were carrying. Behind the smaller forge about twenty feet away was a watering hole about 35 feet long and 15 feet wide. There was also a huge pile of stacked firewood.

“Knap! Nyah! Nyah!” Effner said. “You can start when you want. When you are ready to go back to camp for night, tell Bear.” He gestured over to the trail that had led them here and saw the enormous bear of the night before come into the clearing and sit by the entrance.

“Will there be anything else?” the dark elf asked. He had brought his hood back up.

“What will the sickle be used for, elf?” Kazrack asked, gruffly.

“I am called Drenthis,” the dark elf replied. “And that is none of your concern.”

“Well, perhaps without that information I will not forge the sickle,” Kazrack replied. “Let’s see if you find that to be *your* concern.”

“You do know that if you fail in your quest and forfeit your life your spirit will not join those of your people in the realms

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<sup>48</sup> See Session #15

<sup>49</sup> *Novilustani* is the elven word for “dark elf”, meaning “Children of the New Moon”.

of your gods, don't you?" Drenthis asked. "Your spirit will be used as Osiris decided and you will be forever deprived of the honor to serve Natan-ahb in the afterlife."

"I do not believe that," Kazrack said.

"Believe what you will," the dark elf said.

"So, you will not tell me?" the dwarf asked.

"You know the price for answers to questions not directly necessary for you to complete your task," Drenthis replied. "All knowledge has a cost."

Kazrack growled, and then bringing the middle finger of his broken arm to his mouth, he tore off the fingernail and spit it at the dark elf.

Jeremy winced.

The elf looked down at the bloody nail, and then back up at the dwarf. Kazrack was unable to see any expression the elf's face. Effner picked up the nail.

"The sickle will serve a variety of purposes; for the gathering of mistletoe, for the cutting of grain, and for the sacrifice of the woman you saw," Drenthis explained. "Anything else?"

Kazrack did not respond but walked over to inspect the forges.

"I don't think so," Beorth said.

Drenthis, Effner and the reptile-footed druid left the clearing.

"What now? Are you going to do it?" Ratchis asked.

Kazrack looked up from looking over the anvil, "I need time to consult the rune-stones."

The dwarf walked off to the other side of the waterhole and found a stone. There he sat in quiet contemplation for nearly an hour, and then threw the stones and spent another half hour, examining the patterns in the runes.

Eventually, Kazrack stood and walked back over to the party.<sup>50</sup>

"Jeremy, let me show you how to get a forge fire going and how to stoke it," the dwarf said, grabbing what wood he could under one arm and taking it over to the large forge.

Jeremy grabbed a load of wood and followed. Ratchis brought some over as well. Kazrack instructed them on how to see to the fire. He then went into his pack pulled out one of the silver candlestick holders the party had retrieved from the Honeycombe.<sup>51</sup>

"Would anyone mind if I melted this down to use the silver to help decorate the sickle?" the dwarf asked.

No one objected.

"I'd better make sure that is okay to do," Kazrack said, and walked over to where the dire bear guarded the way into the glade.

"I have some questions about the decorating of the sickle blade," Kazrack said, looking up at the immense beast. "I doubt you can answer me, so if you could convey the questions to the druids somehow, I'd appreciate it."

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<sup>50</sup> Kazrack did not ever share the results of his throwing the stones with the other members of the party.

<sup>51</sup> See Session #26

“You can ask me the questions,” the bear replied, in a deep bass voice that seemed to shake the ground under the dwarf’s feet.

Kazrack sighed. He had gotten to a point where nothing surprised him anymore.

“Can I use silver to decorate the blade with some symbols or sigils?” Kazrack asked.

“Silver is good,” the bear replied.

There was a long pause.

“Anything else?” the bear asked.

“I guess not,” the dwarf replied and walked back to get to melting down the candle-holder and smelting the metal for crafting the blade.

The day was spent mostly with preparation for the crafting of the blade, Ratchis, Jeremy and Beorth giving Kazrack aid whenever they could. Martin spent the day doodling in his journal and carving small wooden tokens that he kept hidden from the others. Thomas leapt from the top of the forge to the anvil and then the stone table. He leapt far, crying out “Watch Martin! Watch! Watch! Look how far I can jump!”

“That’s very good, Thomas, but be careful and don’t get in Kazrack’s way,” the watch-mage replied mentally to his familiar.

“I won’t,” Thomas replied, sounding annoyed.

In the early afternoon, after the party had chewed half-heartedly on their meager rations, Ratchis walked over to where the bear stood guard.

“Sorry to disturb you,” he said reverently. “But we will need food before too soon, and I did not want to hunt in this wood without permission.”

“You will be supplied with food,” the bear replied in his incredibly deep voice.

Ratchis noticed that by the time he re-joined others the bear had left his post. A little more than an hour later, the bear returned, and approached the forge. In his huge maw, he held a wild boar by the neck. It squirmed in pain as it slowly died. The bear looked at Ratchis, while Martin looked away, and it squeezed its jaws giving the boar a killing blow. He dropped the carcass on the ground.

“Fresh,” he said.

Hour later the sun was setting, and Ratchis had gutted and cleaned the boar, butchering the meat for easy cooking and storage. Effner, Drenthis and the reptile-footed druid returned to lead the party back to their camping spot.

On the way back, Ratchis inquired about his being allowed to leave the Circle of Thorns temporarily.

“Knap! Mardak must be told,” Effner replied.

“Let him know that I wish to go scout out the ravine where the wild ponies are found to look for signs of the shape-shifting creature,” Ratchis explained.

The party ate roasted boar for dinner, and then got ready to settle down to sleep.

“Who will watch first?” Kazrack asked.

“We don’t need watches,” Jana replied. “If they wanted to kill or harm us, they would have done so already.”

“But this forest may still be dangerous,” Kazrack insisted.

“Then you stay up,” Ratchis said, getting into his bedroll. “I agree with Jana.”

Kazrack sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

Everyone went to sleep; except Martin of course.

For the watch-mage, the night was long and cold, and he strained his eyes from reading and writing to the light of his candle.

It had been more hours fewer hours than he hoped, when all of a sudden the black leather case that Martin inherited from the warlock that had worked with Markle, Devon and the Square began to jerk around the camp of its own accord.

Martin grabbed the case and threw it open and Thomas leapt out.

“I figured out how to undo the clasps,” Thomas said happily.

“That’s good, Thomas,” Martin said, mentally. “But try not to get into too much mischief. Come here, let’s have another reading lesson.”

The rest of the night was spent teaching the struggling squirrel to read, until finally sleepiness came over Martin and he crawled into his spot in one of the tents.

### **Balem, 19th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

The next morning, Effner, Drenthis and the reptile-footed druid led the party back to the Glade of Hennaire, so that Kazrack could continue his work.

“Knap! The wall will be opened for you tomorrow,” the kobold said to Ratchis. “But if you leave Mardak says you won’t be allowed back `til full moon. Knap! And, Bear busy today, might not be here. Don’t leave!”

Beorth asked Drenthis for a moment of his time, and he and the dark elf stepped away from the others.

“I was hoping your order would be able to help me with a problem I have,” Beorth said. “I am in possession of a magical item that must be destroyed, but I do not know how. It is said a priest of great faith and power would be able to undo its enchantment, perhaps one of you could do it?”

Beorth pulled the fang-shaped malachite pendant from his breast pocket and held it up.

“A magical item?” Drenthis asked in his smooth voice. “What does it do?” He pulled back his hood and his pink eyes twinkled in the morning light. He reached for it.

“It allows one to control the undead,” Beorth replied.

The dark elf flinched and took back his hand. “Oh.”

“It is a corruption of the cycle of life,” Beorth added.

“Well, yes...” the drow said. “I will tell Larinth the Scholar. He may be able to help you, but as you know there will be a price.”

“Of course,” Beorth replied.

The day went by with Kazrack smelting the metal, with Jeremy and Ratchis’ help. At times when he did not need help, the three warriors took turns sparring, while Martin tried to teach Thomas how to count to ten. Jana maintained the large bonfire they had going, carrying armloads of wood from the dwindling pile.

As the sun plummeted in the late afternoon the party was led back to their campsite by Effner and the others.

They were within a few feet of their clearing and shelter when Martin the Green stopped in his tracks, staring out beyond the clearing to the narrow path that led away from it. He saw a flashing hint of a golden flank stepping into the underbrush.

“Beorth?” The watch-mage grabbed the paladin’s shoulder. I thought I saw... No, it’s gone; that ram you spoke of. I thought I saw it.”

“You did?” Beorth said, surprised. “I thought I saw a glint of something up there too. I thought that might be it.”

Beorth and Ratchis looked beyond the camp for tracks, after the druids had left for the night. Beorth tried to help the ranger, but really had no idea what he was doing.

“Yes, there are tracks,” Ratchis confirmed.

“Of what?” Beorth asked.

“A huge ram,” Ratchis replied, kneeling down to point out the outline of the track. “I’ve never seen a ram that size before though.”

“It’s beautiful,” Beorth murmured.

“Well, regardless of its beauty, its tracks seem to come and go from nowhere,” Ratchis explained. “They seem to start there, come to about here and then go back and disappear again.”

The party laid down for the night, after eating some of the roasted boar they had left, and pondering the mystery of the great golden ram.

Of course, Martin sat by the fire and read and wrote his thoughts in his journal and looked at his maps for the thousandth time. He spent what time he could trying to teach Thomas a few more words and letter combinations but the squirrel’s attention span was not exactly conducive to any but the briefest lessons.

## **Teflem, 20th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

In the morning, the party drank water made from melted snow, and chewed on some cold rations as they made ready for the arrival of the druids to be led back to the Glade of Hennaire for their third day of work.

Suddenly Beorth cried out in horror. He had checked his breast pocket to reassure himself of the presence of the cursed amulet, as he often did, and it was gone!

“Who could have taken it?” Jeremy asked.

“One of the druids obviously,” Kazrack said, angrily.

“Did they even know about it?” Ratchis asked.

“Yes,” Beorth replied, meekly. “I showed it to Drenthis and asked if the druids might be able to learn more about how to destroy it, or if perhaps they could do it.”

Kazrack slapped his own forehead, “You told a DROW about the evil cursed amulet?!? Have you lost your mind?”

“I was up most of the night and saw no one slip into our camp,” Martin said. “I wonder if Thomas smelled anything.”

The watch-mage sent a mental query to his familiar, but there was no response. Martin began to hyper-ventilate as he reached out with his mind to sense the position of his familiar. There was nothing.

“Isis have mercy! Thomas is gone!” Martin cried out. He looked around frantically, and then called out, “Thomas!

Thomas!”

At that moment, the three druids that would escort them to the glade each day arrived.

Kazrack immediately turned to them, “Where is it? Where is the evil pendant?”

“Knap! What you speak of?” Effner asked, with a smirk.

Martin forced himself to calm down, “It appears that a cursed magical pendant that Beorth showed to one of your order has gone missing in the night, as has my squirrel familiar.”

“That is unfortunate, but what does that have to do with us?” Drenthis replied.

“It stands to reason that only one of your order could have taken it!” Kazrack snapped.

“It appears to me that reason may not be one of your strong suits, son of Jocham,” Drenthis said. “Or is it common for the dwarven people to insult their hosts?”

Kazrack was fuming. Ratchis stepped behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Is it not reasonable to speculate that there is some other explanation for this disappearance?” the dark elf continued. “There are an infinite number of things and reasons in this world that you will die never having known. Could this not be one of those things? Or perhaps if you applied this *reason* you spoke of you might figure out a way to discover the truth?”

“Since you seem to know so much about reason, perhaps you can make a suggestion that is reasonable,” Kazrack said, scathingly.

“You know the price for answers,” Drenthis said, with a smile. Kazrack did not hesitate this time. He tore the fingernail from his pinky with his teeth, and again spit it at the druids.

“We already have one from you,” Drenthis said. “It is useless to us.”

A fire as bright as that in a forge burned in the dwarf’s eyes.

“I will pay the price,” Beorth said, stepping forward. He held an open hand towards Ratchis, who handed him his huge hunting knife. The paladin knelt down and placed his hand on a stone, without showing a bit of emotion he cut the tip of his pinky off at the first knuckle. He handed the bloody thing to the dark elf.

“That was not necessary, but... “ Drenthis said.

“But much appreciated, I’m sure, “ Beorth said flatly, as Jana ran over to deal with the blood gushing out from the paladin’s small finger.

Drenthis passed the bit of finger to Effner who instinctually brought it to his mouth.

“Effner!” Drenthis scolded.

“Knap! Yes! Yes! Me no eat!” the kobold said, and slipped the thing into a pouch on his belt.

“I hope that this sacrifice will give us a more complete answer,” Kazrack said.

Drenthis ignored him.

“There is a creature that has come here unasked, but that we have no power over,” he said.

“The ram,” Martin said.

“Would it be so unreasonable to think this creature wants your attention for some other reason than you have discovered?”

the dark elf looked right at Beorth. "Could it not be that this squirrel was in league with this thing, or its master?"

"Are you saying that someone is controlling Thomas?" Martin asked.

"Is that another question?" the dark elf raised an eyebrow.

"No," Martin replied.

"I can tell you that your little rodent servant did not go the way we just came from," Drenthis offered.

Martin looked at the narrow path that led beyond the campsite. They had never traversed that way, but the night before he had thought he had seen the golden ram at the edge of his vision on that very path.

"I have to find Thomas," Martin said, looking at the others.

"I will go with you, Martin," Beorth said. "I have seen this ram before the rest of you, even in my dreams and I think even before we even ever reached Gothanius. I have some part to play in this."

"I would go with you, but I have much preparing to do if I am ever to get done with this sickle," Kazrack said.

In the end it was decided that Jeremy and Ratchis would go with Kazrack to help with the sickle, while Beorth, Martin and Jana would seek out Thomas, the ram and the pendant. The latter three were not really directly helping the dwarf with his task, so this would give them something to do for the day.

Kazrack, Jeremy and Ratchis were led to the Glade of Henaire once again, while they left their three companions to seek out the answer to this mystery.

"I hope Thomas is all right," Kazrack said as they walked. "Truth be told, until recently I liked Thomas better than Martin, but Martin is starting to come around."

"I still like Thomas better," Ratchis replied.

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Beorth, Jana and Martin began to march deeper into the wood, along the narrow path out of the opposite end of the camp. Despite the bright morning sun, the tall trees cast deep shadows across their path, giving everything a gray pallor.

They walked for nearly two miles, going up and down gentle slopes, and blazing a trail in virgin snow, and walking where no human had ever set foot before. The tops of the trees sparkled in the gloom, as the light of Ra's Glory shone through the melting icicles.

Suddenly, Martin sensed his familiar within the range of their telepathic communication.

"Thomas! Where are you?" Martin called, mentally.

"I am not far," the familiar replied, casually. "I am ahead of you. I can smell you on the wind."

"Are you okay?" the Watch-mage asked nervously.

"Oh, just fine," Thomas replied, as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

"We're on our way," Martin said, and then turned to his two companions. "Thomas is close by. He said he is fine, and we should be coming upon him soon."

"Does he have the amulet?" Beorth asked.

"Thomas, do you have something that belongs to Beorth?" Martin asked, sending his thoughts out to his familiar once again.

“Why would I have something of his?” Thomas replied.

The three companions walked on, following the narrow trail through the tall trees. As they came up a hill, they could see the tall wall of thorns in the distance up ahead and to left. They came down that hill and began to climb another, when Thomas dropped out of a tree and onto Martin’s shoulder.

“Excuse me for a minute while I converse with Thomas,” Martin said to Jana and Beorth awkwardly.

“Where did you go?” Martin asked.

“Somewhere,” Thomas replied, cryptically.

“Where?”

“I had to go do something,” the squirrel chattered.

“What did you have to do?”

“I can’t tell you,” Thomas said, curling into a ball in the hood of Martin’s cloak.

“This isn’t any of that familiar’s guild stuff, is it?” Martin asked, annoyed.

“Familiar’s Guild?” Thomas sat up and sniffed confusedly. “Oh... No, not at all.”

“Then what is it?” Martin asked, becoming exasperated.

“He said I can’t say,” Thomas meeped.

“He?” Martin asked, growing more curious.

“What?” replied the squirrel.

“He who?”

“He who *who*?”

“You said ‘he’,” Martin insisted.

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did!”

“No, I didn’t!”

“Well, why did you leave me behind?” Martin asked, changing tack.

“I had to,” Thomas replied, sounding sad suddenly.

“I take you everywhere with me,” Martin said, whining slightly for effect.

“If you had to leave me behind because of Academy business, you would,” Thomas replied matter-of-factly.

“So, this is more important than me?” Martin asked.

“Well... yes, kind of...”

“What is he saying?” Beorth asked, trying not to lose his patience. A cold wind blew through the narrow corridor of trees.

In the distance they heard the clatter of icicles tumbling from the tops of trees. Jana shivered.

“He is being difficult,” Martin responded through chattering teeth. “He mentioned a “he”, which makes me think someone put him up to this.”

“It was the golden ram,” Beorth replied.

Martin turned to the paladin of Anubis. “How do you know?”

“Look!” Beorth pointed to the bottom of the hill to their right. Martin saw a large golden form striding confidently through a narrow path in the thick wall of thorns and out to a rocky forest that stretched beyond their sight.

“What are you looking at?” Jana asked.

“You don’t see it?” Beorth asked, his breath taken away by the sight of the thing under the light of the day.

“It’s beautiful,” Martin said, in an awe-filled voice.

“No,” Jana replied.

“I am sure it has the necklace,” Beorth said. “Or is leading us to who has it. We must follow.”

“I haven’t finished questioning Thomas,” Martin said.

“Talk as we walk,” Beorth said, beginning to do that as he said it. “I do not want to risk losing sight of it.”

As if Beorth’s voice was filled with some new authority, Martin and Jana fell in step behind him and began to march along the narrow path piercing the thorn wall.

“Yep, this is the right way,” Thomas said. “You know these woods would be a lot better without all those thorns and those creepy gnolls and stuff.”

“Thomas, did you take the necklace from Beorth’s pocket?” Martin asked his familiar.

“Of course not!” Thomas said, sounding insulted. “That would be stealing! And plus I’m too heavy. He’d have noticed me on his chest. The lizard was the one that actually took it from him. I just took it from there to...”

Thomas buried his mouth under his little paw.

“The lizard?” Martin raised an eyebrow.

Thomas was silent.

“Jana?” Martin said. “Thomas is saying *your* familiar took it from Beorth.”

Jana’s eyes narrowed, and she focused her attention to her own familiar, the rarely seen lizard tucked tightly under the young witch’s armpit for maximum warmth.

“What’s that about your stealing an amulet from Beorth, Ess’skells?”

“It’s cold,” Ess’skells replied, in her long and languid hiss of a voice.

“Yes, it’s cold,” Jana replied. “Now why did you take the amulet?”

“I don’t like mammals,” the lizard replied. “Present company excluded.”

“It’s okay to admit if you were controlled,” Jana began.

“No one controls me!” her familiar hissed angrily.

“Maybe they were controlled,” Jana suggested to Martin, ignoring Ess’skells.

“Thomas didn’t sound controlled,” Martin said. “He sounded like he agreed to it.”

“Well, both familiars were in on it,” Jana said.

“Maybe there is a beast god of squirrels out there,” Martin mused, half-smiling.

“Why did you take the amulet?” Jana asked her familiar, returning her thoughts to the lizard.

“I was asked to,” was the reply.

“Someone asks you to steal something from the group and you just do it?”

“I was bored!” Ess’skells replied. “Maybe if you gave me something to do every once in a while.”

“You complain that it’s cold, so I keep you where you are warm, and then you complain about that too!” Jana snapped. “But if there is anything you can ever think of doing just let me know and I’ll let you do it.”

“I’m cold. Tired. Want to sleep,” Ess’skells replied, lazily.

Jana sighed.

They walked around a smaller hill, the thorns winding through a thick patch of trees. Soon, they’d be outside of the confines of the druid’s forest.

“Are you mad at me?” Thomas asked Martin, carefully.

“No,” Martin replied. “I trust you, so I am not mad. I was just worried about you. I thought you might be eaten or something. That is part of why I want you to learn to read, that way you can leave me messages.”

“I’m sorry,” Thomas said, sadly.

“It’s okay,” Martin said, scratching the squirrel under the chin. “Tonight I’ll teach you how to read the word for ‘nut’”

“No, not nut,” Thomas replied. “I don’t want to think about nuts. I tried eating one even though I wasn’t hungry, and it was terrible!”

Martin pet him some more.

Finally, they came out the other end of the wall of thorns, near to where it turned left and extended outward for quite some ways.

The area beyond was less heavily forested, with deep snow banks built up around lone trees. Beorth stepped forward, and Jana and Martin followed together.

There was another gust of wind, and the frosted thorns crackled up and down the wall. Martin leapt back, as Beorth stopped. Before them, hanging from a low tree branch was the partially burned naked corpse of a man. It swung back and forth in the wind.

“How did...” Martin never finished his question.

Three large humanoid forms leapt from behind the trees at them, coming around their right sides towards Beorth and Martin. They were over six feet tall and had long coarse brown hair all over their bodies, large black eyes and bear-like ears, but their faces bore the pug-like qualities of a goblin. They were wielding javelins and had crude spiked clubs at their sides.

They were bugbears. They growled and hooted in their guttural goblin tongue.

Martin got over his surprise immediately and blowing a handful of sand outward, said, "*Somnare!*"

One of the bugbears collapsed in a snoring heap, while another cast his javelin into Beorth's side. The paladin's splint mail rung out brightly, echoed by his grunt. Martin flinched back, being able to slap away the javelin thrown at him, receiving a minor scratch on his forearm.

Beorth drew his long sword, and silently charged the bugbear that had assaulted him. The hairy goblin ducked under the blow and came back up, stepping back and shoving his hands out to try to throw the paladin off balance. Beorth swung around to make a second attempt, but the bugbear already had his morning star out and parried the blow with a snarl.

"*Kikanass!*" Jana cried, and the bugbear that had tossed a javelin at Martin, stumbled backward, bringing his hands to his eyes. He was blind. He stepped backward, placing his back to a tree and pulled his own spiked club.

"*Imago distortus,*" Martin mumbled, and his visage became blurred.

Beorth blocked a blow from his bugbear opponent and riposted, cutting it deep in right thigh.

"*Farazan kar tarna-ke!*" the bugbear cursed.

"*Kikanass!*" Jana cried again, approaching Beorth, and this time the bugbear fighting Beorth cried out in surprise as his world darkened.

Martin drew and loaded his crossbow, while Beorth's opponent stepped away from combat, but the paladin did not get a moment's rest. Two more bugbears emerged from the trees charging at him and the young witch with their morning stars. Beorth grunted as he felt another blow clang against his armor, and Jana nearly fell as a spike from one of the clubs impaled itself in her shoulder and tore back out again. The bugbear attacking Jana wore a chain shirt, and a hardened leather cap. The top half of his body was dyed black.

Beorth swung his blade at the new opponent, but it deftly avoided the blow. Beorth backed off.

Jana pulled her own club from the leather thong at her belt and rammed it into the bugbear's ribs. The chain shirt absorbed most of the blow.

Martin hung back, pulling a handful of multi-colored sand from his satchel of components and waiting for an opportunity to use it (after letting his loaded crossbow hang from his side). However, the blackened bugbear adjusted himself to stand between the two spell-casters and struck Martin with the end of his club. Martin stumbled backward. Jana tried to take advantage of the bugbear looking away from her, but his martial skill was too great to be easily distracted. He blocked the blow with his own club on the backswing.

One of the blinded bugbears stumbled into the wall of thorns as he tried to get away from the melee. He cried out, as the thorns squirmed and moved to impale him as much as possible. The bugbear slumped to the ground, bleeding to death.

Martin spoke an arcane word, cast his colored sand forth, and a blast of swirling colors enveloped the two bugbears. The one closer to Beorth was stunned, but the other shook off the effects with a snarl. He swung at Martin again, but this time the watch-mage was ready and turned away from the blow.

Beorth charged the stunned bugbear, but it stumbled randomly to one side and the paladin missed.

Jana's club, however, found its target and smacked the bugbear leader (the one in armor) in the back of the head.

Martin pulled his staff off his back and swung it at the armored bugbear, striking it. It stumbled, overwhelmed by the constant attacks. It swung around to strike Jana, but she side-stepped.

Beorth checked his momentum from his charge and swung around, cleaving open the skull of the bugbear just as it shook off the stunning effect of Martin's spell. It fell dead.

*"Imago creare!"* Martin called out, pulling a bit of wool from his cloak. On the other side of the wall of thorns appeared the image of Jeremy.

"Hey ugly!" the illusory Jeremy cried. "Over here! I'm gonna kick your ass!"

The bugbear leader hustled away from the two spell-casters and deeper into the trees away from the wall of thorns.

Beorth and Jana moved to follow him. And Martin came up from behind. Beorth took the lead, and two more bugbears appeared from the overgrowth, blocking the way to the leader.

*"Kikanass!"* Jana cried, but the leader was unaffected. She came up behind Beorth, who engaged one of the two new bugbears.

*"Somnare!"* Martin intoned, casting his sand forward, and one of the bugbears fell to sleep.

The other bugbear waited for Beorth's approach.

"Anubis! Please grant me your favor. I need your aid in battle!" Beorth cried out to his god and felt the *divine favor* of the jackal-god fill him.

Jana tried to blind the waiting bugbear, but again the spell failed.

Martin lifted his crossbow and fired at the creature and struck it in the shoulder. It howled in pain but continued to hold its ground to let its leader escape. But the leader was not bolting just yet, instead he fetched a javelin from the quiver on his back and hurled it at Jana. She screamed as it finished its arc in her hip. She felt it strike her pelvic bone, and blood-bathed her right leg.

Beorth charged, filled with his god's power and with one hit ripped the entrails out of the bugbear body. It feebly swung its morning star when the paladin approached, but missing, it simply collapsed, slowly and painfully dying.

Jana attempted to *daze* the leader, but he was too willful to be affected.

*"Imago creare!"* Martin cried, and the form of a huge golden ram stepped out from the trees. "Oh great one who has guided us here, protect us now!" The ram stepped forward, its great hooves crunching in the deep snow.

The bugbear leader's eyes opened widely in fear, and he turned tail and fled.

"I say we run for it!" Beorth said, pointing his sword towards the where the bugbear ran with his bloody long sword.

"This way?" Martin pointed back to the passage through the thorn wall.

"This way!" he cried and charged deeper into the trees.

"Wait," Jana cried. "Let's tie up the sleeping ones so they don't end up coming up behind us."

"Good idea," Martin said nervously.

"Okay, but hurry," Beorth said.

"You know, I don't think we can survive another encounter like that one," Jana said, as she pulled out some rope from her pack. "Not that I think we should turn back or anything, but just so you know."

"I know, but I am going on regardless," Beorth said.

Martin slowly nodded.

They tied up the two sleeping bugbears and then jogged off to the east.

End of Session #30

AQUERRA

## Session #31

“Yep, yep, yep! That’s the right way,” Thomas encouraged telepathically, as the party jogged through the deep snow towards a distance hill. Beorth thought he had seen the glint of the golden ram ascending the hill.

They came to the hill which has the shape of a lop-sided ziggurat, with a ring of trees obscuring the top, and lines of snow-covered shrubs at various levels.

“Let us make our way up more cautiously,” Beorth said, slowing his pace. The clanking of his armor being muffled a bit by the slower speed.

“Be careful, there’s bad guys up ahead,” Thomas warned Martin the Green.

“Thomas says there are ‘bad guys’ ahead,” Martin relayed the warning, and then went on to ask his familiar if they were more bugbears.

“No, they’re not the hairy goblins, and they aren’t like the folks in the thorns,” the squirrel chattered. “They’re humans, dressed in black and don’t smell of death.”

Martin whispered the information to his companions.

“Shouldn’t we try to sneak up there?” Jana asked.

“Um, how?” Martin said.

“I do not think sneaking is our strong suit,” Beorth said. “I think we’d best just go up there and worry about it if we are spotted.”

Jana shrugged her shoulders, while Martin hung his head. They made their way up the hill. Beorth took the lead, his sword in his hand, dripping a trail of blood in the snow.

He came to the ring of trees around the nearly flat top of the hill, while Martin and Jana hung back about twenty-five feet, crouched behind some of the shrubs. Beorth looked through an opening in the foliage and saw two figures dressed in black. They both had shaved heads, but one was much shorter and stockier than the other, who was tall and a wiry build.

“Did you hear that?” the tall figure said to the other. He had a strange quarterstaff strapped to his back. It was a bit thinner and shorter than most Beorth has seen. “It is probably those bugbears again,” the man continued. “Go check it out.”

The stocky figure walked towards the trees where Beorth hid. The paladin noticed that the man wore sandals despite the snow, but had his feet wrapped in black wool. It was obvious he was a monk of Anubis, no one else in the world dressed that way. The man was unarmed but had large meaty fists.

The monk turned to his left, and Beorth took the chance to crane his neck to see what was just off center of the clearing. It was a stone bier upon which was the huge golden ram, but it was tied down with three thick ropes and upon its muzzle was a leather muzzle.

A twig snapped.

“Who goes there?!” The stocky monk called, turning towards Beorth again. “I see you! Step out of the trees! Speak!”

Beorth did not hesitate. He stepped out of the trees, still holding his sword at his side.

“Someone is calling Beorth to come out of the trees,” Jana whispered to Martin. “It’s a man’s voice.”

“Should we join him?” Martin asked, softly.

“Not yet,” Jana replied.

“It is I, Beorth Sakhemet,” the ghost-hunter of Anubis announced in a confident voice. “I believe you have something that belongs to me.”

“And what would that be?” the stocky monk replied in a gravelly voice.

“You have my amulet. It was brought to you,” Beorth continued to walk forward until he was only five feet away. The tall wiry monk, strode forward.

“Your amulet? Master Beorth, I have heard of you. I know nothing of the amulet of which you speak,” the tall monk said, his voice was low and smooth. “You should know that I would not take anything that was not mine, and neither would my disciples.”

“I assume you are Adder,” Beorth said, flatly.<sup>52</sup>

“Oh, no, no,” the tall monk pressed his hands against each other before his chest as if in prayer. “I am not so important of a man as he. I am Vander, Initiate of the Stone.”<sup>53</sup>

There was a long pause.

“Why do you hang back,” Vander asked. “Come forward. Let us talk. Are you alone?”

“No,” Beorth replied. “No, I have two friends.”

“Why do they hide?” Vander asked.

“Martin! Jana!” Beorth called, turning back. “Come up here.”

Jana and Martin looked at each other.

“Okay, let’s go,” Jana said to Martin, shrugging her shoulders.

The wizard and the witch stepped into the clearing. Vander smiled.

“So, what brings you here, Beorth Sakhemet?” Vander asked.

“I was led,” Beorth replied.

“Led?”

“Yes, I was led,” Beorth repeated, not volunteering any details.

“By whom?”

“By your captive.”

“Captive?” Vander looked genuinely surprised. “Oh, the creature that you see! Its guile never ends.”

“Yes, it is rare to find a guileless creature,” Beorth replied, glibly. “And what brings you here?”

Vander stepped closer and gestured back to the ram. Its large azure eyes moved to peer at Beorth. “We came here to find and capture this creature.”

“Why would you capture such a beautiful creature?” Beorth asked.

Vander clucked his tongue, “You should know that visions of beauty on the surface do not always reflect beauty of the

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<sup>52</sup> Beorth first heard of Adder from Master Hamfast during the Interlude that was detailed after Session #24.

<sup>53</sup> Monks of Anubis have titles that coincide with their position in the hierarchy of their order.

spirit.”

“Oh, I know,” Beorth said. “I guess it is possible that this creature is one of Seker.”<sup>54</sup>

“In the ancient past there were many more Powers than we know of today,” Vander explained. “This creature is all that is left.”

“Left of what?” Beorth asked.

“A being that existed in *The Time Before*,” Vander replied. “Its divine form was destroyed in the tumult that ended *The Time Before*, but for the millennia that has passed it has re-taken the form of this great ram in an attempt to regain its full power. Thankfully, there has always been someone to hunt it and destroy it before this could happen, and it would take hundreds of years for it to re-gather its power and take corporeal form once again.”

“They’re bad! They’re bad! They’re gonna hurt the ram! The ram is good! The ram is good!” Thomas began to screech in Martin’s mind.

“Calm down,” Martin re-assured him. “We will figure out a way to handle this.”

“Anubis has shown me creatures like this one in my dreams,” Beorth said, quietly.

“So you could seek them out?” Vander asked.

Martin leaned over to whisper in Jana’s ear, “Why would they say it was of Seker, if...”

Vander’s ears were keen. “It is not of Seker! It is of Set. Or at least it was once allied with him. You must realize that in the universe there exists a perfect specimen of every animal of nature,” Vander explained. “Some of these have achieved divinity and are known as the Beast Gods. Others wander the world and the planes, aiding the gods or seeking to become gods themselves.”

“I hadn’t heard that,” Beorth said.

“It is true,” Vander replied. “Some would call them celestial, but we would call them axiomatic.”

“And, I take it that is synonymous with disposable,” Beorth said, allowing his facetiousness to come through. “For I definitely feel that such a beautiful creature should not die.”

The paladin of Anubis walked past Vander towards where the ram was bound, and the tall monk stepped backward to move with him. The other monk stepped to his right to stand between Jana, Martin and the ram. He still was about fifteen feet away from the two spell-casters.

“Well, that is up to Master Hamfast,” Vander said, speaking of the fate of the ram. “Unless he speaks to Adder, I am afraid he will be forced to follow his master’s decision.”

“I am taking this decision into my own hands,” Beorth said, and walked right over to one of the ropes holding the ram down, and raised his sword.

“Beorth, don’t do anything foolish!” Vander said.

Beorth’s sword came down on the thick rope and it snapped. The ram began to struggle to raise his rear legs which had been partially freed.

“Lomax,” Vander called to the stocky monk. “We must stop them, but do not hurt them...too much.”

A sneer appeared on Lomax face as he began to run towards the two spell-casters, but when he was five feet away, he leapt high into the air, leading with a kick, and bending the other leg back beneath his body. The flying kick connected with

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<sup>54</sup> *Seker* is the evil god of deception and betrayal. He is often called “Master of Light & Darkness”.

Jana's chin and chest, sending her backward, her lip swelling, as blood dribbled down her chin. Lomax landed and turned to face her and Martin. He held his hands in claw-fingered stance, gently bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Forgive me for this, Anubis," Beorth cried aloud, as Vander leaped to the attack. The paladin ducked a punch and swung his sword low across the monk's leg, but Vander leapt high into the air avoiding the blade deftly. Beorth noted that while the martial arts style Vander was using was similar to that used by the Monks of Anubis he had been raised, it seemed more aggressive—hands in a clawed form, instead of the normal closed-fist stance.

Jana had her club in her hand and began to swing it wildly in front of her to keep Lomax at bay, while Martin hustled around out of reach and pulling a dagger began to cut at the front rope holding down the ram. Unfortunately, the rope seemed to resist his pitiful whacks at it.

Lomax ignored the watch-mage and let loose a flurry of punches at Jana, but she was able to bat them off with her club. While Vander, with unparalleled speed and skill, pulled his bo stick from his back and spinning it in one hand over her his head, brought it to bear with both hands and laid two hard jabs with the butt against Beorth's chin and neck.

Beorth tasted his own blood in his mouth and returned with a painful cut at Vander's forearm, but the monk showed no reaction. He simply twirled his staff with great speed, cutting the air like thunder as it spun to knock the sword away before it could do more harm. Beorth knew in his heart that this was a battle he had little hope of winning.

Martin finally cut through one of the ropes, and the ram lifted its head up. The watch-mage turned with a smile of accomplishment towards Jana, in time to see Lomax easily reach through her defense and crunch her nose with his fist. Blood spurted out over her face and chest and she crumpled unconscious to the ground. Lomax turned and looked at Martin. "There are two ways to do this," he said.

Beorth continued to try to get through the whirling defense of Vander's bo-stick but could not without making himself vulnerable. He felt the blow of the stick against one ankle, but he held his ground and did not fall, however, by planting his feet he left himself open when the staff whirled around and the other end slammed him in the helm, making a large dent. Beorth stumbled backward, away from his opponent and called out to his god, "Anubis! I need your strength! Please grant me your healing power." He laid his hands upon his own face, and felt the warmth of his god's power, but he knew he was just delaying the inevitable.

"*Disapparé*," Martin intoned, and he disappeared from sight. Invisibly, he crept around the large stone and began to cut at the remaining ropes.

Lomax jogged over to where Martin stood, easily following the watch-mage by the footprints that seemed to appear in the snow by their own accord. He let a back hand slap go, that connected with Martin's temple. Martin the Green was growing nervous, and his shaking as he frantically tried to cut the rope worked against his goal; not to mention his random bobbing to avoid the blows from Lomax.

"What one cannot see still exists," Lomax said, quoting some monk chant.

Beorth had renewed his attack upon Vander, while the tall monk let out a long low breath and squeezed one fist so tight it turned from his olive flesh tone to red and then to white as he punched at the paladin's solar plexus. Beorth turned his blade down towards the fist, forcing Vander to pull his punch at the last minute. Neither found their mark.

Martin winced as he felt another punch catch his lip.

Vander dropped his defense and leapt to a nearly blurred flurry of blows with his staff and his feet. Beorth felt them contact again and again and fought to remain conscious. He took advantage of the opening and succeeded to slice the length of his long sword across Vander's hip and groin. The monk showed no emotion, but he was forced backward, placing all his weight on the uninjured leg.

"Your blow struck true, Ghost-hunter," Vander said. "But I am not afraid of death, for even if I come before the Master, he will reward me for fighting against one as treacherous as you."

"Thomas, I need you to go to the others," Martin commanded his familiar. "Go run, and hide if you have to, but find Ratchis and bring him here."

Thomas obeyed unquestioningly, knowing from his master's tone that this was very serious. He slid down the inside of Martin's robe, and out and away; unseen by Lomax.

A moment later, Martin was visible again, his face bloodied by two more powerful punches, and lying unconscious on the ground.

"You and your faction have turned your backs on Anubis!" Beorth accused, as he and Vander traded more blows. Lomax moved to join the fight but stopped in his tracks as the ram flexed its body and burst the remaining rope. It stood up on the stone bier, but even without the platform, its shoulders would have been over six feet off the ground. It still had the muzzle on its snout.

"It is free!" Lomax cried, fear creeping into his voice. "You have doomed us all!"

The ram replied by leaping from the stone and slamming its huge golden horns against Lomax knocking him down easily. It stood above him and looked down. The stocky monk twisted on the ground and leapt to his feet, futilely punching at the magnificent beast.

Beorth's attention was taken from his own fight, but Vander was not as easily distracted, and one final blow struck home.

The last thing Beorth saw was a golden blur as he fell to the snowy ground, unconscious.

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"I hope they find the amulet," Kazrack said, as he took logs from Jeremy's arms and tossed them into the forge fire. "if it were not for this *geas* I would have gone myself."

Ratchis looked up from where he was cleaning three rabbits that the Bear had brought earlier, "I just hope there isn't any trouble for them."

And as if to dash his hopes, Thomas appeared leaping up on the half-orc's shoulder.

Ratchis was taken aback.

"Hey Thomas is here," Ratchis said, standing. Jeremy and Kazrack stopped what they were doing and looked over.

"Can you understand me?" Ratchis asked the squirrel holding up the little tree-rodent in huge palm. "If you can understand me shake your head. Is Martin in trouble?"

Thomas chattered, and wiped his face with his paws and then looked to the northwest, and then back to Ratchis.

"Does he have the amulet?" Jeremy asked.

"We should return him to Martin," Kazrack offered.

"I think Martin's in trouble," Ratchis said. "I see no other reason for Thomas to come here to us."

"We need to return to camp then and get our weapons and armor," Kazrack said.

"Can you lead us to Martin?" Ratchis asked Thomas, and the squirrel leapt off his hand and began to scurry towards the entrance to the glade.

"I guess we'll have to talk to the Bear," Kazrack said, as the three of them walked to the exit.

They arrived at the entrance to the Glade where Thomas waited beside the huge Bear, who stood as the three companions approached.

"We need to return to camp, and then go seek out our companions," Kazrack said, flatly.

“Mmmm. Are you done for the day?” the Bear asked.

“We’re mostly done. We may need to come back later,” Kazrack replied.

“If you leave you may not come back today,” the Bear said.

“We’re done for the day,” Ratchis inserted.

“Then I will lead you back to your camp so you can assist your companions in extricating themselves from the danger they have stumbled into,” the Bear replied.

“What danger is that?” Kazrack asked.

“You know the price for answers to questions that are not directly involved in your completion of the sickle,” the Bear said.

The dwarf growled and looked to Jeremy. Ratchis looked to the Neerguardian as well. Jeremy looked back and forth at them and scratched his chin. The soft golden peach-fuzz on his face was growing into a beard.

“A fingernail,” was all Ratchis said.

“Well, lose another one if you want,” Jeremy said, shrugging his shoulders.

“They’re not going to take mine,” Ratchis said. “They already have one.”

“I’m not giving these monsters anything,” Jeremy retorted with a look of disgust.

“So your friends who bled for you...” Ratchis’ own disgust was cut off.

“We do not have time to haggle,” Kazrack said, angrily.

“All right! All right!” Jeremy said, with a sigh.

“Do you want me to pull it off for you? It might be easier that way,” Ratchis offered.

Jeremy clipped a bit of finger nail off with a knife and offered it to the Bear.

The Bear snorted. “You should know by now not to play games.”

“You mean you want the whole thing?” Jeremy asked.

The Bear did not reply.

“Will you stop playing and just do it, just as the rest of us have,” Ratchis said.

Jeremy grimaced and then cut the whole nail off his right index finger.

“Here,” Jeremy held it out to the Bear, gritting his teeth. The Bear licked up into his mouth.

“You companions followed the great beast that led you into the Circle of Thorns,” the Bear said. “They have left the circle and have come into conflict with the bugbears that live there. If you follow the trail out of your camp to the north, you will find their trail and come to a place where you can leave the Circle. You will see a hill with a ring of trees atop it about a half a mile from the wall. You will find them there.”

The Bear led them back to their camp, where they gathered their weapons and donned with armor, and then took off down the trail, following Thomas as he leapt from tree to tree.

“Maybe it was because Thomas is an animal, but he was allowed to leave and return, but I’m not sure we will be able to get

through,” Kazrack said. “Didn’t they say something about if we left, we could not come back until the full moon?”

“We can only hope we will be allowed back in,” Ratchis said.

“This place stinks,” Jeremy said, sucking on his bloody finger.

The three of them moved up and over a hill and around another coming to where there was the narrow passage through the enormous thorn wall. They made their way through and came to the area of fewer trees. They immediately saw two bugbears lying hogtied on the cold ground and struggling to get free.

“I guess we came the right way,” Jeremy said, going forward as Ratchis checked the bugbears’ bonds, making sure they were tight.

“They will get free eventually, but that should keep them from coming up behind us too soon,” Ratchis said.

Jeremy found the naked hanging man.

“And every time you turn around there is another reason to hate this place,” the Neergaardian said, cutting the dead man down.

“We don’t have time for this,” Ratchis said. “Leave it be. Beorth will know how to handle it best when we find him.”

“I was just cutting him down,” Jeremy said. “Wasn’t planning on burying him right now, just seemed disrespectful to keep him hanging up there.”

“Well, it might keep animals from getting to the body before we get to inter it,” Kazrack said.

“Well, too late now,” Jeremy said.

“Jeremy will you load this for me?” Kazrack asked, handing him his light crossbow.

“You know, it really hurts to load this thing with a raw and bloody finger,” Jeremy said, as he pulled back the string. “I doubt you’ll even hit anything since you have to fire with one hand.”

Kazrack just smirked and took back the crossbow.

Ratchis spotted the hill with the ring of trees and led the way.

As they came to the bottom of the hill there was a flash of gold that erupted from the ring of trees and came barreling down the hill to the right.

“Look! It’s the ram that Beorth was talking about!” Ratchis said, pointing. “Let’s follow it.”

“It seems to be running away from something,” Kazrack said, as it disappeared from their view and into a narrow ravine north of their position. “Let’s check the clearing at the top of the hill first.”

“Maybe the ram is what hurt the others,” Jeremy suggested.

“I doubt it,” Ratchis said, growing tired of Jeremy’s foul mood.

The dwarf and the human climbed the hill, with the half-orc leading them. Ratchis breached the ring of trees and saw the bier of stone just off center. Atop it he saw Martin’s unconscious hog-tied form.

“Martin is here,” Ratchis said, walking into the clearing.

“Let’s move in,” Kazrack said to Jeremy, doing just that, but the Neergaardian decided to check the perimeter. He crept along the outside of the ring of trees, trying to move as silently as possible and staying low.

Ratchis began to pull the rope from around Martin's wrists and ankles, as Kazrack crossed the clearing. The dwarf stopped and looked back seeing that Jeremy had not followed.

"Where the hell are you going?" Kazrack called, annoyed. Jeremy did not reply. He must have been sufficiently distracted.

As he walked past one fir tree, he was surprised by movement on his left. A figure in brown and black robes leapt out slashed deeply into Jeremy's shoulder with a strange weapon. It was short shaft of wood with a short scythe-like blade on one end.

"Son of a..." Jeremy cried out, spinning around to put his two swords between him and the monk. This monk was of medium build and had short spiked dark hair and olive skin. He had a permanent grin on his face.

Jeremy had barely gotten his swords up when the monk, bouncing like a rabid animal, let loose with a flurry of swings from his strange weapon.

"Guys! I have wild one here! Ambush!" Jeremy called to his companions, over the din of clashing blades. He backed away through the trees and into clearing. Kazrack came running past him towards the trees, to approach the ambushing monk from his right.

"I'll deal with this one. See if there are any more," the dwarf yelled as he went by, his flail a blurry circle above his head.

Jeremy thought he heard something and looked to his left, just in time to see the foot of another flying monk connect with his face. The Neergaardian stumbled back from the blow, feeling the side of his face already begin to swell up. This monk was short and stocky, strong-looking, but had dreadful purple bruises all over his face. The three companions did not know this, but he was named Lomax.

Jeremy was not caught completely off guard this time, blood still running down his left side from the first blow. Using the flat of his long sword, he slapped the stocky monk in the side of the head and then followed up with a punch from the hilt of the Right Blade of Arofel. Lomax staggered and fell unconscious.

Kazrack burst through the trees looking for the monk that had attacked Jeremy, but ran right past him, only noticing the figure after he felt the bite of the monk's blade. The monk's speed was alarming to the dwarf. Kazrack felt the curved blade try to hook his ankle and pull him off his feet, but he was able to stand his ground.

Jeremy hurried back towards where he had been ambushed and slapped his sword against the back of the monk's head as he and Kazrack now flanked him.

"If you're a follower of Anubis you should put down your arms," Kazrack said to the monk that attacked him, but received no reply.

On the stone bier, Martin stirred as Ratchis removed the last of the rope about the watch-mage, and taking hold of his holy symbol placed his other hand on him.

"Nephthys, give me your power so that I can heal this wizard, and we can get to the bottom of this mystery," Ratchis intoned, and Martin felt the soothing healing warmth of divine power go through him.

"Martin, what is going on?" Ratchis said, helping the watch-mage to sit up.

"The monks of Anubis..." Martin coughed out. "Where's Beorth? Where's Jana?"

"I don't know," Ratchis replied.

"We freed the ram," Martin began, but his explanation was cut short by a yelp from Jeremy back in the trees.

As he positioned himself to keep the young monk flanked, he was surprised by another figure running out of the underbrush and striking him in the side with a flying kick. This monk was tall and wiry, with a black pony-tail in the rear center of his bald head. It was Vander.

Jeremy grew angry. “All right, that settles it!”

The smaller, quick monk struggled to strike Kazrack, but the dwarf was able to fend off his blows at the cost of connecting with his own.

Jeremy spun with all his strength, spying an opening in the guards of both monks that now flanked him. With incredible speed, his short sword went down delivering a deep puncture to Vander’s shin and foot, cutting clear through muscle. In the next instant he came back up, the full sharp edge of his long sword catching the smaller monk on the side of the neck and with a sickening snap, sent it toppling off.<sup>55</sup>

The monk’s headless body hung there at an awkward angle for a moment and then collapsed as blood exploded in a torrent from the frayed neck.

“Ah, so we have a seasoned warrior!” Vander said, holding up his injured foot to keep from applying too much weight on it, but still kicking with it, which sent blood flicking in all directions.

“Uh, no! Wait!” Jeremy protested, amazed at his own feat.

Martin hobbled off the stone, as Ratchis drew his masterwork warhammer and charged into the fray. “Watch our backs!” the half-orc called to the Watch-mage as he disappeared into the trees.

Martin looked around and noticed something tucked under a tree on the opposite side of the stone bier from the battle. He wandered over and saw Beorth’s unconscious and bloody form (but bandaged) bound and laying on his stomach.

Meanwhile, at the fight, Vander ducked Ratchis’s blow deftly, and with a quick motion pulled his staff from his back and made the half-orc taste both ends of it before thrusting it at Jeremy, who knocked it out of alignment with his short sword.

“You’ve betrayed your gods, and so you will fall!” Kazrack said to the monk.

“It is you who have helped your friend betray Anubis,” Vander replied.

“I trust my friend’s wisdom over yours!”

Kazrack moved to help surround the skillful monk, but his flail failed to find its mark. Jeremy’s swords were kept at bay by Vander’s nearly-inhumanly fast stick-work, but Ratchis’ strength won out. The half-orc slammed his hammer down on the monk’s forehead. There was a crunch sound as blood began to fill Vander’s eyes. The monk spun around confused by the haze of pain, allowing Kazrack to finally strike a telling blow. Vander collapsed into a bloody pile of robes in the snow.

“I found Beorth,” Martin called.

“Is everyone alright?” Jeremy called out, looking down at the bloody monk’s head a few feet away from him.

“Where’s Jana?” Kazrack called.

“Nephthys, please stabilize this man so that we may discover what evil has transpired here,” Ratchis said, kneeling beside Vander, and laying a hand on his head wound.

“Jana!” Jeremy called, his voice echoing through the nearby hills. “Jana! Can you hear me?”

“Keep it down!” Kazrack admonished. “There could be others around.”

“Or more bugbears,” Martin added weakly.

Ratchis walked over to where Beorth lay, and knelt beside him, granting the paladin Nephthys’ healing blessing as well.

“Obviously, they did not want him to die or else they would not have bound his wounds,” the half-orc said.

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<sup>55</sup> Jeremy scored a “Save vs. 10 + ½ damage or decapitation and instant death” critical hit.

Jeremy began to wander the general area searching for Jana.

“I got help! I got help!” Thomas squealed, running into the clearing, and leaping onto Martin’s shoulder.

“Yes, you did a great job, Thomas,” Martin said, patting his familiar on the head. “Now, do you smell Jana around?”

Thomas sniffed the air. “All I smell is pine and blood,” he crinkled his nose.

“She’s over here!” Jeremy called from the other side of the clearing.

Hanging from a tall branch, was Jana wrapped in a blanket and tied up tightly. The three adventurers’ gear was in a bundle at the other end of the rope as ballast.

Together, Jeremy and Ratchis were able to get her and the gear down, while Kazrack rifled through the monks’ belongings. Among them he found two glass vials (one with a yellow liquid and another with black liquid). He also found what appeared to be a holy symbol around Vander’s neck, but it was not the familiar jackal-head of Anubis, rather a lead ram’s head with a look of anger, and golden eyes. He also snagged the fine and unusually light quarterstaff that the head monk had used with such skill.

“Hey Martin, look at this,” Kazrack called. “This is a fine weapon, and here are what are likely potions of some kind.”

Ratchis tended to Jana, and then began to break up the frozen ground to bury the dead monk.

Beorth sat leaning against the stone bier shaking his head back and forth.

“So, what the hell happened?” Jeremy asked. “Where did these monks come from?”

Martin explained how they had followed the ram and then found it bound as a prisoner. He also explained how Vander had described it as a servant of Set from *The Time Before*.

“Needless to say, we did not believe him,” Martin added.

“How come?” Jeremy asked. “The thing is big and unnaturally beautiful, and it led us to those awful monsters who claim to be druids. It could very likely be a servant of Set.”

“Beorth doubted their claim,” Martin said. “And that was enough for me.”

Jeremy turned to the Ghost-hunter. “I killed one of your brothers by accident,” he said. “We just wanted to talk with them, but they attacked us.”

“One of them had this,” Kazrack said, handing Beorth the ram’s head symbol.

“They claimed to be monks of Anubis, but this would not be their symbol,” Beorth said, he winced as he hefted the thing, the pain of his wounds cutting through his exhaustion.

“What’s this?” Kazrack asked Beorth holding up a belt with several small metal stars attached to it. “Toys of some kind?”

“They are weapons,” Beorth replied, looking up.

“Heh. If you say so.”

Ratchis wiped sweat from his brow, the cold having no effect on him due to his boots and paused in his difficult digging to cast *Bull’s Strength* on himself.

“Who was the hanged man?” Jeremy asked.

“We don’t know,” Martin replied.

The party waited for some time while Ratchis did most of the digging by himself as there was only one shovel. Jeremy helped a bit, by moving dirt away from the edges of the grave with Beorth's shield. It was nearly two hours later when the monk Jeremy had subdued with his blades began to stir. By this time, he had been tightly bound.

The monk was questioned by the group.

"What is your name?" Beorth asked.

"I am Lomax, Initiate of the Gate," the monk replied, instinctually going to rub the ache out of his neck, but being unable to.

"Why were you and your companions not willing to parley?" Kazrack asked.

"Why did you attack Beorth and his friends?" Jeremy added.

"He and his two companions freed the evil creature," Lomax replied calmly.

"I do not believe this creature is the evil you think it is," Beorth said.

"Of course, such beauty..." Kazrack said, thinking of the sunlight sparkling on the golden fleece of the creature.

"Beauty does not equal good," Beorth warned.

"But, why not?" Jeremy asked.

Beorth sighed, "We'll talk about it later. Now is not the time to have a discussion on the nature of evil and beauty."

"No! I meant, why didn't you believe them?" Jeremy said.

"I have had visions of the ram from my god," Beorth said. "I think I am meant to help it and it me."

"You are being misled," Lomax said.

"And what of this symbol?" Beorth asked the monk, holding up the ram's head. "It is not the symbol of a follower of Anubis."

"It is a symbol of those who follow Adder who have been assigned to seek and destroy the evil ram creature," Lomax said.

"So, where can this Adder be found?" Beorth asked.

"I do not know," Lomax replied.

"And what about the amulet?" Kazrack asked. "We did not find it among your things."

"I do not know of what amulet you speak of," the monk said.

Beorth looked up at Martin, "Could you ask Thomas about what he did with the amulet?"

Martin obliged his companion.

"He does not want to speak of it," Martin replied after a moment. "But he did admit that he did not give it to any *men*."

"Beorth, is it possible that these visions of yours came from the ram and not from Anubis? And that you are being led astray?" Kazrack asked, as diplomatically as possible.

"I know in my heart the source of these visions, and that I am being tested," Beorth said. "It is possible I am being led astray, but what choice have I but to follow my heart?"

Kazrack nodded solemnly.

“But as for those monks of this mysterious order,” Beorth continued. “My judgment may have been clouded in this matter, but one thing is certain, anyone who would suggest that I use that amulet for any reason to control undead is no follower of Anubis.”

“So, if they do not have the amulet, what do we do with them?” Jeremy asked Martin and Jana, standing a bit away from the interrogation.

“I guess our only choices are to free them or kill them,” Martin said, with the weight of fatigue in his voice.

Suddenly the hooting of voices was heard echoing among neighboring hills.

“More bugbears!” Martin cried.

Ratchis leapt out of the nearly completed grave and moved to patrol the perimeter of the area.

Kazrack continued badgering the monk.

“How do you know the ram is evil?” the dwarf asked.

“It is what I’ve been told,” Lomax replied.

Kazrack sighed.

“Does anyone object to freeing this man?” Kazrack asked.

“No,” said Beorth, quietly.

Ratchis leapt back into the clearing joining Jeremy in solid “Yes.”

“I would hope you would respect my wishes in this,” Beorth said. “More bloodshed will not correct this schism. We only ask that you pledge not to trouble us again.”

Lomax was silent. “I will pledge non-interference in your other matters here, for you have already foiled us in our attempt to return the ram to Master Adder.”

“In this I will believe you,” Beorth said.

Ratchis grunted.

“This is crazy!” Jeremy exclaimed.

“We must also consider that to let them free is to have to return those items we found on their persons,” Jana said. “We cannot leave them defenseless in a wood full of bugbears.”

Jeremy was speechless with confusion. He merely raised his hands into the air and made a soft choking noise as if he lost all ability to mouth out words.

“Then it is settled,” Kazrack said. “We will return them their things and send them on their way. And I will heal the two of them so they are safe for their journey.”

“I am sure Anubis’ will have us cross paths again one day, Brother Lomax,” Beorth said. “I hope you remember our mercy.”

Kazrack cut him Lomax free and the monk stood and bowed.

"I am sorry for the death of your companion," Kazrack said.

"He has already been judged," Lomax replied, bowing again.

"This is crazy!" Jeremy managed to say again.

"Compassion is one of the many weapons of Nephthys in her battle against oppression," Ratchis said. "I will see this as a sign to follow Beorth's wishes."

Jeremy grunted.

As Kazrack used the healing gifts of his gods on Lomax and Vander, Ratchis explained that he had heard bugbear voices hooting from the north, but that more importantly he had seen enormous ram tracks heading down the hill in the same direction.

Martin laid down the potion vials and staff for Lomax to take.

Lomax bowed and looked to Beorth. "May your eyes be opened to the truth of the world," Lomax said, as the party followed Ratchis down the hill towards the sound of bugbear cries.

"I just want it known that I almost exhausted all of my magic for the day," Martin said, as the party trudged down the snow-covered hill towards the stony corridor that cleaved another nearby hill asunder. Ratchis had seen the ram go in that direction.

"We don't need magic," Kazrack shrugged.

They came to the entrance to the ravine. Either side was flanked with rocky cliffs about twenty-five feet above ground level; and a great deal of shrubbery and trees screened the entrance, along with tall pines on the cliffs themselves, creating cover for anyone or anything that might have been up there.

Beorth sagged under the weight of his armor, as he stood with the others, his exhaustion worn clearly on his face. Ratchis crept forward through the tree and poked his head into the ravine and listened. In a few minutes he returned.

"I hear some voices ahead," Ratchis explained. "The ravine curves off to the left a few score feet ahead, and I think there are bugbears back there, but it could be humans; couldn't tell."

"Did you get a sense of how many?" Kazrack asked.

"More than three," Ratchis said with a smirk.

Kazrack looked at Beorth's sorry condition and called on his gods to heal the paladin, and while the wounds on his body closed, the weariness did not dissipate.

"I'm gonna climb that wall there and up to the left side ledge," Jeremy said.

"No," said Ratchis. "It is too dangerous."

"I just want to see if anyone is up there and see if I get a better view of the area," Jeremy reasoned.

"But we cannot all get up there and we should not split the group in such a way that we cannot easily get to one another," Kazrack said.

Jeremy sighed.

Martin echoed the sigh and looked to Jana, "How do we get ourselves into these things?"

"I ask myself the same question everyday," Jana replied with a shrug. "I have not yet found an answer, not that it really matters anyway."

“We need to consider our next action,” Kazrack said. “It is not my place to tell you all what to do but seeing as it is getting on dark and three of us are badly injured, I am not sure going in there after the ram is the wisest course of action.”

“Do you think the ram has the amulet?” Martin asked. “That would weigh our choice one way or another.”

“I think it does,” Jana said. “It is just a gut feeling, but I think so.”

“I will lead us to a place we can rest for the night,” Ratchis said. “We can return in the morning.”

“I think that might be a good idea,” Beorth croaked.

But suddenly, there was a scream like someone in blinding agony. It echoed through the canyon and sent shivers down their backs.

“Did that just sound like someone getting hurt?” Ratchis asked.

“Yes,” Martin and Jeremy said in unison.

“Maybe we need to press forward,” Ratchis suggested, changing his mind.

“I think our decision was made for us,” Kazrack said.

“Okay, Kazrack and I will go forward a bit and see what we can see,” Ratchis said. “If we are attacked from above run back. We will come behind you and watch the rear. I may take a little longer, but don’t wait for me.”

“Just let me climb up the ridge and look around,” Jeremy suggested again.

“No, you might be easily spotted,” Ratchis said.

“And if you are hurt we may not be able to get to you,” Martin said.

“And we should not split the group that way,” Kazrack said.

Jeremy fidgeted.

Kazrack looked up to the ridge in question and in the dying light he saw what appeared to be some kind of shabby figure retreating into the canyon.

“We may have been spotted,” the dwarf said, hurrying through the trees into the ravine, looking up and to both sides as he entered.

Ratchis was right behind him. They could see the retreating form of a bugbear above them to the left, so Kazrack hustled to the wall and squatted, and Ratchis charged towards him, planning on using the dwarf as a boost up and grab the bugbear before he could alert any more of his kind. But the hulking half-orc miss-stepped and slipped, slamming into the cliff face and sending Kazrack off his feet. Above them, the bugbear hooted loudly.

“Jeremy, get up here! Bring your bow!” Kazrack cried, and with that the plan fell to pieces.

Jeremy ran through the trees and fired his crossbow at the rapidly disappearing bugbear, missing, while two more of the hairy goblins appeared on the right ridge and chucked javelins down at Ratchis’ prone form which covered the dwarf. Fortunately, they struck with little force, and did no damage.

“Fall back! Retreat!” Ratchis cried.

On the other side of the trees, Beorth obeyed the booming voice and began to back away from the entrance to the ravine.

Kazrack crawled out from under Ratchis and high-tailed it towards the entrance, and Ratchis followed. Jeremy reloaded his

crossbow and fired up at one of the two figures throwing javelins from above, drawing blood. However, this time one of the javelins struck Ratchis heavily. He could feel his ribs bruise and thanked his chain shirt for keeping him from being skewered.

Kazrack burst through the trees, yelling “Run!” to Martin, Jana and Beorth, who just stared at him blankly. Beorth made a move to retreat further, but his exhaustion slowed him way down “Fall back! We can take cover behind those large stones!”

Ratchis moved up to Jeremy who stood just within the ravine loading his crossbow. “I’m going to die if you don’t run away!” the half-orc screamed at the Neergaardian, who reluctantly slowed his reloading to move back. Ratchis dodged left and right, as more javelins came his way. A third bugbear appeared on the ledge.

Ratchis moved to the end of one of the narrow paths through the trees and made ready to clobber anything that came through, while Kazrack ran over to Beorth and tried to forcibly throw him over his shoulder.

“Jeremy! Come here and help me with Beorth!” the dwarf cried, but the paladin struggled, not wanting to be carried, protesting vehemently. He broke free and moved further away from the entrance to the ravine.

Jana merely stood there waiting, while Martin moved back to the shade of a tall tree, out of view.

Failing to carry off Beorth, Kazrack moved back to the treeline and made ready as Ratchis did, to hack at anything that came through the trees.

Two of the bugbears on the ledge crept past the tree line and made ready to throw more javelins at the party. Jeremy fired his crossbow at them, but the bolt went high, missing completely.

But now there was another group of bugbears rushing through the trees out of the ravine. Ratchis slammed his hammer into the first one coming through. There was an explosion of blood and fur, as it fell under the weight of the blow, but still struggled to get back up.

The bugbears on the ledge took advantage of the half-orc’s distraction and he felt the bite of another javelin.

Beorth moved further away from the melee, as Martin pulled a tuft of wool from his cloak and making his arcane gestures and muttering his words, the image of the enormous golden ram appeared on this side of the tree line, but blocking direct line of sight between the bugbears on the ledge and the rest of the party.

Kazrack charged into the trees, swinging his flail wildly with his off-hand, but missed, striking a tree trunk instead with a nearly arm-numbing blow.

Jeremy stepped over to stop a bugbear trying to get past the one Ratchis was engaged with, and with a quick chop of his long sword sent the hairy goblin’s left hand flying off. The creature’s arm gushed like a hose. It screeched and dropped to its knees.<sup>56</sup>

The other bugbear had barely gotten back up from his knees, when Ratchis crushed its skull with his masterwork hammer. But the stream of bugbears bursting through the trees did not stop. Another came through, slamming his spiked club into Ratchis’ already bruised side. While the bugbears on the ledge threw javelins at the illusory ram.

“Let’s finish off these gobbos and then we’ll run!” Jeremy yelled.

One of the javelins came sailing through the illusory ram, and suddenly one of the bugbears began to scream “Loxxo! Loxxo!”

Jana cast her *blindness* spell on one of the bugbears on the ledge, even as another moved up to join them, bringing more javelins with it. The young witch then moved back to watch over the exhausted Beorth.

“Take a taste of this!” Jeremy howled as he sunk his long sword deep into the back of the screeching bugbear that held onto its bloody stump.

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<sup>56</sup> Yet another deadly critical hit by Jeremy.

Kazrack moved through the trees trying to cut down bugbears and keep them from bursting through the trees and getting to the rest of the party, but his blows all missed or were ineffectual.

Ratchis stepped back from the trees and pulling a dagger from his boot tossed it at a charging bugbear, but the blade sunk into a tree. Jeremy moved to back up the half-orc, as he was guarding the widest path, and the bugbear approaching slammed the Neergaardian with his morningstar.

Martin continued to have his illusory ram move toward the ledge, as javelins rained down around it.

At that moment there was another commotion from within the ravine. They could see the golden dire ram bearing down on them, its hooves cleaving huge rents in the snowy, rocky ground. It was being chased by five more bugbears, being led by one that was particularly large and dressed in a chain shirt.

“We gotta get these down and then run,” Jeremy yelled. “There’s an army bearing down on us!”

“We must stay and fight now,” Kazrack replied. “We have no choice.”

About thirty-five feet from the battle, Jana and Beorth watched from among some trees.

“I can’t see what’s happening,” Beorth said. “There are too many trees in the way.”

“There is some kind of commotion beyond the trees,” Jana replied.

Kazrack tried to finish the last of the first wave of bugbears by him but missed completely.

Jeremy held the gap that Ratchis had held, and slashed the large charging bugbear in the chain shirt open, and nicked it with his short sword as well. Ratchis, did not hesitate and crammed into the gap, bringing his hammer down on the thing’s neck and shoulder. It dropped its arm down as if it were now useless.

At that same moment, the ram leapt high into the air, and brought a hoof down on a bugbear’s skull, crushing it easily. Kazrack’s jaw dropped open, as bugbear brain splattered onto his chin and beard.

Martin had his illusory ram turn and look at the new one.

Kazrack made ready to attack the next bugbear that came through the trees, but one of the charging bugbears stopped short of the range of the dwarf’s flail and pierced his armor with a javelin.

Other javelins from above went right through the illusory ram.

Ratchis stepped back from the gap and called to his goddess, “Nephtys! Bless my weapon!”

Beorth and Jana crept forward, heading towards the real golden ram.

Jeremy rushed further into the trees to meet the charging bugbears.

“Wait! I thought I said to pull back!” Ratchis cried. The first bugbear ducked Jeremy’s swing, but the Neergaardian was committed to his position now, and suddenly found himself facing three bugbears at once.

Jeremy grunted as he felt the heavy blow of one of the hairy goblins, and staggered, just barely bringing his long sword up to parry a blow from a second bugbear. However, all went black for him with a third heavy blow. Jeremy collapsed bleeding and unconscious among the trees.

Kazrack cursed in dwarven.

“Help! Jeremy is down!” Martin yelled from the relative safe vantage point by a tall tree.

The golden ram turned and walked to meet Beorth, and the paladin looked up into its large mahogany eyes.

It opened its mouth and upon its tongue was the malachite pendant that could control the undead. Beorth reached up and took it.

“In exchange for your life, please help my friends,” Beorth implored and tried to bargain. “I freed you!”

The ram regarded the paladin with a look of obvious disgust.

Kazrack ran to one of the bugbears running past Jeremy’s bleeding form and it let out a loud “oof” as the light flail slammed its ribs.

Ratchis stepped up to help, but these bugbears were deft at avoiding blows. The second of the bugbears ducked and thrust his spiked club right into the half-orc’s crotch. Ratchis dropped his hammer and leaned over in pain, collapsing. The third bugbear began to go through Jeremy’s things. It held up his mithral sword, the *Right Blade of Arofel*, and hooted with delight.

“Jeremy’s down! Ratchis is down!” Martin cried, as he commanded his illusory ram to look as if it planned to charge the scattering bugbears.

“Loxxo! Loxxo!” cried their leader.

Kazrack took another blow from a bugbear. “You are more bug than bear!” the dwarf cried. “I will kill you all! I will squash you beneath my boot!”

Martin drew his crossbow, allowing the illusion of the ram to stand unattended.

“Jana, please! They’re dying!” Martin called.

“I’m going to go start helping Jeremy and Ratchis if I can,” Jana said to Beorth from where she stood behind him. “Follow me when you can and help.”

Kazrack screamed a battle cry, but it did not seem to help, as his opponent’s morningstar pierced right down to the bone of his left hand (his right still being broken and, in a sling,) and it throbbed in awful pain.<sup>57</sup> The dwarf backed away, forcing his injured arm to keep follow-up blows at bay.

The golden ram turned back to the battle and charged a laughing bugbear.

“Loxxo,” it said calmly just before it felt the crushing blow of the ram’s immense horns, sending it flying back.

Martin loaded his crossbow and fired at the bugbear dogging Kazrack, but missed and the recoil of the weapon nearly knocked him on his rear end.

Kazrack moved back into the trees using branches to provide cover. The other two bugbears looked up at the golden ram and turned to flee. The ram ran one down, and it lay bloody and trampled. Jeremy’s sword was still in its hand.

Beorth moved to help Jana bind the wounds of the dying.

The bugbear fighting Kazrack turned and ran, just barely avoiding a parting blow from the dwarf. While the one the ram had sent flying stood and shook his head and dove for the underbrush to crawl away.

“Lady of the Raised Shield, please hear my cry and heal my wounds so that I may defend my friends,” Kazrack called to the dwarven goddess, Rivkanal, but the pain of his broken arm as he attempted the somatic components ruined his concentration, and the spell failed.

The Ram walked over to Ratchis dying form, as Jana worked frantically to bind the many places Jeremy was bleeding from. It leaned over the half-orc’s face and opening its mouth breathed on him.

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<sup>57</sup> **DM’s NOTE:** Kazrack suffered the following critical effect: *Primary Hand/Arm struck; Numbed, -4 to attack rolls for 2d4 rounds.*

In a second, Ratchis' eyes fluttered, and he coughed and choked out the words, "Thank you."

Beorth left Jana to do what she did best and walked over to the golden ram. The bugbears were out of sight. Even those up on the ledge had fled at the sight of the ram defending itself.

"Thank you, O glorious beast for saving our friends' lives," Beorth said, bowing his head.

Beorth suddenly felt a feeling like a clearing of his mind, and deep inside he heard the deep rich voice of what he knew to be the ram itself.

"You have been tested, Beorth," It said. "And have been found wanting. The opportunities will come again for us to make this journey together, but *this* opportunity has been lost to you."

Beorth looked up with surprise and then his head and shoulders sunk low again, as the ram turned from him and ran, leaping up the side of the nearby rocky outcropping and disappearing into the fading light.

"It is not safe for us to stay here," Kazrack said.

"Thank you, Kazrack, your insight guides us all," Martin snapped sarcastically, and kneeled beside Jeremy to aid Jana, but she looked up blood all over her face and hands.

"He will live," she said of Jeremy. "But we need to get him out of here."

**End of Session #31**

AQUERRA

## Session #32

Martin pulled a chain shirt off of one of the bugbears, and collected a few javelins, looking to Ratchis for approval. The half-orc nodded. Ratchis felt the exhaustion brought on by his recent wounds, but still his huge muscular frame was such that even in such a condition he was stronger than the average man. He lifted Jeremy by the shoulders, and Kazrack and Jana took one leg each. They carried him back towards the wall of thorns, the hooting of bugbears echoing behind them.

The passage back through the wall seemed narrower than before, and they had to carefully move Jeremy through to avoid being pierced any of the thicket. On the other side stood Drenthis, the dark elf druid of the Circle of Thorns, and he led them back to their camp.

As they prepared to sleep and cast off the fatigue of battle, Martin addressed the others crankily. He could feel the exhaustion of his long day deep in his muscles, but no drowsiness came to relieve him of the feeling because of his magic ring.

“Come the morning, we should all talk,” the watch-mage said.

“About what?” asked Ratchis.

“About what we may have learned today, and about tactics,” Martin said.

“I agree, we do need to coordinate our actions,” Kazrack said, unrolling his bedroll.

Many hours later when sleep finally came to Martin, the ticky-tacky of broken thoughts leading into a deep dreamless slumber.

## Anulem, 21st of Dek – 564 H.E.

In the morning after their prayers and spell preparations Ratchis and Kazrack applied the healing favors of their gods on the injured.

“You can rest in the glade,” Kazrack said to a groggy Jeremy as he helped the Neergaardian to his feet.

“I doubt I will be much help,” Jeremy said.

“We only desire your company,” Kazrack replied.

“Sure, I guess you deserve that much,” Jeremy said, with a smile.

Kazrack frowned.

Drenthis, Efner and the reptilian-footed druid came to the campsite to lead them to the Glade of Henaire as they did every morning.

As they walked Kazrack spoke to Drenthis, “I will be done smelting in two days’ time and will actually be able to begin the crafting on the sickle after that, but my arm is broken.”

“How do you expect to complete the sickle with your arm injured so?” the dark elf druid asked.

“Well, either you druids will be kind and help me, or I will fail in my quest and die,” the dwarf said, making no effort to hide the annoyance in his voice.

“Perhaps we should bring him the dog,” Drenthis said, turning to his kobold companion.

“Knap! Knap! The dog!” Efner replied, happily.

“What is the dog?” Beorth asked.

“Oh, knap! You will see.”

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Later that morning, as Kazrack worked, and Ratchis helped as he could, the party began to discuss tactics and how everyone seemed to do whatever they liked in combat situations, leading to their often being routed, or barely succeeding over their foes.

“Should we have leader?” Martin asked.

“My father trained me as a soldier and thus, how to take orders, but I do not see that life working for many in this group,” Kazrack said.

“But there will be situations where we will need to act as one,” Martin said. “And if we do not have some form of tactical guide our lack of organization could cost us one or all of our lives.”

“Are you willing to obey someone even if you do not agree?” Kazrack asked, wisely.

“If I trust the person’s instinct for combat,” Martin replied.

“If we elect a leader, are we to assume that personal initiative is to be discouraged?” Jana asked, in her usual snide tone.

“We should at least make some arrangements for the night of the full moon,” Beorth said. “We know *something* is going to happen and it will likely involve trying to stop Kazrack from completing the sickle. We have never had an opportunity to know what we were going to fight, and when. Now we do...”

“What we need to do is communicate more in battle,” Kazrack said.

“And when we fight that shape-changing creature we need to trust each other and not hesitate, in case we may need to attack something that does not appear to be a threat,” Jeremy said, not bothering to open his eyes, as he lay near the bonfire on his bedroll.

“A shape-changing creature could come into our midst and use that against us,” Kazrack said. “Especially if can assume one of our forms.”

Jeremy nodded silently.

“Beorth,” Ratchis said, looking to the paladin. “Are you confident in your knowledge of battle tactics to be responsible to call retreats under certain circumstances?”

“I am still only learning,” Beorth said, and Ratchis nodded.

And on and on they went in circles trying to come up with rules of thumb for various situations and means to communicate things to each other in battle.

“I could teach you all orcish,” Ratchis offered.

“I will cut my tongue from my mouth before I learn orcish,” Kazrack said, spitting.

Ratchis snarled.

There was an awkward silence, broken only by the hissing of the metal dipped into the water trough by Kazrack.

“You should be leader!” Thomas chattered in Martin’s mind.

“Ssh, Thomas,” Martin thought back.

“You wouldn’t have to shout to be obeyed, you have charisma,” the squirrel continued.

“Thomas, you are so nice to me.”

“Well, if we cannot plan tactics for all occasions, or even for this shape-changing creature that we really know nothing about, perhaps we can devise ways to defend Kazrack and the forge on the night of the full moon,” Beorth said.

“Trenches might help,” Martin suggested. “Long ones around this general area with stakes in them to limit the approach of enemies.”

“But what if they can fly?” Jeremy suggested.

“Then it won’t matter, but we might as well do what we can,” Ratchis replied.

“I do not think whatever it is will fly,” Kazrack said. “I have dreamt of this place and always there were many glowing eyes in the dark and among the trees, though in the dreams the trees were closer.”

“Heh, I have dreams all the time, and believe me they do not always come true,” Jeremy said, grinning.

“But his dreams were divinely inspired,” said Beorth.

“Whatever,” Jeremy said, shrugging his shoulders. “You know, it seems suspicious that the druids seem to know exactly when we’re going to be attacked. It is as if they are arranging it.”

“Maybe they are,” Martin replied.

“And there is nothing we can do about it,” Ratchis added.

“Perhaps all the spell-casters could confer on what spells to pray for and prepare that day so that they may complement each other,” Beorth added.

“I do not need to prepare spells,” Jana said. “But still, that is a good idea.”

“Well, before we do anything we should confer with the druids and see if it is okay that we dig up the ground and do whatever else we have to do,” Ratchis said. “The ground is hard and frozen, so we should start as soon as we can as it will take a long time and be very hard work.”

The half-orc walked over to where the Bear guarded the entrance to the glade and asked if it were okay to dig.

“You are going to dig up trees?” the Bear asked.

“No, and we will avoid killing anything,” Ratchis replied.

“If it will help you with your task and not harm the Glade, feel free.”

And so the day was spent digging the first of what the party hoped to be many trenches surrounding the whole area of the forges, the anvil, the trough and the other tools and accessories. Ratchis began a trench on the east-west axis of the forge-area, just south of it, while Beorth helped to clear dirt, and Jana and Martin sharpened stakes from the dwindling pile of firewood.

By day’s end there was but one day’s worth of wood left in that pile (as they used it to feed the forges and to keep the huge bonfire going). When Drenthis and the other two druids came to lead them back to the camp he explained to them that some of them would be led to a place where they could safely collect more firewood, the next day.

## **Ralem, 22nd of Dek – 564 H.E.**

There was another day of digging. Jeremy, Jana, Beorth and Martin were led by Efner and Drenthis to a place where frost and disease had killed many trees. They were provided with a sledge and spent the day cutting and splitting wood and then

dragged it back to the Glade of Hennaire.

The party would soon fall into a routine. The next evening when they returned to camp there was a sack of living snails, some nearly eight inches in diameter. Ratchis dropped them into a pot of boiling water for the party's dinner.

Martin watched them boil with wide eyes. In Thracia, similar snails were a delicacy, but because of his ring he knew he would not be able to enjoy them. He sat far from the others as they ate, so he could not smell the appetizing aroma.

## **Osilem, 24th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

The days were not as cold as they had been on this morning, and as usual Drenthris, Efner and the other druid brought the party to the Glade from the camp for their day's work.

As they walked, Drenthris came up beside Jana. "I wanted to inform you that a certain invitation has been accepted that will allow you to attend," he said the young witch.<sup>58</sup>

"A priestess of Isis?" Martin asked, overhearing.

"Who accepted the invitation?" Kazrack asked, coming up from behind.

"That is not in our power to divulge," Drenthris replied. "But I can tell you that something will be provided to take care of your arm this day."

"Good, because by mid-day the smelting will be done," the dwarf replied.

At noon they heard the growl of the Bear, as the hiss of Kazrack's work died down as he finished. The party looked over to the edge of the clearing from where they carved stakes and Ratchis continued to dig, with Beorth moving the dirt away with his shield.

Efner approached, hopping along joyfully like a killer lap dog in robes, his deep indigo fur glistening in the sunlight, shining black in places. Behind him walked Drenthris the dark elf, the hood of his gray cloak up over his head, and beside him was the huge bugbear they had seen the first night. He had a shaved face and his natty goblin-hair was dyed red and black, where it emerged from beneath his toga of flayed human skin. And now their attention was brought to a much smaller prostrate figure that hunched and crawled through the snow; his arms and legs bare from underneath a rough piece of fur tied around his body. It was a man, with shorn brown hair, portions of his scalp scabbed over from large cuts. His face was the same where he had had a beard. He huffed and puffed, as the bugbear dragged him along with a leather leash.

"Knap! We have brought you the dog!" Efner cried, happily as he hopped forward.

"We have brought you the dog," the bugbear repeated. He had a deep voice that rumbled from the bowels of his immense fur-covered stomach.

The bugbear pulled the leash upward and the man was raised up gagging for a moment as he clawed at the collar to pull himself up and keep from choking. The bugbear plopped him down on his feet.

"Why is this man on a leash?" Kazrack cried dropping his tools and jogging forward. The dwarf moved to pull the leash off the man, and the bugbear yanked the man despite being muscular and over six feet tall as if he were a toy, the cracking of his muscles audible over the call of voices.

"No one touches the dog!" the bugbear barked, his fangs dripped mucous as he roared.

"Kazrack. Wait," Beorth said, coming beside the dwarf and pulling him back.

"Is this man your slave?" Ratchis said, stepped forward, his hands were balled into red fists. The bugbear looked at him, the

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<sup>58</sup> When the party first met Mardak the Elder, leader of the druid Circle of Thorns, she was warned that she might not want to be present when the final crafting of the masterwork sickle takes places under the full moon.

slightest trace of joy entering his bulging left eye, as he raised an eyebrow and cocked his head.

“He does what we say,” Drenthis said, raising a hand.

Ratchis stopped and sized up the bugbear.

“Where did you get this man?” Jeremy asked, coming alongside his half-orc companion. “What is he doing here?”

“Knap! He is a priest of Ra!” Efner snapped.

“What?!” Martin’s jaw dropped.

“Let go of that,” Jeremy grabbed for the leash, and the bugbear raised his left hand casually as if to swat the Neergardian away.

“Nephthys!” Ratchis cried, invoking his goddess’ name to cast the spell *Word of Freedom*.

The leash collar popped open and the man tumbled down to the ground.

“Wait!” Drenthis cried. Jeremy placed his hands over his head, anticipating the blow from the bugbear druid. “There is no need to violate your agreement.”

The bugbear held his hand in the air, and Jeremy crept backward.

“No! No!,” the nearly-naked man cried, as he scrambled to grab at the collar, obviously wanting to put it back on. The bugbear seemed to like this and pulled out of the man’s reach a few times and let out a low laugh. He finally dropped it on the ground and the man hastily tried to put it back on.

Ratchis stepped forward onto the leash.

“No! You can’t stop me!” the man cried and looked up to Ratchis pathetically, pulling at the leash.

“What are you talking about?” Jeremy asked, astonished at the pitiful sight.

“I have sinned against Ra,” the man cried. “I must do this.”

“What could you have possibly done to allow yourself to be treated in such a way by these beasts?” Jeremy asked.

The man fell silent and dropped his head.

Ratchis lifted his foot from the leash, and the former Sunfather snatched up the leash and collar and strapped them on.

“I am a sinner. I have sinned against the grace of Ra and have humbled myself here for the last five years,” the man said. “I may not rejoin my brethren until this time of penance is done.”

“But what did you do?” Jeremy asked again.

Kazrack raised a finger to his lips and looked at the blonde Neergardian. “If you had done something that made you submit to this, would you want to talk about it?” he asked quietly.

“I guess not.”

The priest of Ra placed the end of the leash into the bugbear’s hand and the humanoid yanked it harshly a few times as if to test it.

“Give them your gift, dog!” the bugbear barked.

The man reached into his dirty urine-stained fur and pulled out a crusty old scroll. He handed it to Ratchis.

"If used properly the spell of this scroll can be used to re-grow or reattach a severed limb. It should be more than sufficient to set a broken bone," Drenthris said. "Of course, it will take someone of great wisdom and faith to successfully cast it."<sup>59</sup>

"Thank you," Kazrack said, looking down at the priest.

"We will leave you to your work now," Drenthris said, in his usual polite manner.

"Knap!" cried Efner, seeming especially playful this day.

The bugbear began to turn and yanked 'the dog' after him, but stopped and pulled him to standing position.

"Before we go, tell them what you did," the bugbear bellowed, shaking the man as he spoke. "Tell them so that they may know the foul black darkness in the hearts of humans who hold themselves above my kind. Speak! Speak!"

The man stood straight up for the first time, though his head and shoulders still drooped. He spoke softly. "I was... I was in charge of the defense of a town that was to be raided and razed by a band of orcs and near-men, like him..." he pointed to Ratchis without looking up. "The leader of these Near-men offered me a deal. All I need do was hand over to him twelve children, and they would leave the town alone. We were outnumbered. We would have all died, man, woman and child would have been killed, but not before those twelve children, and every other woman and child, would have been raped first. I was arrogant. I thought I could give values to some lives over others."

The man was sobbing by now. "I used the trust these families had in me and rounded up the children and sent them to the leader. He... He... raided anyway, and killed everyone... everyone, except me. He kept me alive. He tortured me and used me and then left me on the side of the road so that I may know what I had done and what he had made me give up."

The bugbear pulled the man away, as he continued to sob.

The party spent some time cleaning up the area around the forge and preparing the tools and resources needed for the next day's first round of actual crafting.

In the evening, Kazrack reviewed the scroll and found that its power was such that there was a really good chance that it would not function if either he or Ratchis tried to cast the spell from it.<sup>60</sup>

"It seems a waste to try and cast the spell from the scroll if it will likely fail," said Kazrack. "These druids' help seems dubious to me, best we save it for some future time when we might have the power needed to use it successfully."

"But what about making the sickle?" Jeremy asked.

"I will have to do the best I can with a broken arm and with what aid I can gain from the rest of you," Kazrack said.

"Remember, there is not only a great chance the spell from the scroll will fail, but also a small chance that it may go awry and have a negative consequence."

Martin sighed.

"What about you, Martin?" Jeremy asked, looking to the watch-mage. "Can't you use the scroll?"

"I cannot call down divine powers, Jeremy," Martin replied.

"I will sleep on it and see what wisdom I can muster on this problem," said Kazrack.

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<sup>59</sup> This was the *Regeneration* spell.

<sup>60</sup> **DM's NOTE:** In Aquerra, it is not necessary to have a wisdom score sufficient to normally cast a spell from a scroll, but it does increase the chance of failure or negative side effect.

## Tholem, 25th of Dek – 564 H.E.

Morning found Kazrack explaining to the others that he would simply do his best with his broken arm and hope that it might heal enough to allow him to finish the work by the next full moon.

“But if you don’t do it you may die,” Martin said. “We do not know exactly how the promises to Osiris work.”<sup>61</sup>

“It matters not,” Kazrack replied. “The chances are the scroll will fail and then we’d be in the same or *worse* position.”

Feeling low, the party gathered their things and followed Efner the kobold druid towards the Glade of Henaire.

When they arrived the others looked around for ways to help Kazrack as he looked at the forged and sighed and shook his head.

Ratchis followed Efner halfway back to the edge of the Glade.

“Efner,” Ratchis said. “You know the scroll we were granted?”

“Knap! Yep!” the kobold replied.

“We might be able to use it, but the chances are small,” Ratchis explained. “Do you think one of the other druids might be able to cast it for us?”

“Knap!” The kobold smiled. “Knap! There is a price.”

“I’ll pay a price,” Ratchis replied.

“You already paid the first price,” Efner said. “Hafta pay new price.”

“What is the new price?” Ratchis asked.

“Knap! Your seed.”

Ratchis’ eyes widened with surprise, and he paused not sure of what to say to that, but finally he let out a breath and lowered his gaze to meet that of the kobold directly.

“Okay,” Ratchis replied.

It was explained to Ratchis that the druids would come to him in three nights time to bring him somewhere for the sample to be collected.

Ratchis returned to the others and explained to them that he had convinced the druids to use the scroll for them and repair Kazrack’s arm.

“However, we will have a few days wait,” Ratchis added. “But losing a few days is better than risking it all on Kazrack’s arm healing naturally in time to finish this sickle.”

“In the meantime we can continue with our preparations for whatever is going to happen on the night of the full moon,” Beorth said.

And so the party spent the rest of the day making more stakes and lengthening the trench around the forge area. Kazrack was impatient as no one allowed him to help, insisting that he rest. Not satisfied, he packed and re-packed his backpack and those of the others over and over trying to find the most efficient way of doing it.

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<sup>61</sup> When Kazrack was delayed in following up on the task assigned to him in return for bringing Jeremy back to life he began to suffer from weakness, boils, dizziness, and an overall malaise.

## **Balem, 26th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

The next day the party was led to the Glade of Hennaire as usual, as they passed through the entrance in the trees, the Bear moving to guard the exit and the other druids moving off to do whatever it is they did all day, they were filled with a sense that something was different.

As they approached the forge, Ratchis spoke up, “Um, I think the glade is smaller.”

“You noticed it, too,” Martin said, slowly. “I thought it was my imagination.”

“The trees have actually moved in closer all around us,” Ratchis said. “Not too much, but still ten feet is a long way for a tree, let alone, a few hundred of them.”

The rest of the party began to look around with their mouths agape.

“This is a place of the druids, perhaps they did it,” Martin suggested.

“Look!” Beorth said, pointing down into the trenches.

The entire outer side of the trench that was slowly coming around the forges was collapsed and in most places, the stakes the party had been sticking into the side pointing up at an angle in order to form a defensive barrier looked as if they had been forced out of the earth from the inside.

“I am getting the feeling this wood does not want us here,” Jeremy said.

“Well, that’s no surprise,” said Martin.

With a sigh, Ratchis went back to digging and shoring up where the trench had been collapsed. Jeremy and Jana collected the fallen stakes and began putting them back, while Martin sharpened more. Beorth helped Ratchis, and Kazrack sat around bored out of his mind.

Later in the day, Beorth, Jeremy, Martin and Jana were led to where they could collect more wood.

## **Teflem, 27th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

“Stop it!” Jeremy cried to the trees the next morning when the party arrived to find that they had moved another ten feet closer and the trenches were partially collapsed again.

“If the woods themselves are against us, perhaps we have no chance at all, no matter what!” Kazrack proclaimed.

“So, why don’t you slit your throat, while you are at it?” Beorth snapped.

Kazrack glared at the paladin.

The party spent a day similar to the one previous, but this time Ratchis continued to extend the trench, while the others shored up the partially collapsed area.

## **Anulem, 28th of Dek – 564 H.E.**

And so another day came of merely killing time, until the druids came to pick up Ratchis for him to pay his price.

Drenthris and Efner arrived late in the afternoon.

“Knap! I hope you did not tire yourself out too much!” the kobold yapped to the half-orc.

“I have much discipline and am not so weak that it should matter,” Ratchis replied.

“What is this all about?” Kazrack asked.

“He must come to pay his price for the reading of the scroll,” Drenthis said.

“Ratchis, what have you agreed to do?” Kazrack asked. “Please do not do anything I would not approve of for my own sake.”

“I am doing it for all our sake’s, and do not worry, I would not betray my own scruples. Anything I do, I do of my own free choice.” He paused and turned to the druids. “I am ready to go.”

“Knap! Sure, you don’t want your friends to come watch,” Efner asked with a sly smile.

Ratchis glared at the kobold.

“Have it your way.”

Ratchis was led away by the two druids.

The others worked until close to sundown and then Drenthis returned to lead them back to their camp.

“Where is Ratchis?” Kazrack asked.

“He will be returned soon,” Drenthis replied. “And at that time your arm shall be repaired.”

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“How will you collect it?” Ratchis asked as Drenthis and Efner led him through the narrow trails of the thick foreboding forest.

“Knap! The usual way, we bring you somewhere and you put it in a bowl,” Efner replied.

“As long as my companions do not find out, I will do as you say.”

The druids nodded.

As the sun dropped below the horizon, Ratchis could see that he was being brought back to the main clearing where he and the others had first met the druids, but by some circuitous route, and to a place further back.

The area was lit up by several large fires and was filled with scores of bugbears armed with spears, and growling and hooting in their guttural goblin language. As Ratchis and the two druids approached, they quieted down and the crowd parted, revealing the tall gnoll, Mardak the Elder. Beyond him, stood the huge bugbear druid, and the half-orc Ratchis had seen on the first night as well. Beyond them was a stone bier, upon which sat the woman the party had seen when they first enter the Circle of Thorns. She was not chained, but was hunched over and shivering, covered in a thick fur blanket.

Drenthis walked back towards the Glade of Henaire.

Mardak stepped forward and spoke, “Efner has informed us that you are willing to give us your seed in return for our further assistance. It is your choice: You may have the bowl, or you may have the woman. I am feeling generous.” The gnoll gestured back to the shaking woman.

Ratchis’ mouth dropped open.

“What do you plan to do with...my seed?” Ratchis asked.

“It shall be placed in the woman,” Mardak said. “She is at the proper time in her cycle, and she bought some more years of her life to care for the child that shall come of this, which shall be our champion. What is your choice?”

Ratchis paused.

“One more moment please,” Ratchis requested and walked towards the woman. She cringed as he sat beside her on the stone.

“I want you to know that I would not do anything you did not want me to do,” Ratchis said, trying hard to make his growly deep voice as soft and gentle as possible. “I only want to do what you would have me do, so let me know what you want.”

The woman looked up at the hulking half-orc, still shivering, tears streaming down her face, which was pale with cold and fear.

“I don’t know,” she said, softly, her voice quavering. “I’m scared. I’m afraid of what they’ll do to me and how they’ll do it if you choose the bowl, but I’m afraid of you too.” And with that she pulled away, frightened of what his reaction would be to what she said.

“I can’t imagine that they will be gentler than I will, but...”

“All I know is that this is going to buy me at least three more years of life, maybe even eight, and a few more years of life in this terrible place must be better than death. I guess... I guess you are the better alternative.” She dropped her eyes, as a look of disgust came over her face.

“I am a follower of Nephthys,” Ratchis said. “Do you know of Nephthys?”

The woman nodded.

“Then you know that Nephthys would not want me to rob you of your freedom of choice,” Ratchis explained gently. “So, if you change your mind, or... just stop me at any point.”

She nodded again.

The half-orc gently wrapped his muscular arms around the woman in an attempt to comfort her.

The bugbears began to cheer and hoot.

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Ratchis was brought back to the camp, escorted by Drenthris and Mardak the Elder many hours later

“Ratchis, I am glad to see you are safe,” Kazrack said, stepping forward. “Though you look as if you had a rough night.”

“I am fine,” Ratchis replied softly.

“Where is the scroll?” Mardak asked, not wasting time with greetings or false pleasantries.

The scroll was fetched for the imposing gnoll druid and he rolled it out, his long gnarled and clawed fingers holding it gingerly, as if something about it disgusted him.

Mardak the Elder intoned the words from the scroll and reached out and touched Kazrack gently on the arm.

The dwarf was seized with a sudden pain. Kazrack felt as if his arm were on fire, as he felt the bones beneath his flesh twist and turn and re-join and re-knit. He gritted his teeth and did not let one word of complaint pass his lips and in less than a moment the pain receded. He flexed his arm back and forth. It felt as good as new.

“I thank you,” Kazrack said to the gnoll.

“It is your half-orc friend you should thank,” Mardak replied. He made no attempt to hide his disgust for the entire group.

“I fully intend to,” Kazrack said.

Mardak turned away, and walked from the camp,

“I hope you are now able to complete your task with no further complications, except of course those that may occur on the night of the full moon itself in the Glade of Hennaire,” Drenthis said.

“And what would those be?” Martin asked.

“That remains to be seen,” the drow elf druid replied, and walked out of the camp.

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The next day was the *Day of Deathlessness*.<sup>62</sup> Beorth observed the day in silence and did not aid Kazrack in his task. Kazrack began his actual forging, asking the paladin’s forgiveness if he did not observe the holidays of the human god. Ratchis helped Kazrack some, but in general everyone was very somber.

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And so, the days passed with Kazrack working diligently, and the others helped how they could. On several occasions, the others were led to where they could collect more wood, but mostly there was little to do. Jeremy was the most bored. He spent a lot of his time practicing headstands and cartwheels and running and jumping as much as possible. At time, Martin would create illusions and Jeremy would try to instruct him on how to make their combat actions look more believable. Martin also built a ladder by lashing wood together, and he and Ratchis built a barricade atop the smaller forge, basically creating a defensive position above the area from which a better view and aim could be gained against any that might attack the forge on the night of the full moon.

During this time, the trees about the glade continued to encroach upon the small area the forge was in. In addition, it seemed that more trees were ‘arriving,’ and the wood itself was thicker. The progression was a few feet a day and always seemed to happen at night, noticed when the party would arrive at the Glade for another day’s work.

On several occasions the trenches were partially collapsed again, and once they were partially flooded. And while the weather was generally warmer during this, the last month of the year, on one occasion a cold slushy rain fell out the sky in bucketfuls, making for a miserable day for the party, huddled by the bonfire or the forges, trying to stay warm and as dry as possible.

Kazrack completed all but the final touches on the sickle on the fifteenth of Onk, which was good thing because the next night was the first night of the full moon. The sickle was of excellent quality and had silver inlaid on part of the blade in blockish designs that suggested dwarven runic art.

## **Isilem, 16th of Onk – 564 H.E.**

It was not long after Ra’s Glory had set that the moon rose, bright and full, but a bit fuzzy.

Kazrack pulled the sickle from where he had kept it safe and placed it on the large anvil that was provided for him.

“Once I start working on this, I am unsure how long I can stop doing it without violating the terms of my task,” Kazrack said, as Martin and Jana took up positions atop the forge, and behind the make-shift battlement. “So, I will only stop to help if I see someone dying.”

“The trees are moving!” Martin hissed, and they all looked to see the line of trees advancing all around them, as if their upper branches were arms that pulled skirt-hem roots up out of the ground to creep forward daintily like old crones dressed

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<sup>62</sup> *The Day of Deathlessness* is said to be the one time of the year when the gates to Anubis’ Realm are closed. It is somber day and people tend to speak in quiet tones, if at all (Monks of Anubis take a vow of silence) and many people refrain from work or any dangerous activity. It is said that those that die this day are doomed to walk the world and never find rest.

as young girls at a cotillion.

Kazrack began to work. He hammered at the blade rhythmically, and there was an answer call as the trees took their place less than twenty feet around the forge area. It was the sound of a wood flute, light and playful on the breeze. The notes it played moved up and down and around the rhythm of the dwarf's hammer. A second theme joined it from the other side of the now very small clearing, and then a third. They wove around each other, emphasizing certain portions of the main melody as they came together for a measure and then flew apart again, like feathers dancing on the wind.

"I'm sorry I got you guys into this," Jeremy said. "But I'll do my best to get you all out of it."

"That is all we can ask," Martin said from atop the now cold forge.

A figure stepped out of the trees. It was a beautiful brown-skinned woman dressed in a green gossamer gown and barefoot in the grass. She had long flowing brown hair that seemed to have green highlights in the glare of the raging bonfire that complimented her emerald eyes. She looked right at the party, smiling and curtsied and then began to dance.

"Is she the danger?" Martin wondered aloud.

Around and around the forge area she danced, and now other instruments joined the wood flutes. There were higher pitched chimes and lower-pitched wood-winds winding together in such a way that it always felt held together by Kazrack's hammer blows. Suddenly, another woman joined the first, and she too was dancing, her movements perfectly matching those of the first, and before the two of them had made a quarter rotation about clearing, another woman joined them, and then another and then another. And soon, seven beautiful women danced about the clearing, each in a nearly sheer dress of a different color. The first had worn green, but there was soft sky blue, and flaming orange-red, and daisy-yellow and oaken brown, royal purple and lily-white.

"Nephthys, grant me the strength of the bull, like that of the slaves of yore that broke the yoke of tyranny that held them against their will," Ratchis said, invoking his goddess' power to increase his already great strength.

As the six new women continued to dance, the first stepped out of the circle towards where Jana sat upon the forge next to Martin.

The woman's smile broadened and she motioned for the young witch to come towards her. She then feigned the main dance step in time with her companions as they really did it.

"I don't think we should do this," Martin said.

"It only seems to be me she wants," Jana said.

"I think she is your friend. The one you've been waiting for," Beorth said. "The one the druids mentioned."

"Do you think so?" Jana asked, looking back to face Beorth. "I don't know. This is kind of weird."

"Don't do it," Ratchis said.

But Jana shrugged her shoulders and climbed down the ladder and made her way out to the circle of dancing women. Jana was overcome with the scent of flowers in full bloom as she stepped up to the green-clad woman and took her hand.

"Just follow what we do," the woman said. Her voice lilted perfectly as if she were singing with the music that had still had not stopped.

Jana tried to mimic their dance, but several portions of it were difficult for her untrained feet. It also seemed to suddenly change at times, and though the seven women seemed to be reacting to some unknown cue, Jana would stumble and one or more of the women would gracefully step up to her and keep her on her feet.

Round and round they all went, most often evenly spaced in the circle.

The first dancer stopped again, and this time she beckoned to Jeremy. Unable to stop himself, Jeremy moved to run out to

the circle of dancing women.

“What are you doing?” Ratchis cried, grabbing the Neergaardian by the shoulder.

“She wants me. Didn’t you see?” Jeremy replied, his eyes jerking back towards the beautiful woman as he shrugged Ratchis’ hand off.

“What if they are evil?” Ratchis asked.

“They are not evil. They just want to dance!”

“It’s your choice,” Ratchis sighed.

“Yeah, so let go!” Jeremy skipped towards the woman, leaping over the trenches around the area. She swayed her hips provocatively to the music.

“My name’s Jeremy, what’s yours?” he asked, reaching a hand out as he approached her.

Suddenly, the trees began to move again, but this time only one tree for each dancing woman, moving forward five feet to mark the dancing circle.

Kazrack’s rhythm continued, as did the music about it. Jana continued to dance with the other women.

Martin loaded his crossbow.

Jeremy reached out to touch the woman, but she gracefully danced away and seemed to step right into the tree that had stepped out nearest her. Out from the other side of the tree appeared another of the women. Jana stopped dancing in shock. It suddenly became clear what happened, the women had each moved one place around the circle by entering the tree nearest them and exiting the next tree to their right.

While beautiful, Jeremy did not feel the same way about the woman closest to him as he had the first. There was something just so *charming* about her. He had to talk to her. He jogged over towards where she danced now, moving continually withershins, and towards the next tree.

There was a sudden change in the music, and the woody sounds of pan-flutes became a sudden frenzy of chimes, whistles and plucked strings. It seemed to fit perfectly with softer and faster sound of Kazrack working the blade’s curve.

From among the trees came flying dozens of swirling colorful balls of light that orbited a center point in groups of three and then danced around in seven places about the circle, one cluster above each of the trees. In the light of the bonfire the party could see that the dancing lights actually orbited tiny little green-skinned men in green clothing and feathered caps. They each had a set of four mosquito-like wings sized for their foot-tall forms. As they watched in amazement the little faeries gestured as if working a marionette, and beneath each, rose a pile of sticks that took the shape of man and danced to frenzied music manipulated by the invisible pixie strings. They little men giggled uncontrollably, shaking their rear-ends happily in the air as they made their stick men dance.

Beorth moved over to the bonfire and picked up a log that burned at one end. It was one of several the party had purposefully left at the edge of the fire to allow for easy access.

One of the stick marionettes crumbled as one of the pixies swooped down towards where Martin took everything in jaw agape, crossbow in hand and simply touched him on the top of the head. Martin was taken a back for a second and then a look of great anger filled his face as he flushed, and he swung the crossbow in his hand at the little man as it swooped out of the way.

“Come back you little thief!” Martin cried.

“What did he take from you?” Ratchis called up.

“He stole my bag,” Martin cried, standing. His satchel hung at his hip as usual.

As Jeremy nearly reached the object of his very recent affections, each of the women stepped into a tree again and switched positions.

“Come back, I just want to talk to you,” Jeremy whined.

“Lady of the Raised Shield protect me from those who might cause me harm,” Kazrack intoned, pausing his work to cast a spell upon himself.

As suddenly as the anger had come over him, Martin stopped and looked into the colored light hovering above them all. “Pretty,” he said, a bit of drool slipping from the corner of his mouth.

Beorth dropped the small burning log into one of the spiked trenches that the party had soaked with oil and set it alight.

Ratchis’ head turned to the left and right, trying to keep himself abreast of everything going on. Jeremy continued to run after the woman that had beckoned him out of the defense of the forge area, while Martin continued to drool.

Another of the little men swooped down, and this time he touched Beorth on the cheek, and he too was overcome with a great anger and pulling his long sword cut deep into the little man.

“Auughh!” the pixie cried out and fell into one of the trenches, impaling himself.

Suddenly, all the stick man marionettes collapsed and all the pixies buzzed angrily.

“Ooh! Ooh! That’s not funny!” they all chattered in their impossibly high-pitched voices.

Ratchis reacted quickly and reached into the trench and placed a hand on the dying pixie and the other on his holy symbol about his waist.

“Nephthys! Grant me your blessing for this strange creature so that this night might continue peacefully,” he called to his goddess. The creature stirred and immediately began a giggle that was interrupted by a cry of pain. He then laughed some more.

“You should be more careful,” Ratchis said to the faerie as it flew back up to join its companions.

“Beorth, why did you attack it?” Ratchis asked, as he saw Martin leap off the top of the forge and make his way to the large stone table that served as part of the work area in the glade. He swung his staff about him wildly.

“He hit me,” Beorth explained to Ratchis, a vacant look in his eyes.

“We should try to restrain ourselves unless they really hurt us,” Ratchis suggested wisely.

“Ratchis! Martin is acting weird!” Kazrack said, continuing with his hammering even as he looked up.

“I’m flying!” Martin cried, flapping the ends of his staff up and down as if they were wings. Martin’s long brown hair wagged in the humid air.

“Something is wrong with Beorth as well,” Ratchis cried. “Jeremy get back in here!” The half-orc grabbed Martin by the ankle easily, as the watch-mage was nearly four feet in the air atop the stone table. Martin responded by smacking Ratchis in the chin with the butt of his staff, drawing blood. Suddenly, Beorth thrust his sword at the half-orc as well. Ratchis turned awkwardly so his armor took the majority of the blow, but he winced with pain.

“I don’t want to go to bed yet, Mommy!” Martin cried.

The music changed again. The deep sound of Kazrack knocking the blade into the wooden handle with a mallet was echoed by deep drums in the woods.

Faintly, they could now hear the sound of galloping coming from the east.

“Woo-hoo! They’re coming! They’re coming!” the pixies began to screech.

The seven dancing women screeched and disappeared into the trees and did not re-emerge.

“I don’t like this,” Jana said, and began to move back into the forge area.

Ratchis had not let go of Martin’s ankle despite the wounds he suffered, and he yanked the Watch-mage onto his face.

“Stay down and calm down!” Ratchis commanded.

“Where’d you go?” Jeremy cried to the trees that had swallowed the woman. However, unnerved by the drums and galloping he sprinted towards the tall forge and leapt up into the air, vaulting over it. He landed beside Kazrack.

“I didn’t want to leave her out there,” Jeremy said.

“Jana?” Kazrack asked.

“No, not Jana,” Jeremy said. “The girl. She’s beautiful.”

Beorth wandered away from Ratchis and out of the forge area. Jana spotted him and hustled over towards the paladin to keep him from wandering too far.

Ratchis yanked Martin’s leg to pull him off the table, but the feeble watch-mage managed to keep his grasp to the table edge and hold on for dear life, crying to his mommy the whole time. Jeremy hurried over and grabbed the other ankle and yanked Martin off onto the ground. However, at that same moment one of the pixies cried, “More people dancing!” and pointed at Jeremy and the Neerguardian began a jig.

“I can’t stop dancing!” Jeremy cried, his arms flailing wildly.

The galloping grew louder and louder and suddenly from the trees emerged seven pairs of men. But they were not normal men. They had thick hairy legs like a goat’s that ended in cloven hooves. They had hairy barrel-chests and curly brown locks that could not hide two small horns on their heads. They wielded thick cudgels and had wild looks in their eyes, hooting to the rhythm of the drums. They danced as well, slamming their clubs against each other’s as if fighting, but never connecting. They created their own dancing ring, and at time one would swing low and the other would leap over the blow and then return a high blow the other would duck.

Beorth stumbled past two of them, who swung as if part of the dance, but tried to knock the paladin down. Fortunately for him his confused stumbling led him out of the way of the blows and the goat-men continued to dance. Jana reached Beorth and grabbed him to pull him back into the defensive circle, but the paladin pulled away. Ratchis hustled to aid his two companions and was shocked to watch Beorth turn and cut deep into Jana’s side.

She cried out in pain.

**End of Session #32**

### Session #33

“Anubis! What have I done?” Beorth cried, suddenly finding his wits again.

Jana clutched her bloody robes and retreated back into the central area. Beorth followed as Ratchis yelled for him to get away from the thrashing satyrs.

Unfortunately, Martin took that opportunity to turn his dazed attention to the young witch and knocked her on the top of the head with his staff.

“Ow!” she cried out, as one of the little green men swooped past Beorth again trying to touch him, but the paladin just barely ducked.

“I’ll get them off of you!” Martin cried to Jana, staring as if he could see something hovering about her head, and then suddenly he shook his head, and seemed to realize what he had done. “Oh Jana! I’m so sorry!”

Ratchis moved to block the one entrance the satyrs could possibly reach them through, and a pair swung around him and one slammed the half-orc’s chin with his cudgel.

Another pixie swooped at Beorth, brushing his bald head with a hand. Beorth felt a tingle go through his mind again but was able to shake it off. The pixie banked and came around swooping at Jana, who barely ducked a touch as well, as Martin spoke an arcane word and cast *blur* on the paladin.

Beorth moved to block another possible area of access to the forge area by the satyrs. He held a pair of the goat-footed men at bay, ducking the wide blow of one as he spun madly by, frothing and singing drunkenly to the melodic drums of the forest.

Ratchis felt the weight of another club, as he thrust the head of his hammer into the gut of one of the satyrs, knocking the wind out of him and sending him down.

“Attack to subdue!” Ratchis called, but his voice was drowned out by high-pitched chanting coming from one of the pixies.

“Grow! Grow! You gotta grow! Because working for the gnolls is a big no-no!” the pixie recited and suddenly the brown dry grass that had barely survived under the snow prevalent here, began to grow at an incredible pace in a large square in one corner of the forge area, and wrapped itself tightly around Martin, Beorth, Jana and Jeremy. The Neergaardian was still frantically doing nothing but dancing, but now his jerky movements were even more ridiculous as the entangling grass tried to hold him down.

The pixies exploded with laughter.

Martin tried to pull himself to the edge of the flailing grass, but his strength was insufficient. Beorth followed suit but failed as well.

One of the spinning satyrs reached out and swung at the entangled Beorth, but the paladin swung his sword back and forth and barely fended off the cudgel blow. Jana was desperately trying to get herself free, but the grass proved too tenacious. Martin began to saw at the individual blades of grass with his dagger.

As the three struggled to free themselves, and Jeremy could do nothing but dance, Ratchis held his ground, readying himself for any satyrs that might try to break through to reach Kazrack.

The pixies began to fly in a tight and quick circle.

“Hey! He looks like he has ants in his pants!” one of the pixies cried pointing at Jeremy.

“Shut up!” Jeremy yelled back angrily, as the music became even faster and more frenzied, syncopated by the slamming of the satyr cudgels against one another.

“Your beard looks thin to me, Master Dwarf!” Another of the pixies cried. “You call yourself a dwarf? You couldn’t

hammer a roach!”

They all tittered and flew about.

“You have the limp-wristed hammering of a sniffing flower elf!” Another Pixie mocked the dwarf, and again they all tittered and giggled.

“Nephthys, grant me your divine strength so that I may defend my companions and help us overcome this test!” Ratchis cried out, casting a spell upon himself.

Suddenly, Jeremy no longer felt compelled to dance, but he was still stuck fast in the tangled foliage. “Finally!” He cried. “Somebody get these off of me!”

Beorth was able to make some progress away from the outer edge of the entangled area, where the goat-footed men danced, but only managed to get himself more deeply entangled near the center, but at least he was out of reach of the cudgel blows.

A pair of the satyrs, moved to the edge of one of the trenches, and bellowing as they skipped past each other took swipes at the stakes below to clear them away. Ratchis moved to intercept them, coming between a pair, which allowed one to take a swing, striking the half-orc in the small of the back. Ratchis stumbled with an “oof” but kept his footing and slapped one of the satyrs back with his hammer, trying hard to simply knock them out and not break any bones.

One of the pixies, dive-bombed at Jana and brushed the skin of her cheek. In a second, she had a blank stare and was no longer struggling to break free of the grabbing grass.

Martin reached over and began to try to help Jeremy pull himself free, as a pixie landed above Kazrack, atop one of the forges. It pulled a tiny little bow from its back and fit an arrow into it.

“Fun time!” the pixie cried. Jeremy was still stuck fast. Beorth, however, was able to break free finally, moving towards Kazrack.

Ratchis slammed another satyr with his hammer, knocking the goat-footed man into unconsciousness, while frustrated, Jeremy reached over into the fire and pulled out a brand.

“Fire is no good,” the pixie atop the forge said, and fired one of his tiny arrows at Jeremy, but despite the fact that he was stuck fast, the arrow flew wide of the Neergaardian. Another pixie landed atop the forge and fired a tiny arrow as well. This one struck Jeremy, and he swooned. In a moment, he was snoring softly on the cold ground, dropping the fire brand.

Martin the Green picked it up quickly.

Beorth moved with uncharacteristic speed, sliding past Kazrack and reaching up, he slapped the first pixie with the bow in the side of the head with the flat of his sword.

“Huh?” the pixie said, surprised, before tumbling to the ground unconscious.

“Well, that’s not nice!” the other bow-wielding pixie said annoyed, and fired an arrow at the paladin, missing.

“Why do you oppose us?” Kazrack cried out.

“Why would a jackass’ rear-end be an improvement over your hairy face?” one of the flying pixies replied.

Now it seemed that Ratchis was involved in the violent dance of the satyrs. He traded blows, but his divinely-borne strength gave him the advantage. One of the satyrs moved to get around the half-orc, as he eagerly moved to get at another, but Beorth momentarily ignoring the pixies dropped his sword and snatched his staff, to hold the satyr at bay away from the dwarf.

And still the music flowed from the wood in cacophonous waves.

The pixies flew in a circle tossing insults and non-sequiturs, except for the unconscious one and the one with the bow atop

the forge. It let an arrow fly at Kazrack, and the dwarf felt its tiny bite, but he was able to shake off the magic of it. Seeing this, Beorth left the satyrs to Ratchis and moved back to guard Kazrack.

“My little friend would you like to hear a joke?” Kazrack called up to the pixie that was firing at him.

“Oooh, I love jokes!” the pixie cried in his impossibly high voice. “Tell me a joke before I shoot you with an arrow and put you to sleep.”

Jana continued to drool, doing nothing but staring into space, while Jeremy snored. Martin stuck the non-burning end of the brand into the ground.

Ratchis called to his goddess once again, asking for her healing favors for himself, but he left himself open and felt the weight of a cudgel in his gut.

“Come on! Come on! Hurry up and tell me the joke, Master dwarf,” the pixie called. “Or I can tell you a joke.”

“*Sumnus!*” Martin called, getting his arm free enough to pull sand from a pouch and cast a spell at the pixie. However, the spell sputtered and had no effect.

“There will be no jokes!” Beorth admonished. “By Anubis, I will not allow you to keep us from fulfilling our appointed tasks for Osiris!”

“Shaddap!” the pixie replied, and fired an arrow at the paladin, but Beorth turned out of the way and swung his quarterstaff with both hands, bringing it down with all his strength on the pixie’s head. There was a sickening cracking sound, as the faerie collapsed into a bloody heap.

“Bad! Bad! Killer! Killer!” the pixies all began to buzz together. All laughter left their voices, replaced with a disturbing angry quality made chilling by their child-like voices. They all pulled out their tiny bows and readied arrows in them.

“Ha ha! What a funny joke!” Kazrack called out, and then said more softly to Beorth. “We want to maintain the illusion that this is still a game on both sides.”

“It is a little too late for that,” Kazrack,” Martin said, overhearing as he watched the pixie’s blood pour down the side of the forge.

A barrage of tiny arrows came down upon the paladin, most could not get through his armor, but he felt the bite of two and felt their magic try to affect him. He was able to shake off their effects with the grace of his god.

Martin took up the burning stick again. It was mostly burned away at this point and it scorched his hand as he dropped it onto Jeremy’s sleeping form.

“Wake up! Wake up, now!” Martin yelled to the Neerguardian.

Beorth kneeled beside the pixie he had struck and laid his hand upon it, but even before he could call to his god to close the faerie’s wounds, he knew it was too late. The pixie was dead.

“How long have I been out?” Jeremy asked groggily, shaking his head back and forth after frantically brushing the firebrand off. “Whoa! How’d I sleep with all this racket? And all these guys are still here?”

“You need to get free,” Martin said, frantically to Jeremy.

“Who wants to hear my funny joke?” Kazrack asked again.

“Well, we got something funny for your friend,” one of the pixies squeaked, as they all aimed their bows at the paladin once again.

“Kazrack, wait ‘til I am free, and I’ll be glad to listen to anything you have to say!” Jeremy replied. It was unclear if he was joking or not.

Beorth left the pixie corpse and hurried over to where Ratchis was keeping the satyrs at bay. He thrust the butt of his staff into one. It bellowed angrily, as tiny arrows rained down on the paladin once again.

The satyrs continued to spin and dance, but now in tighter circle, making more of a concerted effort to get past the half-orc in one place, and past the paladin at another. Ratchis slapped another satyr with the broadside of his hammer and sent it reeling to the ground.

Jeremy struggled to stand, but the grasses held him down, just as they continued to hold Martin in place.

Beorth was distracted by the satyrs and did not see the pixies continuing to fire their tiny arrows at him. He felt the slightest sting, and then a tingling washed over him.

“It’s done!” cried one of the sprites in his high buzzing voice.

“It’s done!” echoed another.

“No, it isn’t!”

“Yes, it is!”

“I heard it’s done. Is it done?”

“It’s done!” The pixie voices tittered back and forth, full of malice and laughter.

Martin spoke an arcane word or three and tossing colored sand, a spray of colors washed over three satyrs and they were stunned.

A satyr made its way past Beorth whose dropped his guard a bit and was looking around with a confused look on his face. The satyr grabbed Jana, who had just snapped out of her *confusion* to find herself entangled by the grass.

The young witch hissed a word, but her concentration was broken by the pawing satyrs, and her *blindness* spell failed.

“I love it when they resist!” the satyr drooled, lust in his deep bass voice.

“Get off of her you brute!” Martin said, trying futilely to reach them, but the grass held him motionless.

“Beorth! Quick! Help Jana!” Ratchis cried, reaching back, and pushing the dazed paladin with one hand, while fending off a satyr with his hammer.

Beorth stumbled towards the witch, even as the music in the forest changed. The frenzied high flutes gave way to earthy woodwinds, which were punctuated by deep hunting horns, that seemed to grow louder with each blow, as if hunters approached.

“Uh oh!” the pixies all cried and began to buzz away in the opposite direction of the horns.

Beorth smacked the satyrs grabbing Jana with his staff, and it turned to him, reaching for its dropped cudgel.

“Ratchis! If you can make your way towards me, I can pause my work long enough to use my gods’ healing blessing,” Kazrack cried to the half-orc.

A satyr took a swing at Ratchis, who stepped back to avoid the blow and be within reach of Kazrack.

“Lady of the Raised Shield! Please heal this one who shields me as a mother shields her child,” Kazrack said, putting his left hand to his runestone bag around his neck and he lay his right on Ratchis’ arm.

The half-orc felt the warm healing divine energy pass through him, and the stiffness of closing wounds. He smacked the closing satyr away and filled the gap to keep the fey creatures away from the diligent dwarf.

Another spoken word from Jana, and the satyr that had recently held her and now tried to smash Beorth's head in, covered in fear and took off. Beorth gave the goat-footed man a parting shot with his quarterstaff. It yelped uncharacteristically.

The last pixie to depart hesitated and with a forgetful "oh yeah" snapped his fingers and the grass holding Martin, Jana and Jeremy and place returned to normal, freeing them.

"See ya!" the pixie cried, flying off. The hunting horns grew louder, but now there was another sound coming from amid the horns. The music seemed to swell and fall in off-time to make the sound become clearer. It was the baying of hounds.

Martin jogged over to Kazrack and crushing a turtle shell in his hand cast a spell of protection on the dwarf.

"Beorth!" Kazrack cried. "Come here so I can enchant your weapon!"

The paladin did not acknowledge the cry, but instead turned to Jana, "My lady, what do these creatures want with you?"

"Beorth! Come here!" Kazrack cried again.

"Beorth?" Jana questioned the paladin. "Whatever is the matter?"

The baying of the hounds seemed to unnerve the satyrs and they began to flee. Ratchis took a parting shot at one and sent it falling unconscious to the muddy ground.

Jeremy stood and drew his weapon, turning just in time to move out of the way of what would have been a skull-crushing blow from a satyr, as it fled past him. The blonde Neergaardian took the blow to the shoulder instead and returned in kind with the flat of his blade, slapping it in the side of the head.

"Who is Beorth?" the paladin asked Jana.

The young witch's eyes opened wide in disbelief.

At that moment huge hounds broke from the trees and took off after the fleeing satyrs.

"This is craziness," said Jeremy.

"You are Beorth," Jana said, gently. "Don't you remember?"

Beorth was silent.

"Oh, no!" said Martin, shaking his head.

"You with the quarterstaff. Come here!" Kazrack tried drawing the paladin over again, not allowing a little thing like loss of memory to interfere with his hope to enchant the weapon.

"His mind is clouded by the pixie's arrows," Ratchis said.

"Look, fill him in quick. Wolves!" Jeremy said, pointing the huge hounds.

Ratchis put a meaty hand on Jeremy's shoulder. "Allow me to handle them."

The hounds ran right through the clearing, ignoring the party and chasing the satyrs exclusively.

"Wow, good job, Ratchis," Jeremy said.

The hunting horns continued to blow, and suddenly the women that had disappeared before emerged from their trees, applauding the hounds.

"Martin, tell me, what's going on?" Jeremy asked.

"I think we are safe for now," the watch-mage replied.

"What are we doing here?" Beorth finally spoke again.

"Come with me," Jana said, taking his arm and leading him towards Kazrack.

Jeremy waved at the woman he had chased earlier. She laughed and waved back. He began to slowly walk towards her.

"So, uh... How *you* doin'?" the Neergaardian asked with a cocked eyebrow.

"Who's the short guy?" Beorth asked Jana in a whisper, gesturing to Kazrack.

"That is Kazrack the dwarf," Jana replied. "He is our friend. He can help."

"That's right, I will enchant your weapon," Kazrack said.

"They're all gone, Kazrack!" Jeremy sighed, shrugging his shoulders as the beautiful women began to dance in a circle again.

"I'm sure something is following them," Kazrack said. "Don't you hear the horns?"

"My lady, could you explain what is happening?" Beorth asked Jana again.

Martin climbed back up onto the cold forge again.

The horns swelled and for a second they all thought their eardrums would burst. They stopped with a final blare, and the party looked up to see three giant humanoids step into the clearing. They were nearly eleven feet tall and had swarthy skin and curly red beards and hair. They were dressed in studded leather armor and had huge swords at their sides and bows in their hands. They laughed a deep rich laughter that almost made the ground shake.

"Perhaps these men wish to be amused as the pixies," Kazrack said, annoyed with their laughter.

The giants stopped laughing and the center one spoke. His voice was pleasant bass, almost melodic, "So, you are completing the sickle for the Circle of Thorns?"

"Aye," said Kazrack.

"Much blood will be spilled with that blade," the giant said, with smirk

"Whose?" Jeremy piped up.

"It matters not. Just... much..."

"And what is your place in all of this?" Kazrack asked.

"Our place is what it has always been regarding this dance of the moon," the giant said.

"Didn't you miss it?" Jeremy asked.

"We did our part, which is to end it," the giant said. "As our tribe has done every full moon in the waning winter months since the time of our grandfathers' grandfathers' grandfathers."

"Are the pixies of your tribe?" Kazrack asked.

"The pixies? They are like magical gnats," the giant said, and the other two laughed. "Annoying, but part of the plan of Osiris."

“So, this dance happens every...” Jeremy began.

“Full moon, yes,” Martin interrupted him.

“Jana, please distract Jeremy,” Kazrack said, not wanting the Neergardian to speak.

Jeremy rolled his eyes.

The dwarf addressed the giants again. “One of our number has lost his memory from some curse of the pixies. Is the effect permanent?”

“Yes,” the giant replied. “He must build his life anew unless you can find a powerful shaman to remove it.”

“Is there one among your kind?” Kazrack asked.

“No, we are a dying people,” the giant said with a grimace. “We no longer have any who have the craft to undo such magics. The irony that you would ask us for aid that we cannot give because of your kind is not lost on me.”<sup>147</sup>

“I do not understand,” Kazrack said, puzzled.

“Long have the stonefolk been an enemy of our people,” the giant said. “Emerging from their hills to rip up trees and hunt beasts and tear the minerals from the land and to war with our kind. Your people make no distinction between those of our tribe and others, and rarely have you respect for what lies outside the confines of your sculpted hills.

“Well, I am glad we are not coming to blows today,” Kazrack said.

“You may continue with your task,” the giant gestured to the anvil. “For you, the difficult part is past...for your forgetful companion only difficulty awaits. It is a great crime to kill a pixie, for though they are tricksters they do no lasting harm.”

“We didn’t kill any pixies!” Jeremy cried.

Jana pointed at the pixie corpse.

“As you have taken life, so has life been taken from you,” the giant said.

Jeremy stared at Jana.

“Why are you looking at me? *I* didn’t kill the pixie,” the witch said, insulted.

“Oh,” said Jeremy.

“I supposed I must have killed the pixie,” Beorth said, despondently.

“And now we leave you to your task,” the giant said, nodding. He and the other two marched off in the direction the hounds and satyrs went.

Kazrack sighed and went back to work.

The woman in the green gossamer gown beckoned to Jeremy once again, and he skipped towards her happily. The other women continued to dance.

“Someone keep an eye on Jeremy,” Kazrack said.

The Neergardian was drawn away from the others, and this time the woman allowed him to come up very close.

“Tell your companion, Jana that we want her to join us again,” the woman said. “We have something to tell her. We hope to

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<sup>147</sup> Dwarves and giants are traditional enemies, hating each other since the beginning of mortal time.

instruct her.”

“Jana! They want to talk to you right now!” Jeremy called. “It’s important.”

“They can talk to me right here,” Jana replied, suspicious.

“Convince her to come to us and I will reward you,” the woman whispered to Jeremy with a wink.

The Neerguardian marched over to Jana and took her by the arm.

“You are not yourself, Jeremy.” Ratchis said, stepping over to stop him. “You are under the influence of a charm.”

“He is?” Martin asked, surprised. “He seems to be acting like he always does. Inscrutably.”

Jeremy yanked on Jana’s arm.

“Leave me alone. I don’t want to go with you!” She pulled her arm free with a jerk.

Jeremy sighed, and walked back to the object of his affections.

“Perhaps we should bury this creature,” Martin said gesturing to the dead pixie.

“I will pull this satyr away so that when they wake up they will go elsewhere and leave us alone,” Ratchis said.

“Bring us the sister,” the woman said to Jeremy.

“I’m trying!” Jeremy whined.

“We only want to help her.”

“Jana!” Jeremy called to the witch again. “They say they want to share spells with you.”

Jana’s eyes narrowed.

“This may be your only chance to learn the ways of Isis,” Jeremy suggested, trying whatever he could to convince her to come over.

“There is a priestess of Isis in Nikar,” Martin said, remembering that Ratchis had mentioned this before.

“This is your last chance! You don’t know what you are missing” Jeremy called to Jana again, and then added under his breath. “And neither do I, for that matter.”

Jana ignored Jeremy and the women, and instead pointed out each party member to Beorth and said their names.

Martin walked over to Jeremy and took his arm. “Come back here with the rest of us. Ratchis says you are under the influence of a charm.”

“I am not.”

The women tittered and made one last revolution about the forge area and then disappeared into the trees. Their “leader” blew a kiss to Jeremy.

“Hey! Wait! Come back!” he cried, but they were gone again.

The music died away.

The party buried the pixie. Beorth spoke some words to Anubis as best he could. He found that while he could not remember specific prayers, all the basic customs of his faith were still with him, and while a great deal of knowledge was

wiped from his mind, he still knew his god and his faith. Some things cannot be forgotten.

Kazrack finished the sickle, and then spoke a prayer over it. "Lords of the First Clan, King under the mountain, please watch over this sickle and make sure it will not be used for evil... I fear it will pass beyond my ken."

"Mardak said he would come in the morning for the sickle," Ratchis said. "So, we best just rest until then."

"I hate to be beholden to this circle more than I have to, but I hope they can help us with Beorth's predicament," Kazrack said.

"I certainly plan to ask," Jana said. "I still have not given them a fingernail."

"I feel like we are aiding evil every time we help them," Kazrack said.

"I do not think they are evil," Ratchis said.

Kazrack harrumphed his disagreement.

"It can be difficult to know without knowing more," Martin said, "But by our standards I fear they are likely to commit some questionable acts but they serve Osiris and Osiris is good."

Beorth wandered off a bit to commune with Anubis and beg him for guidance. In time, they all went to sleep, Jana and Martin taking the first watch.

## **Isilem, the 16th of Onk**

When the moon had set, the trees retreated back to their original positions, and by dawn the only sign of the night's full moon dance was the many cloven-footed tracks in the freezing ground. The wind whipped through the clearing and soon the whole party was awakened, shivering (except for Ratchis' whose magic boots protected him from the cold). They heard the sound of many feet crunching in the snow and looked up to see the cloaked form of Mardak the Elder, gnoll druid approach. He was flanked by Drenthris and Efner and followed by a score of bugbear warriors. At the entrance to the clearing the Bear bellowed.

"And so you have completed the task despite the distractions of the Dance of Henaire," Mardak growled. He almost seemed disappointed. "I will take the sickle now."

Kazrack raised the sickle and handed it to the towering and graying gnoll.

"Now you must leave here by midday," Mardak continued. "And you may never return. The Bear will lead you back to your camp so you may gather whatever things you have left there and then out of the Circle. Ratchis, you need not contact us about your task.<sup>63</sup> We shall know if you have succeeded or failed."

"I am sorry to interrupt," Jana said, stepping forward. "But one of our number was cursed by the pixies and lost his memory. I am willing to pay a price to have it restored."

Mardak growled and Efner giggled his kobold giggle.

"Whatever fate he suffers, he deserves," the elder druid said with a sneer.

"Maybe, but I am not here to judge," Jana replied.

"Nor am I," Mardak said. "I have not laid this curse upon him and so it is not in my authority to remove it."

There was a pause.

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<sup>63</sup> Ratchis' task was explained to him by Mardak in Session #30.

“One last thing,” Mardak said, turning to address Ratchis. “The forbiddance I have placed upon your companions does not apply to you, Ratchis. You may return in twelve years to train your child when they are ready to become our champion.”

Ratchis was silent. Kazrack’s head jerked to stare, mouth agape, at his half-orc companion.

“What is he talking about?” Jeremy murmured.

“Now, do not dawdle,” Mardak said, turning. “We have been generous to you, do not repay us by overstaying your welcome.”

The druids left the clearing, leaving the Bear at the entrance to guide the party back to their camp and then out of the forest.

“They seem harsh,” Beorth commented.

“Yes,” Jana replied.

“They are vile,” Kazrack said, spitting.

The party began to pack their gear, while Martin’s wizardly curiosity led him to search the ground where the trees had once stood to see if he could figure out how they moved and rooted and uprooted themselves. He saw no sign of their passage but did find a strange thing near where the inner-most ring of trees had been. It was a bee’s wax candle, decorated with the bas relief of tall trees and moon-shapes.

He took the candle to Jana.

“Look what I found,” Martin the Green said. “Perhaps this is what those women wanted to give you last night.”

Jana took the candle and examined it. Martin cast a spell to see if it was magical, but no dweomer was detected. Jana examined it closely to see if she could sense if it were a witch’s token, but this was negative as well.<sup>64</sup>

Meanwhile, Ratchis helped Kazrack pack his gear, while Jeremy sparred with Beorth to ensure that his martial skills were not among those things he had forgotten.

Soon, they made their way towards the Bear to be led back to their camp.

“I have never seen such an enormous creature,” Beorth said, while they were still several dozen yards from the Bear.

“We believe he is a man who can transform into a bear,” Kazrack said.

“I am a bear,” The Bear said in his deep growling voice.

“He has good hearing,” the dwarf commented.

“I was born a bear, and I will die a bear,” the Bear added.

“No insult was intended,” Kazrack said.

“We’re ready to go, Master Bear,” Jeremy said.

During the march Jana quietly tried to catch Beorth up on everything that had been happening, but it was too much, and she kept having to backtrack to fill in details or stop to answer the confused paladin’s questions.

It was nearly midday when the Bear finally led the party through the wall of thorns and to the place where they had first come up the plateau to discover the thorns themselves.

“Ratchis, do you know which way we are to go to discover undertake *your* task for Osiris?” Kazrack asked.

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<sup>64</sup> Witches have the ability to examine the impression objects make in the fabric of the planes, thus being able to sense if they are a token.

"I know the general area it can be found in," Ratchis replied. "I was near there while the rest of you were detained in Ogre's Bluff. It must be near where the hunters of Archet said the wild ponies could be found. However, I think we should rest here the rest of the day and night and set on tomorrow."

"I would rather put as much distance between us and the Circle as possible," Kazrack said.

"However, the proximity of the Circle may afford us some extra protection for one night," Martin suggested.

It was agreed, and they made camp in the narrow space between the thorns and the plateau edge.

Jana spent the day continuing to fill Beorth in as much as possible.

"I know this is overwhelming," Jana said. "But it is important that you know as much as possible so that you can make proper choices, especially if faced with any of our known enemies."

"I will rely on you to tell me the truth," Beorth said. "I do not know why, but I trust you."

Jana gulped. "I don't know, I don't think the others will like that. Anyway, you should not rely on just one person to tell you the truth."

"Why would the others not like my getting this information from you?"

"I have done things that have cast a very bad light on me and my intentions," Jana explained.

"What? Did you kill someone?" Beorth asked, almost jokingly.

"Yes."

"And were you punished?" Beorth's smile faded.

"No, that is why I am here, to escape punishment."

Beorth was silent for a minute, and Jana searched his face for some sign of how he would react.

"Am I... Am I beholden to travel with you and your companions?" Beorth finally asked loudly so that all could hear him. He scanned the make-shift camp taking in the others.

"You are only beholden to what your god desires," Kazrack answered.

"Well, there is the contract," Jeremy added.

The group then retold the story of the journey to Gothanius Castle as a group. Jana's role in the attempted robbery by Markle and the others was glossed over, though Kazrack still glared at her.

At dusk, Beorth stepped away to pray, "Anubis, my companions have reminded me of my connection with you. I know that despite my loss of memory you have not abandoned me, and I will not abandon you, and I will struggle to overcome this disability and prove myself worthy of your grace."

The party set watches, and in the morning, they headed south by southwest, led by Ratchis.

## **Osilem – 17th of Onk – 562 H.E.**

They were happy to be out of the thick and often dark Forest of the Blood Sap and in lower lands where the pines and firs were interspersed with scrubby trees and spread more far apart. They marched through the deep snow, with the biting wind in their face.

Ratchis led the way keeping the stream in view to their left as long as he could.

“I can’t wait `til we get to a cozy inn and a warm bed and a real meal,” Jeremy lamented, and everyone groaned in agreement.

At dusk, Ratchis chose the best camp site he could find, on the edge of a thicker portion of woods to the west, sheltered from the more open plateau, but not deep in the unknown woods.

Everyone was cold and exhausted, so Martin volunteered to watch the majority of night himself as his ring, *Lacan’s Demise*, made him do without but the barest minimum of sleep. He could still feel fatigue in his bones, but he would lie listlessly most of the night anyway.

They built a small fire between their two tents, against Ratchis’ wishes but even he had to admit that drawing the attention of undesirable was preferable to freezing to death.

“Sometimes I think you forget we don’t all have magic boots,” Jeremy had said.

“I have never hesitated to place the blessings of Nephthys on any of you, or even share my boots to protect you from the elements!” Ratchis replied angrily.

“Okay. Okay,” Jeremy said, squeezing into his bedroll. “You take things so damn literally sometimes.”

The moon set, and the night was pitch black. In the distance Martin could hear an owl hoot for a good long time, and then there was no sound but the wind and the crackle of the dying fire.

The campfire was barely giving enough light to outline the adjacent tents, and Martin stood to find more tinder, when he heard the crunch of footsteps in the snow, emerging from the deep shadow of the wood.

The watch-mage forgot about the fire and turned to awaken Ratchis, but he cried out as he felt the bite of an arrow graze his shoulder. Blood poured down his left arm and the wound burned, as he threw himself into one of the tents. He heard sharp barking voices as tall dog-headed humanoids stepped into the fire light.

“Wake up! Wake up!” Martin cried, throwing himself on the ground and into the tent. “We’re under attack by gnolls!” He landed atop Jeremy who awoke with an “oomph.” Ratchis, who was lying beside Jeremy, snapped awake and his hand found his warhammer at his side. The deft half-orc rolled out of the tent, as Martin spoke an arcane word and touched Ratchis on the shoulder and the Friar of Nephthys’ visage was *blurred*.

Jeremy grabbed his crossbow and began to load it. Kazrack awoke as well, and began to yell, “Everyone wake up! Attack! Gnolls!” Hoping that those in the other tent would hear. Beorth, being a light sleeper startled awake.

“There are several in the trees!” Ratchis said, spying his hated enemy with his darkvision, and with that he charged, smashing the closest hyena-headed humanoid in the face, knocking it to the snowy ground. It struggled to get up, leaving it bow on the ground.

Unfortunately, no one noticed that another pair of gnolls were approaching the camp from another angle, and one swung his battle axe right into the smaller tent, where Beorth and Jana still sat. Jana was rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, as the axe blade came slicing down on her. The tent pole absorbed most of the blow, but now the young witch had blood oozing from a deep wound in her head.

The gnoll Ratchis had knocked down rolled to its feet and swung his battle-axe free in an awkward attempt to take out the half-orc’s legs. Ratchis leapt over the blow and then moved his hammer to block the attack of a second gnoll that rushed over to aid his companion.

Martin slowly crawled back out of the tent as Jeremy snuck out the opposite side and made for the trees, crossbow in hand. The watch-mage pulled a bag of sand from his belt and sprinkled it before him, crying “*Sumnus!*” The gnoll that had been chopping viciously through the other tent to get at those inside, tumbled to sleep. Jana crawled out through the hole and waved to Martin to show she was all right.

“Yes!” Martin said, pumping his fist.

Kazrack moved to back-up Ratchis, swinging his halberd, and missing, but distracting it long enough to allow Ratchis to get in crushing blow to the ribs with his warhammer. The gnoll was staggered but did not fall. It swung its axe at Ratchis, grazing the half-orc’s bicep.

Beorth crawled awkwardly from the tent, sword in hand.

“Beorth and Jeremy are going to need light!” Kazrack cried out, seeing Jeremy hesitantly approaching from the opposite flank.

Martin grabbed a brand from the fire, hoping to use it as a torch, while Jeremy took the best shot he could in the dim light, and clipped the calf of one of the gnolls fighting with Ratchis and Kazrack.

“Watch where you’re shooting that thing!” Kazrack warned.

With a word from Jana, a dagger in her hand was giving off light equal to a brightly burning torch. She lobbed it in the direction of the fight.

The gnolls squinted angrily, and Kazrack lunged to take advantage of the moment’s distraction but slipped on an icy patch, and fell face first before his opponent.

Ratchis roared and slammed his warhammer into the gnoll closest to Kazrack as it raised its battleaxe and it crumpled with a muted moan. However, this left him open to a deep cut to the hip from the other gnoll. Kazrack sputtered and sat up quickly, trying to get to his feet but was surprised by a third gnoll that stepped out of the shadows and cleaved the dwarf’s helmet with a ringing blow.

Beorth ran up and swung his sword at the new opponent, but misjudged; swinging too early.

Martin spoke another word and the new gnoll was reeling as if bright flashes were popping in his face. Kazrack took the moment’s distraction to stand and thrust his halberd forth again, but even while stumbling about stupidly the gnoll managed to evade the dwarf’s blows.

Jeremy let off another crossbow bolt, and with his better sight the quarrel buried itself in a gnoll’s neck. It choked up blood, but still lived dropping it axe to one hand to cover the wound with his other.

Ratchis took a swing at it, but it stumbled backward and ran into the darkness of the woods. The other gnoll attempted to run, but this time Beorth did not misjudge and stepped forward to swing against the turning gnoll. It squealed for a moment before dying.

There was moment of seeming silence and then the crunching of one pair of boots in snow became that of perhaps a half-dozen.

“There were more of them,” Kazrack said.

“There are always more,” Ratchis said, spitting a bit of blood. “That is how gnolls work, small scouting parties that test the quarry’s strength. This place is not safe. We have to break camp.”

“But first we have to do something about the dead,” Beorth said, solemnly. “I mean, right? That is what I do?”

“Yes,” said Jana.

Ratchis sighed.

“I can help you find stones to build them cairns,” offered Martin.

“That will take too long,” Ratchis barked. “Burn them. Jeremy, help me with the tents.”

“What do we do with the sleeping one?” Martin asked.

“Kill him,” Ratchis said, coldly. “Put him out of his misery.”

“I’ll do it,” said Jana, with some relish. She walked over and pulled a knife, deftly slitting its throat as it snored.

“This tent is ruined,” Jeremy said of the smaller one., as he moved to pack it up.

“I can fix them with a spell,” Martin said. “Just wrap them up.”

“I will strip the bodies for what we might be able to use,” Kazrack said. He turned to Beorth “If that is okay with you.”

Beorth hesitated. “I think that would be okay. I seem to remember that spoils of war are allowed to be taken, or at least that makes sense. But perhaps part of whatever money is found should be donated to Anubis.”

Kazrack nodded absently and collected long bows and arrows from the dead gnolls. He also found hide pouches full of coin. There were a handful of Thrician platinum coins, along with some Black Island and Herman Land coinage. He was most pleased by the silver dwarven obleks.<sup>65</sup>

Beorth set the bodies ablaze, and then party marched east by southeast, led by Ratchis, trying to put distance between them and these woods.

**End of Session #33**

AQUERRA

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<sup>65</sup> The "*oblek*" is the common dwarven coin, being a small ball of precious metal flattened on one side and stamped with the rune representing that metal. An "oblek" is originally a measure of weight in the dwarven system equaling about 1/25th of a pound.

## Session #34

The six adventurers marched through the night. Ratchis' pace did not flag, and Kazrack moved to the back of the straggling line to keep Jana and Martin going. The moon slipped behind a cloud, and soon they were stumbling in the dark, drunk with fatigue, forcing themselves through tall snowbanks.

"I will bring us near the stream," Ratchis said. "The snow will not be as deep there, and we may be able to find a sheltered place.

He was not far from wrong. As they breached another bit of thick woods and the first lights became visible ahead of them, they found a dried branch of the stream filled with snow, with a low shelf of land that provided cover from the wind, and out of sight from the main hunter's trail they intersected.

"We will camp down here," Ratchis said.

"I will take first watch," Martin said, after casting a mending spell or two to repair the ripped tent.

"Jeremy, will you watch with Martin?" Ratchis asked.

Jeremy sighed tiredly, "Sure, I'll stay up."

The tents went up and the rest of the party fell to sleep straight away, almost too tired to shiver against the cold.

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The weather grew warmer as *Ra's Glory* crawled up the eastern sky like a burning flag, and the drip-drip of melting snow was all around them and in a few hours there was a trickle of a stream in the snow filled stream bed.

"I can't keep my eyes open any longer," Jeremy moaned, and stood.

"I am pretty tired myself," Martin said. "Who has the next watch?"

"Beorth, I suppose," Jeremy replied. "And, uh, Kazrack... I'll wake the dwarf."

Jeremy crawled into the larger tent and shook the dwarf.

"Time for your watch," the Neergaardian said.

"Uh? Wake someone else. Not Ratchis..." the dwarf grumbled.

"Oh, you mean someone else who is not a spell-caster?" Jeremy replied, crankily. "Well, someone else is going to have to suck it up."

Kazrack rolled over.

"Ratchis it is then," Jeremy said, turning away.

"Okay, I'll do it," Kazrack said, sitting up.

Beorth and Kazrack watched for several more hours. The sun reached its peak and then began its western descent. Martin was awake in about two hours, feeling as if he no longer needed sleep, but still feeling the soreness of the nearly ceaseless marching in his bones. He searched in his pack for his whittling gear and went back to the project that kept him occupied most of his sleepless nights.

Eventually, Ratchis and Jana stirred. Ratchis immediately walked off from everyone else and knelt by the uppermost portion of the little sheltered beach where they had camped. There he prayed, looking out over the track that ran parallel to the stream and beside the woods the party had passed through.

Jana helped Beorth gather what tinder the party had left and began a fire.

Jeremy continued to snore quietly in the smaller tent.

Suddenly, Ratchis spotted a quadrupedal creature emerge from the wood, charging in their direction, a blast of smoky breath rising from it as it panted in the cold air.

It was some strange combination of cat and dog, but four feet at the shoulder, with brownish-red fur, pointed ears and spots on its coat. It had a slavering maw and seemed to let out a chuckling snort as it approached with a strange gait, its powerful and over-developed fore-shoulders seeming to yank the rest of it along.

“Gnolls!” Ratchis cried, though he saw none of the humanoids, he recognized the creature as the type gnolls often use. “Martin, bring me my hammer. Nephthys, heal my wounds so I may better deal with this new danger!”

The half-orc laid a hand upon himself and his wounds closed, so he was back to perfect health.

Jana dropped the wood she was carrying and popped her head over the ledge of earth, and spoke her arcane word of *blindness*, but the creature seemed to ignore the spell, and just kept on coming.

Martin dropped his whittling knife and wood and ran over to Ratchis’ pack, where the large warhammer leaned.

Ratchis pulled the dagger from his boot and tossed it with all his might at the approaching creature. The blade cut into its shoulder, and it yelped, but still did not slow.

Kazrack grabbed his halberd and moved to stand beside Ratchis.

Jana cried out her arcane word again, but again it failed to affect the thing.

The commotion made Jeremy stir, and he stuck his head out of the tent.

“Ratchis? Martin?” he mumbled.

“Wake up!” Martin cried, hefting the hammer. “We’re under attack, again!”

“Gotta get up,” Jeremy mumbled to himself, looking around for his weapons. “Remember why you’re doing this. Remember why you’re doing this.”

The strange animal leapt down on Ratchis, grabbing his forearm in its powerful jaws. The half-orc yanked it out painfully before the limb was snapped off, but blood and bits of flesh went flying. Ratchis cried out in pain, as Kazrack swung his halberd to distract the thing. Martin stepped behind the half-orc and held out the hammer. Ratchis grabbed it, and in one swift motion moved to bring it down to smash the great animal’s head but missed.

Kazrack thrust the blade of his halberd at the creature, smacking it in the muzzle, and drawing blood.

“By the gods! What is this creature?” the dwarf exclaimed.

“Jana, you are injured. Let me help you,” Beorth said, and he lay his hands on the young witch, and some of her wounds closed. Even as he did this, she tried again to blind the thing, failing.

By this time Jeremy had crawled out of the tent and was loading his crossbow.

At the edge of the wood appeared several gnolls with longbows. They let out a group roar and moved forward, drawing arrows from their quivers. Only Ratchis was in a position to see them. “Gnolls! Coming down on us, straight for me from the northwest!” the half-orc cried, trying to give his companions as precise a description as possible. The low ledge that created this small beach where they had camped created a shelf that was over six feet high at the sound end of the beach, but only three feet high where Ratchis and Kazrack fought the beast.

Jana spoke another arcane word and made a gesture, but again the gnollish creature seemed to simply shake off her spell.

She cursed under her breath.

Kazrack felt Jana's failure with great pain, for the creature was able to get within the long reach of the pole-arm and grab hold of the dwarf's arm. There was a sickening tearing of flesh and tendon, and Kazrack cried out in agony. The dwarf's arm fell to his side, a useless and pain-filled lump of flesh, that poured blood in a torrent to the snowy ground.<sup>66</sup> He knocked himself off his feet in his effort to pull his arm free.

"Kazrack!" Martin cried, having readied his own crossbow and firing at the animal. The bolt flew way over the melee.

Jeremy climbed up the shelf and looked at the gnolls approaching. He prepared his shot, even as the three closest gnolls (still over 80 feet away) stopped to fire arrows from their long bows.

He felt the bite of one across his temple. He dropped prone and lost his shot.

"Can we flee across the stream?" the Neergardian suggested loudly to his companions.

Ratchis made what would have been bone-crushing contact to any normal creature with his hammer, but this animal's hide was a thick mat of cushioning wire-like hair, and dense muscle. The blow only served to anger it more and draw its attention away from the dwarf long enough for him to stand. Kazrack left his halberd on the ground, now unable to use the two-handed weapon.

Beorth, meanwhile, was struggling to climb the six feet to the top of the shelf, his heavy armor dragging him down.

Jana jogged over to where the ledge was not as high and simply stepped up, and moved her hands in a clawing motion at the closest gnoll while chanting under her breath.

It cried out in fear and dropping its bow, turned to run in the opposite direction of its companions.

Again, the gnoll's animal sunk his devastating teeth into the dwarf's flesh, and this time he was yanked from his feet, tossed aside like a rag doll.

And the dwarf's arm still bled uselessly.

Martin dropped his crossbow and frantically pulled sand from a pouch at his belt. He tossed it and said, "*Sumnus*," while pointing at the beast that was tearing Kazrack apart, but the creature would not sleep.

Ratchis slammed the side of his hammer into the animal's flank. It yelped.

Jeremy let a bolt go, and it barely grazed a gnoll's leg. It cursed in its barking tongue and aimed an arrow at the Neergardian. The gnoll arced it too much and it struck Jeremy's foot puncturing his boot, but it absorbed most of the damage.

The gnoll that fled in fear, cried out in pain as one of his companions still emerging from the wood, took aim at him instead.

Again Kazrack dragged himself to his feet, drawing his light flail, and smacked the beast's snout, making teeth go flying free.

The fight with the beast had moved sufficiently into the beach area, to allow Beorth to take up a place in the melee. He abandoned his attempt to climb and moved to slam the butt of his staff into the creature's face, but the beast reared back, and the paladin missed.

Again, Jana attempted her spell that caused fear, but this time she failed. Perhaps she was distracted by the horrific cries of agony coming from Kazrack, as the dwarf was again pulled off his feet and ravaged by the beast. And still his arm bled.

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<sup>66</sup> **DM's Note:** Kazrack suffered the following critical result: *Primary Weapon Arm Struck – Severe Muscle Damage, double die damage, Arm Useless Until Repaired, +1d4 hps damage / round*

Martin moved over to where the ledge was lower, risking coming close to the beast again, but turned his attention to the advancing gnolls. “*Sumnus!*” he cried again, tossing sand, and this time a gnoll fell face first in the snow, snoring softly.

“Thank you, Isis!” the alumnus cheered.

It seemed that the third time was the charm, because Ratchis brought his hammer down on the beast one last time and there was a loud crunch as brain matter scattered everywhere. The creature fell in lifeless heap.

“I will heal Kazrack,” Ratchis announced to the others.

A gnoll came charging up to take advantage of Ratchis’ distraction. It ignored the bite of a crossbow bolt from Jeremy (who ignored those that continued to pepper him with arrows) and swung his battle axe with his full momentum. Ratchis, ducked however, as Beorth stepped in to block for him.

“I’ll take care of this gnoll,” the paladin said. “Take care of the dwarf.”

The paladin’s staff met the gnoll’s chin, and it flew backward, unconscious.

Jana dropped back down to the beach, ready to use her healing skills should Ratchis fail, while Martin plucked a bit of wool from his cloak and said, “*imago creare*. A black shadow creature, humanoid in shape, and much like the one the party had fought outside of the *Sun’s Summit Inn*, but with vaguely bugbearish features, appeared on the field of battle, menacing the gnolls.<sup>67</sup>

“Nephthys, grant me your healing strength so that I may bring friend back from the edge of Anubis’ Realm,” Ratchis prayed over the dwarf. The arm, while still useless as its very muscles were torn, stopped pouring the dwarf’s life into the snow. The dwarf’s eyes fluttered, but he did not regain consciousness.

“I can use some help up here!” Jeremy cried, shooting one of the gnoll’s taking aim at him. This time the bolt buried itself in the opponent’s thigh. Jeremy rolled, avoiding a return arrow. The other archer-gnolls fired at the illusory shadow, but the arrow flew right through it. Martin had his creation act as if it felt where the arrow flew through, and then toss back its shadowy head and howl.

Beorth moved to obey Jeremy’s summons, when he saw the shadow-creature for the first time.

“By Anubis, what is that!” the ghost-hunter exclaimed. “Guardian of the Dead, I call upon your power to send this creature back from whence it came!” Beorth channeled divine energy toward the shadowy thing, but there was no effect.

Jana stepped alongside Beorth and spoke her arcane word again, in order to blind the gnolls firing at Jeremy, but again her spell failed. It felt the bite of another of Jeremy’s bolts, but did not flee or fall.

“I am running out of bolts!” Jeremy cried out.

Ratchis came running up now, snorting loudly in orcish at the gnoll foes.

Martin had his creation fly towards the gnoll firing at it, reaching as if to claw out the humanoid’s heart. The gnoll cried out, dropping his bow, and running.

Beorth cursed and dropping his quarterstaff drew his sword. “Anubis, my faith was insufficient to turn this foul creature. Give me the strength to wreak vengeance upon it!” And with that the paladin charged at the creature and brought his shining blade down over his head and right through the creature.<sup>68</sup> Nothing happened.

“Beorth, it’s an illusion,” Jana said.

The shadow creature turned and addressed Beorth, “Yes, it is an illusion. I’m sorry, apparently I should have mentioned

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<sup>67</sup> This occurred in Session #14

<sup>68</sup> **DM’s Note:** Paladins of Anubis do not gain the ability to *Cure Disease*, instead they gain the ability of *Divine Vengeance*, using a turning attempt to deal +2d6 damage to undead creatures.

this earlier.”

“Yes, Martin can create illusions,” Ratchis echoed as he ran past both the paladin and the illusion to charge at the remaining gnoll (for the rest were now fleeing back into the woods) and smash its skull.

Jeremy stood. “Thank the gods!” He walked over to check on Kazrack, while Jana slit the throat of the sleeping gnoll.

Martin had dispelled his illusion and was already at the dwarf’s side when Jeremy arrived.

“How’s Kazrack doing?”

“He’s breathing,” Martin replied. “I guess he’ll be alright.”

Jana began to collect the arrows and bows from the fallen gnolls, while Beorth collected their bodies and took what valuables they had.<sup>69</sup>

Ratchis used the healing graces of his goddess to heal Kazrack once again. “Nephthys, we will not get far from our enemies with our friend unconscious. Give him strength to get back to his feet.”

Kazrack coughed and sputtered and his eyes fluttered open to see Ratchis leaning over him.

“Ratchis!” Kazrack seemed surprised to be alive. “Your son... that was your payment... for the scroll that healed my arm?”<sup>70</sup>

“Yes,” Ratchis replied. “Relax, my friend. You have been gravely injured and need to rest a bit.”

The dwarf looked away, feeling ashamed.

“I will be able to heal your arm tomorrow,”<sup>71</sup> Ratchis said to Kazrack, who clutched his limp and useless right arm with his left. “You rest while we pack and clean up, but the gnolls will be back.”

“Well, then, shouldn’t we hurry away?” Jeremy asked.

“The gnolls will take some time to heal their wounds,” Ratchis said. “I want to skin their beast, their fur is very warm.”

Ratchis skinned the hyenadon, while Martin watched, intrigued, and the others—except for Kazrack—broke down camp. The dwarf quietly prayed, beseeching his gods for the answer to why fortune had not favored him of late.

“It will be an hour before Kazrack is even able to move with any kind of reliability,” Jana said. “Perhaps there is somewhere else nearby we can move to and hide.”

“Or I can do the hiding,” Martin said.

Everyone looked at him. “What I mean, is that I can use an illusion to help shield us. Perhaps a rocky outcropping and a fallen tree will look believable.”

“Do it,” Ratchis said.

And so an hour passed, as the party sat beneath the illusory rocks and branches, gathering their wits and strengths. Martin could do nothing but concentrate on his spell.

Ratchis checked on Kazrack one last time, as the others pulled their packs on to their backs and Martin made ready to drop the spell.

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<sup>69</sup> Jana and Beorth collected a few longbows, battle axes and daggers and nearly three score arrows, along with more Black Island copper coins and some silver obleks.

<sup>70</sup> See session #32

<sup>71</sup> The “*useless*” critical result can be counter both by the *Cure Moderate Wounds* spell (or greater) and by being tended to by someone with the healing skill for 2d4 days minus 1 day per point over DC 15 on healing check (minimum 1 day).

Kazrack stood and bowed to Ratchis, and then whispered, "I may not be able to speak freely later, so I'll say this now." The dwarf paused and looked down and then back up straight into Ratchis' eyes. "Uh, I know you are a good person, but you still surprise me from time to time. I mean, uh..." The dwarf struggled with his words. "I know some peoples leave their children to be claimed by the elements, but to my people, there is nothing more valuable than a child. If I had known what you were going to do, I'd have asked you to not do it, but nevertheless, I am indebted to you."

Ratchis did not reply.

The dwarf continued: "Ratchis, in my mind you are like a diamond that is uncut. You are beautiful, but rough. If you would allow it, I would like to call you *D'nar*, henceforth. It is the dwarven word for an uncut diamond. The diamond also represents the heart to my people, so it is doubly appropriate. Also, I offer you my services, if you should seek to liberate your child."

Still Ratchis did not reply.

"Do you accept my pledge?" the dwarf asked.

"I am not going to liberate my child," Ratchis finally said. "But I am going to go see him in 12 years hence. I have known other names, and my people use other names as descriptions, so if you wish to call me that, I will answer to it. I only did what needed to be done, whether it was right or wrong, I made my choice freely. Please, let's forget it, and put our minds on the task at hand."

"Do you give me permission to raise your son in your stead, should you be unable to do this?" Kazrack asked.

"I don't think that would be possible, considering where he is," Ratchis replied.

"Do you give me permission to raise your son in your stead, should you be unable to do this?" Kazrack repeated, stubbornly. "Twelve years is but a short time to my people, but still many things can change in that period, even that place."

"I don't think that would be possible, considering where he is," Ratchis said again, meeting stubbornness with obstinance.

"Fine. I will accept what you can give freely and nothing more." The dwarf hefted his pack onto his good shoulder, straining with the weight, and wincing from the pain of his recent wounds. He made to walk away.

"There is one last thing," Ratchis said, placing his big and callous hand on the dwarf's shoulder. "Ratchis means 'pale runt' in the orcish tongue."

"They named you wrong."

"Orcs grow fast."

"I prefer *D'nar*," and soon the party was marching westward by southwestward, led by Ratchis

As they marched through snowdrifts, among skeletal scrubby trees and bushes, interspersed with thick firs and pines, it was discovered that Beorth had no idea where the party was going and why.

Ratchis and Jana explained as best they could.

"... And the druids said that this other-worldly creature can take multiple forms," the half-orc said.

"And when they said multiple forms they seemed to mean that it cannot only change its shape, but be more than one thing at a time," Jana explained. "Not that I really understand how that could be."

"I guess we'll find out soon enough," Jeremy said.

Kazrack did not speak at all.

In time Ratchis found signs of wild ponies and followed their spore to a sunken field that was bordered on its eastern and western ends by lop-sided hills, as if long ago a wave had washed away the center of a much larger hill, or even a mountain. The half-orc ranger led them around from the north, as light snow began to filter down.

They were all exhausted, especially Kazrack, who winced with every step as his arm was jarred by the marching.

In the distance they could see a small group of wild ponies huddled for warmth. Their breath rose like a signal against the backdrop of the gray horizon.

“It could be among those ponies,” Ratchis said.

“Yes, but we need rest,” Jana said. “We are in no condition to take this thing on now.”

“Maybe we can climb up the western face of the western hill and observe their behavior from there,” Ratchis said.

“I think you’d be better off finding us a camping spot,” Jana replied.

“I can help to scout for a camping spot,” Beorth offered.

Ratchis was taken aback.

Jana patted Beorth’s shoulder sympathetically. “I don’t remember you doing any scouting before, so why you don’t stay behind and we’ll try to catch you up some more on events.”

“Will he be okay on his own?” Beorth asked of the half-orc.

“He does this all the time,” Jana replied, and nodded to Ratchis.

The half-orc jogged away, running atop the drifts as if he did not weigh a thing, his magical boots carrying him over and around the foot of the western hill and out of sight.

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Ratchis returned nearly an hour later, saying he had found a place he had been to before, when the rest of the party had been arrested. It was a large cleft rock outcropping, shaped like a crab claw on its side, and its open end screened by tall pines. The stones at the back point of the “claw” created a natural staircase, while a stubborn tree’s roots had cracked the thinner end and created a climbable divot. It had been here that Ratchis had run into the stranger who had seemingly killed a bunch of gnolls single-handedly.<sup>72</sup>

As the rest of the party made camp, Kazrack began a long dwarven prayer, saying it very softly as he removed his armor. He then tied his arm in a sling, and hefting his prayer stone on one shoulder, walked to the inner corner of the cleft in the stone. There he dropped the stone, prostrated himself before it, began to scrape the dirt off the incline, down on to himself and the prayer stone.

Jana noted what the dwarf was doing and hurried over, passing Martin who was looking around and scratching his chin, “I wonder if this thing could turn into a tree?” he mused. Jana paid no attention him but laid a hand on Kazrack’s shoulder. “Kazrack, you shouldn’t overexert yourself. Your arm is useless!”

“Thank you, Jana,” the dwarf replied without looking at her. “I will be fine.”

“No, you are, as we say in Westron, a nut!” Jana declared.

Martin noticed Jana’s flustering and walked over, and then noticed Kazrack’s position and actions.

“Kazrack, what are you doing?” the watch-mage asked.

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<sup>72</sup> See **Interlude II** (between sessions #27 and #28).

“I must do this,” was Kazrack’s only reply.

Martin paused, “Very well,” he said and walked away.

“Can anyone help you with this?” Jana offered.

“Thank you, but no,” Kazrack said. He still had not looked up.

Jana walked off surrendering with a sigh.

Once the tents were set up Ratchis finished cleaning the hyenadon hide, while Martin put a sketch of the beast into his journals. Jeremy spent some time showing Beorth the finer points on using one of the recovered long bows, and then while the paladin practiced, the energetic Neergaardian began to scale the stone and scurry back and forth to practice climbing.

“Don’t use up too many arrows!” he called down playfully to the paladin. The top of the stone was no more than fifteen feet above the ground level.

Suddenly, Martin cocked his head, in the tiniest moment of silence amid the chatter and bustle of his companions he thought he heard something above them upon the rock.

“Did anyone else hear that?” Martin asked. “It sounded like crunching snow.”

Everyone stopped, except for Kazrack who remained prostrate upon his prayer stone.

Ratchis signaled for everyone to remain quiet, and then sprang up the incline to check it out.

“Thomas?” Martin called to his familiar, who was wrapped in a ball in the watch-mage’s hood. “Do you smell anything? Gnolls? Or something, *wrong*? The thing we are hunting may smell *wrong*.”

“All I smell is Ratchis,” Thomas chattered.

Ratchis soon returned.

“Must have been the wind knocking snow from a branch,” the half-orc reasoned.

Kazrack’s chanting began again, and he removed the stone and ceramic beads he wore in certain locks of his beard. Everyone else returned to their previous activity. Martin used his *mending* spell on Ratchis’ chain shirt to repair a link.

There was a sudden sound of many booted feet hurrying on the snow above them.

“Gnolls again?” Martin sighed and looked up as gnolls appeared above them on the broader side of the cleft.

Ratchis had already pulled his bow, but he let off a too-hurried shot that fell short, striking the stone wall. The gnolls fired in kind. One of the gnolls appeared directly above Kazrack and fired an arrow down on the dwarf, who leapt backward as it clipped his shoulder.

“We might be able to hide!” Jeremy cried and ran for the cover of the trees at the entrance to the “claw”. However, as soon as he got under them, he spotted a handful of more gnolls coming from that direction. “Scratch that idea! They are down here, too!”

Martin cried out as he leapt away from one arrow only to feel the slash of another whizzing past him.

Beorth fired an arrow, but his recent practice failed him, and his arrow also fell short of its mark. The hyena-men barked their laughing language.

Kazrack ran past the mage towards the tents, crying “the trees are our best chance of cover!” Martin turned with the armorless dwarf and chanted, “*distortus!*” and touching Kazrack, made the dwarf’s image blur. The mage followed to gain cover behind the tents.

Jana mumbled her arcane words, pointing at one of the archer-gnolls, but the spell did not seem to work.

A gnoll tried to run past Jeremy, who turned and used his momentum to bury his sword in the thing's back. However, Jeremy did not feel the all-too-familiar and often satisfying thud of the long sword blade cutting deep into flesh and meeting bone. No, instead he felt as if his sword had entered a very thick pudding, or drying mortar, and then he could not believe what his eyes revealed to him. Instead of gouts of blood and crumbling gore, that he had grown accustomed to seeing, the gnoll's flesh seemed to grow amorphous, and instead of veins and organs, the inside of the creature seemed made of brownish-red pudding-like material (at least pudding was the best analogy he could make in his mind, for he had never seen anything like this). Jeremy yanked his sword back in shock, as the two halves sprouted tendrils that connected and then pulled the two halves back together, melding back into one piece. The gnoll's head, which was now at an odd twisted angle, looked back at Jeremy with filmed over eyes that dripped milky mucus as the flesh turned and curled.

"By the gods! It's not gnolls! It's not gnolls!" Jeremy began to scream as he pulled his short sword from his belt and twirled it in his left hand, swinging both blades down on the horrific thing.

Jeremy winced as his long sword cut deep into the gnoll-thing again. And again, it was a blow that would have sent any other foe crashing to the ground bleeding out their life, but instead the thing seemed split open unnaturally, and then collapsed in on itself, as if decaying gelatin.

In the knoll, Ratchis sent an arrow hurtling into a gnoll's neck and it tumbled into the chasm, screeching. It appeared to be a normal gnoll, and clutching at the wound pathetically, suddenly stopped moving. The half-orc dropped the bow and ran towards the trees when he heard Jeremy's cry. "Jeremy!" he cried back. "It might be an illusion!"

The gnolls atop the ridge fired back a volley of arrows. As Ratchis had made the cover of the trees, most aimed at Kazrack, who hopped around like mad to avoid, them, but nevertheless was bleeding as two nicked him in the face and neck. He hustled for cover under the trees.

Beorth met up with one of the gnolls who had advanced unseen past Jeremy and the strange pseudo-gnoll. The paladin swung his sword and immediately stopped the leading gnoll. Battle axe and sword met in a clang as they furiously parried each other.

Martin pulled alongside Beorth, as another gnoll moved to join the fray. The mage cast his colored sand at the pair and spoke an arcane word and a flurry of colored light washed over the gnolls. In less than a moment they were unconscious on the ground. Jana moved to the edge of the trees but turning back spoke a word and *blinded* a gnoll, causing it to drop its bow and cried out in fear.

Now more gnolls poured out of the woods, cackling in their disturbing tongue. One charged at Kazrack but misjudged due to the *blur* spell Martin had placed on the dwarf, and ran past, having to swing back awkwardly, and staring at his axe with confusion.

Jeremy was jarred from his horror, by the approach of another gnoll, it looked at him and opened its mouth, but despite its ferocity, no voice emerged from where there should be screaming. Before he knew what was happening, the approaching gnoll whipped his arm at the fallen amorphous thing, and *its* arm stretched out. The muscles and sinews cracked and wheezed disgustingly as it whipped out and connected with the other pseudo-gnoll. Jeremy could see lumps of flesh inundating down the tendril of alien flesh from the gnoll to the oozing lump of flesh that once appeared to be a gnoll.

"Aarrgh!" Jeremy cried out, horrified. He thrust his short sword into the new "gnoll" and swung his long sword through the tendril, disconnecting it. The short sword cut a slash into the thing, but it immediately began to close up. "They are not all gnolls! Some are some kind of magical creature!"

Ratchis slammed his hammer into an approaching gnoll as he moved through the trees towards Beorth, and it fell dead. Its skull cracked open.

Another pair of gnolls came through the trees and swung at Beorth, who blocked one blade and ducked the other, he told Martin to flee.

Martin left the melee to the paladin and took off back towards the tent. He had forgotten about the gnolls on the ridge, and

he felt the bite of three arrows. The watch-mage cried out and dove into the tent. He cast his *shield* spell.

Beorth buried his sword into the head of one of his opponents and flicked it back from where it had stuck into the bone with a grunt. He turned to face the other gnoll and grunted again.

Kazrack moved to cut off a gnoll coming around from the right and slammed his flail across its chin. However, instead of the satisfying crunch of bone, he felt the sensation that Jeremy had felt. As if his weapon slapped against thick mud or a hardened jelly. It turned to face him with a silent scream.

“D’nar! Did you see that?!” he cried to Ratchis.

Jana tried her spell of fear on the thing facing Kazrack, but it had no effect.

The new pseudo-gnoll brought its axe down on Kazrack, who only barely was able to divert the sharp side of the axe head with his flail at the last second. He took the blow to the neck and shoulder, and worried that his right arm would go dead soon. He was still trying to ‘shake it off’ as he hit the ground unconscious.

Suddenly, Jeremy became aware of a buzzing sound. He hazarded a peek at the pile of goo, and saw that it was re-shaping itself, cracking and buzzing, squeezing itself into a cone of flesh that spurted out a ball of insect-like hairs that melted into a segmented body, spindly legs and membranous wings. The “gnoll” had turned into a giant hornet, nearly two feet long. It buzzed angrily.

“It’s changed into something flying!” Jeremy announced, as he was the only one who could see this astonishing sight. He was barely able to block the blow of gnoll, which was re-absorbing the tendril up into its arm, making a sickening slurping sound. It swung its axe with its right, Jeremy blocked with his long sword and stabbed with his short sword. The wound closed itself up nearly as quickly as it was made.

Ratchis hustled across the fractured melee towards Kazrack. “Jeremy’s right! The thing the druids sent us for has infiltrated the gnolls!”

The gnoll facing Beorth broke into a run, going back deeper into the trees. Beorth let it go and turned to see what he could of the others. What he saw was a gnoll swinging its battle axe down on the tent that held Martin, as another was climbing down the natural staircase formed at the point of the wedge in the stone.

“Ratchis, you go help Kazrack,” the paladin called, turning back for a second.

“Anubis, give me strength.” He ran towards the gnoll at the tent, and those still up on the ridge fired down on him. He felt the painful stings of the arrows slamming into the scales of his armor. He swung at the gnoll destroying the tent, but it left its mischief and blocked the blow with a cackle.

Martin stood through the hole in the tent and seeing Beorth had the tent-destroyer well in hand reached into the red leather bag at his belt and pulled out a ball of fur, which he tossed into the direction of the trees.

“Go kill those gnolls I stunned,” the watch-mage, commanded the magical ball of fur that spun and grew into a ferocious wolverine. It landed on one and immediately commenced to tear the flesh from it.

Jana moved to join Ratchis, and two more gnolls came around a thick tree. She had to rely on her speed alone to avoid their deadly blows, but felt the hard slam of the shaft of the axe smash her across the cheek as the gnoll raised it back into position. Her robes grew dark with her blood. Trying to keep in mind the tactics she had learned in the many battles she had been part of in recent months, Jana turned to be back-to-back with Ratchis, should the gnolls try to surround them. She took a tentative swing at one of her foes with her goblin club and missed. It looked at her and, and its skin began to crack and peel, and roll backward and from its chest shot forth a tendril of red-orange undulating flesh that seemed to meld with Kazrack’s unconscious form. The dwarf shuddered.

The gnoll with the tendril arm tried to move past Jeremy, and whipped its tendril out again towards the hornet, and again it connected with a sound like loud chewing. However, it left itself open for a blow from the Neerguardian, who cut a sizeable piece of the strange flesh from the “gnoll”. Even on the ground, separate from the rest of *what-it-was*, the flesh squirmed and turned and peeled, and sprouted tendrils to rejoin with the rest of the thing.

Jeremy looked to finish this thing and cut the tendril, but swinging, he slipped on an icy stone half buried in the frozen ground and fell, face first on the ground. Jeremy rolled, and tried to get to his knees without dropping his swords. He felt a blow like a fist against his side. He turned and felt a strange pulling at his flesh. A second tentacle now waved back and forth from the gnoll-thing and it flailed as if it was trying to connect itself to Jeremy. At the same time, the hornet had extruded a tendril of its own and it was connected to the second of the two gnolls that had succumbed to Martin's spell. The yellow and black insect shell of the hornet, grew as it slid down the tendril towards the fallen gnoll.

"Yeargh!" Jeremy cried.

Ratchis slammed his hammer against another gnoll skull, without slowing his pace, helping Jana with one of her foes. As he felt contact, he let go of the hammer and drew his long sword and his long hunting knife. With skill born of raw determination, the half-orc bellowed, and ducked axe blow, as he blocked one from the "gnoll" that was attached to Kazrack.

"Jana! Cut that thing!" Ratchis cried.

Beorth cut the gnoll before him at the hamstring and it crumbled.

"Martin, finish that one," the paladin said, as the gnoll staggered to get back up, its blood pooling in the cold mud of the knoll. Beorth ran to help Ratchis and Jana.

The wolverine made a strange sound as it clawed at the second downed gnoll. It seemed to make a moaning sound, as if something was wrong with it. Its claws seemed to be having little effect on the thing. It scratched at the tendril ineffectively.

"*Imago*," Martin muttered, and his form once again became that of a shadow.

Jana dropped her club and pulled her dagger, cutting at the tentacle attached to Kazrack's ankle. The tendril pulsed. Her blows seemed to have little effect, and the gnoll turned to address her, again making no sound from its mouth that anyone could hear, while making all the gestures and grimaces associated with an attacking gnoll mechanically.

Blood pooled about Kazrack, melting the snow, and he grew paler as the tendril squirmed and creaked and cracked, and began to take the look of his flesh, even as the covering gnoll flesh slid down the tendril to meet it.

Jeremy dodged the tendril that flailed at him and hacked through the one attached to the "hornet".

"Can these things even die?" Beorth cried in despair, for a moment forgetting even his faith.

"Martin! Start a fire! Try fire!" Ratchis called, as he slashed the gnoll that had been attacking Jana with his hunting knife. The ranger's sword blow was parried.

"I have oil in my pack!" Beorth offered.

The gnoll with the torn hamstring, swung out at Martin in his shadowy form, crying out in pain and fear. Martin was able to avoid the force of the blow, and mentally commanded his magical invisible shield into a position where it could protect him from the archers. The shield glowed translucent green as three arrows bounced off of it. Meanwhile, the other gnolls had finished climbing down and charged at Martin screaming gnollish curses. Martin ducked back into the tent and avoided the blow and crawling out the back grabbed Beorth's pack and began to rummage it for the oil.

Beorth moved to flank the gnoll Ratchis was attacking, but it spun around and knocked the paladin's blow away.

Jana was still trying to cut at the tendril when out of the corner of her eye she noticed the gnoll-thing it was attached swing its axe. She felt the weight of the weapon on her head, and a piece of her scalp was shaved off. She fell to the ground.

Beorth allowed this to distract him, and suffered a deep arm cut from the gnoll he and Ratchis faced.

Jeremy hacked at the "gnoll" before him again, and it melted into a puddle of red-orange and black flesh. He noticed that

the unconscious gnoll had become a blob of twisting flesh, and it crawled up the tendril, incorporating it as it ascended and then melted into the hornet itself emerging from the other side with a sound like someone stepping through wet mulch, as a second hornet. It buzzed angrily as well.

Ratchis left the gnoll to Beorth and bullrushed the “gnoll” connected to Kazrack. It did not budge, and the hulking half-orc stumbled backward surprised. He had rarely met up with things or people that could resist his raw strength.

One of the giant hornets stung the wolverine and it yelped.

Beorth backed away from his opponent and took a swing at the “gnoll” connected to Kazrack cleaving its head, and it the thing bulged and gelled and then cracked like chicken bone but began to ooze back together slowly.

“Jana, Kazrack is dying! Heal him!” Ratchis commanded, getting his weapons back into position to deal with the gnolls.<sup>73</sup>

Martin was now pouring oil on a rolled-up blanket as he weaved back and forth barely avoiding the blows of a gnoll’s battle axe. In a moment, it caught fire.

Jana, blood covering her face, continued to be ineffectual against the tendril on Kazrack. She cried out again, as she just barely dodged a blow from the false gnoll.

Jeremy came charging into the fray, holding his swords above his head to ward off the dive-bombing hornets. He chopped down on the tendril with his long sword and it snapped like leather strap, cracking and oozing as it flailed around on the snowy ground.

Ratchis let the thing feel his own sword, and it again made that silent scream. The rent, where its kidneys should have been, opened and closed like a bloody toothless mouth. There was no sign of bone, just layers of fluid cartilage. It fell over in two pieces.

Out of their sight, the wolverine squealed as arrows from the ridge pelted it. It shivered and died and then disappeared.

Martin took no notice. He ran over to the squirming bisected pseudo-gnoll and dropped the flaming blanket on the thing. It seemed to immediately react, shooting out tendrils, and churning more violently, trying to grow and change, discarding layers of dried flesh that turned to dust as they rolled off, and yet there seemed to be no end to them.

“Jeremy, don’t let that thing get away,” Beorth said, pointing back to the puddle of flesh the Neerguardian had left behind. The paladin knelt beside Kazrack’s pale form and lay his hands upon the dwarf’s chest. “Anubis, heal this dwarf. I implore you.”

Beorth felt the warmth beneath his hand, but it was not as warm as had hoped, for he had already used much of his healing power this day. Jana knelt beside him and placed her rolled cloak beneath Kazrack’s head. She immediately began to inspect him for the worst wounds.

“Somebody, please bring me my healing kit, and hurry!” She called out with worry in her voice.

Martin poured another container of oil on the burning thing and the flames leaped up high. Jeremy leapt back in surprise, “Hey! Warn someone next time!”

“Sorry,” Martin said hurriedly, dropping the empty container. “Gotta get the healing kit.”

Jeremy finally turned to look at what Beorth had pointed at, if only to turn his eyes from the glare of the fire. The two hornets had extruded a tendril each and were connected into the “melted” pseudo-gnoll. The tendrils unguled, with swellings of flesh pumping into the downed thing.

“Ratchis!” Jeremy cried, but he could not get to the hornets, for there was still other normal gnolls amid the trees that party

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<sup>73</sup> **DM’s Note:** Not only was Kazrack at negative hit points, but the thing was draining his Constitution, so the negative hit point total he would die at kept approaching zero as his loss of a hit point every round approached it. In Aquerra, characters do not die until reach a negative hit point total of 10 + one-half their maximum hit point (rounded down). Applying first aid to someone at negative hit points takes 1d10+10 rounds.

had lost track of. A gnoll swung down at Jeremy, who returned with a belly-bursting short sword thrust. Ratchis did not hesitate. He charged and sliced right through one of the tendrils. Jeremy turned to join Ratchis, wiping blood and ichor from his eyes. “Beorth, kill the gnolls. Kill all the gnolls. We’ll try to finish these *things*.”

Martin ran back into the camp, and an arrow got past his shield, clipping his foot. As he leapt into the tattered tent to find the healing kit, the gnoll that had chased him before sprung out and roared, its battle axe above its head.

“*Stupore!*” Martin cried, but his spell failed. He ducked instead.

Beorth came running to the watch-mage’s aid, and drew the gnoll away, allowing Martin to seek for the needed kit. The undulating tendril suddenly seemed to change direction, and in a moment all of the puddle of flesh was gone, absorbed up into the tendril. Ratchis dropped his knife and chopped the thickened end off. It oozed and crackled as it slid up towards the fleeing hornet (the other hornet had already left), while the fallen piece began to do the same.

Beorth saw two more gnolls picking their way down the “stairway,” and sighed. Martin looked at the gnolls and then at the paladin, holding the newly found healing kit in his hand.

“Go, help Kazrack,” Beorth said. “I’ll finish this.” He parried a blow from the “tent-crushing” gnoll.

Martin hustled to Jana and handed her the kit.

“Stay here and assist me,” she said abruptly, snatching the kit. “And when I say bring me the healing kit, don’t tarry next time.”

“Okay,” Martin replied meekly.

Both Beorth and his opponent were surprised as a gnoll fell off the ridge above dropping his bow. He had two arrows in his back. The gnolls above began to yell, and those climbing down wavered.

Jeremy fired his crossbow at the retreating hornet and missed.

Ratchis hurried over and sliced the length of his long sword across the stomach of “tent-crusher.”<sup>74</sup> The gnoll doubled-over, as if he were laughing, but puked up black-blood instead. He was dead.

The gnoll that was halfway down the staircase at the point of the wedge that made this knoll, changed his direction. The one at the bottom looked up at his fleeing companion and then at the gore covered half-orc gritting his teeth and clutching his sword in both hands and cursed and immediately began to climb back up as well. As he saw his companion’s feet disappear over the top, he heard the half-orc roar. There was a moment’s whistling sound and then a burning pain through his mid-section. He convulsed and fell backward, fifteen feet to the ground.

Ratchis pulled another javelin from the quiver on his side and hefted it.

The gnoll scrambled pathetically to climb again, and Ratchis took aim. He waited for it to be nearly halfway up again and again he let loose with the javelin. Again, the gnoll tumbled backward, the crunching of his bones echoing in the cleft in the stone. It did not get back up again.

The gnolls upon the ridge were gone.

Jeremy walked over to where Jana frantically barked orders to Martin and wrapped bandages and sewed cuts.

Beorth stood by and watched, grim-faced.

“Beorth, can Anubis help him?” Jeremy asked the paladin.

“Anubis will guide him if Jana fails.”

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<sup>74</sup> **DM’s Note:** Sometimes an unnamed monster among a hoard will make himself known to the players by a nick-name if he does something noteworthy, like smash tents, or take too many hits to kill than normal because of unlucky damage rolls.

“Is everyone okay down here?” a man’s voice suddenly called. Where the gnolls had been moments before there was now a man dressed like a frontiersman, in a thick bearskin coat and a raccoon hat, but Ratchis could see that the man wore a studded leather jerkin beneath the coat, and though he held his bow in his hand, he wore a battleaxe at his side.

“No!” Jeremy and Martin replied at once.

“The gnolls are all dead, except the one that got away,” Ratchis called up to the man.

The man looked down and was taken aback. “Half-orc,” he lifted an arrow to his bow.

Ratchis made ready to run for cover, but Jeremy ran between them.

“No! Wait! He’s okay,” Jeremy gestured with a thumb to Ratchis. “He’s, uh... He’s with us.”

The man lowered his bow. “What are you doing with this pig-fucker?” the man asked scornfully of Jeremy.

Ratchis scowled.

“It’s all right. He kind of just follows us around,” Jeremy replied in an off-hand way. “He does what we say. Right, Ratchis?” The Neergaardian chuckled.

“Shut up, Jeremy,” Ratchis replied, flatly.

Martin looked plaintively at Jana, and she nodded. The watch-mage left her to tend to Kazrack (who now looked like he would live) and walked into the clearing. “Sir? I am Martin the Green, a watch-mage of Thricia. Have you heard of our order?”

“Uh, I guess so,” the man replied. “Look, I just wanted to tell ya that there are gonna be more gnolls crawling all over this area in come about two hours when they get back to their main camp. There summin like two-hundred of them running around west and north of here.”

“It appears that a strange creature, a creature that can subsume other organisms and then takes their forms, and apparently from another dimension, has infiltrated the gnolls,” Martin explained.

“Huh?” The man looked puzzled.

“No one will listen,” Jana said, walking over. “Don’t bother. There is nothing more I can do for Kazrack at this point, all he needs is rest and warmth.”

“I know a place you can hide, and the gnolls won’t find ya,” the man offered.

The party took him up on his offer. He was Patrick, and from the area of Archet, and knew these lands very well, including the location of a hunting blind that could hold five uncomfortably out of the wind and wet. He was accompanied by his son Preston, a boy of about ten years of age. He wore a long hunting knife and had his own bow and quiver.

Preston hurried at his father’s command to prepare the ponies, clearing one of a pack to allow the party to lay Kazrack across its back.

Ratchis checked the two tame ponies as they seemed very docile and he was worried they had become subsumed by the creature and were not unable to neigh or make a sound, just as the false gnolls had not been able to cry out. They were real ponies. Two other wild ponies kicked and neighed.

“Time for breakin’ em is spring,” Patrick said, pulling the ponies. Preston pulled the tame ones.

They marched for two hours along a narrow trail. Preston led, and Patrick took up the rear. After some time, Ratchis noticed that the boy never spoke a word. The half-orc walked beside him and tussled his hair. “Gonna grow up to be a hunter like your father?”

“I already am a hunter,” the boy said annoyedly, and brushed the big hand away.

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The hunting blind was well hidden, and after he had shown it to them, Patrick made to leave. Martin asked if he would bring a message regarding the shape-changing creature to Siram in Archet.<sup>75</sup> Pat agreed. He also warned them about an owlbear in the area, that had been feeding on ponies. He had seen its tracks.

“Don't worry,” Jeremy replied, with a chuckle. “We'll take care of that too while we're at it.”

They could not all fit in the blind at once, and with Kazrack requiring special care there was even less room.

Ratchis and Jeremy took the first watch, but first the half-orc placed the blessing of his goddess on Jeremy and Kazrack, so that they may withstand the cold.

Beorth and Martin took the second watch, but Martin passed out from the cold, so weakened by his many wounds. Beorth awoke the others, who hefted Martin back into blind, and Jana came out to join Beorth. They huddled for warmth in one of the tents, trying to listen over the wind. It was pointless to actually watch, as the dark of night was impenetrable.

In the morning, Ratchis called upon the power of Nephthys to heal Kazrack three times, repairing his arm, and closing his many smaller wounds more securely than Jana's hasty sutures.

Kazrack left the blind to pray. He did not speak a word, except to tell Ratchis not to waste his healing on him anymore.

“I have been found wanting,” the dwarf mumbled.

**End of Session #34**

AQUERRA

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<sup>75</sup> Siram is the unofficial leader of Archet (See Session #29)

## Session #35

### Tholem, 18th of Onk - 564 H.E.

Kazrack removed the stone beads he wore in his beard, and he climbed out of the hunting blind and to a thorny bush by a tree where he kneeled and prayed, his head laying on the prayer stone. He took no notice of the cold, unbeknownst to him because of Ratchis' spell.

In the very early morning it was Ratchis and Jeremy watching again. Jana, Martin and Beorth rested in the blind.

"Do you think we'll be able to track the gnolls?" Jeremy asked the half-orc. "Plenty of snow on the ground."

Ratchis snorted. "I don't know."

"You know, that thing, whatever it is, if it could be gnolls, it could be that owlbear, or any of them ponies," Jeremy looked at Ratchis expecting a reply.

The ranger was silent.

"You never can just talk like a normal person, can you?" Jeremy asked, snidely. "It is either pulling teeth or barking orders with you."

"Jeremy, why don't you climb up and get some rest," was all Ratchis said. "Send Beorth down. Let the others rest."

"Heh."

Beorth climbed down soon after and Ratchis gave him his boots to wear.

"Um, no thanks. I already have boots," Beorth begged off politely.

"These will keep you warm," Ratchis said.

"Mine are pretty warm. They have fur and everything," Beorth replied nervously.

Ratchis sighed, "They are *magical*,"

"Oh," Beorth replied. "Perhaps we can take this time to discuss what to do next."

Beorth pulled off his own boots and slipped on the boots of Uller. They seemed to conform to his size seamlessly as he laced them up. Ratchis put on his old boots which he carried in his over-stuffed pack.

"Jeremy was just talking about the same thing," Ratchis said, his voice never lost a scratchy deep quality, like he was sucking back snot with every hard consonant. It was faint most of the time, but when he was angered or excited, it would become more prevalent.

"How will we find this thing?" Beorth asked.

"I would think that something so corrupt and alien would be..." Ratchis searched for the words. "That you'd be able to detect it with the sight given to you by your god."

"I?" Beorth was taken aback. "You think so?"

"It appears to have the ability to take over bodies," Ratchis said, changing the subject. "Dead creatures it seems to take over more easily."

"Perhaps the blessings of your goddess will protect us from a creature that can take over bodies," Beorth mused.

"If we are going to be here much longer, we are going to need a fire," Ratchis said, and walked off to collect wood.

Up in the blind, Jana, Martin and Jeremy slept. Thomas was tucked under Martin's chin, shivering.

Suddenly there was a resounding crack in the woods. Silence.

"What in the Hells was that?" Jana cried, sitting up.

There was another crack and then another, like wood being split apart. Jeremy opened the hatch on the hunting blind.

"What's going on?" The Neergardian called out, squinting in the morning sun. "Ratchis? Is Ratchis in trouble?"

He looked down and saw Kazrack kneeling beneath a nearby tree.

"Kazrack! Kazrack!" he called, but the dwarf ignored him. "Did you see anything?"

Jeremy sighed, and grabbing his weapon belt climbed down the rope ladder.

Ratchis was smashing up a tree with an spare long sword. It was one he had appropriated from the Ogre's Bluff town guards.<sup>76</sup>

"I thought a fire would attract gnolls," Jeremy said.

"Better than freezing to death," Ratchis grunted.

Jeremy shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

Ratchis was really letting the small dead tree have it. He hacked over and over again, until he was basically hammering it into firewood because the blade became so dull.

Jana had climbed down as well.

"Ratchis, do you need help?" she asked.

"No."

An hour later Ratchis had a huge fire roaring in the biggest open space he could find in front of the blind. He stacked the wood, and kept it fed all day.

The day passed without event. Beorth wandered back from praying, while Kazrack never moved at all. Even after the sun had set, he merely unrolled his blanket by the prayer stone and slept there, shivering occasionally. When he was certain the dwarf was asleep Ratchis cast a blessing of warmth on him.

Everyone slept around the tall fire. Martin and Beorth took the first watch. Beorth was silent.

Martin entertained himself by talking with Thomas.

"Feeling better Thomas?" the Watch-mage asked his familiar. He had been complaining of the cold all day.

"I dunno," Thomas chattered, and licked his little forepaws. "The fire is nice, but I am so tired."

"Why don't you take a nap?" Martin suggested.

"But I'm *not* sleepy!" Thomas' tone grew anxious. "I am tired. Tired, tired, tired, but sleep doesn't come. Just like the thing with the nuts!"

Martin stroked his head comfortingly.

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<sup>76</sup> See Session #28 for that chaotic encounter involving the town guards, Richard the Red, Rindalith, the party and a manticores.

“Shall I tell you a story to pass the time?” Martin asked the squirrel.

“Yeah, yeah! Yeah, yeah!” Thomas nodded his head up and down, blowing out his cheeks in joy.

“Once upon a time there was a giant squirrel who was a king in the Second Age,” Martin began.

“How big was he?”

“Ten feet from head to tail,” Martin replied with a smile. It suddenly struck him how much he really loved this little brown squirrel imbued with a part of himself.

“Wow!” Thomas said. “How did he climb trees?”

“Trees were bigger then.”

“Can you cast a spell to make me bigger?” Thomas inquired, cocking his head.

“No, not yet,” Martin replied, mentally. “But some day.”

“You know, I like trees, but I am beginning to think inns are better,” Thomas said, longingly. “I’m really cold!”

“I know, Thomas,” Martin sighed. “We’ll be back to civilization soon.”

“Tell me the rest of the story.”

And so nearly two hours went on like this, until finally Martin had to throw more wood on the fire. He crept over to the woodpile, careful not to step in the puddles of melted snow in the area they had cleared, or on any of his sleeping companions.

When he looked up from the woodpile, not more than twenty feet away stood a dwarf. Martin did a double-take, looking over at the sleeping Kazrack and back to the motionless dwarf.

They stood there perhaps a full minute just looking at each other. Finally, the dwarf began to step forward.

“Beorth!” Martin called in a harsh whisper.

“Your fire looks warm,” the dwarf said in a voice much deeper and raspier than Kazrack’s ever was. “May I share it?”

The polite request was replied in kind before the watch-mage knew what he was saying. Politeness becomes habit when one learns diplomacy.

The dwarf stepped more clearly into the light of the fire. He wore a dyed dark green fur cloak, green breeches, and a white shirt under his chain shirt, which was covered by a brown fur vest. He had wild red hair, and while his beard was well-groomed, his hair was natty in places (nearly as bad as Ratchis’). The dwarf wore two hand axes dangling at his side, and a short bow strapped to his pack. He wore no hat.

Beorth walked over to see what Martin had been so excited about. He was taken aback by the sight of the dwarf removing his gloves and warming his calloused hands by the fire.

“Oh,” the paladin said. “You’ve invited a guest?”

“It seemed the hospitable thing to do,” Martin shrugged his shoulders. He addressed the dwarf. “I am called Martin. Martin the Green.”

“Helrahd,” the dwarf chirped like an obese owl.<sup>77</sup>

The two companions were quiet, not sure if he had spoken his name or not.

Beorth introduced himself as well.

“Is that Kazrack?” Helrahd asked, pointing at the more familiar dwarf’s sleeping form.

“Yes,” Beorth said, furrowing his brow.

“Harumph,” Helrahd said. His every move and breath seemed accompanied by a grunt or a smack, as if he were constantly chewing on something that occasionally got stuck in his throat.

“You know Kazrack Delver?” Martin asked.

“No,” Helrahd replied.

There was silent surprise in response to this answer.

“Um, are you seeking Kazrack?” Beorth finally asked.

“Hmmm, yup.”

They offered Helrahd some food and drink. He politely refused.

“There’s a storm coming,” Helrahd said, looking up at the indigo sky.

“Do you know a better place we can stay?” Beorth asked.

“Not yet,” Helrahd replied. “I found signs of a battle up yonder. Was that you?”

“Yes,” Martin replied. “We had trouble with gnolls and, uh... other things.”

Helrahd did not reply.

“It is our watch,” Beorth said. “You are welcome to sleep and be assured that you will be safe, Helron.”

“Helrahd.”

The dwarf laid out his pack and unrolled a bedroll and laid down to sleep.

Beorth and Martin crept around to the other side of the fire.

“What do you think?” Martin whispered to Beorth, pointing in the general direction of their dwarven guest.

“I don’t know what to think, but surely we cannot deny a traveler shelter,” Beorth offered.<sup>78</sup>

“Of course not,” Martin sounded mildly offended. “Come the morning we will hear from Kazrack.”

Soon, it was time to wake Jeremy so that he might relieve Beorth.

“We have a guest,” Beorth said to Jeremy as the Neergaardian groggily rose.

“What? What do you mean?”

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<sup>77</sup> **DM’s Note:** For this session, Helrahd was played by a guest-player, Sean Teasdale (DM of the now defunct “Promised Land” Aquerra campaign).

<sup>78</sup> **DM’s Note:** I so wanted Martin to respond, “*Of course, but don’t call me ‘Shirley’.*”

“A guest,” Beorth repeated. “Martin invited a dwarf to share our fire.”

“What is he doing out here by himself?” Jeremy asked, his suspicion rising.

“Ra only knows. He claims to know Kazrack.”

“How would he know Kazrack?” Jeremy voice was full of surprise and he had to hush himself to keep from waking the others. He continued more quietly. “Maybe he’s famous? Unless of course all dwarves just happen to know each other.”

Beorth went to sleep while Martin and Jeremy took the second watch. Martin mused aloud that the strange creature might be easier to find if they knew its motivations or goals.

“I think it wants to absorb the whole world,” Jeremy offered with a chuckle. “Though it had better pick up the pace if it wants to get it done any time soon.”

Martin rolled his eyes.

The evening passed with Jeremy trying to remember every detail he could about the dwarven caravan upon great lizards he had seen soon after first arriving in Derome-Delem.<sup>79</sup>

## **Balem, 19th of Onk – 564 H.E.**

In the morning, Kazrack met Helrahd.

“Greetings Rock-brother!” Kazrack said. “Welcome to our camp!”

“Well met,” Helrahd replied in dwarven, and they grasped wrists shaking them roughly.

“Well met,” Kazrack repeated in the common tongue.

“Our meeting is most fortuitous,” Helrahd grunted in his bass voice. “I come from one {snort, hack} Beléar.”

“His name is known to me,” Kazrack said. “For it was he who initiated me into the ways of the rune-throwers.”

“He has gathered us up to aid his friends and yours, the gnomes of Garvan, and sent me to find you, so you may join us as well,” Helrahd explained. He let a hawk fly.

“You said, ‘Us’?” Kazrack questioned.

“Our band from *Abarrane-Abaruch* is camped outside of Ogre’s Bluff,” Helrahd continued to speak in dwarven. The others looked up when he spoken the name of the town in common. “Their scrub-chin constable is a hassle; we’ve had to move camp several times.”

Kazrack explained to the rest of the party what Helrahd had said, and then introduced each of the party members with him, ending with Ratchis.

“...who I have chosen to call D’nar,” Kazrack said.

“He got pig blood?” Helrahd said, finally using his guttural spiting and choking common with Kazrack. It was not that he did not know the common tongue well, but he spoke as if it tasted bad in his mouth. When he spoke dwarven his words were more precise.

Ratchis looked up and Kazrack walked away, as if he did not hear the question.

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<sup>79</sup> See Session #7, when the party was passed upon the road to Stonebridge (leaving Bountiful) by a Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium caravan. At this point, about five months have passed since that encounter.

“Can’t stay here,” Helrahd grunted. “I can lead us back to Ogre’s Bluff and our camp.”

“We cannot leave this general area,” Ratchis said. “I have sworn an oath to destroy this creature, this thing and so I must do it. My friends are aiding me.”

“What thing?” Helrahd asked.

“I do not know what it is, but it can take any shape, and even become multiple creatures at once and it can fly,” Ratchis was having trouble with words to describe it more specifically than that.

“Storm’s coming; need shelter,” Helrahd said, dropping the topic of conversation.

Ratchis looked at the sky and nodded. He had prepared enough spells to protect everyone from the cold except Helrahd and proceeded to dole out his goddess’ blessing.

It was decided they would head back towards the pair of hills where they had seen the ponies and see if perhaps there might be a cave facing into the tiny vale.

Helrahd would accompany them.

Kazrack hurriedly packed everyone’s stuff for them and then offered to carry Martin’s pack.

Martin thanked the dwarf with a smile.

Helrahd grunted. He also kept shifting his gaze over to Jana and squinting, as if he were trying to see through her, or examine her more carefully.

At one point in the journey she noticed the new dwarf and Kazrack talking in quieter tones and both their eyes drifted to her at different points.

The snow began to fall after they had marched an hour and in less than an hour from then, when they reached the hills, the weather was obscuring visibility pretty badly and piling up fast, covering the snow from a week or so before.

Ratchis urged everyone to double their pace. They clambered down into the miniature vale, for it looked like there might be a path up that side of the hill where they figure a cave would be (and out of the direction of the wind, conveniently).

“Martin?” Jeremy asked the illusionist.

“Yes?”

“Can owlbears fly?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen one.”

Ratchis made out what could be a way up the hill but left the rest of the party waiting down a ways. He brought Jeremy along, since the Neergaardian was a good climber and good at judging what might be too difficult for the others.

At first the path up was not so bad, slippery in parts, but even falling would not have been so dangerous, but after about 30 yards, the path suddenly ended. There was a slippery five-foot vertical climb. Ratchis boosted Jeremy up, and the handsome young man, now grizzled with a blonde beard, glinting red in place, made his way another dozen yards to an even steeper climb. He signaled back to Ratchis that he was going to climb and check it out.

Ratchis gave him the thumbs up and then hoisted himself up the first climb and moved in that direction. Jeremy stood there trying to find the best way to climb the steep twenty-five-foot incline with his bare hands, but Ratchis tied a rope to a grappling hook and tossed it up a few times until he finally caught on to something solid. He handed the rope to Jeremy, who smiled and happily climbed up.

The snowfall grew only harder, and Jeremy had to blink flakes out of his eyes. He pulled his arms and shoulders over the top, and could see that up here was a small plateau with a single tall fir adjacent to a higher plateau another fifteen feet up, but this plateau had a cave mouth; five feet high and several feet across.

“There’s a cave up here,” Jeremy said as he looked down to find a good place to hang on as he pulled a leg over.

By the time he heard the sound it was too late. Jeremy looked up just in time to see a huge bear come charging at him. He put his hands up and felt them get knocked back into his face as something hard and pointed scraped against his chest and knocking him backward.

“Whoa!”

Jeremy went sailing through the air. Ratchis saw him pass over his head, a trail of blood following his limp form.

Jeremy landed with a thud and skipped painfully down the snow-covered rock-strewn path. Ratchis ran over to him. He saw Beorth and the others moving forward after having heard Jeremy cry out.

“Nephthys!” Ratchis cried out, grabbing hold of the belt of scored and broken chain links about his waist, while laying his other hand on Jeremy. “Bless this man with your healing embrace so that he may rejoin this battle against evil!”

Jeremy stirred.

“What the hell was that?” Martin asked.

“I think the cave is occupied,” Beorth said, flatly. Though he had lost his memory, he had not lost his dead-pan delivery of what others often wondered might be attempts at extremely dry humor.

“Augh... It’s a bear’s lair!” Jeremy moaned, and then looked right at Ratchis angrily. “You chose a bear’s lair!”

He stood and brushed himself off wincing from a sudden pain. He shook it off.

“Did it make noise?” Beorth asked.

“It came up suddenly. It was just there! It must be very fast. It could have made a sound, not sure,” Jeremy checked his weapons and armor. “It doesn’t seem to be climbing down, and Martin seems to think it cannot fly. So, we are safe for the moment.”

“If it is a real owlbear,” Beorth said.

“Either way, we’ll go the long way around the hill and come from the other side,” Ratchis said. “It looks like there may be a path down to it from above.”

“In this weather, who can tell?” Jana mumbled.

Helrahd grunted.

The party made their way off the hill and out of the vale and around to the other side. This side had a more gradual slope and was covered with trees. In the spring it was probably covered with tall wild grass, but now it was covered in snow and ascending it was exhausting.

Ratchis led the way, as usual, but Kazrack was close behind him. Helrahd took the rear

“When we get there I will go down first and draw the beast from it cave so that you and the others may take it by surprise, using missile weapons,” Kazrack said to the half-orc.

“Put your armor on and I’ll let you go along with your plan,” Ratchis said. He had noticed much earlier during the march that Kazrack merely carried his armor and would not put it on.

“D’nar, I must do what must be done,” Kazrack said, mysteriously.

Ratchis grunted.

They were moving among the trees now, and so the top of the hill was obscured. Martin plodded along with Beorth behind him, and Jana in front. As the Watch-mage pushed a tree branch out of the way something big and hard tumbled down on him heavily.

“Oof!” Martin cried out and then screamed when he saw what it was. A human torso, head and shoulders removed from the rest of the body. The arms looked like they had been twisted and pulled off and the lower half chopped perhaps with an axe. The face was frozen in a look of horror.

Kazrack dropped his pack to run over to investigate the screaming. The pack began to slide and then roll down the hill. He hesitated for half a second and then ran towards the scream anyway. Jeremy was able to get in the pack’s way and stop it.

Kazrack arrived right behind Ratchis.

“Food for gnolls,” Ratchis said when he saw the torso. “They love the winter.”

“I knew him,” Martin said, having turned away. “His name was Reginar. He was one of the boys who joined up to come to Derome-Delem. He was in my group.”<sup>80</sup>

“We will bury him after we have dealt with this creature and acquired shelter from the storm,” Beorth said.

Martin nodded, wiping his mouth.

Jeremy and Helrahd finally made it over.

“We could use that as bait to lure out the owlbear,” Jeremy said, pointing to the torso,

Beorth and Martin glared at him.

“Uh, I was only kidding?”

Martin sighed.

“Do not even joke of such things,” Beorth admonished.

Ratchis found several gnoll encampments; low wooden shelters built about a tree’s base to be camouflaged.

“These are meant to hold four gnolls,” Ratchis explained. “They huddle there for warmth when they sleep, or to burst out on prey or enemies.”

Helrahd found a human head stored in one of the small circular shelter.

They came to the top of the hill and the wind was so strong that they could feel it threatening to whip them right off the top. They crouched down.

Ratchis went down first to check the path. The snow was now falling so hard that he had not gone fifteen feet and he had all but disappeared. Ratchis found the path was narrow, but not too slippery, and since the wind was blowing against the hill face as they went down, it would be less likely to shear someone off. Unfortunately, not sixty feet from the plateau that he knew was above the one that held the cave the path became particularly narrow, icy and treacherous. He knew the others would have trouble.

Eventually, after much debate the whole party was huddled on the edge of the icy section and would loop the rope around a

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<sup>80</sup> Like the original members of the party, Martin too came to Gothanius with a troop of young men recruited to hunt the dragon. Members of his group included: Simon, Peter, James and Maria.

person's waist and then it would be held on either end and they would be let across very slowly.

Ratchis went across first with the rope tied about his waist, and then he pulled the rope as Kazrack came across.

Beorth was next, but a wind shear drove him off the path and only the raw strength of his companions holding the ropes on either side kept him from tumbling down the harsh hillside to his probable death. They all yanked with all their strength jerking the paladin back onto the path. He remained frozen there for a moment and then began to stir.

"Beorth! GO VERY SLOWLY!" Ratchis bellowed to be heard above the wind.

Beorth got up to his knees and began to slowly crawl. It was unbelievably icy and never very sure-footed, he could feel his knees slipping out from under him as well. There was another wind shear and he half-tumbled off the path, hanging there pathetically, bobbing back and forth.

"He's gonna fall! He's gonna fall!" Thomas chattered excitedly to Martin. The watch-mage closed his eyes and held the rope with the little might he had, but he used it all.

Kazrack and Ratchis yanked with so much of their might that Jeremy was nearly pulled from his place on the other side of the rope, but he let go, and Beorth was pulled to safety.

Martin and Jana made it across with little trouble, followed by Helrahd. Jeremy was last.

"Jeremy! Tie the rope around your waist!" Ratchis called.

"What?" Jeremy exaggeratedly pretended to not be able to hear and placed a hand behind his ear. "What is that you're saying? Throw the rope away?" He made as if to chuck the rope off the hill, but wrapped it about his waist instead, chuckling.

Ratchis grunted disapprovingly.

Soon, they all stood upon the small plateau that overlooked the cave. The tall fir tree looked like an old man dressed in green crouched against the wall to hide from the wind stood, and seemed like a natural means to get down to the cave level.

"I'll go down and lure it out," Kazrack said.

"No!" Ratchis and Jana said simultaneously.

"Maybe Martin could use an illusion to draw it out?" Beorth suggested.

"You don't have a plan?" Helrahd grunted incredulously. "I thought you had a plan. You told me you had a plan."

"It may not smell it and sense it is not real," Martin said.

"There is a plan, I am going to lure it out," Kazrack said, moving to climb down the tree.

"Not even if I have to do such a stupid thing myself to keep you from doing it," Ratchis said, and with that he leapt past the dwarf and grabbing on to the tree, lowered himself down. Kazrack followed.

"I'm not going down there," Helrahd said.

Beorth stepped off the ledge and made to grab the tree but did not compensate for the winds gusts. In a moment he was tumbling down the tree painfully, landing stunned at Ratchis' feet.

Jeremy swung off the edge of the ledge and merely jumped down to the lower plateau, while Jana made her way very carefully down the tree.

Meanwhile, Martin cast his *minor image* spell, creating a goat that bleated loudly. Jeremy crept behind the goat.

“Stay back by the tree, Jana” Jeremy said, gesturing her back.

Kazrack began marching toward the cave mouth, so Ratchis left the reeling Beorth and hurried ahead of him

“Does Kazrack have a death wish?” Jeremy asked Jana. The young witch shrugged her shoulders.

Ratchis roared into the cave. Everyone tensed up waiting a reaction.

“*This* is your plan?” Helrahd commented from above.

“Come down,” Beorth called. “It looks like we have to go in.”

“Helrahd, after you,” Martin gestured towards the tree.

“I don’t want to go down there without a plan,” Helrahd said.

Martin shrugged his shoulders and leapt onto the tree as if he had learned from watching Thomas, and prayed to Isis all the way down.<sup>81</sup>

Jana cast light on her club. The snow was growing deep and was falling faster still.

Helrahd finally came down as the party prepared to enter the cave, but slipping, he fell halfway down.

The entrance was narrow, so that even though two could walk abreast their shoulders would touch.

Kazrack and Ratchis led the way, followed by Jeremy and Beorth. Jana and Martin were being trailed by Helrahd, who had strung his bow. The cave was damp and seemed to have been formed by both flowing water and perhaps an earthquake, for the narrow opening gave way to a larger chamber that had a slanted ceiling (six feet high on the right to 18 feet high on the left) made of one solid piece of flat igneous rock.

Even as Ratchis noticed the beast rise and lope towards them on all fours, he knew something was wrong. There were no bones. No smell of rotting meat or droppings. Something was wrong.

The owlbear reared up and opened its beak as if to squawk or roar, but no sound emerged. It stood just over eight feet tall, and had dark brown fur of a bear, but feathers shrouded its shoulders and arms, the latter of which ended big bear claws. Its head was that of a huge bird, with a nasty hooked beak and big eyes that seemed to move independently of each other.

Only Kazrack and Ratchis could see, but the others could hear the scuffle. Jana was carrying the light but she was too far back. Jeremy moved around Kazrack’s left and into the chamber, squinting to see the monster in the light’s edge.

Martin stepped forward and touched Kazrack’s unarmored shoulder casting his *blur* spell on him. “Jana, we need light up here!” he added on to the end of his arcane words.

Ratchis charged at the monster and struck it hard with his warhammer. The shock of the blow traveled up his arms, and he could see where the blow hit that the owlbear’s hide was stretching back over itself of its own accord, crackling as it moved.

Ratchis was taken aback, and thus reacted too slowly. The owlbear reached out and pulled the hulking half-orc towards itself like an over-enthusiastic uncle does to a sickly nephew. Ratchis could feel the bear’s claws rake him and cringed as the beak came down to pierce his shoulder. Blood poured down the half-orc’s body. He struggled to free himself, but even his great strength was not enough.

Jana came forward with the light and now the situation was clear. “*Kavitas!*” She cried out her arcane word for the *blindness* spell and she felt the energy go off, but the creature did not seem effected. It puzzled her.

Helrahd moved to the entrance of the chamber and readied his bow for a clear shot.

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<sup>81</sup> **DM’s Note:** Squirrels grant their masters a +2 bonus to climbing checks.

Kazrack charged at the beast, “Krauchaar, guide my blade!” The creature wheeled around, but the blow cut deep. The owlbear’s haunch seemed to snap open and then grow back together again, but more slowly than Ratchis’ blow.

“This is the creature we seek!” Kazrack called to the others.

“Anubis, Guardian of the Dead and defender of the living, please imbue my blade with your divine power so I may help defeat this foe!” Beorth called to his god, infusing one end of his quarterstaff with magic.

Jeremy ran up to the owlbear, swinging his longsword, but held the blow at the last minute as the thing whirled around, almost as if it meant to use Ratchis as a shield. The half-orc continued to struggle, but his face was buried in the feathers and fur and he could feel the air leaking from his squeezed chest.

“Kill it!” Ratchis croaked. The owlbear replied by driving its beak deeper into Ratchis’ wounded shoulder.

“*Stupore!*” Martin tried his *daze* spell, but the creature did not seem effected.

Jana attempted to use her spell to *cause fear*, but again the spell did not seem to effect this thing.

Kazrack held his halberd back over his head and brought it down with all his might, moving to a place where he could flank it, but it whirled around, and the pole arm blade sunk into Ratchis’ exposed left side.

“Arrgh!” Ratchis cried out, and then went limp.

Beorth hit it from the other side, and there was a resounding crack in its shoulder, that its body echoed, as that arm dropped down and then the muscles and sinews seemed to crawl back up to place, sounding like loud chewing.

Martin cast his colored sand at the creature and a last of multi-colored twirling lights erupted from his hand and cascaded over the creature. It shook its head back and forth and stepped backward, dropping Ratchis to the cold hard floor.

Both Kazrack and Jeremy tried to take the opening left by the withdrawing monster, but the dwarf over-extended himself and nearly tossed away his pole-arm. Jeremy had to turn his blade at an odd angle, and it bounced off with no effect. They stuck close with the beast and it beat away their blows.

There was a chitinous tendril emerging from the creature’s leg and it was connected to Ratchis’ thigh. It oozed and cracked and unguled.

Helrahd moved forward, but as he fell to one knee and fired, he tripped and twisted his ankle badly. The arrow skated on the stone floor.<sup>82</sup>

“You work on the tendril, and I’ll try to finish it off,” Jeremy called to Kazrack, as Beorth moved to his side.

Martin waved his open hand before him and cast his *shield* spell. The owlbear opened its beak to make its natural sounds, but no sound emerged. It clawed Jeremy deeply, even as it reached over and slammed Beorth with its beak.

Ratchis moaned in his unconsciousness.

Jeremy felt his long sword slice into the owlbear’s side, and he felt the thick muscle give way to the pudding-like essence beneath.

Jana ran forward and swung her bugbear-made spiked club, but her blow fell too short and she only hit the floor instead.

Kazrack thrust his halberd at the thing, but it knocked the blow away easily. Beorth moved over to Ratchis and went to lay his hand upon the servant of Nephthys.

Helrahd waited for a chance with another arrow, but when he took it, the arrow arced too high.

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<sup>82</sup> **DM’s Note:** Helrahd’s player rolled a fumble *Twist ankle*. *Half speed for 10 rounds*.

Martin moved over to Jeremy and began to poke at the beast to distract it a bit to allow Jeremy a better chance to strike it.<sup>83</sup> The poking seemed to annoy it, and it continued to swat at the staff. But noticing Jeremy's approach, it thrust its sharp hooked beak forward and made a deep gash across the Neergaardian's handsome face. And it pulled Beorth into its deadly embrace.

Jeremy hacked at the tendril connected to Ratchis, but it seemed to be covered in an insect-like shell and did not want to break. Kazrack followed suit, but still the tendril seems to drain life from Ratchis.

Jana scraped the thing with her club, and it swatted at her as well, allowing Beorth the leverage he needed to break free, but it would only be momentary. The creature threw its head to the ceiling in frustration and knocked Jeremy aside easily. The blonde warrior lay on the cave floor, bleeding out. And then the thing snatched Beorth again, holding him even tighter this time.

Kazrack ran beneath the thing's gaze to snatch up Jeremy's short sword. He thought that since it was magical it might prove more effective against the creature, but this left him open to a vicious blow from the thing's beak.

Beorth struggled to free himself again, but there was no luck this time.

Jana attacked it fruitlessly with her club, while Helrahd, dropped his bow and pulled out the axes he carried. He ran forward and chopped one down on the tendril. It resisted the blow.

Martin reached in his magical red leather bag and pulled out a ball of black fur, which he tossed in the direction of the false owlbear, as he withdrew. The ball grew as it spun through the air and landed before the beast as a black bear! It clawed at the owlbear at Martin's commands but managed to claw Beorth instead.

The owlbear-thing dropped Beorth's limp form and it retreated some more. A second tentacle now emerged from its body, and this one was connected to Beorth. It then rushed forward and grabbing the black bear from Martin's magical bag, it squeezed the smaller bear in its arms. The bear bellowed in pain as it thrashed around to free itself.

Kazrack and Helrahd were both chopping on the tendril that held Ratchis, while the former's axes could not cut through, the tendril began to whip back and forth to avoid blows from Kazrack's use of Jeremy's elfin blade.

The bear and the owlbear seemed to performing some violent dance. The owlbear swung around and squeezed more life from the black bear, while the animal clamped down its jaws on the thing's upper arm. The flesh in the mouth squirmed and cracked.

Finally, Kazrack cut through the tentacle that drained the life from Ratchis. He let out a grunt of satisfaction, as Helrahd, moved to hit the owlbear itself with his axes. The thing spun around, and the dwarf's axes buried themselves in the bear's back. It let out a pathetic scream and then disappeared. The owlbear opened its arms up in surprise.<sup>84</sup>

"Oops," said Helrahd under his breath.

Martin and Jana stood to either side of Kazrack, to try to distract the false-owlbear as the dwarf cut at the tendril attached to Beorth.

The owlbear fell down on all fours and took a swipe at Kazrack; for a second it seemed like it had hit, but then Martin realized, the *blur* spell had done its job.

Uninterrupted, Kazrack was able to cut Beorth free, as Helrahd continued to fail to do any harm to the strange monster.

"The fastest way to kill a tree is not by chopping its branches!" Helrahd cried to his fellow dwarf, as he dodged blows from the irritated creature.

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<sup>83</sup> **DM's Note:** He was using the *aid other* combat option.

<sup>84</sup> **DM's Note:** The reason those being "bear-hugged/grappled" were hit so often by their companions is because the person being held provided the creature with 50% cover.

The monster withdrew once again, and suddenly its entire body convulsed. Each of its clawed arms began to grow and stretch, and then cracked open, the sound of cartilage and flesh re-shaping itself, as the dried outer carcass began to fall away. There was a disgusting sound of something forcing its way through flesh, as a long bony tail tipped with a stinger burst out of the base of the thing's back. It fell on its stomach, and from its sides exploded insectoid legs. It clattered across the cold stone floor, as the majority of its body broke open and then was reabsorbed, as it changed itself into an enormous scorpion, its claws opening and closing with obvious great strength, and its tail swinging over its body menacingly. As it changed the sound of tearing flesh echoed in the cave.

"What manner of abomination...?" Helrahd said, as he stepped backward.

Martin reached into his magical bag again, and this time the ball of fur turned into a badger, that landed on the scorpion's back and began to claw at it.

"Helrahd! Take up Beorth's staff! It is enchanted!" Martin instructed the dwarf.

It reached out with its claws and grabbed both Kazrack and Jana, trying to hold them fast, but Kazrack leapt back, while Jana was able to get her club between her and the claw and use that as leverage to escape, even though she could feel a black bruise begin to develop across her mid-section.

Helrahd felt the sting of the tail as it pierced his shoulder. He waited for the feeling of poison going through his system.

"Jana! How injured are D'nar and Beorth?" Kazrack called to the young witch who most often served as healer. "You must see to them."

Jana nodded and turned to move to Ratchis but felt the scorpion's claw clamp down on her painfully, and even though she pumped her legs to run, she made no progress, as she was being held above the ground.

"This had better work," Helrahd cursed, dropping his axes and picking up Beorth's staff. Of course, he did not know that only *one end* of the staff was enchanted.<sup>85</sup>

Martin looked at Jana flailing in the claw, as she desperately tried to pry it open. The monstrous scorpion advanced, so the watch-mage withdrew and grabbing Ratchis by the shoulders risked pulling him back out of the way of the melee.<sup>86</sup>

As the badger made slow progress through the scorpion's shell, the thing moved to sting Kazrack, but again missed due to the *blur* spell. Jana tried one last time to escape, but the thing squeezed her more tightly and, in a moment,, she hung limp in the claw.

"Jana!" Kazrack cried. "Natan-ahb, guide me. There must be worse causes to suffer for!"

Kazrack stabbed at the thing, but it knocked the blow out of alignment with its free claw.

Helrahd, wielding the staff as a double-weapon, slammed both ends into the scorpion's face. There was a satisfying crunch as one did considerable damage to the thing and it reeled.

Martin began to bind Ratchis' wounds; trying his best to remember all the things he had ever seen Jana do.

The scorpion backed up and turned to flee. The badger was tossed off it back, but not before leaving a trail of squirming ichor down its back from its teeth and claws. Kazrack thrust the *Right Bade of Arofel* into its side and cut a huge gash that squirmed and sprouted tendrils that flailed at each other, but did not seem to be able to re-connect.

Jana was still being tossed about with every move of the scorpion, as it held her high above its head as it fled into the darkness in the rear of the cave.

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<sup>85</sup> **DM's Note:** Since double-weapons need to be doubly enchanted to be magical weapons, I have ruled that the use of the *Magic Weapon* spell on a double weapons requires the caster to choose an end to enchant.

<sup>86</sup> **DM's Note:** Any time someone is at negative hit points it is very easy to kill them by pulling their wounds open. The chance depends on how fast they are moved. They must make a FORT save (DC 10 + 1 / 10 feet moved in the round) or die. If the person doing the moving makes a healing check against DC 10 they can grant a +2 circumstance bonus to the saving throw.

Kazrack charged at it, but it flicked its tail and his charge was broken, the sword thrust was way too short.

Helrahd made to run after as well, even as the badger got to its feet and gave chase, too, but spying the dying paladin, he dropped to his knees beside him as well, to do his best to staunch his bleeding.

The rear of the cave narrowed again, and curved to the left. The scorpion moved very quickly and could easily outrun the dwarf and the badger. Kazrack could see that the rear of its form was quavering as a whole, and tendrils burst from under its shell and waved back and forth wildly.

The narrow passage made a sharp curve in on itself and as Kazrack came around he stopped short of smacking into the wall. There was not where to go but up. The scorpion was walking up the sheer wall to a vertical passage that went at least sixty feet up (as far as Kazrack could see with his darkvision).

Kazrack dropped the short sword and began to load his crossbow, as the badger tried to clamber up the wall unsuccessfully.

Kazrack fired straight up, but the bolt clattered against the tubular passage. He grabbed at another bolt and began to load again but looking up to keep an eye on its progress he saw it disappear out of his range of vision.

The last thing Kazrack saw was the top half of Jana's body fused with the scorpion claw, her legs were already absorbed into it, and her head and arms waved around limply as if she were an immense finger-puppet.

And then she was gone.

**End of Session #35**

AQUERRA

### Session #36

“Jana!” Kazrack cried, as he desperately scrambled to climb the sheer rock wall. He dug his hands into the dirt and stone in vain.

The badger mimicked his actions, but actually began to make some headway up the shaft before it suddenly disappeared.

Kazrack punched the stone wall and headed back.

Meanwhile, Helrahd frantically tried to keep Beorth from dying, occasionally looking over at the growing pool of blood beneath Jeremy nearby.

Martin still struggled with Ratchis.

There were several moments of near-silence in that cave, when all that could be heard was the rasped breaths of the dying, and shuffling of the hands of the healers, tying, tucking and sewing.

Finally, Kazrack came back around the corner, and in a few moments had called upon the healing graces of his gods to stabilize the three dying warriors.

Helrahd slumped on the ground and let out a great sigh of relief.

“Where is Jana?” Martin asked Kazrack, who stood in the middle of the cave with his face buried in his big hand.

“She is gone.”

“Where did she go?”

“The thing took her away,” Kazrack said, tears rolled down his ruddy cheeks and disappeared in his beard. “She’d dead.”

“What do we do now?” Helrahd grunted at Kazrack.

“Why are you asking me?” Kazrack asked, looking down.

“You are the leader of this group,” Helrahd said.

“I wouldn’t say that,” Kazrack replied.

“You’re the only dwarf here aren’t you?” Helrahd said, as if that explained it all.

Kazrack let out a low breath, and then shaking his head as if the memory of it had just come back into his mind suddenly, he said, “Jana’s gone.”

“What? Was she the leader?” Helrahd asked callously.

Beorth stirred, and both Martin and Kazrack hurried over to him.

“Ratchis and Jeremy are down, Jana is dead, and the creature is still alive, but I am going to have Martin cast an illusion to hide us while we rest,” Kazrack said in a hurry, pulling Beorth up to a sitting position.

“Whuh?” Beorth mumbled, rubbing his temples.

“Ratchis and Jeremy are down, Jana is dead, and the creature is still alive, but I am going to have Martin cast an illusion to hide us while we rest,” Kazrack repeated himself in exactly the same tone.

Beorth stared at him dumbly. “Uh, I need a moment.”

Martin and Kazrack began to discuss the use of an illusion to hide themselves, but Martin insisted it would not work.

“We need to move everyone into the narrow end of the cave, where we cannot be surrounded, and I can guard us all in a narrow place,” Kazrack said.

“You’ll need help moving the pig,” Helrahd said, pointed to Ratchis. “He’s big.”

“Helrahd, I would appreciate it if you didn’t call D’nar a pig. He has proven himself to be my friend, and when you insult him, you insult me,” Kazrack, said, walking over to the other dwarf, just barely holding back an angry tone.

“Hrm,” was Helrahd’s reply.

“I know how you feel about him, and I don’t expect you to change your feelings...”

“I don’t feel about him one way or the other,” Helrahd said, squinting and smacking his lips. “He seems pretty good in a fight.”

They moved the wounded into the narrow part of the cave, and Kazrack made a barrier using Ratchis’ javelins. Helrahd checked outside and reported nearly two feet of snow had already fallen. They could not have left even if they were all conscious.

Beorth seemed dazed, but after a several hours of prayer by himself in a corner, he came over to Kazrack.

“What happened?” the paladin asked.

“The battle did not go well...” Kazrack’s voice trailed away, and then he cleared his throat. “My gods have shown their displeasure and have withheld their blessing in battle. That is why I almost killed D’nar, and I foolishly let the creature slip past me as it carried Jana to her death.”

“So there is no hope for Jana?” Beorth asked.

“None that I see,” Kazrack said, softly. He then straightened his shoulders and lifted his head, snorting back a bit of snot himself. “We should be prepared the creature may be back.”

“You think it will?” Beorth asked.

“I do not know, but I fear it will.”

## **Teflem, 20th of Onk – 564 H.E.**

Kazrack, Martin and Helrahd took turns watching through the night.

In the morning, Helrahd made a fire by the entrance. He reported the snow had slowed down but had not stopped. The entrance was covered.

“We will have to spend another day in here,” he said.

Beorth nodded, as he lay his hands upon Ratchis’ chest and called upon his god’s power to heal the Friar of Nephthys.

Ratchis awoke with a start, and then cringed as he felt the pain of the blow to his back. He lay on his side, breathing slowly.

“Last... Last thing I remember is a sharp pain in my back,” Ratchis hissed.

“We are still in grave danger,” was Beorth’s only reply.

“I guess that means that the creature is still alive?” Ratchis asked, managing to sit up.

“It is not dead,” Beorth replied. “But Jana is.”

Ratchis' head dropped.

"Where is her body?" he asked.

"No body. The thing absorbed her in whatever way it does," Beorth said. "At least that is how Kazrack described it."

Ratchis crawled off to pray by himself.

"Oh, Osiris," he said softly. "Please claim Jana's soul, who died working in your service and spare her from damnation in Set's Realm."

Martin awoke screaming.

Beorth hurried over to him. "Martin! What is it?"

"Uh, uh..." Martin was speechless. "Uh, I dreamt I saw Jana, and I went to embrace her, and she exploded into a bunch of those tendrils like that thing shoots and they were grafted onto my flesh and I could feel my flesh melt away!"

He covered his face and shuddered.

Ratchis and Kazrack did what they could to heal all the injured, and soon Jeremy was conscious too. Kazrack, despite the fact that he was gravely injured refused any healing, and did not heal himself.

Soon, Jeremy was told about Jana.

"So, it just carried her off?"

"Yes," Martin replied.

"How long has it been? A day?"

"Yes," Martin said, again.

"Can we hope to defeat this thing?" Martin asked aloud. "Perhaps we should go back to town and re-gather our strength."

"We should stay and destroy this thing," Beorth said. "From what you said, I think we almost killed it last time. We just have to remember to use fire."

"Why are we hunting this thing again?" Helrahd asked, and then spat.

"Because it is a monstrous abomination that will wreak havoc in any civilized or uncivilized land it enters?" Ratchis scowled.

"Mmm, that's a good reason," Helrahd said, flatly.

"It's because of me," Jeremy said, standing. "This is all because of me."

The Neergardian hobbled out to the mouth of the cave.

"Because of you?" Helrahd asked, but no one else said a thing.

Hours later, what dim light the sun could give through the cloud cover faded, and the winds picked up again, but the snow all but stopped.

Beorth took the candle that they had found left behind in the Glade of Henaire, and after making sure it was not magical

(by asking Martin) he set it out and gathered everyone round in order to have a memorial for Jana's passing.<sup>87</sup>

"Anubis," Beorth called out. "I have no corporeal form for Jana. She was taken from us. I would like to burn this candle in memory of her. I hope she spends as little time with him as possible and returns to us in a form befitting her spirit. I do not remember all the good she has done, but she was good to me..."

Jeremy spoke next, tears sliding down his sallow cheeks. "Jana, I'm sorry you had to come on this trip. Sorry about what happened to you. I know you did it... You all did it because of me... I can't take your place, and I'm sorry. But we'll make sure you didn't die in vain. We'll kill this thing, and if Rindalith shows his face here again, we'll kick his ass for you."

"Jana, your sacrifice for this cause has cleansed your soul," Ratchis intoned. "You have earned the peace I know will come to you now."

Martin merely laid down the tiny cat figurine he had been carving for Jana's *Festival of Isis* gift in front of the candle.

Kazrack said nothing, but merely left the circle. He squeezed tears from his beard.

Helrahd grunted.

### **Anulem, 21st of Onk – 564 H.E.**

The next day the snow had stopped, and the sun was shining brightly. The front passage of the cave was flooded, and there was water trickling out of the rear chamber as well, where water poured down the shaft where the monster had fled with Jana's remains.

Ratchis decided to climb the shaft and see where it led, and if perhaps the party might try to leave the cave that way.

"What if that thing is waiting for you up there?" Jeremy asked.

"He is not going to go all the way to the top, just as far as he can to see the top," Kazrack said.

Ratchis shook his head and began to climb. "I'm going all the way up," he called down.

Jeremy shook his head, and Helrahd did as well.

"Hrm. Are we going to have a plan this time?" Helrahd asked Kazrack.

"He's just going to see how high it is," Kazrack replied. "We're not doing anything yet."

"Right," Helrahd yanked at a nap in his hair.

Ratchis found the shaft opened beneath a bush on the hill slope where the party had found the gnoll tents.<sup>88</sup> He came around and climbed back down and cleared the snow from the front of the cave and came back in.

"We might as well go out this way," he said to the others. "We can't delay any longer, that thing could be absorbing more stuff as we speak and growing bigger and stronger."

Everyone began to gather their gear.

"Do we have a plan this time?" Helrahd asked again.

"No," Kazrack said, packing his things, and taking up Martin's things to carry as well.

"You should make plans."

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<sup>87</sup> See Session #33

<sup>88</sup> See Last Session

“Yes,” Kazrack replied shortly.

“Not to be insulting, but as the leader you should offer them more guidance,” Helrahd coughed out the words as if they choked him.

“This is not a military unit, and we do not give orders,” Kazrack said.

“You are a rune-thrower.”

“Yes, but they are not dwarves,” Kazrack said. He slipped his pack on his back.

Ratchis walked over. “We will look among the ponies, since that is closer and easier and if that fails, I guess we are going to have to trace the gnolls back to their main camp.”

“That sounds dangerous,” Helrahd said.

“Yes, it will be.”

Helrahd grunted. Martin shuddered.

As the party left the cave, Jeremy spoke up.

“Listen everyone, I want you to promise me something,” the Neergaardian said, shading his eyes with his hands. The morning brightness was reflected off of the white that covered everything. The air was alive with the sound of running and dripping water. “I want you to promise that if I am in trouble and it’d be dangerous to help me that you’ll just ditch me; forget me. I don’t want anyone risking their lives for me anymore.”

“I cannot make a promise like that,” Ratchis snorted. “My relationship with my goddess supersedes any human relationship, and she would not have me make such a promise.”

“I will not promise that either,” Kazrack said.

“Why? What’s your excuse?” Jeremy asked, shrugging his shoulders.

“I will not give an excuse.”

Beorth just shook his head.

“Face it, Jeremy,” Martin said. “We are all in this thing together. We *have* to risk our lives for each other.”

“I won’t have you do it,” Jeremy insisted. “I won’t have you trade your life for mine.”

“Too late,” Martin replied, thinking of the Book of Black Circles.

From their vantage point out on the small plateau in front of the cave mouth they could see the hill across the tiny vale from them. It had a nearly flattened top, and wild ponies were pushing their way through the deep snow to find some edible grass. Some small trees dotted the hillside, and one larger tree with long drooping branches was right on top.

“We should talk about how we are going to handle this before go over there,” Beorth said. “I mean, if it turns out to be one or all of those ponies.”

“I will endeavor to keep it away from everyone else, by drawing as many attacks upon myself as possible,” Kazrack said.

“Your armor would help in that endeavor,” Ratchis snapped.

Helrahd’s grunt seemed to signal his agreement. Kazrack just shook his head.

“The thing seemed vulnerable to fire,” Martin suggested. “We saw that when we fought it in gnoll form.”

“Too bad we didn’t remember that when we fought it as the owlbear,” Beorth said.

“Jana might be alive if we did,” Martin’s head drooped.

“Well, let’s not make the same mistake twice,” Ratchis said.

They went about doing the best they could to fashion flammable arrows. Martin would be used as the point man for lighting other people’s arrows, using a torch.

Ratchis cast *Endure Elements (Fire)* on Beorth and himself, as they’d be likely involved in melee combat with the hopefully burning creature. Kazrack refused the spell.

It took them a long time to make their way down to the vale. Kazrack slipped at one point and went rolling painfully down the steep hillside. No one laughed.

The mid-day sun was high when they were waist deep in snow at the base of the other hill. The climb here would be too treacherous, so Ratchis went ahead. He made his way to the south side of the hill, jogging along atop the snow with *Uller’s Boots*. He then made the desperate climb up the hill’s south side and made it to the top.

The ponies whinnied and moved awkwardly away from him in the snow. The half-orc looked around and saw no sign of the creature. The ponies all seemed to be real ponies on brief inspection, but he decided he’d get the rest of the party to the top before risking a closer check.

Ratchis tied a rope around his waist and tossed it over the side of the hill where his companions waited.

“I’ll support the rope,” Ratchis called down; a bit of snow cascaded off the hill as if in reaction to his voice. Behind him, some of the ponies began to try to make their way off the hill. “Send Kazrack up first!”

Ratchis took a few steps back away from the edge and sat down in the snow, bracing his legs in the cold wet stuff and down into the ground. He held the rope with both hands.

Soon he felt the weight of Kazrack on the rope, and he held on tight. Ratchis leaned way back to get as good a bracing as possible, and then he startled in surprise.

Below on the rope, Kazrack cursed as he had to stop to hold on tight and keep from falling. Suddenly, the rope slid back down a few feet.

“I think there is trouble up there!” the dwarf called down to his companions.

Ratchis had hurriedly stood and turned, for what he has seen shocked him. There beneath the drooping tree branches was small human female figure. She was on her knees and sobbing silently, her face buried in her hands.

Ratchis pulled out his long sword and took one step forward. Below Kazrack struggled to make it up the rope.

“Jana?”

The silently sobbing figure did not respond.

“Get up here fast!” Ratchis called back to his companions, never taking his eyes off the woman that appeared to be Jana. “I don’t know when I’ll have to cut the rope!”

Kazrack hurried over the edge and onto the top of the hill.

“Nephtys, imbue my weapon with your divine favor,” Ratchis intoned, casting *magic weapon* on his long sword.

Kazrack invoked his gods and cast the same spell on his halberd.

Meanwhile, at the base of the hill...

“Jeremy, you go up first,” Martin said to the Neergaardian, and gestured with the rope he held to steady it. Jeremy leapt to it, shimmying up the rope like a monkey.

“Jeremy, hold the rope if Ratchis let’s go,” Beorth called after him.

“Let’s hope I get up there before he does,” Jeremy winked and doubled his pace.

Seeing that Jeremy needed no help from him, Martin let go of the rope and cast *prestidigitation*.

Ratchis and Kazrack were still keeping a safe distance from “Jana” when Jeremy got up there. He walked over to the half-orc and untied the rope from around his waist.

“I’m going to see if Jana’s okay,” Ratchis said to the others.

“Jana?” Jeremy was puzzled, but he made sure to wrap the rope around his arm twice, while stealing a look at the balled up human form.

He called down to Martin to begin to climb.

“If that’s Jana, she’s a ghost,” Kazrack said softly.

Martin began his awkward climb up the rope, using his feet against the snowy hillside for support.

Beorth cast *magic weapon* on his own blade.

Kazrack took a step towards the girl, moving beneath the sparse branches of the drooping tree.

She looked up, and it was clearly Jana. Tears streamed down her face and she let out a gasp of air, and then fell into ball again, wracked with silent sobs.

“Everyone should get up here!” Ratchis barked, and he he grasped his belt of broken chain links and whispered to his goddess, “Nephthys, please *aid* me in this struggle against this hideous monster that has devoured and replaced our companion.”

Jeremy moved to where he could tie the rope around a rock, but the movement of the rope threatened to knock Martin from it, so the watch-mage merely held on for dear life, making no progress.

“Sorry!” Jeremy called down, tying off the knot very tightly.

“Hurry up!” Helrahd growled from below the watch-mage.

“Lady of the Raised Shield, please protect my companion should we have to fight unnatural and evil things this day, as I fear we must,” Kazrack prayed, as he touched Ratchis on the shoulder, and took another step towards “Jana”.

“Martin! Hurry up!” Beorth echoed the dwarf, and Martin looked back down and sighed with annoyance. He slowly continued to climb.

‘Jana’ stood, and made as if to step towards Kazrack, but stumbled, and as she threw her head up to right herself, she opened her mouth –From it emerged a barbed slimy tentacle of a tongue, over ten feet long. It raked Kazrack across the face and moved to wrap about his neck. The dwarf leapt to the right to avoid being grabbed.

“Hurry up!” Helrahd could be heard yelling from below.

Ratchis roared in horror and charged at the false Jana, swinging his sword down from over his head.

He suffered for his rash attack, as the tongue-tentacle whipped back from Kazrack and cut Ratchis across the face, but he ignored the pain of it and continued onward.

Ratchis brought his sword down, cleaving Jana's head clear in half, down through the shoulders. There was the sickening sound of tearing flesh, as the organ-less cartilage-like inside squirmed and pulsed and oozing slime slid down the outer flesh that still looked like Jana's sad face. She tumbled over into the snow.

Hearing the sound of combat behind him, Jeremy's patience for Martin grew thin and he began to haul the watch-mage up. In a moment, the green-robed wizard rolled over the edge of the hill.

Kazrack ran forward and thrust his halberd into the prone form of Jana, closing his eyes as he jabbed it again and again.

"Jeremy! I need the rope!" Beorth cried up from the base of the hill.

The mutilated and pulsing form of Jana swelled up like balloon and rolled away from the reach of the dwarf's pole arm.

"Come on!" Helrahd cried up to the top of the hill, impatiently.

"You cannot escape our righteous wrath!" Ratchis roared, and ran at the crawling form, but suddenly he noticed the shadow of moment above him. The tree branch above him, whipped down and grabbed him about the neck and shoulder. The half-orc tore himself free in shock. He could see the branch waving back and forth, the bark of the 'tree' rolling back to reveal the pinkish-orange texture of the alien creature.

"The tree! It's the tree, too!" Ratchis called out.

"Eh? I didn't hear that. What did he say?" Helrahd grumbled and spit, below, looking to Beorth to illuminate the situation for him.

At that moment Jeremy threw the rope back down and Beorth grabbed it, but he fumbled awkwardly, and could not get the traction he needed to make any progress up the steep snowy incline. He fell back into the snowbank.

Helrahd laughed, and grabbed the rope and began to make his way up.

Martin was on his feet by now, and had pulled out a torch and lit it with *prestidigitation*. He dropped it on an area of bare rock.

Kazrack chopped at a large tree branch and cut it deeply. It crackled and bubbled, as all the branches came to life. One of the branches whipped at Ratchis who ducked, but Kazrack received another flesh-tearing blow. Ratchis swung back, but the tree suddenly seemed very 'awake' and easily avoided the blow.

Jeremy hauled up the dwarf.

"That's how ya do it," Helrahd said, rasping up a green and yellow hawkker to spit back down to where he had come from.

"*Manus Magiae!*" Martin canted, and an invisible hand lifted the burning torch and moved it towards the tree.

The branches now teased the stocky dwarf, whipping at him from above, but staying out of reach of the halberd. Kazrack felt the whip of one of the tentacles again, and he threw himself down to rip himself free of the thing's grasp. Ratchis was not as lucky, and he had to struggle for moment, before pulling free again.

Martin's torch was now floating among the base of the most offensive branches, and the flames licked against the glistening bark.

Kazrack leapt to his feet and swung his halberd, in an attempt to take the thing by surprise by his sudden attack, but again, it easily avoided the blow.

One of the smaller branches grabbed the base of the torch and began to try lowering it into the snow. Martin felt the strain

on the fabric of his dweomer, but he was able to keep it from being lowered all the way down.<sup>89</sup>

Kazrack continued to struggle with one strong branch that whipped at him again and again, but avoided his blows.

“Aaaaaagghuraagh!” Ratchis hollered, and charged the tree-thing, burying his blade deep into its trunk. It seemed to explode open, with a hundred tiny tendrils squirming back and forth, and its inner essence rolling and bloating and bursting disgustingly. He looked down and saw what was once the Jana-thing being reabsorbed into the tree trunk.

Helrahd tossed the rope down to Beorth, as he got to his feet on the top of the hill.

“Don’t climb, I’ll pull you!” Jeremy called down to the paladin.

Martin mentally commanded the torch to go back up into the branches again. Tiny flames expanded across a branch.

Suddenly, the ground shuddered. Eight of the largest branches shoved themselves deep into the snow and took stable purchase in the frozen ground, as the rest of the smaller branches and the roots in the ground shriveled back into the trunk of the tree. There was an echoing cracking sound, as the branches, now not unlike segmented spider legs flexed and pulled the oozing and changing tree trunk from the ground. The trunk shriveled and flipped up, revealing a huge beak like the owlbear had had. However, this huge misshapen head, was now at the center of these spider legs, with two bulbous eyes, that looked around frantically.

All the snow falling from the branches extinguished the torch, and the thing just seemed to “abandon” the burning branch, letting it fall off into the deep snow. The thing lurched forward, and the beak pecked deeply into Kazrack’s chest, while one of the legs pinned him down to the ground.

Helrahd patiently took his bow from his back and began to string it. “I thought the plan called for fire?” he called over to Martin, and spit.

Ratchis was among the rear spider legs, and he hacked at one with his sword. A layer of the cartilage peeled off like a spring, and flesh rolled beneath it, trying to grow back.

Beorth finally made it to the top of the hill.

Martin let go his concentration on the *mage hand* holding the torch, and used his still present *prestidigitation* spell to light Helrahd’s arrow. The dwarf let the flaming arrow go, and it sunk into the abnormal owlbear-spider head, but the fire went out as it flew.

Kazrack frantically struggled to get to his feet, but he felt the bite of the beak again, and he fell onto his face. He barely rolled out of the way of one of thick spidery legs, trying to pin him again.

“Get up! Get up!” Ratchis called to the dwarf.

Again, Ratchis whacked the leg, and this time he cut nearly halfway through. This distracted the thing long enough for Kazrack to stand and thrust his halberd into one of the bulbous eyes, it burst, leaking over the beak.

The thing was not happy. It pinned Kazrack between the clawed points of its two front legs and lifted him to the beak and took a bite. The dwarf lay in a puddle of snow melting from the warmth of his pouring blood. One of the spider-legs was resting on his chest, and already seemed to be twisting and changing to fuse with the dwarf’s body.

“Kazrack is down!” Ratchis screamed.

Helrahd drew another arrow, and again Martin lit it with his spell, but this one sailed over the thing, in an attempt to not hit Ratchis or Kazrack.

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<sup>89</sup> **DM’s Note:** I ruled then that Martin’s player could roll an opposed Intelligence check against the thing’s strength to keep it from being moved, but upon reflection I would now rule that *Mage Hand* has an effective strength of 2 (which is to say, up to 6 lbs is a light load – yes, I am being generous).

“Kazrack is down!” Ratchis yelled again, and hacked at the thing’s head, prying the beak open at the corner. It screamed silently.

Jeremy dropped the rope and pulled out his own bow, while Beorth charged the thing, avoiding a leg and bringing his sword down on its face. “Anubis, grant me the power to destroy this creature!” And he called his god’s power to *smite evil*.

The spider-owlbear- thing crept backward, leaning heavily to one side to avoid using the leg Ratchis had crippled. It dragged Kazrack back with it.

Martin lit another of Helrahd’s arrows, and again it sailed over the thing missing.

Ratchis chased after the thing, but it lifted one of its front legs and suddenly it melted into more pliable tentacle form, grabbing the half-orc about the neck. Ratchis was jerked short of completing his charge.

Jeremy held an arrow ready for Martin’s spell but cursed under his breath as Ratchis was slowly being dragged back and forth as he tried to pry the thing off. Ratchis felt a wave of chill deep within, as if he suffered from a fever. Beorth ran to join the melee, failing to notice that Kazrack was growing pale as well.<sup>90</sup>

Helrahd was too impatient to wait for Martin to decide whose arrow to light and let his go. This one bit into the snow, short of its target. The dwarf spit in anger.

Finally, Ratchis ripped himself free of the tentacle and dropped to the snow, gasping.

Martin lit Jeremy’s arrow, but it missed as well.

Beorth swung at the thing, but it knocked the blow out of alignment with the tentacle that had just let go of Ratchis, and grabbed the paladin around the waist. Beorth could feel the sharp scales of the tentacle rip into his side. He could see it moving and pulsing, changing from scales to short thick sharp hairs and the needles, and then boney spikes and then teeth and then back again.

Martin lit another of Helrahd’s arrows, but archery seemed to be failing as a tactic. He also pulled out a torch and lit that as well.

Ratchis picked up his sword and jogged over, burying it in the empty eye socket. Ichor burst out in a shower covering him from head to toe. More tendrils burst out, and then melted away again, as it tried to rebuild itself.

Jeremy cursed and dropped his bow. He charged at the thing, rolling away from its beak attack and thrusting the *Right Blade of Arofel* into its mouth. He jabbed it around in there and then yanked it out, as the beak came snapping shut again.

“Ah Ha!” Jeremy cried, with smile, wiping ichor from his eye. “That was for Jana!”

Beorth was being held at bay by the tentacle about his waist. He struggled to free himself, but his strength was not up to the task, as he had no leverage. Instead, he felt his internal organs shudder, as the tentacle grew thicker and thicker and squeezed tighter and tighter.

Martin cast *mage hand* again and moved toward the fight. The torch bobbed up and down beside him.

“Slow down, Pudgy!” Helrahd growled and he jogged forward, lighting his arrow on the torch as he let it go. It sailed in a perfect arc, landing deep behind the ridge of the thing’s remaining eye. The ichor on the surface caught fire, and thing began to crackle and peel.

Ratchis cleaved the thing’s immense beak with his sword, as it tried to retreat once again, but by now it was on the opposite side of the hill, and the force of the blow made it begin to slide down the snowy embankment.

Beorth sensed the thing panic and loosen its grip a bit. He was able to pull free and drop to the snow. The tentacle peeled back to expose a spidery leg again, as it drop itself in the ground to try to halt its fall.

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<sup>90</sup> **DM’s Note:** Both Kazrack and Ratchis suffered Constitution drain.

It continued to slide.

Kazrack began to be dragged down with it, but the thing let go of him in a last attempt to grab something stable enough to hold it. It tumbled down the sharp incline about thirty feet and then freefallen another forty feet into a deep snowbank.

Jeremy hustled to the edge and looked down.

Beorth knelt beside Kazrack's bleeding form. "Anubis, I call upon you to halt my friend's journey towards death." The paladin laid his hands upon the dwarf to heal him.

"Is he alright?" Martin asked Beorth, coming over to the still unconscious, but now stabilized, dwarf.

Beorth nodded.

"Is it dead?" Helrahd asked, coming along side Jeremy on the hill edge.

Ratchis sheathed his sword and readied his bow. He held one of the prepared arrows at the ready.

Jeremy jogged back to get his own bow and did the same.

In the meantime, Martin had walked over with the torch, and then sent it with the *mage hand* down towards the hole in the snow, but it could not illuminate the bottom, as he could not get it to go down far enough. He brought it back up and lit Ratchis' arrow.

The half-orc fired, but the arrow clipped the top of the hole in the snow and went out as it tumbled down awkwardly.

Beorth ran over, pulling the stopper off a flask of oil. He tossed it, oil trailing in a stream behind it, into the hole.

Martin lit another Ratchis' arrows and this time it went right into the whole. There was flash and then smoke rose from inside, as clumps of snow slid down into the hole from the collapsing sides.

Helrahd and Ratchis fired a few more flaming arrows, as Beorth lobbed two more flasks of oil in there. The was hissing and popping and more smoke and falling snow.

"Is Kazrack alright?" Jeremy asked.

"Kazrack will be fine," Beorth replied.

Ratchis made his way down the incline towards the hole, and Jeremy followed as far as he could. Only Ratchis could walk right up to the edge of the hole, because *Uller's Boots* allowed him to walk atop snow, and without leaving footprints.

Ratchis looked down, and all that was left of the thing was flatten bubbling piece of soft cartilage. It was blackened, and every few seconds it would sprout tendrils as if in a coughing fit, but they would melt away and be reabsorbed into the disk of flesh.

Ratchis poured more oil on it, and it burned and burned. Until all that was left was a brittle blacked wedge. He called up for one of Kazrack's shovels and he broke it up and slipped the pieces into a sack and tied the end in a knot, and slipped it into his backpack.

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A few hours later they were back in the cave. Ratchis used most of his healing spells on Kazrack, who mumbled as he came into semi-consciousness. He was fed some water and then he spoke.

"Did we kill it?"

"Yes," Ratchis replied.

“Did anyone else die?”

“No.”

The dwarf slipped back into unconsciousness.

“I will have to go back tomorrow to Beléar,” Helrahd announced. “Will you come with me?”

“We will come,” Ratchis said. “The thing is killed and we can go back to our original goal of helping the gnomes.”

“At least until I get a ‘feeling’ about the Book of Black Circles,” Martin commented.

Jeremy’s head drooped.

Martin sighed and cast *prestidigitation* again, to clean the ichor off everyone.

### **Ralem, 22nd of Onk – 564 H.E.**

The next day Ratchis used some orisons to repair one of the damaged tents, and then the party set out towards Ogre’s Bluff.

Kazrack marched sluggishly. And his face was scared and puffy from the raking tentacles.

As they left the paired hills, Beorth looked back, and noticed the form of an immense golden ram looking down at them as they departed.

“What a beautiful creature,” he thought. “I wonder what it is doing here?”<sup>91</sup>

They marched for hours, led alternately by Ratchis and Helrahd. And at last lights they could see the lamps of Aze Nuquerna to their right as they passed north of it. Finally, as real darkness settled in, they could spy the twinkling of three small cooking fires and the sound of many deep dwarven voices.

### **End of Session #36**

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<sup>91</sup> Jana had not gotten to the part about the ram, in her re-telling of the party’s adventures to the amnesiac Beorth.

## Session #37

“Friends! I have found Kazrack Delver!” Helrahd cried as he broke into the camp. There was a sudden cheer. “He come now behind me with his {gurgle, spit} companions.”

Kazrack led the party into clearing, while Ratchis fell to the back. There were nine dwarves here, of various ages. They all bore armor and weapons, though of differing styles, and some of them seemed to be passing around a clay jug.

Two dwarves stepped forward from the crowd. The first was Beléar. He appeared much as he had before, except now he wore a suit of fine chain mail and had a warhammer at his side. His black beard was wound in two braids, his streaks of white swirled in them. Beléar and Kazrack grasped wrists and shook, Beléar patting the younger dwarf on the shoulder.

“Kazrack. It is good to see you again. It looks like you have been through some great ordeal,” Beléar spoke in his usual grave tone, as he sized up his road-weary and injured former student. He then looked over Kazrack’s shoulder at the others. “Still traveling with the same bunch, I see.”

“Beléar, I have much to speak to you about,” Kazrack began, but Beléar raised his hand.

“We shall have time,’ Beléar said. “But tell me, what happened to the witch?”

A puzzled expression passed Kazrack’s face, and then he knew what the older dwarf meant. “Jana has passed on.”

Beléar nodded.

The other dwarf that had stepped forward joined them. To non-dwarves he might have appeared the same age as Kazrack, but Kazrack could tell he was a few years older. He was seasoned veteran of combat. He has short cropped black hair on the top and sides, but he wore it long in the back. He was swarthier than the other dwarves, as if he had some red dwarf blood in him and had a star-shaped scar above his right eye.<sup>92</sup> He wore a suit of splint mail beneath his fur jacket and leaned on a great axe. A pouch of runestones could be seen tied about his neck.

“This is Captain Adalar Barnath,” Beléar gestured to the dwarf. “He is the leader of this group I have assembled. Come join us at the fire. Everyone! You must be weary from your journey. We have naught but cram, because game has been scarce and we cannot trade in the human town, for their constable is a cur of a man.”

“We know,” Jeremy piped in.

As the two groups gathered about the circle, one of the dwarves leapt at Helrahd and grabbed him in great hug. As the dwarf pulled away from the spitting grumbler, the others could see that it was a female dwarf. Jeremy gawked, but Martin looked away politely. She stepped boldly over to Kazrack and spoke, “Hello! I’m Kirla, Helrahd’s sister.”

She wore a chain shirt and small helmet. Her hair was copperier in color than her brother’s, and she had rosier cheeks. Kazrack could tell that these dwarven siblings were hill dwarves, and thus could not be of Beléar’s community. She had a short well-kempt beard, with one longer braid made of four locks of hair, and wound with a gold wire, that held a bright garnet at its bottom. It was obviously as sign of honor for a shield-maiden.<sup>93</sup>

She thrust her hand out.

All the other dwarves fell silent, except Helrahd who coughed. Kazrack stared at the hand, not sure what to do. He bowed.

“I am Kazrack Delver. Well met,” he said, averting his eyes. Kirla sighed and stamped her foot. Kazrack took her hand and shook it.

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<sup>92</sup> Red Dwarves (also known as “hill dwarves”) tend to be ruddier in skin-tone than Black Dwarves (i.e. mountain dwarves).

<sup>93</sup> In dwarven society, those female dwarves who are trained in martial skills are called “Shield Maidens” and are charged with the defense of the women and children of the stronghold during times of war or attack. Occasionally, they are also charged to defend dwarven temples.

Captain Adalar shook his head.<sup>94</sup>

Everyone sat around the fire, but Ratchis stayed outside of the circle, pacing about. The eyes of dwarves seemed to lay heavily on him.

“D’nar, please sit,” Kazrack gestured to the ground on the other side of him from Beléar. “Your counsel is sought here as well.”

“I guess we should take a moment to thank Natan-Ahb in prayer for this coming together of dwarves and humans for the benefit of our fine gnomish friends who have long been our staunch allies,” Beléar began. He lowered his head and laid his hands flat upon the earth. All the other dwarves bowed their heads as well, but only two or three pressed their hands to the ground, Kazrack among them. The party bowed their heads as well.

After the prayer, Beléar continued, “Unfortunately, I must begin with what is not the best of news, but positive news none-the-less. I was unable to muster the forces I thought I ought.” He paused. “It seems that the lower passages of our community, *Arbarrane-Abaruch*, have been overrun by these strange hairy bear-like man creatures...”

“Quaggoths,” Martin interjected.

“Yes, some were called that name,” Beléar’s eyes widened. “I assume you have also had run-ins with these things?”

“Yes,” Kazrack replied.

“No coincidence, I have no doubt,” Beléar said. “However, that is gem of another grade as we say... As I was saying, the place is under attack. And while the stronghold has more than enough power to repel any invasion, these fine dwarves were all could be spared. They volunteered, and are to be honored for giving up their place to fight for their home in order to fulfill the ancient pledge of the earth peoples.”

He paused.

“What we have here are a sturdy lot of dwarves ready to do what must be done to free those gnomes from evil, and with the aid of the elves, we should be able to deal with this Mozek once and for all.”

There was a long silence. Three of the dwarves were obviously brothers.<sup>95</sup> They had bright cornsilk beards, and their lack of mustaches betrayed their youth. The all wore chain shirts, and their eager faces moved from party member to party member, but most often they looked at Ratchis with looks of disgust. They were the Tamitch Brothers, Golnar, Tolnar and Jolnar.

“There will be no aid from the elves,” Ratchis finally broke the silence.

“Figures,” Captain Adalar scoffed.

Kazrack explained to Beléar and the others how the elves had also been attacked by quaggoths. He went on to try to explain about the drow witches, and the danger of drow attack on the surface. There were protests in mixed common and dwarven from the dwarves.

“Dark elves are a myth,” Helrahd spit.

Captain Adalar nodded.

Beléar shook his head. “It has often been feared that they might return,” the older priest said. “It was discussed in the inner-chambers of the rune-throwers with the chieftain. The quaggoth are typically the servants of the dark elves, while they might have attacked at random, their attacks were too well organized and timed to be their own work. They are being

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<sup>94</sup> In dwarven culture it is considered inappropriate for unmarried male and female dwarves to be so familiar as to grasp wrists in welcome.

<sup>95</sup> For there to be three siblings in the same family is considered very auspicious, as the dwindling birthrate of dwarves makes it so that often dwarves are only children or have one sibling at the most. As with elves, twins are very rare in dwarven society, so triplets like Golnar, Jolnar and Tolnar might even be seen as freakish.

directed. Who else would it be?"

"We believe as you do," Beorth spoke up. "I don't remember anything. Any of these things, except what Jana told me before she passed and what I have picked up, but somehow, I think perhaps this gives me a better perspective on all these puzzle pieces. Regardless, these quaggoth attacks are not coincidental, and would not be surprised that what connects them to Mozek and his demons is Hurgun's Maze."

"What do you mean you don't remember anything?" Beléar asked.

Beorth's loss of memory was explained.

"Oh, this just gets better and better, doesn't it?" Captain Adalar grumbled in dwarven. Kazrack looked at him.

Captain Adalar stood. "We came to aid free gnomes from an oppressor, but now we are learning that these quaggoth creatures might be part of some greater and broader danger, and that brings in the danger of drow? And with whom are we going to defeat these evil gnomes, demons, drow and witches? I have much faith in my axe, and in Natan-Ahb before all other things, but if the danger is greater than our elders know we must return and warn them, or am I to believe that by joining our small group with this group of tattered rags we are to accomplish all this? Look at that one!" The captain pointed to Martin. "He doesn't seem fit for nothing more strenuous than baking bread! And that other one," He pointed Ratchis. "Sure he is big, but he has the blood of our enemies!"

Kazrack stood. "He has the blood of our enemies, but he also has the blood of men. He favors man."

"That must be a cold comfort," one of the two dwarves who had not spoken yet muttered. There were two sitting just outside of the circle, passing a jug between the two of them. The one on the right was the smallest of all the dwarves present, but he also appeared to be the oldest. His beard was mostly white, with thin streaks of black, and on top he was mostly bald. He rheumy blue eyes, and wore a chain shirt, like most of the other dwarves, but his skin was pock-marked, and care worn. When he did not have the jug, he picked at his lips. He was Blodnath.

The other looked to be the same age as Kazrack. He had a rich thick mahogany beard, and a hair in one small tight braid. He wore all black. He had two sheathed short swords on his lap. He did not speak at all. He was Baervard.

"Captain, no matter what, we are going to rescue the gnomes, and then from there we will decide if all or part of us will return to Arbarrane-Abaruch," Beléar said calmly. "We are to see these people as our allies, even if history says we cannot all be friends."

"Yes, Rune-Thrower," the captain said, bowing his head and sitting back down.

"Well, we will find out more when we have returned to Garvan and defeated Mozek, and freed the gnomes," Beléar said.

"Do we think the gnomes will aid us against Mozek?" Beorth asked, and this led to a long discussion as to how loyal the gnome community was in general to Mozek, and whether they might not suspect at all that he was a demon.

"I think we should seek out the Maze now," Ratchis said. "I think the key to defeating Mozek is there."

"No one knows where Hurgun's Maze is," Beléar said.

"But Beorth knew of a place where we could find out," Ratchis replied.

"Knew?" Beléar asked skeptically. "You mean he forgot it with everything else he forgot? So, it does us no good."

"We can seek out a cure for Beorth's memory, and then the Maze," Ratchis said.

"And by that time the gnomes may be all dead, and Arbarrane-Abaruch overrun by drow," Captain Adalar said.

"Yes," Beléar said. "We are going to help the gnomes. That is what we came here to do and that is what we will do. Tomorrow we will make our way there."

"I would like to stop in Summit to retrieve some books and things I've left there," said Martin. "And also, we need to re-provision ourselves for what might be a long journey."

"Better Summit than Ogre's Bluff," Ratchis said.

"Impatience leads to ruin," Beléar said wisely. "We shall make our way to this town and make what preparations we need and then go from there."

It was agreed.

Everyone began to settle into their own thing, about different fires. Jeremy joined Blodnath and Baervard by one small fire. While Beléar and Kazrack walked off to the edge of camp. Ratchis noticed that the other dwarves did not seem to talk to Helrahd much, and he wandered off.

"So, you're a wizard?" Kirla asked Martin the Green. Martin was taken aback, as his spell-casting ability had not been mentioned, nor had anyone been specifically introduced.

"Yes," he replied.

"Do you take over people's minds and make them bend to your will and do your bidding?" She asked matter-of-factly.

"No!" Martin was shocked at such a suggestion.

"Do you raise the dead and make them serve you as shambling zombies?"

"No!"

"Do you twist people into monstrosities to break their minds and make them go crazy and start killing people?"

"No!" Martin shook his head. "What makes you think that?"

"Well," Kirla scratched her hairy chin. "That's what all the wizards do in stories."

"Not all wizards are like that," Martin explained. "And definitely not Academy wizards. In fact, being a watch-mage of the Academy is a great honor, as I am entrusted to look after people."

"Me too," Kirla replied. "I am a shield-maiden. Sworn to guard my stronghold's homesteads. As a shield-maiden if I ask any dwarven man to be my husband he must."

"Well, that is quite an advantage," Martin quipped.

Meanwhile, Jeremy was spitting a mouthful of Dwarf Spirits into the fire. He coughed and gagged.

"Do it again. The second time is better," Blodnath said. Baervard never spoke a word.

Jeremy shrugged his shoulders and took another swig. It burned like liquid fire in his throat, but it seemed to burst into comforting warmth in his stomach.

"I'm Jeremy, by the way," he told the two dwarves.

"Eh? What kind of name is that?" Blodnath sneered. "Sounds kinda elfy."

"It isn't."

"You should call yourself Nithnil."

"Now *that* sounds elfy," Jeremy replied.

“Well, the elves stole some of our language,” Blodnath said. “Elves steal lots of stuff. They call it ‘discovering’, but it naught but stealing.”

“I’ve met elves before,” Jeremy said, craving another swig of the spirits, but noting how the old dwarf held the flask to his breast protectively. “They were nice. They gave me this sword.”

Jeremy drew his magical short sword. “It is the Right Blade of Arofel.”

Both Blodnath and Baervard’s eyes opened widely.

“Is that really the Right Blade of Arofel?” Blodnath asked

“You’ve heard of it?” Jeremy asked by way of reply.

“Are you crazy?” Blodnath motioned for the sword and Jeremy handed it to him. “Arofel was General Otto Herir’s closest companion.”

“Who?”

“The founder of Petrified Tree?”

“What?”

“Troll-Slayers. It was a group of mostly dwarves, but there were elves and gnomes, too, that joined up at the end of the Troll-Wars to eradicate the troll-race. They are still around; the organization that is.”

“When was that?” Jeremy asked.

“The Third Age.”

“Wow, this is an old sword.”

“Yeah, by human standards,” Blodnath replied. He examined the sword and hefted it, and then handed it back to Jeremy. “That is a kingly gift.”

“What else can you tell me about Arofel?” Jeremy asked, eagerly.

“Well, he was a half-breed, uh...half-elf. He was a wizard, too. At least, I think he was. The stories always describe him jumping to the top of walls with one bound and crawling on them like he was a spider. Things like that.”

Beléar and Kazrack talked.

“I have sworn an oath to Krauchaar not to wear my armor until he shown that I am in his good graces,” Kazrack said to his former teacher.<sup>96</sup>

“I fear you tempt the gods,” Beléar replied gravely. “One of the ways that Krauchaar shows us his grace is by giving us the skill and ability to make and use armor.”

“I must have done something to offend him,” Kazrack continued. “For my blows have been less effective, and I have succumbed to blows that I should have endured. When he shows that I am in his good graces again, and I am blessed by his warrior-provess, then and only then will I don my armor, again. Until then, let it be a weight I bear as a penance, but not serve me in a protective fashion.”

Beléar shook his head. “Let us hope you live so long.”

“Do you not approve of my choice and my sacrifice?” Kazrack asked, allowing some disappointment to creep into his

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<sup>96</sup> *Krauchaar* is the dwarven god of battle.

voice.

Beléar avoided the question. “Why do you think that you have fallen from Krauchaar’s sight?”

“Because I have been completely ineffective in combat,” Kazrack replied.

“I admire your piety, Kazrack, but not everything is a direct sign from the gods,” Beléar said. “I think you should reconsider this sacrifice, and the danger it puts you, your companions and your charges in. However, if in good conscience you believe this is what Krauchaar would have you do, then do it and I wish you success and growth with it and from it.”

Soon, everyone was asleep in their bedrolls, and the dwarves offered to take care of setting watches. The party heartily agreed, desiring a good full night’s rest for a change. Of course, Martin, who felt like he needed a good rest, could not fall asleep, except for the brief two hours his magical ring allowed him.

### **Isilem, 23rd of Onk – 564 H.E.**

The going was slow in the morning, and it was closer to noon before the newly formed group, fourteen people strong, was marching northward to Summit. The sun was warm on their faces, and everywhere could be heard the sounds of thaw.

They marched through the woods that covered the hilly land, northward to Summit. Kazrack marched with Beléar the entire time, and they talked in hushed, but serious tones. Ratchis led the way, but Helrahd was close behind. The others marched clustered in groups. Jeremy walked with Blodnath and Baervard at first, but later walked ahead to chat with Beorth and Martin.

The three companions discussed Jana, and Chance and even Malcolm, Jeremy fearing that the others had forgotten them, but then remembered that Beorth did not remember any of them, and Martin had never met Malcolm.

A recurring topic of discussion was Kazrack’s refusal to wear armor. It seemed everyone in the party thought he was being foolish.

“Kazrack?” Beorth asked the dwarf. “When you die, how shall I bury you?”

“You need not concern yourself with that,” Kazrack replied. “With Beléar here, if such a thing were to occur, he could take care of it.”

“I am afraid your lack of armor will cause your demise,” Beorth stated flatly.

“I have made a pledge,” Kazrack said solemnly. “Please do not rebuke me. When I have seen that I have regained my gods’ favor, then I will re-don my armor.”

Summit was reached by late afternoon. Camp was made at the foot of one of the trails leading up the ridge to the town proper, and a list was made of equipment the group needed for their endeavor. The dwarves donated an emerald they claimed was worth 200 pieces of silver towards the collection, while Martin and Jeremy went into town, craving the comforts of an inn.

At the Sun’s Summit Inn, they were spotted immediately by Maxel the local smith that also acted as town constable. He called them over to his table.

“You two look pretty road-weary,” the constable said, standing to pull over an extra chair. “Come sit and eat and rest your feet and tell me of your journeys.”

“Well, um,” Martin pulled at his collar. “There isn’t much to tell.”

“Uh, yeah,” Jeremy added. “We ran into a bunch of gnolls and a crazy monster and had to come back here to rest and recollect our supplies.”

“In order to hunt the dragon?”

“Of course,” Martin replied.

“Well, those friends of yours. The brothers and foreigner,” Maxel began.

“Finn and Carlos and Frank and Gwar?” Martin asked.

“Yes,” the constable said. “They went looking for the missing people, which I am glad they are doing. Even if they don’t find the dragon, they can still do some good around here. I think the king was smart to attract stout-hearted young men here to Gothanius. We needed their spirit after the dark years of the wars with the orcs.”

“Um, do you know where they went?” Martin asked.

“Not exactly, but I know they were going to go to the temple of Bast to ask the young priest there for help,” Maxel replied.

“Temple of Bast?” Martin asked.

“Yes, surely you’ve been told about it,” Maxel said. “A little place north of town, a very thick wood separates the town from it. It is in the shadow of large outcropping of rock, where the ridge’s height rises dramatically. Arrias is a young priest that came took over the place after the old priest died. Not many people go there anymore. Bast has fallen out of favor in these parts, just not much call for luxury or pleasure.”

“I was unaware there was a priest there,” Martin said. “Perhaps we too can enlist his aid.”

“I’m up for going out there tomorrow,” Jeremy said. “Anything else unusual going on?”

“Well, actually,” Maxel said. “You see that young man over there.” He pointed to a young man of probably no more than seventeen summers sitting at the bar. He had short dark red hair, and a fresh lightly freckled face, but it had the deep marks of dirt that only comes from weeks on the road. He wore a dark brown tunic with a green shirt and had a dusk colored cloak folded over the seat next to him. He had a pack beneath his feet, and he slurped from a bowl of steaming stew in fingerless gloves, but thicker leather gauntlets lay on the bar. The boy had a battleaxe on his back, and a bow wrapped up beside him.

“What about him?” Jeremy asked.

“Oh, he’s looking for you,” Maxel replied, looking at Martin.

“For me?” Martin asked. The constable nodded. In the meantime, Gibb had brought them both food, and a pitcher mead “on the house.” The constable noted that Martin did not drink any.

“I am abstaining from drink,” Martin replied, fingering his ring nervously.

“And the stew?”

“I ate on the road,” Martin said, as Jeremy slurped his down hungrily, smearing a thick slab of bread in the leftovers and then gobbling it down with relish. The Neergaardian washed it down with a second mug of mead.

The constable looked at Jeremy’s zest and then to Martin, but the watch-mage excused himself and walked over to the young man.

“I was told you seek me out,” Martin said, allowing his outer fur cloak to open to reveal his road-worn but immaculately clean emerald Academy robes.<sup>97</sup>

“You are Martin the Green!” The young man said, smiling. He stood and took Martin’s hand.

“I am called Derek. Derek Jamison,” the young man said. “I was sent to give you a message and to aid you if at all possible, by Barnstable the Brown, of Ettinos.”

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<sup>97</sup> Martin uses the *prestidigitation* cantrip to keep his travel robes clean. He has a second set of robes he dons for special occasions.

“Oh? Have you really?” Martin replied with a smile. “What brings you to Derome-Delem to begin with?”

“Oh, I have been here six or seven months,” Derek replied. “I have things I need to tell you, but perhaps here in the common room is not the best place.”

“Of course,” Martin replied, and waved for Jeremy to follow him. Mara led them to the room that had been prepared for them.

“Barnstable was a friend of my teacher, Red Arrow,” Derek said. “And my teacher sent me in his place to aid you and inform you however I could about the dragon.”

“What do you know about the dragon?” Martin asked intrigued.

“Well, there is evidence he uncovered that it might not just be any old dragon,” Derek claimed. “It is supposed to be one of the oldest dragons. One of the first generations of dragons. I think they call the ‘Progenitors’.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Jeremy quipped.

“Tell me something,” Martin said. “What kind of familiar does Barnstable have?”

“Uh, a goat named Scrappy,” Derek replied.

Martin nodded.

“Are you some kind of dragon expert?” Jeremy asked.

“No, not at all,” Derek replied. “I am just a good tracker. Good at getting into places, decent in a fight, if I have my bow, that is.” The kid winked.

“Heh,” Jeremy dropped into his bed and started pulling off his boots.

“Well, we can use all the help we can get,” Martin said. “It is good to know that my Academy contacts can actually pan out for me. But unfortunately, the dragon is the last thing on our list right now. We have quaggoths from the Plutonic Realms and people searching for Hurgun’s Maze and demon gnomes and drow.”

“Well, I gave my word I’d help you, and so I will,” Derek said. “What are you doing next?”

“We are going to go save some good gnomes from evil gnomes,” Martin explained. “Or at least try. But in a way that will help because they might know more about the dragon, especially after we were led to believe there was no dragon.”

“Oh, there is a dragon,” Derek said.

“Well, if Barnstable says there is, then I believe it,” Martin replied. “But there is a lot you need to get caught up on if you should hope to help.”

“Well, tell it to him quietly then, will ya?” Jeremy said, crankily rolling over in the bed. “And you know Ratchis would kill ya if he knew you were telling a stranger about all the things we been doing.”

“But Barnstable the Brown sent him,” Martin objected.

“Yeah, yeah, Barneby the Buh. . .” the Neergaardian’s voice trailed away into a snore, the kinks and knots in his body relaxing as he snuggled into the straw filled mattress.

Martin and Derek talked into the night, until finally the well-traveled boy fell asleep on the floor. Martin who only needed two hours of sleep, spent the rest of the night scouring his maps and studying his notebooks and spellbooks, while Thomas ran in circles about the room.

## Osilem, 24th of Onk – 562 H.E.

Jeremy was up early the next day, and after a quick bite brought Derek with him to the camp. He introduced him around as “Martin’s friend who is gonna help us” and proceeded to enlist his aid in helping the party gather the needed supplies.

The dwarves paid no attention to the young man, except Kirla, who Ratchis noticed giving the once over.

Kazrack shook the boy’s hand heartily, “Know how to use that thing?” He gestured to the battle axe.

“Kind of,” Derek replied. He was soft-spoken but had a tone of confidence that rung in the few words he used to express himself.

Ratchis immediately trusted him, and decided to go with his gut feeling. “Is not Nephthys also goddess of friendship?” he thought.<sup>98</sup>

Jeremy, Derek and Ratchis went to retrieve the goods the party needed.

Meanwhile, Martin finally awoke, having finally gone to sleep as the sun had appeared below the eastern mountains. He washed up and gathered his things to visit the Alderman. However, when he opened the door, there stood William Turnkey.

William’s long brown hair was back in a neat pony-tail, and he wore a long coat of dyed sheepskin and a three-corner hat.

“May I come in?” he asked with a polite smile.

Martin stepped back and let him in, closing the door again. “Richard?”

The form of William Turnkey shifted and bulged and twisted. There stood Richard the Red, his auburn hair falling in neat ringlets on his adorned ear. His crimson Academy robes were immaculate, especially when compared to Martin’s shabby road set. He smiled broadly. He had finely combed beard and mustache. The inner lining of his blood red dyed sheepskin cloak was a soft turquoise satin. He wore a short sword on his belt, and a huge red stone on a golden ring on his left pinky finger.

“So, where have we been?”

“I don’t know where *we* have been, but I have been helping to fulfill tasks required to reverse the consequences of your misdeeds,” Martin said. He offered Richard a chair, but the watch-mage preferred to stand.

“You are not being clear, Martin,” Richard replied. “How am I supposed to help you if you are unclear with me. The more information you give me the more I can piece together and figure out exactly what is going on around here and fix it.”

“I dare say that you, Richard, are a good part of ‘what is going on around here’,” Martin replied. He plopped down on the bed. Thomas popped up onto his shoulder.

“Oh, your familiar is cute,” Richard said, and suddenly there was a nut in his hand. He offered it to Thomas.

“Thomas isn’t hungry,” Martin said, flatly. And the squirrel leapt into the younger watch-mage’s hood.

Richard flicked the nut into the air and then caught it again. It disappeared up his sleeve.

“It’s important to know all kinds of magic,” Richard winked after his little trick.

“What do you want Richard?” Martin sighed. “Have you freed another drow witch we should know about?”

“Come now, Martin! Where are your manners?” Richard chided him. “Is that any way to treat a colleague and wizened mentor?”

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<sup>98</sup> As friendship is a duty chosen by freewill, Nephthys also concerns herself with this element of human life.

“I ask again, what do you want?”

“I come to offer *you* something, Martin,” Richard replied, sighing some himself. He sat down beside Martin on the bed. “Surviving in this environment means growing and becoming more powerful to help defeat the evils we both know exist. We are on the same side, Martin. We may have different means, but we have the same ends. Peace. Stability. Justice. I have a proposal for you.”

“And what is that?” Martin the Green stood and walked across the room.

“I train you,” Richard replied. “I teach you some spells. I am certain you are ready for spells of the Third House and maybe a little bit of this or that, and you *inform* me.”<sup>99</sup>

“Inform you?”

“Yes,” Richard stood and walked over to him. “You and your companions can serve as another set of eyes and means of gathering information. If we pool our knowledge, we can both be better prepared. I will share with you my magical knowledge and arcane lore and you will share with me your gathered knowledge, rumors, and sightings and theories and what-have-yous. Of course, I would tell you some of these things as well.”

Richard turned and walked back to the bed.

“I cannot speak for my companions.”

“Then speak for yourself,” Richard retorted. “What will it be? Will we help each other?”

Martin hesitated.

“I don’t see any reason why we cannot aid each other in mutual goals, or with some shared knowledge,” Martin finally said. “But I must confer with my companions about the training. I, too, think I can handle spells of the Third House but this will take time and that we do not have much of.”

“Okay, so let me start by asking you where you and your companions have been,” Richard said.

“The Circle of Thorns,” Martin replied. “A druid’s circle dedicated to the Beast Gods, west of here.”

“I have heard rumor of them. What were you doing there?”

“Kazrack and Ratchis had tasks to accomplish there. Tasks for Osiris in return for bring Jeremy back to life,” Martin explained.

“What?” Richard seemed genuinely shocked. “When did Jeremy die?”

“In Aze Nuquerna,” Martin replied. “You know after you charmed him and drew him down to the garbage pit where there was a living pile of tentacled filth?”<sup>100</sup>

Richard looked down suddenly. “I, uh, I didn’t know. I certainly didn’t mean for him to get hurt. I, uh, didn’t want him to go down there after me. Could you tell him I’m sorry?” Richard looked up at Martin, who eyed the older watch-mage intensely looking for a sign of sarcasm.

He found none.

“Tell him yourself.”

“How did he come back to life?” Richard asked.

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<sup>99</sup> In Aquerra, arcane spells are divided by “House” to describe level of power.

<sup>100</sup> See Session #22

“The Urn of Osiris,” Martin answered. “The elves had one.”

“Of course, they can’t use it themselves,” Richard scratched his chin. “So, you all had to make promises to Osiris to get him back?”

“Yes.”

“What was yours?”

Martin hesitated.

“Why do I think you are going to be able to tell me something about my required task?” He finally said.

“I don’t know. What is it?”

Martin sighed.

“I’m not sure I should tell you,” Martin replied.

“I cannot help you if you don’t tell me,” Richard said, softly.

“I am supposed to retrieve something called the Book of Black Circles from some Brotherhood of the Lost and then cast one spell from it and then destroy the book,” Martin said, all in one breath as if to sneak it by the elder mage.

Now it was Richard the Red’s turn to sigh. He sat back down on the bed. Martin sat on the chair.

“That is not exactly an easy task,” Richard finally spoke.

“It’s not.”

“What is the alternative?”

“Death.”

“Have you considered dying?”

Martin did not reply but just blinked several times.

“I am not kidding, Martin,” Richard said solemnly. “The Book of Black Circles is not just any old spellbook and if half the things I have heard about it are true, death is preferable to reading even a single one of its pages.”

Martin buried his face in his hands.

“What was written in that book was transcribed by seven of the most diabolical and corrupt minds of all time.”

Martin looked up, “The Corruptor?”<sup>101</sup>

“Yes,” Richard nodded. “He was the last. It was he who was finally able to bend the book to his will.”

“What more do you know about it? What specifics?” Martin asked.

“This has to be an even trade. I’ll tell you all I know about the book and you tell me about, hmmm, the other tasks. I assume the others were for Kazrack, Jana and Ratchis?”

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<sup>101</sup> *Marchosias the Corruptor* is one of the most infamous of evil wizards in Aquerra’s history. A former master of the Academy of Wizardry, he is responsible for the Second Humano-Orc War, the creation of *The Void Heart* (aka the *Sphere of Annihilation*), and the collection of countless items of great magic for his plans of world domination.

Martin nodded.

“Well?”

Martin went into a long-winded and carefully worded description of what the party had done in *Dybbuk Akvram*, and about the death of Jana. He left out the monks, the golden dire ram and about Ratchis' night of copulation.

“So what spells can you offer me?” Martin asked as soon as his tale was done.

Richard laughed and named five spells. Martin could choose any two of them.

“I would not seek out that book if I were you,” Richard then said. “It will mean your death, or worse and the same for your friends. Sure, there is great power in it but it will corrupt you. It cannot be used for good. You do not have the strength to withstand it.”

“And I bet you would, right?”

Richard was silent for a moment, and then shook his head.

“No, I would not trust myself. I would not touch it.”

The two watch-mages were silent again. “But not to worry we'll figure you a way out of this. You know, even promises made to gods can be circumvented with the proper loopholes.” Richard winked.

“I need to find companions and discuss the question of my training with them,” Martin said, standing. “I am afraid we are under too tight a schedule to fit it in now, but I will try my best. How shall I find you?”

“I have a room here under William Turnkey,” Richard said.

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Martin caught up with his companions and spent the morning with them collecting gear. He mentioned to Ratchis about Richard the Red and training.

“I don't trust him,” Ratchis replied.

“Neither do I,” Martin said. “But I need the spells, and the power will help us against Mozek, if he is who we are to face next.”

Ratchis nodded. “I think we have waited this long, we can afford to wait a little longer. How long will it take?”

“Eight days or so,” Martin replied.

“The hardest part will be convincing Kazrack,” Ratchis said.

“But at least we will be able to spend the Festival of Isis here in town,” Martin said.

Again, Ratchis nodded.

The afternoon found Jeremy, Martin, Ratchis, Derek and Beorth having a light meal and sipping beer (except Martin of course) at the Sun's Summit Inn.

Suddenly, the door burst open and a teen-aged boy in an apron came running in. He had bowl-cut black hair and chubby cheeks despite his tall thin, almost gawky, frame. He had a hammer in his hand.

“Gibb! Sound the militia bell!” the boy cried, out of breath. “There are dwarves marching on the town dressed for war!”

“Ranold Horton, if you are fibbing me you know you’re going to get in quite a bit of trouble,” Gibb said, snapping the towel he had on the bar.

Martin rose and walked over. “I’ll handle this,” he said. “It is my fault. The dwarves are with us. I should have informed the constable and the alderman. Run back to your father and tell him to not raise the alarm. I will be right over to explain everything.

“Yes sir,” the boy said and went running back out.

Beorth and Ratchis decided to head to the dwarf camp “just in case,” while Jeremy accompanied Martin to the Alderman’s house.

The two companions found Alderman Henry Horton up on the roof of his house with one of his sons, re-shingling the roof after what had been a harsh winter.

“Make sure you get those straight, Garold,” the alderman said to his oldest son, and then waved to Martin.

“Martin the Green! I’m glad to see you alive and well, and to hear we are not under attack by dwarves!” the alderman said, as he made his way to the ladder and down off the house.

“I like him, he’s down to earth,” Martin whispered to Jeremy.

“Down to earth? But he’s on the roof!” Jeremy replied, with a chuckle.

Martin poked the Neergaardian with an elbow.

The alderman invited the Martin and Jeremy inside, where his wife Melanie, served crackers and cheese, along with some wine. Jeremy ate hungrily, while Martin did his best to look as if he were eating, and even managed to swallow down a mouthful of the stuff. It was as tasteless and disgustingly textured as damp parchment covered in half-solidified glue to him.

Martin did his best to tell the alderman *some* of what the party had been doing, without giving away anything too specific, though at one point he mentioned the gnomes, causing Jeremy to shoot him a glance.

“Gnomes?” the alderman asked. “What gnomes?”

“Oh, nothing terribly important, and nowhere around here,” Martin replied. “Just some gnomes we encountered journeying from abroad. Um, we told them we’d give them what aid we could to get home safely.”

Jeremy nodded.

“Well, even a day’s journey beyond here to the west, north or southwest can lead to very dangerous territory,” the alderman said. “While the people of Gothanius have never seen eye to eye with the non-humans of Derome-Delem, I hope no harm comes to them.”

“I’m sure none will,” Martin replied.

“Anyway, gnomes are pretty short. You’d have to get down on one knee to see eye to eye with them,” Jeremy quipped.

Martin glared at Jeremy. But the Alderman laughed.

“Well, hopefully those mercenaries the king sent to explore the territory north of Greenreed Valley for further expansion will make this whole area a lot safer,” the Alderman said, and took a sip of wine.

“Mercenaries? You mean the dragon-hunters?” Martin asked.

“Huh? No, no. A group of maybe two dozen men passed through here to explore the area north of Greenreed Valley. They arrived during that last horrible snowstorm and left right after it cleared. Hmmm, maybe four days ago; No word from them

yet, but it hasn't been too long.”

“Oh, I see,” Martin mused over this silently.

“Not to butt in, but do you know why the king has decided to send these men now?” Jeremy asked.

“Well, springtime is the best time for exploration, and the dragon has not been sighted for some time, as far as I know,” the alderman explained. “The more land we have, the more resources, the more resources, the more strength.”

Melanie walked into the living room, and Martin noticed she was looking at his plate.

“I... um... um... I...” Martin hemmed and hawed.

“How long do you plan to be in town?” the alderman asked. “Now that the thaw is here, we can begin the work on your house.”<sup>102</sup>

“Oh, my companions and I have not decided yet...”

Jeremy interrupted, “But hopefully, we will be here for a few days at least. We can use the rest and recuperation.”

“Yes, I hope we will be here long enough to celebrate the *Festival of Isis* with you and your townsfolk,” Martin finished.

“That would be lovely indeed and would mean a lot to the people of Summit.” The alderman replied.

As Martin and Jeremy walked back to the place at the foot of the ridge where the dwarves were camped, Jeremy said, “I have a bad feeling about what might happen if those mercenaries run into the gnomes or vice versa.”

“I know.”

At the camp, Martin pulled Ratchis and Kazrack aside to speak with them about Richard the Red's proposal.

“At the very least it would mean another delay,” Kazrack said. “Not to mention, that Richard the Red is not to be trusted and is responsible for great evils beings loosed on the world and the effective death of two young elven women.”<sup>103</sup>

Martin nodded, and Ratchis scratched his own chin.

“In fact, instead of trying to convince me that it is in our interest to allow you to train with this villain, perhaps you should explain to me how it is *not* in our interest to tell Beléar of Richard, rally my kinsmen we have here and march into town to capture, and failing that, kill, this so-called Watch-Mage?”

“We should discuss this with everyone,” Ratchis said. “I have no objections to involving Beléar, but we should limit what the other dwarves know, lest one of them put it on themselves to do something rash.”

“Dwarves are never rash,” Kazrack replied.

“Uh-huh.” Jeremy said, walking over.

Soon, Jeremy, Martin, Ratchis, Kazrack, Beorth and Beléar had made their own circle around a smaller fire to discuss the situation. Derek was busy looking through the various supplies the others had gathered in and around town, hovering not too far away.

“Beorth, what have you been told about Richard the Red?” Ratchis asked the paladin.

“He... freed the drow witches, at least that is what Jana told me,” Beorth replied.

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<sup>102</sup> Remember, Martin the Green is supposed to be stationed in Summit overseeing the dragon-hunting project and helping to aid the people of Gothanius in general and the settling of Greenreed Valley in specific.

<sup>103</sup> Rahasia and Tirhas Tesfay.

“It is a bit more complicated than just that,” Martin sighed.

And the tale of the party’s woes, especially as they pertained to Richard the Red were discussed in some detail, each member of the party adding what they remembered and their own two coppers besides. Martin and Jeremy added what the alderman had said about the mercenary band.

“This is as convoluted as the ancient tales that take six days to tell,” Beléar commented.

“And yet, we did it in less than an hour, not bad eh? Jeremy quipped.

“I do not think it is in our power to defeat or capture Richard the Red,” Martin said.

“And yet, it seems perfectly within his power to know where we are and when Martin is around,” Jeremy added. “Maybe we can learn something from this, and eventually be able to defeat him.”

“I don’t like it,” Kazrack said.

“Kazrack,” Beléar spoke in his typical solemn tone. “You are more familiar with this man’s crimes than I am, so I leave this decision in your hands, and out of mine. However, Martin, my advice to you is that you abandon these foul arcane practices that can only lead to your corruption.”

“Um, thank you,” Martin coughed. “I will consider the advice.”

“I say he does it,” Ratchis said. “We are going to need whatever firepower we can against Mozek, and we can use more time to gather supplies, and I want to commission a bow. In addition, we should seek out the aid of the priest of Bast, and perhaps Finn and the others will return with some useful news.”

Kazrack grunted and stood, as if to walk away, but then turned back to the circle, and looked to Martin. “You know best in regard to your own order and ways, Martin,” the dwarf said. “I do not trust Richard the Red, but I do trust you, and thus I trust you to make the right decision.”

There was silence around the fire, broken only by Derek’s sudden whistling as he moved to where the dwarves were preparing dinner.

“Then I say we stay a while and I learn what I can from him,” Martin finally said. “Whatever evils Richard may have done or allowed to have happened, I have to assume at this moment that he still had a good intention despite his means, and still seeks to fulfill the oath of our order to help each other in training and gaining of knowledge.”

“And what of the mercenaries?” Beorth asked.

“They have either found the gnomes or not by now,” Ratchis said. “There is nothing we can do about that.”

“Also, I would like to be around for the Festival of Isis,” Martin said. “As superficial as it may seem to some of you, the ability for a watch-mage to accomplish his duties is often dependent on the goodwill of the people he is sworn to help protect, and if I do not know the people of Summit and they do not see me among them celebrating holidays as they do, there could be an irreparable gulf that could cause greater harm later.”

And so, it was agreed.

**End of Session #37**

## Session #38

And so days began to pass, as winter hiccupped into spring. Martin spent his time training with Richard, learning to channel greater arcane forces, and trying gain whatever knowledge of arcana and other interesting tidbits he could, but Richard the Red seemed very closed mouthed while he did his teaching. He was very serious about the task at hand and tolerated little small-talk.

The dwarves remained camped outside of Summit, just southeast of the alder-village, at the base of the path that led up the ridge to the settlement.

Each morning Beléar would awaken Kazrack with a kick, for they had training of their own to do, as the elder dwarf was helping the younger to unravel the greater mysteries of the miracles granted him by the dwarven gods.<sup>104</sup>

“Ugh! I was already awake,” Kazrack would complain, shielding his head with his arms.

“You say that every morning,” Beléar would always reply with a sign of humor.

Meanwhile. Jeremy did his best to help Beorth with his climbing, finding a spot on the ridge and spotting him and giving his pointers as the paladin alternately scaled the cliff both with and without his armor on.

Ratchis spent his time wandering the nearby woods, gathering wood and game for the camp, and occasionally accompanied by Derek, who also seemed to be at ease in the forest, and helping to provide for the rest.

During this time, both the party and the people of Summit were preparing for the Festival of Isis. The party prepared their own gifts for one another (or at least some of them did), while the town built a stage in the square, and all the townsfolk hung bells from their eaves and had paper-lamps hanging in their doorways and windows. The weather was growing just warm enough to allow the outdoor celebrations to go on without worry, and tables were brought out. The smell of the traditional butter made from small crisp winter apples filled the air, soon to be spread on the bread being baked in every home.

## Anulem, the 28th of Onk – 564 H.E.

On the evening of the holiday Ratchis approached Kazrack after the dwarf’s evening training session.

“Kazrack, would you do us the honor of joining us in town tomorrow evening for the celebration? Despite your religious affiliation?” the half-orc asked the pious dwarf.

“Your offer warms my heart, but I cannot join in revelry at this time,” the dwarf replied solemnly. “I wish you and our companions a good time, and I wish I could join you.”

Ratchis shook his head and walked off to join Beorth, Jeremy and Derek on their walk up to town.

The whole town was aglow, not only with the colorful shadows of the paper lamps, but with genuine joy. The sorrow that normally hung over the town on the edge of the Gothanian frontier had temporarily lifted.

The sound of music could be heard, even before the party turned the corner to see an open pavilion tent, beneath which a rag-tag band of ten musicians played, while townsfolk danced in circles and squares, spinning each other around and switching partners when a caller commanded.

The smell of freshly cooked food wafted in the air, and there were three large bon-fires burning, as children ran screaming chasing each other in blind glee.

Martin the Green was already there, standing with the alderman and shaking the hands of the townsfolk, who all seemed to want the honor of meeting him. He had spent the first part of the day training with Richard, but the lesson had not been very productive. Richard seemed to have returned to his chatty and questioning self, continually bringing up the gnomes, and

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<sup>104</sup> All spell-casters must train upon gaining a new spell level.

asking what the “internal matter” could be that it’d be so important to Martin.<sup>105</sup>

There were only about 200 people in Summit, and all appeared to be in attendance. Ratchis immediately walked over to where the food was being served and grabbed a bowlful. The townspeople parted like the sea before the huge half-orc, some glaring at him from a safe distance, but most simply avoided meeting his gaze altogether. The women shuddered as he went from table to table getting food. Ratchis felt the alienation heavy on his shoulders, but he felt the rumble in his stomach more deeply.

Jeremy joined the dancing, while Derek stood by and listened to the musicians, eating a spiced sausage on a stick.

Beorth stood apart from everyone, though he did try some of the food. He seemed uncomfortable with the whole thing.<sup>106</sup>

Martin began giving out copper pieces to all the children, and soon a riot broke out as several wanted more than one and others began fighting over what had been given them.

“Is that anyway to behave on the Festival of Isis?” Martin asked them. “If you don’t behave, Isis will see and your gifts will go ‘poof!’”

The children were astonished.

“Hey Martin, you look like you picked up some new recruits!” Jeremy exclaimed as he walked over, smiling at the children that surrounded the watch-mage.

“Is he an evil wizard?” one of the children asked, pointing at Jeremy. The Neergaardian was not wearing his armor, and only had the *Right Blade of Arofel* with him, he had washed up and his golden locks were slicked back. He had finally gotten a chance to shave, and his good looks were apparent once again.

One of the young girls giggled.

“Yes! I am an evil wizard! Boo!” Jeremy bellowed and the children scattered screaming. Jeremy laughed and went over to get some more food and drink before re-joining the dancing.

Soon the music died down and the Alderman, Henry Horton, took the stage. There was a rousing cheer and a great deal of applause. He made the typical official-sounding speech one would expect a politician to make, followed by some general announcements, and a general wish that the populating of Greenreed Valley would bring wealth and prosperity to Summit in the coming year.

“And one last thing,” the alderman added. “We have special guests with us here tonight. None other than Martin the Green, who as well all know will be living with us here in Summit as the kingdom’s watch-mage, showing again how even the Crown recognizes the importance of our fine town, and his stalwart companions, whose deeds have already reached our ears, though they remain humble about it. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, I give you... THE FEARLESS MANTICORE KILLERS!<sup>107</sup>

There was a great cheer from the crowd, and everyone looked to the party with great big smiles.

“Yes, word returned from the capital of how you all slew the beast and then donated it to the king for his trophy room,” the Alderman added.

There was another cheer, and then a large cake was carried out in the party’s honor and they were all handed huge pieces and mugs of ale to drink. Ratchis had to go get his own though, as no one would approach him.

“No one likes you because you’re a pig-fucker,” a man standing near the keg said to Ratchis.

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<sup>105</sup> The party told Richard the Red that the gnomes wanted the elves’ help on an “internal matter” in Session #22

<sup>106</sup> Monks of Anubis do not celebrate the Festival of Isis, having their own secret ceremonies to usher in the new year; in addition, the fact that Beorth is from the Black Islands Barony where worship of Isis is forbidden, he probably never celebrated the holiday even as a young child.

<sup>107</sup> **DM’s Note:** I warned the players, “name yourselves, or you will get named.”

Ratchis looked up with a snarl.

“Yeah, you remind them of what they don’t want to know,” the man continued. He slurred his words some.

“And what’s that?” Ratchis asked.

“That no one in the part of the world doesn’t have *some* orc in ‘im,” the man laughed, and slapped Ratchis on the shoulder. “My own great-grandma was an orc. Sure, I don’t look like a pig-fucker, but I am one too, and so are more people than would care to admit.”

The man smiled and Ratchis smiled back, and then the man leaned over and puked up huge chunks of the spicy sausage covered in a greasy yellow sauce.

“Cheers!” Ratchis cried with a smile and raised his cup, going over to his spot away from the crowd, but feeling better about it.

Derek moved embarrassedly away from the party, and hung around on the outskirts of the square, not wanting to gain undeserved glory by association; though he did have some cake.

The dancing and eating continued, and even after all the children had nodded off to sleep, the adults kept dancing and drinking. Beorth noted, however, that the people hardly ever actually praised Isis, or said the names of any of the gods.

As if to prove his thought wrong, an old woman approached the ghost-hunter of Anubis and asked, “I was told you serve Anubis. Is that true?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Beorth replied, bowing his head.

“You do not seem like the monks I saw when I was a girl, when there were still some around. They took my grandfather away when he died,” the lady croaked.

“I am not a monk,” Beorth said. “I am a warrior in service to Anubis.”

“Well, I was hoping you could give a prayer or blessing for my daughter,” the woman asked.

“She has passed on?”

“Uh, well... she’s among those that went missing,” the woman’s voice cracked. “She had gotten herself a beau, you know, and was on her way to meet him where he tended his papa’s goats, but she never made it there.”

She choked back a sob.

“I am sorry,” Beorth said.

“People say to keep up hope,” the woman continued, the tears streaming down her face juxtaposed against the revelry so near them and all around. “But it has been so long. I know in my heart she must be dead. I just have to let go. I just have to go on. I can’t hope.”

“I understand,” Beorth said. “What was her name?”

It took a long time for the woman to be able to speak the name, “Rita”.

“I will give a prayer in her name so that Anubis may watch over her soul wherever it may be,” Beorth promised. “Rest assured that whatever she may have suffered in this life, she is safe against the bosom of Anubis.”

The woman sobbed and thanked him.

Finally the night began to wind down. Jeremy drunkenly shook the alderman’s hand. “If you throw a party like this next year we’ll be back!”

“We throw a party like this every year!” the alderman replied with a smile.

Beorth, Ratchis, Jeremy and Derek headed back to the camp. Martin told them to go ahead as he received a note calling him back to the inn. In his room he found a pile of gifts and a note explaining that these items were for him and his companions as tokens for the Festival of Isis. It was signed by Richard the Red.

Martin took up the gifts to bring back to camp with him. There was heavy rectangular object (probably a book) wrapped in a dingy gray cloth and tied with cord, addressed to Martin. There was an oblong package wrapped in burlap, addressed to Jeremy. There was a painted blue box addressed to Ratchis. A sack with clanging pieces of metal within was addressed to Kazrack, and for Beorth there was a linen bag that seemed to hold some sort of heavy cloth.

Martin distributed the gifts, but Beorth did not touch his.

Martin unwrapped a book which was a dictionary of runes, sigils and wards and their common roots.<sup>108</sup>

Jeremy unwrapped a jeweled scabbard of a golden weave. Three sizable sapphires were evenly spaced down its length. The attached noted read, *“This is a replica of the scabbard of the Right Blade of Arofel. I saw it in a mural above the Vault of Lutz in the Trolldeep.”*

Jeremy was awed and immediately began putting it on his belt.

“Where’s Trolldeep?” he asked Martin, and the watch-mage shrugged his shoulders.

The blue-dyed wooden box held an orcish tattooing kit for Ratchis. There were two large needles, and a barb for scarification, and two jars of ink, one red and one indigo.

For Kazrack, there was a black metal greave fit for his right arm, which would fit over his armor.<sup>109</sup>

“Whoever this Richard is, he must think very highly of all of you,” Beorth said.

“He’s always wanted us in his debt,” Martin replied.

“I am refusing his gift,” Beorth said, flatly.

“Why?” asked Jeremy.

“Because this man is trying to manipulate us and buy our trust,” Beorth explained.

“What does your note say?” Ratchis asked.

“It says ‘Life is a series of choices’,” the paladin read. “I have made mine. Martin, you can give your friend his gift back.”

“He is not my friend,” Martin replied.

“Nor mine.”

“It was given in the spirit of Isis,” Ratchis said. “It would be an insult to the craftsmanship of whatever it is to let it go unused.”

“I will not be convinced,” Beorth said.

Ratchis distributed gifts of his own. He had used hides gathered from animals he had hunted and made armbands stitched with a broken chain motif.

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<sup>108</sup> **DM’s Note:** By studying this book, Martin could increase ranks in his Knowledge (arcana) skill.

<sup>109</sup> **DM’s Note:** This greave has a 50% chance to cancel out any critical hit made to the arm in question.

“Does this make us honorary friars of Nephthys?” Jeremy asked excitedly.

“No, but they sort of represent our...uh,” Ratchis struggled for the word.

“Solidarity,” proffered Beorth.

“Yes,” Ratchis nodded.

“Will they get us sanctuary in a temple of Nephthys?” Jeremy asked.

“You can get sanctuary without them,” Ratchis explained.

“Oh,” Jeremy seemed disappointed, but he immediately put on the band.

Martin also distributed gifts. He had made each member of the party a wooden figure, which he made into necklaces.

He even gave Thomas a little wooden nut.

“A reminder of what I can never have,” the sullen squirrel sighed.

Martin scratched his familiar’s head.

During the gift giving Derek stood just within earshot; unable to fully participate in the camaraderie and friendship of his new companions.

The dwarves were up late drinking, as Captain Adalar had procured them a keg of ale from the Sun’s Summit Inn with Kazrack’s aid.

That night Ratchis and Martin opened Beorth’s gift. It was a shining silvery gray prayer shawl of the type common (though varying in style) to the various priests of Ra’s Pantheon. It was lined with black and decorated with a pattern of diamond and quarter-moon shapes. A note upon it said, “*This is the actual Shawl of Estes. I found it in the collection of the mad necromancer Mazzar. – R.*”<sup>110</sup>

Martin cast *detect magic* and saw the glow of moderate magic. The two companions decided to keep the item for now and try to convince Beorth to take it.

## **Ralem, the 1st of Prem – 565 H.E.**

The next day Martin studied with Richard and did not speak of Beorth’s refusal. He gave Richard a necklace as well. Richard’s figure was a pig.

“Oh, a pig?” asked Richard.

“They are the smartest beasts,” Martin replied with a smirk.

Richard nodded.

Martin asked Richard about the shawl, but the elder Watch-mage would only say that it was an object sacred to monks of Anubis—a holy relic.

He had lunch at the Alderman’s, who gave him the gift a bottle of fine wine from Princeton.<sup>111</sup>

In the afternoon, he continued with his studies with the party’s nemesis.

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<sup>110</sup> Little is known of the Mad Necromancer Mazzar, except that he was a student of Marchosias the Corruptor.

<sup>111</sup> Princeton is a “Free Town” on the southeastern coast of Derome-Delem.

The next night Martin offered the wine up to the party as they sat around the fire with Beléar and Adalar discussing possible tactics for approaching the gnomish village, and whether the normal gnomes would help fight Mozek and his allies, or fight against the party. They also discussed how to recognize the evil gnomes.<sup>112</sup>

Suddenly, Martin hushed everyone.

“I think we are being watched.”

Ratchis stood and looked around. Kazrack also stood. “Where?” the dwarf asked.

“It is just a feeling. I think we are being watched magically,” Martin explained.

Kazrack grasped the pouch of runestones around his neck and called out in dwarven to Lehrothronar to him sight to see the mysteries of magic. The dwarf scanned the area and what appeared to be a glowing orb floated not too far away. Only the essence of magic it emanated gave it shape.

Kazrack explained what he saw.

“We are being scryed upon!” Martin announced.

“What do we do?” asked Beorth.

“Jeremy, you are the closest. Poke it with your sword,” Kazrack said to the Neergardian.

Jeremy stood and drew the Right Blade of Arofel and Kazrack directed him. He felt no resistance at all, but Kazrack confirmed that when the sword had met with the “sensor” it had popped out of existence.

“We must be very careful what we say from now on,” Ratchis said.

“We do not know who that was that was watching us, or for how long,” Beorth said.

“I bet it was Mozek,” said Kazrack.

“It could have been Richard,” Martin offered. “And Jeremy’s blade may not have done a thing. Perhaps whomever was listening in heard our intention and made it disappear.”

The group was silent for a time.

“Perhaps we should avoid going back to the gnomes and seek out Hurgun’s Maze immediately,” Ratchis suggested. “We may be able to use the power there to defeat Mozek.”

Everyone began to argue, but most disagreed with Ratchis.

Beléar spoke up, “We have an obligation to help the gnomes, but we also have an obligation to defend our stronghold against those bear-men creatures that you say were sent by drow. We have already been delayed, we cannot go on a wild hunt for a legendary place.”

It was agreed that whether the evil gnomes knew the party was coming or not that they would go and seek to liberate their gnomish friends along with their dwarven allies.

“We could always try to take one of them gnome patrols you told us about alive and then convince them we are there to help them,” Helrahd grumbled the suggestion.

It was also agreed that some of the party would take the three hour hike to the temple of Bast and see what aid or information they might get from the priest there.

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<sup>112</sup> The party conjectures that they can identify the evil gnomes by their glowing green eyes.

Later in the night, Martin and Ratchis took Beorth aside and told him of the shawl and how it was a sacred relic of Anubis.

Beorth gulped and rubbed his calloused hands together.

“I feel as if I should know what this thing is, but alas with my memory gone I cannot ascertain its true significance,” Beorth said. “But my instinct says that it is what he says it is.”

“It has a magical enchantment, and nor could I detect an evil from it when I used my goddess’ favors to test it earlier today,” Ratchis offered.

“It is hardly plausible that a villain such as he would give me such a valuable gift,” Beorth said, he took the shawl from the bag and examined it.

“What use is it to him?” Martin said by way of explanation.

“It would make sense as a way to get into our good graces,” Ratchis said. “If he thinks he can save Derome-Delem by freeing drow witches, then I think he would think nothing of parting with valuable items for whatever his agenda. We cannot presume to know his mind.”

Beorth nodded. “It seems impossible to reject such a gift.”

At that moment Jeremy was walking by and asked what the gift was.

“A prayer shawl,” answered the paladin.

“You mean like old women wear?” Jeremy asked with a grin.

“No, like the kind a priest or a follower of Anubis would wear.”

“Don’t they have a different word for it when a man wears it?” Jeremy’s questions continued.

“They do not.”

“I only ask because Malcolm used to call what he wore a kilt, but it looked like a dress to me,” Jeremy chuckled, remembering his fallen friend.

“Who is Malcolm?” Beorth asked, and Jeremy shook his head.

“You really don’t remember anything do you?”

Now it was Beorth’s turn to shake his head.

Night soon fell, and Jeremy decided to go back to town with Martin and sleep in the extra bed in the room Martin rented at the inn.

Meanwhile, Beorth prayed silently in the darkness to his jackal-headed god, wearing the Shawl of Estes. Ratchis saw that the shawl’s seeming luminescence became an actual glow of white light as Beorth prayed.

### **Osilem, the 3rd of Prem – 565 H.E.**

In the morning there was a knock at the door.

“Who is it?” Martin asked, walking to the door. Jeremy was lacing his boots.

“Richard,” came the voice from behind the door. Martin let in the elder watch-mage.

Jeremy stood tensely when he saw the mage. He strapped on his weapon belt.

“Jeremy!” Richard greeted. “I am so glad to get a chance to see you. I really wanted a chance to apologize in person if my actions led in any way to your unfortunate death. If I had known that that would be the result, I would have taken a different course of action.”

Jeremy smirked, “It’s too bad you can’t apologize for Jana’s death too.” The weight of the girl’s death re-paying a debt for his sake weighed heavy on the young swordsman.

“Yes, it is,” Richard replied softly.

“Well, don’t let me keep you,” Jeremy said, and he made his way to the door. “You have lots of studying to do and I, uh... I have lots of things to do to.”

He closed the door behind him.

Martin opened his mouth to speak, but Richard raised an finger and silently prowled to the door and took the knob.

“Jeremy?” he called through the door.

There was no reply. Richard threw open the door and there stood the Neergaardian with his ear thrust forward. He quickly straightened up and cleared his throat. “Oh uh, you done already?” Jeremy asked.

Richard let out a hearty laugh, “Please leave us to our business, Jeremy.”

Jeremy shrugged his shoulders and left.

The penultimate day of Martin’s training began.

Jeremy joined the others, and while Kazrack trained with Beléar and Helrahd was off hunting on his own and the other dwarves packed and repacked their gear all day trying to top each other in categories of portability over ease of use, Beorth, Jeremy, Derek and Ratchis headed through the thick wood north of the town.

They could see a black protrusion of rock several miles away, looming with some scrubs on it over the thick forest. They had been told that the Temple of Bast could be found at the protrusion’s base, built where the ridge that created Greenreed Valley abruptly changed in elevation.

They found the temple in a state of seeming disrepair. The trees and vines of the surround wood had grown out under the paving stones of the courtyard, and now it was a haphazard mess of root and stone. There were weeds poking up through the flagstones and nasty dirty mulch of autumn leaves left to rot beneath mounds of melted snow.

The building itself was squat and square and had a large iron-reinforced wooden door inset against two wooden statues of cats. The iron was rusted, but the door still bore the carvings of hundreds of cat shapes that all fit into each other elegantly. Its base was made of large brown bricks, while the top portion and roof was made of lacquered logs, now chewed by insects and the weather.

They approached the building. It was eerily quiet.

Ratchis called out, “Hello!”

His voice echoed amid the thick trees.

“This place sure could use a little upkeep,” Jeremy quipped.

Ratchis glared at him

“Have you ever met this priest before?” Beorth whispered, looking confused.

“Not that I know of,” Ratchis replied.

Ratchis knocked on the door with a meaty fist. The knocks reverberated in the quietude of the place. A cool breeze caused the hairs on the back of Derek's neck to rise, as the protrusion of stone cast a dark shadow across their position.

There was no answer to the knocking.

The half-orc tried the door, but it was bolted from the other side. He quickly jogged around the building looking for another way in but found none.

In the meantime, Jeremy knocked some more.

"Maybe, uh..." Jeremy muttered. "They said he was fairly isolated here, maybe he's wandering about or is somewhere close to town."

"He may not actually live at the temple for all we know," Ratchis offered.

"Maybe we need to ask for entrance, or say some magic word like in a story," Jeremy said.

Derek chuckled.

"One would think that a temple would be open to all," Beorth said.

Jeremy walked over to one of the shuttered windows, and knocked on it. There was a crack and a crash as the shutter he touched broke off a pin and came crashing down, hanging across the other at an odd angle.

"Jeremy!" Ratchis barked.

"Might as well take a look in," Jeremy said, shrugging his shoulders.

He covered either side of his face and looked into the darkness of the temple. He could see that the floor was sunken within, so that this window was further off the floor from the other side. Jeremy was surprised to see leaves and dirt within the temple as well. The few pews looked in neat order, but as if they had not been used in a long time. He could also see that light was coming through from holes in the ceiling.

Being Jeremy, he leapt upon the windowsill and began to climb to the roof.

"Jeremy!" Ratchis barked again.

"What?" Jeremy called down from his perch, looking around for better purchase from which to grab the roof edge.

"Can you come down from there?" Ratchis half-asked half-commanded.

"Well, sure I can, but I wanted to see through the holes in the roof and see if maybe he's sleeping or something," Jeremy said.

"If there's someone here he can answer the door," the paladin banged on the door three more times with his mailed fist.

"Wouldn't you think it was rude if some found you weren't home, so they climbed up on your roof and came down the chimney?" Ratchis asked Jeremy, who still had not come down.

"I wasn't going to go inside!" retorted the Neergaardian, and with that he made a grab for the roof and pulled himself up.

"Jeremy!" Ratchis barked a third time.

Derek looked at the half-orc and then up at the Neergaardian who balanced on the edge of the roof and smiled.

"I'll take a quick look," Jeremy said. And that he did. From his perch, he could see that the altar was draped and that there was a door to the left of the dais. There was no sign of anyone being in there.

Jeremy quickly stood to report what he had seen and spun around. Losing his balance, he fell and rolled off the roof with a pain-filled “oof!”

He quickly sat up, but then sat for a minute clutching his side. Ratchis walked over and offered him a hand to stand and walk it off.

“No one’s in there,” Jeremy croaked.

It was agreed that they would leave the temple, as breaking in with no actual sign of danger might be blasphemous.

“I hope we’re not leaving him to some ill-fortune,” Ratchis said, as they walked away.

“The only alternative is to force entry into the temple,” Beorth said, shaking his head.

“It was barred from the inside,” Jeremy noted. “How did he get out?”

“There could be a secret way in and out,” Derek offered.

Jeremy nodded. “Like in the stories.”

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Meanwhile, during a lull in Martin and Richard’s study sessions, the younger watch-mage found himself doing some verbal gymnastics in order to keep from revealing too much in a fast exchange of questioning with his tutor.

“I first encountered the drow and quaggoths in Trolldeep,” Richard was explaining, when Martin the Green was looking for more information on the potential drow invasion.

“Where is Trolldeep?” Martin asked.

“Southeast of here, just north of the City of Ash.”

“What is the City of Ash?” Martin asked.

Richard shook his head and sighed. “It used to be an elven enclave. It was destroyed during the Troll Wars. Engulfed by a great fire.”

“Why are the drow coming now?” Martin asked.

“My belief is that they somehow found out about the wedding of the King of Tempestas,” Richard said.<sup>113</sup> “Most elves in Aquerra, except those in the most remote regions will be either going there or have their attention focused there, allowing the so-called dark elves a chance to re-emerge and gain a toe-hold.”

“When is the wedding?”

“Sometime during the next celestial year,” Richard explained. “Which ranges from seven to nine years in our reckoning, but the party has already started from what I heard.”

“Could we get back to the fourth conjunction?” Martin asked, turning the subject back to learning the spells of the Third House so as to avoid more questions from Richard. “I think I’ve almost mastered it.”

“If you can remember that the movement of the smallest digit is most important as you emphasize the second syllable,” Richard said. “You are almost ready to cast a fiery bolt.”

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<sup>113</sup> This wedding is supposed to end a centuries long schism between high elves (elustristani) and wood elves (silvestristani).

## Balem, the 5th of Prem – 565 H.E.

One last day passed uneventfully, and both Martin and Kazrack finished their training. Richard the Red reminded Martin of their agreement as he shook his hand one last time, and the others argued more about what to do next.

Ratchis brought up Hurgun's Maze again and the need to seek out the Pit of Bones, but Kazrack and the dwarves insisted that helping the gnomes came first.<sup>114</sup>

So finally they marched through Summit and down the ridge into Greenreed Valley, hoping to seek out the tunnel that had brought them out of the gnomes' territory and into the dubious safety of the valley. Now they sought to follow it back.

As they came down the western side of the ridge into the vale, they could see the large area of steam to their south. It seemed like so long ago that they had fought the bizarre flaming flail-headed snail creature there, but it had only been barely over two months ago.

"Do you think it is growing?" Martin mused, of the steamy swampy area.

Ratchis shrugged his shoulders.

"What is it?" Beorth asked, always grasping at the ephemeral edges of his memory.

Jeremy explained the story, and Derek walked behind them, listening intently.

The prospective planning continued as they walked, but they could not find any course of action they could all agree on. Kazrack suggested that Thomas could be used to find the gnome village itself, as he had found his way there on his own when he had been separated from the party when they had first been captured by the gnomes.

"Thomas, we may have to follow you to the gnome village," Martin told his familiar mentally. "Do you remember the way?"

"Uh-huh," Thomas chattered. "But I don't understand, how are all of you going to jump from tree to tree?"

"We can follow you on the ground, can't we?" Martin asked.

"Oh yeah."

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The party and their nine dwarven companions wandered for hours in the northeastern section of the vale, looking for a sign of the underground tunnel they had followed out of the gnomish territory, and where they had been ambushed by Mozek's brothers when they emerged. Ratchis described the area the best he could to Derek, who also used his woodsman skill to seek out the spot, and in the end, it was he who found it.

The burned tree trunk was still there, beginning to rot from the moisture of all the snow between that time and now, but the tunnel was collapsed, and while there was a sunken line of earth trailing off to the north, soon, the line ended where the tunnel was too far underground. They would not be able to go that way.

"We are going to have to find the tunnel that cuts through the ridge," Ratchis said. "The big one."

And so, tired and cold, they continued to march. This time turning back eastward to the ridge, hoping to follow where they had emerged from the secret tunnel beneath the inn and then follow the ridge to the tunnel to Garvan. However, by the time they found the spot, it was growing dark, so they decided to camp. The dwarves, especially the three brothers, Golnar, Jolnar and Tolnar, grumbled, for they had hoped to reach the gnomes right away, feeling impatient after having sat around the camp for over a week. However, the broad cave made a good place for camp and soon they all slept around a few small fires while they took turns watching in sets of four at a time.

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<sup>114</sup> Beorth learned of the Pit of Bones in the Interlude before Session #24 and that a route to Hurgun's Maze might be found there in Session #26.

## Teflem, the 6th of Prem – 565 H.E.

In the morning, it did not take them long to find the tunnel through the north side of the ridge. Derek looked at it in awe as they passed through. It was over a quarter-mile long and in most places was nearly perfectly round. It was not a natural passage.

Beyond it was the forest of pines, interspersed with deciduous trees, some of which had already begun to bud.

It was less than two miles to where the “root house” was.<sup>115</sup> However, the area was blackened by fire. Many of the trees making the perimeter of the little house’s “yard” were knocked over, scorched, or cracked. And the house itself was nearly torn asunder, as the tree that made up its roof and the support for its walls had tipped over, creating a barrier that split the area in half.

The party and the dwarves carefully entered the area and began to look around. Captain Adalar ordered the three brothers to watch the perimeter, and Kirla and Baervard joined them. Ratchis moved in first to look for tracks. He did not have a hard time finding any.

“At least two dozen booted men came through this area,” Ratchis said, crouched on the ground. “Probably the mercenaries Martin mentioned.”

“Here is one,” Beorth said, and he pointed to the partially burned remains of a man in ring mail armor. He wore a tattered tabard that held Gothanius’ coat of arms. Derek found another body on the other side of the tree. It looked like it had been mauled by some large animal.

“Do you think this was done by the gnomes?” Martin asked, looking around at the remains of arrows, broken swords and bows and other signs of a large battle.

“At least partially, yes,” Ratchis replied.

“This is a bad bad place,” Thomas whimpered in Martin’s mind. “Lots of bad bad things happened here. Let’s go back to Summit. The inn is warm and safer.”

“But Thomas, we need to help the gnomes. They were very nice to us,” Martin replied.

“You’re right, but I hope we’re not burned up,” Thomas said.

“Me too.”

It took the party three hours to dig two graves deep enough to satisfy Beorth. Beorth took the time to prepare the two bodies the best he could while Martin and Kirla collected whatever arrows and other weapons they could find. Most were broken, but Martin *mended* a long sword, and the rest were packed for Kazrack to melt down or repair later.

After the burial and a brief snack, they continued on their way. Thomas went just a head of the party leaping from tree to tree.

Ratchis led the way for the group, followed closely by Helrahd and Kirla, while Baervard and Blodnath took the very rear. The rest of the group was spread out, Jeremy and Derek marching together, as did Beorth and Martin. Kazrack walked with Beléar, while Captain Adalar led the three dwarven brothers.

Three or four miles north by northwest of the “safehouse” as the party had begun to call the gnome destroyed post, the landscape became more difficult to traverse. They marched up and down some steep ridges, that were lined with tall pine and fir trees. It made it difficult to see very far ahead or to the sides.

“Good place for an ambush,” Ratchis said. “Stay alert.”

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<sup>115</sup> See Session #15

The half-orc turned from calling back to others and noticed a figure crawling over the ridge directly ahead of them. It was a man, dragging himself on all fours. His clothing was ragged, and his armor was in pieces. He wore no helm, and a large portion of his scalp looked as if it had been ripped from his skull. He moaned as he tumbled over and rolled painfully towards the party.

“Is it a zombie?” Martin asked, as Ratchis ran forward to attend the man. As he approached, he could see a second man, crawling as well, about thirty feet further behind.

“There are two!” Ratchis called.

“Thomas! Come to me now!” Martin called to his familiar.

“I’m right here!” the squirrel replied, poking up from Ratchis’ head, which he had dropped on as the ranger ran by.

The whole group stopped in their tracks, and looked around warily.

The fallen soldier cringed when he saw Ratchis’ ugly visage and hulking form, but the Friar of Nephthys was not daunted by the reaction. “Nephthys grant me your grace so we can heal this fallen soldier. Show your infinite compassion, for we cannot be sure if he fights for good or evil.”

Ratchis laid his hand on the moaning man and felt the divine healing energies of his goddess pass through him.

Kazrack, meanwhile, ran past the half-orc and the soldier towards the second man, calling to Rivkanal to grant him her healing graces, but as the dwarf approached the blackened figure leapt up and clawed at him. Now Kazrack could see that this second man was dead. Rotten entrails swung freely from beneath the undead creature’s chain shirt, and its eyes were sunken and black. Its skin was yellowed and hardened, and it had dirty black claws that had once been human fingernails. It wore a torn tabard decorated with the symbol of Gothanius.<sup>116</sup>

Before anyone else could react, Golnar, Jolnar and Tolnar cried out in unison, “Look!” pointing to the left. In a small clearing at the top of another ridge stood a gnome. It wore black robes and hard wiry green hair, and glowing green eyes.

The creepy little thing let out a loud shrill laugh. “I will kill you all and make you my undead minions!” It cried

“Evil gnome!” Martin screamed and the chanted, “*Incendiore!*”

An arrow of pure flame shot towards the gnome, looking as if it would easily find its mark, but instead the gnome twisted and turned at the last minute and the *flame arrow* sped past.

Ratchis abandoned the injured soldier and moved to aid Kazrack, but stepped into a blow from the creature. It threw its arm out and punched the half-orc in the neck. Ratchis felt an unnatural cold sensation rush down his body, and then a feeling like his heart had been grasped and twisted by a burning hand.<sup>117</sup>

“It can touch your soul!” he warned the others in an agonizing moan, and then swung his hammer with both hands smashing the dead man in the head and it fell over hissing, as black bile poured over its hairy chin.

“Kazrack, get back!” Jeremy yelled, rushing forward, and stabbing into it with the Right Blade of Arofel as it clambered up to its feet.

“I’ll take care of him!” Golnar cried charging at the gnome, but his cry became one of distress and he disappeared, tumbling into what must have been a concealed pit, just to the right of the gnome. He let out a howl.

“No!” cried Tolnar and Jolnar in unison, and they charged as well.

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<sup>116</sup> The coat of arms of the Kingdom of Gothanius is a stylized golden ‘G’ upon a maroon field, with a coppery-brown mountain inset within it.

<sup>117</sup> **DM’s Note:** Ratchis suffered a negative level.

“Come back!” commanded Captain Adalar. “Hold formation!”

But the young dwarves did not obey.

Kazrack stepped back from the fray and called out, “Natan-Ahb, please! We are beset by undead. Please halt them and turn them and drive them from my path!”

But Kazrack’s faith was insufficient and the undead soldier rose to its feet, grinning with black broken teeth.

Derek fired an arrow at the gnome, but the arrow seemed to go right through him without an effect. The gnome just laughed.

Beorth ignored the gnome and went forward to join Kazrack. Now it was his turn to call his god’s power, “Anubis, I call on your power with my faith to turn this undead!”

The creature cowered and turned to move away. Ratchis and Jeremy both gave it what would have been crippling blows to any living man, but it merely stumbled as it sought to escape the divine power of Anubis.

Martin now moved towards the gnomish adversary, fairly certain it was an illusion, but knowing that meant there was a spell-caster hidden somewhere nearby. He cast *shield* as he moved.

Jeremy did not give chase to the wight, but instead stopped to gather his surroundings and noticed three more undead soldiers moaning softly ambling awkwardly towards them.

“Beorth! More of them ahead!” He warned his companion.

“Fall back!” Kazrack called out. “Draw them to us.”

Ratchis, however, kept up with the wight, and slammed it again with his hammer.

At that same moment, Tolnar leapt into the pit that Golnar had tumbled into to save his brother, while Jolnar seeking to go around the pit to get to the gnome fell into another concealed pit. Beléar stepped forward to look into them.

The pits were filled with zombie soldiers.

The three dwarven brothers now struggled against a half-dozen undead Gothanians, dressed in ring mail. Some even had weapons sheathed at their belts, left unused as they preferring to rip the living flesh off with their hands.

Noticing the disappearing brothers, Kazrack hustled in that direction, while Derek just stood around with confused inaction.

Again Beorth called to his Jackal-God, guardian of the dead, to send away the foes of life, and the approaching zombies turned and fled.

Jeremy leapt towards a fleeing zombie and tore through it with his long sword. It collapsed into a twitching pile of limbs on the ground.

“We have to get to the zombies in the pits!” Beléar called to Kazrack. Martin walked and looked down to see the undead soldiers trying to overwhelm the two dwarven brothers who frantically tried to keep the things away. Flicking a drop of molasses into the pit, Martin spoke a word and suddenly the zombies moved even slower and more awkwardly than before.

Ratchis would not let the wight escape and slammed it again but had been drawn over a hundred feet away from the rest of the battle.

Kazrack took his rope and grappling hook and tossed it into the branches of a tree near the closer pit, and Beléar grabbed it dropping the end in for the brothers to use.

Derek fired an arrow straight into the top of the head of one of the zombie soldiers, and they heard it come out through one thigh and bite into the ground. The zombie did not seem to notice.

“I must help the dwarves,” Beorth said, seeing the zombies flee. “Jeremy, we must help the dwarves.” And with that he hustled towards the pits.

He came near Helrahd who had cautiously moved to the right of the pits.

“Careful!” he hissed and spat at the paladin. “That gnome is hidden or invisible somewhere near here.”

Ratchis stopped and looked around allowing the wight to gain some ground. He hesitated, wondering if he should continue after it and get drawn further from the rest of the melee, or if he should go back. The wight started turning eastward, and Ratchis checked its progress with his eyes. Suddenly, the half-orc heard footsteps behind him, and he turned just in time to see a muscular gnome with green eyes and wiry black hair that erupted beneath his nose. It burst through the brush at him.

The gnome wielded a battle axe and wore a breast plate. He wore an evil toothy smile as he slammed the axe into Ratchis, who was just barely able to partially deflect the blow with his own weapon, or else it might have removed a leg.

“And I thought I wasn’t going to get to the fight in time,” the gnome sneered. “Thanks for coming to me.”

**End of Session #38**

AQUERRA

## Session #39

Martin cast *prestidigitation* and snatched a torch from where he had one tucked into his belt. Jeremy seeing that Ratchis was in danger hustled towards his half-orc companion but stopped just short to provide cover when the half-orc backed away from the obviously superior opponent. Ratchis fell back and stood shoulder to shoulder with the Neergaardian.

“Come and take your brethren’s weapon from my hand, you fiend!” Ratchis goaded. The gnome cautiously stepped towards them, but not close enough to attack or be attacked. The smirk never left his face.

Blodnath pulled out his own coil of rope and ran towards the pit where Jolnar struggled against the Gothanian zombies alone. Beléar called for Golnar and Tolnar to grab the rope he had lowered into the pit, while Kazrack called to Krauchaar to bless his weapon in dwarven.

“I will help you with the fiendish one!” Kirla cried, there was almost joy in her voice, and she hurried to join Ratchis and Jeremy, her shield before her and her flail swinging wildly over her head.

“Give ‘em hell, Kirla!” Helrahd yelled encouragement to his sister.

Derek crept over towards the area Helrahd was in and tried to box the area in to see if they might flush out the true version of the first gnome they saw, now that Derek’s arrow revealed that the attacker was an illusion. However, the illusion continued to mock them and laugh.

“Eat! Eat! My little human savages!” the gnome called to the zombies in the pit.

Captain Adalar moved up to the pits, and clutching the bag of runestones about his neck attempted to turn the zombies, but his faith was not strong enough, and Tolnar backed against the wall, stabbing at the zombies futilely with his short sword.<sup>118</sup>

Beorth stood at the point of triangle created by him, Derek and Helrahd and closed his eyes. “Anubis, grant me the power to lift the veil over mine eyes! So, I may find the evil creatures that oppose us.” And when he opened his eyes he concentrated his senses into the area and knew that great evil was located somewhere near Derek.

“Let the unholy fumes of hell comes forth,” the gnome facing Ratchis and Jeremy croaked, and with a burp he blew outward and a nasty sulfurous smell came billowing out of his mouth. They felt a wave of nausea come over them. They could feel their lungs spasm, and Ratchis’ stomach turned, weakening him. The gnome moved back and hefted his axe on his shoulder. “Come and get some,” now it was his turn to goad them into coming to him.

It was too much for Jeremy and he hustled away from the evil gnome, hoping Ratchis would follow and draw the thing to the others so that they all could fight it. He passed Kirla on the way. “What foul thing is this?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Jeremy answered. “I thought undead smelled pretty bad on their own, but this guy’s breath is a killer.”

Ratchis moved back, but cautiously, calling to Nephthys to enchant his weapon.

Martin used his *prestidigitation* spell to light the torch he held and then cast *mage hand* to bring the lit torch down into the pits.

Tolnar began to climb the rope Beléar held to escape the pit, but he cried out as one of the zombies ripped at his calf as he emerged. The young dwarf rolled away from the pit with a huff, dirt and blood staining his golden beard.

“Father,” Kazrack called to Beléar. “I must help D’nar. He is near death!” And with that the dwarf hustled towards Ratchis.

Derek strained his ears listening in the area he and Beorth and Helrahd had scoped out. He knew the gnomish spell-caster must be nearby.

Beorth continued to concentrate, moving closer to pinpoint the emanation of evil

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<sup>118</sup> **DM’s Note:** Corporeal undead do not take as much damage from piercing weapons, as piercing their organs does not injure them much.

Kirla finally arrived near Ratchis and stepped past him, calling out to the fiendish gnome, “What are you waiting for? Come on!”

“Come on, bitch!” the gnome called back, moving forward, but remaining cautious. It was a cat and mouse game, each side trying to draw the other towards him.

Martin had his arcane invisible disembodied hand move the lit torch onto one of the zombies awkwardly beating at Golnar with unnatural slowness. The dried cracked flesh caught and soon it was burning. The undead thing moaned but made no move to put itself out. Golnar crushed its ribs with his warhammer and it collapsed into a burning twitchy pile of dead flesh.

Meanwhile, Jeremy deftly put his weapons away, and pulled his crossbow off of his back, as he took cover behind some trees, near where Derek, Helrahd and Beorth were searching for their unseen foe.

“Get back!” Ratchis yelled to Kirla as he rushed past her to charge at the hulking half-fiend gnome. However, the gnome who never stopped grinning, was ready for him and Ratchis felt the blade of the great battleaxe turned by his chain shirt as it struck him. Ratchis felt the groan of protest from his ribs as they strained not to crack. He weakly brought his hammer down, but missing, the gnome slammed him in the chin with the butt end of the axe. Ratchis spit blood and dropped, clutching his side instinctively even as he slipped into unconsciousness.

Kazrack ran to Ratchis. “D’nar!” he cried out. “Kirla, drag him back to father Beléar for healing! You must retreat.”

Kirla did not obey, getting between Ratchis’ body and the gnome.

“Kazrack, we have to push him back, or else Ratchis will be vulnerable to attack,” Kirla said.

Derek’s listening paid off. He heard some low mumbling and turned to his right to see a portal of black light open in the air, and two zombies fell out of it, and ambled forward. Unlike the former Gothanian soldiers, there were naked, and their skin was a weathered gray color.

“More zombies over here!” Derek yelled.

However, Helrahd left the zombies to the others and ran to help his sister, who he spied taking on the gnome by herself.

Beorth sensed that the evil he had originally sensed had moved out of his range, so he slowly came forward, beseeching his god, “Anubis, the evil presence is coming into focus. Please aid me!”

Martin moved his torch to another zombie, but this one batted it away, and the mage could not cause it to catch fire.

Jeremy, seeing the zombies that had just appeared, dropped his crossbow, and drew his long sword, charging into battle; hacking one open. It turned towards him moaning as if such a blow were nothing compared to its existence of constant agony.

“Where did these things pop out of?” the Neergaardian asked.

Kazrack moved to provide an unarmored target for the gnomish fiend and the gnome took the bait, ignoring Kirla and landing two devastating blows to the dwarf.<sup>119</sup> Blood poured down Kazrack’s right arm, and he could feel his old wounds ache.

“How’d ya like that?” the gnome asked.

Gritting his teeth, the dwarf thrust his halberd between the gnome’s legs, catching one of his ankles and pulling him to the ground. Kazrack, followed up with a thrust caused a huge dent in the gnome’s breast plate.

“Drag him away!” Kazrack commanded Kirla again. She sighed and picked up Ratchis’ shoulders and began to drag him away, leaving a trail of blood in the grass. Helrahd ran past her and stepped up to aid Kazrack. “Got the little sucker on the

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<sup>119</sup> Kazrack continued to follow his oath to Krauchaar. See Session #37

ground, eh?” Helrahd spat.

Derek had dropped his bow by now and was fighting with a battle axe of his own, and chopped one of the zombies, sending it to the ground, but it struggled to get back to its feet. A third zombie attempted to slam the young woodsman, but Derek dodged the blow.

Captain Adalar moved towards the zombies, stopping beside Beorth who appeared to be doing nothing but watching.

“What are you waiting for, human?” the captain asked with disgust, hefting his great axe with glee.

“Anubis, do not let this foul creature escape our wrath,” Beorth intoned, and then he said in a commanding voice. “Let me find him!”

Jeremy lopped the head off of his zombie foe and it disappeared with an acrid smell. The Neergaardian kept the momentum of his movement up and hacked into one of zombies fighting Derek as well.

The gnome facing Kazrack and Helrahd, rolled away and to his feet avoiding follow up blows from the two dwarves. He brought his axe down on Kazrack, who stepped back, getting the slightest edge of the blade right down his chest on an angle from left to right. It was like a line of fire in his body and the dwarf gasped and collapsed; his life’s blood pouring out quickly.

Derek sliced the zombie before him in half and looked to Jeremy. “The one that summoned the zombies is still here. I heard him!”

“Huh?” Jeremy queried, and then he felt a deep cold in his body, starting from his hip and then passing through him as if his veins were slowly freezing. He felt weaker.

He spun around as he heard Derek cry, “There he is!”

There stood a bald gnome with black eyes speckled with green sparkling pinpricks instead of an iris, dressed in black robes.

Meanwhile, Kirla dropped the dying half-orc and charged the gnome that had just driven Kazrack to the ground, slamming him in the head with her flail. The gnome cursed.

“Keep him busy!” Helrahd said, moving to flank the gnome, but their opponent was deft and easily avoided the blows.

“Aren’t you going to do anything?” Captain Adalar asked Beorth again, moving to join the fight versus the necro-gnome.

Beorth did do something. He called to his god, “Anubis, I call on you to smite this evil creature!” And he charged forward forcing his god’s divine will through his staff and bringing it down with all the strength and momentum he could muster.<sup>120</sup>

The gnome’s form seemed to waver as the staff came down, and Beorth noticed that his opponent was enchanted by a spell that Martin often used. But it did not matter, the blow struck the gnome anyway, and soon the black robes were smeared with blood trickling off its bald head.

“Oh no!” Martin cried, as he had left the pits where the young dwarves were finally managing to get out and noticed that both Ratchis and Kazrack were down, and only Helrahd and Kirla stood between the other gnome and the rest of the group. “Help! Healers!” he cried, as he ran in that direction.

The gnome was easily fending off both dwarves, and now the siblings were suffering from deep wounds, but continued to fight.

Jeremy swung his long sword at the necromancer gnome, certain he had hit, but the blade went through the wavery image of the thing, and it snickered.

The snickering did not last very long as Derek brought his axe down on the gnome’s foot, and it cried out, hobbling back

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<sup>120</sup> **DM’s Note:** Beorth used his *smite evil* ability and his power attack feat at once.

slowly. He now looked angry, pulling a black stick from his belt and tapping himself on the head saying, “*Niraghas!*”

In a flash, the necro-gnome was covered in a translucent undulating gray-black aura. Adalar ran up and swung his gleaming rune-covered great axe, but he too was fooled by the *blur* spell.

Beorth swung his staff again, striking with one end, but the other end missed as he jerked in pain. Where the staff had struck the aura surrounding the gnome, it shot out and traveled up the weapon. Beorth felt part of his life drained from him.

Beléar was now running to help Kazrack and the others.

The necro-gnome was surrounded by Beorth, Jeremy, Adalar and Beorth, and was looking around perplexed as to what to do. Jeremy struck the fiendish gnome with his long sword and suffered the same fate as Beorth, but his blow was still substantial, and the gnome shuddered in pain.

“What does he have covering him?” Jeremy asked.

“Ya gotta let me in! Ya gotta let me in! Ya gotta let me in!” Golnar was chanting, just adjacent to the surrounded gnome with his warhammer in hand, looking for an opening.

Beléar arrived to see Helrahd take a terrible blow to the head and fall down. Kirla also took another blow, not being able to get her shield in the way in time. The elder dwarf whispered to his gods and reached out and touched Kirla, helping her wounds to begin closing.

Helrahd made it to his feet and swung one of his axes, as Kirla swung her flail again, but though he was flanked the gnome continued to parry their blows easily.

Across the battlefield the other gnome was getting desperate. “Bring me the winds of the foul plane from whence our ancestors came!” He cried, and a cloud of black oil blasted forth from his hands in all directions. Jolnar and Tolnar were now approaching, but Jolnar fell as the cloud struck him, and Derek wretched. The others all cried out in horror, but gritted through the pain.

Roaring, Captain Adalar brought his great axe down on the gnome and cleaved it twain. The aura dissipated, and the gnome’s body began to hiss as its blood left it.

Beorth did not hesitate but ran over towards the other melee.

Martin was panting from having run so far and so fast and came up behind Kirla as she still desperately fought the remaining half-fiend gnome. “Hold still,” he said and making his arcane gestures said, “*Distortus!*” and tapped Kirla’s shoulder.

Jeremy hustled to join the fight, and Derek followed.

“My brother!” the gnome said. “My brother, Frear was weak. But I, Mokad, am not and I will not fail! I will kill you all one by one.”

And with that the gnome, downed Helrahd, who collapsed in a bloody pile, but he missed Kirla due to Martin’s *blur* spell.

Kirla swung with vicious counter-attack, but she missed, and her momentum spun her around dropping her to the ground.

Blodnath who had been staying back to see where he was most needed, now drew a shining short sword and moved to take up Helrahd’s place in the melee.

Beléar moved to Kazrack and chanted, “Rivkanal, heal this brave dwarf who leads these humans and other things in the righteous ways of the dwarven people.”

Kazrack’s eyelids fluttered, as his wounds began closing and the blood stopped flowing from him at a deadly rate.

Kazrack stood and shook his head back and forth, feeling the weakness of having been on death’s door and being brought

back so quickly.<sup>121</sup> Lifting his halberd, he rushed back into the fight.

Adalar continued roaring, and used his axe to decapitate the dying necro-gnome. The body hissed and spat and released a noxious odor. In a moment it looked like a normal dead gnome.

“We need help! We need help!” Tolnar cried clutching his brother Jolnar in his arms.

“Quit yer blubbering. Go help the others, I’ll see to him,” Captain Adalar said, approaching them.

“*Distortus!*” Martin cast his spell again, this time on Beléar.

“Don’t cast your foul magics on me!” the elder dwarf protested.

The gnome cackled when he saw Kazrack and with one blow sent him tumbling to the ground bleeding out again. He then swung at Kirla who was desperately trying to get up, but the blow bounced off her chain shirt. She swung her flail wildly, but missed.

Blodnath, however, buried his blade into Mokad’s arm and there was spurt of blue blood. The gnome cried out, and for once his grin left him.

Derek dropped out of his run and deftly tumbled past the gnome to avoid his blows and join the fray in a flanking position.

“Rivkanal, stabilize this dwarf and come to him in his dreams, so that he might learn some wisdom,” Beléar said, as he healed Kazrack a second time.

Martin began to bind Ratchis’ wounds the best he could, while Jeremy, finally making it to the fight against Mokad, found his martial skill lacking and all three of his good swings were easily blocked, by the ragged opponent.

However, Mokad must have been growing tired, for his blows did not seem to possess the same speed and strength, and Jeremy was able to avoid them. The evil gnome felt the sting of Blodnath’s sword again and was alerted enough by that to duck to avoid Derek’s axe.

“Rivkanal! Guide my blow!” Kirla cried and with a crack her flail smashed Mokad in the skull. The gnome swung back and forth pathetically for a moment and then fell, blood pouring from his head wound.

“Uh. . . uh. . . mama,” the gnome whimpered before slipping into unconsciousness.

Another healing spell from Beléar and Kazrack was conscious again, and he grudgingly healed himself some before going over to Ratchis, whom Beorth had stabilized with his divine gift.

“So that’s what those things are like,” Beléar mused.

“Not changing your mind are you?” Jeremy jibed, and Beléar threw him an irritated glance. “Ratchis and Kazrack alright?”

“I will live,” Kazrack said, not lifting his head. Ratchis moaned in assent.

“Can we expect to face more of those...gnomes?” Adalar asked, surveying the carnage. “Can they all control undead?”

“I think we destroyed the one that can control undead,” Beorth replied.

“One?” Jeremy asked. “How do we know there is only one?”

“We don’t,” Kazrack croaked.

“We need to fall back,” Beléar said. “Another attack like that and we are done for.”

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<sup>121</sup> **DM’s Note:** Remember, according to Aquerra rules if a character goes below 0 hit points and is brought back by magic (as opposed to rest and being tended to) he/she is considered *exhausted*.

“What about the zombies in the pits?” Jeremy asked.

“Martin and I will take care of them,” Beorth said, and so while the others gathered the injured and their things, and Derek and Jeremy searched the two gnomes, Martin and Beorth poured oil on the trapped zombies and set them all afire.

“Anubis, please release their souls from wherever they might be held and allow them into the peace of the Duat,” Beorth prayed.

Among the things gathered from the gnomes were Mokad’s breast plate and battle axe (which was of very fine quality), and Frear’s wand and a traveling spellbook, along with his pouch of components. These last things were given to Martin to hold.

Martin examined the wand’s dweomer. “There is dark magic here,” he announced. “Very weak, but present. I can determine no more.”

“If it helps, the gnome said something like ‘nironax’ when he used it,” Derek said.

“Nironax?”

“Something like that.”

There was some discussion as to what to do next. Kazrack wanted to set camp at the site of the battle, between the pits so that they could not be easily approached. Captain Adalar wanted to retreat back to the “safehouse” and camp there. Most others agreed.

Beorth wanted to go after the wight that got away, and Ratchis agreed, but they were voted down.

“We can track it tomorrow then,” Beorth said. “Perhaps it fled back to its gnomish masters and we will surprise them.”

It was agreed that they would rest for an hour and then march back.<sup>122</sup>

“I don’t like these gnomes,” Thomas said to Martin. “They aren’t nice like the other ones.”

“You’re absolutely right, Thomas. They’re bad,” Martin replied.

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It was late afternoon by the time they got back to the root house. Beorth and Jeremy carried the unconscious Gothian soldier between them, hoping he’d have some answers as to what had happened.

Camp was made, and watches were set. Beorth felt that once again they were being observed, but there was nothing they could do about it, and they just hoped it was Richard, rather than Mozek.

Martin apologized to Beléar for using the *blur* spell on him.

“Dwarves may not use arcane magics,” Beléar explained. “It is a great evil to our people and its use can twist one into a horrific parody of your former self. This is what happened to the derro and now they are forever banished from our people and must suffer pain of death when encountered for their hearts, minds and bodies have been twisted by magic.”<sup>123</sup>

The first watch went by without event. Martin was awake for the whole thing, not needing the sleep due to his magic ring, and he took part in the second watch as well with Blodnath, Jeremy and Derek.

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<sup>122</sup> **DM’s Note:** An hour’s rest will make those who are *exhausted* merely *fatigued*. Another eight hours of rest is required to remove the fatigue, or seven hours if contiguous with the first hour.

<sup>123</sup> **DM’s Note:** Technically, according to the Aquerra Player’s Guide dwarves and halflings cannot cast arcane spells. However, while halflings are truly unmagical, dwarves *could* take levels of wizard or warlock but would have to risk the mind-bending body-twisting circumstances that are bound to happen to those of their race that use the prohibited magics.

“This is the darkest part of the night,” Beorth warned them before bedding down. “Make sure you are as alert as possible.”

Martin nodded.

The four watchers took turns patrolling the camp in sets of two, while the other two sat watch by the fire to stay warm. Martin and Derek were the first to make the circle.

Blodnath pulled out a small metal box about eight inches on each side. It seemed to have many latches, keyholes, hinges and buttons.

“You’re pretty good with those swords, kid,” the graying dwarf said to Jeremy.

“Thanks. My name is Jeremy.” The Neergaardian replied. “What is that you’re playing with?”

“Oh, my trap-trainer? It’s my father’s invention.”

“Is it some sort of game?” Jeremy reached out a hand to touch it, but the dwarf pulled it away.

“It’s no game! It’s deadly serious.”

“Can I see it?”

“We can’t be watching and me showing you how it works at the same time,” Blodnath said, slipping the box back into his pack.

“Well, I’d like to learn some of that kind of stuff,” Jeremy said. “Trap-making and disarming, unlocking stuff, you know... We’ve run into some of that stuff in the past and it can kill ya!”

“Damn straight.”

“When those traps go off you never know what is gonna happen,” Jeremy continued. “Sometimes I think Ratchis has survived by pure luck.”

“Sometimes it’s better to be lucky than good,” Blodnath said.

“So will you teach me?” Jeremy asked eagerly.

“Heh. You’re gonna have to pay me,” Blodnath replied. “And it ain’t cheap.”

“Hmm. Well, I got a little bit of money, and I think Ratchis owes me some, too.”

“The pig? Heh. You’ll never see that money again,” Blodnath spat into the fire.

Derek decided that he had circled enough, and the glow of the fire looked more inviting than usual in the chill of the night. He moved towards Jeremy and Blodnath to have them relieve him, and Martin seeing the vague outline of Derek moving, came over as well.

At that moment they saw movement at the entrance to the cleared area the root house was in. They had to look over the fallen tree, but the form was definitely small and humanoid. Jeremy jumped to his feet and leaped up on the tree trunk and Derek clambered up as well. Martin ran around the side of the tree, while Blodnath moved to come around the long way.

“Stop now,” Derek commanded the form, pulling an arrow in his bow, and pointing it at the approaching form.

“How about giving me some light?” the figure spoke in a high-pitched voice that crackled as if echoing the embers of the fire.

The figure’s eyes glowed green as it came closer to the aura of the fire behind the tree.

“Are you sure you need it?” Derek asked.

“I figured you’d want it,” the dark form chuckled.

“Mozek Steamwind,” Martin said, doing a horrible job of hiding his fear. He came around the tree and saw the stocky white-green-haired gnome come into view. Martin remembered the large hairy mole on his prodigious nose.

“Mister the Green. Mister Northrop,” Mozek greeted the two adventurers with a nod, and then looked to acknowledge both Derek and Blodnath. It was amazing how such a diminutive figure could instill such fear. Even Blodnath and Derek could sense it.

Jeremy did his best to act nonchalant.

“You are far from home,” the Neergaardian warrior said, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“No, *you* are far from home,” Mozek replied, he sneered showing his teeth which gleamed in the muted light of the fire spilling from over, around and under the huge fallen tree.

“What are you doing here?” Jeremy asked, not giving in to the gnome’s intimidation tactics. “Trying to succeed where your brothers failed?”

Mozek giggled, and Derek felt a chill run up his back. He had to concentrate to keep his hand that held his arrow knocked from shaking.

“If I wanted to kill you, you’d already be dead,” Mozek’s voice was high-pitched, and changed its timbre like shards of glass being scraped against metal. “Unless of course, you are ready to admit that you are the mastermind behind whatever your group’s agenda is and reveal your true power.”

Martin could not tell if Mozek was being facetious.

“So, you just came to talk?” Jeremy replied with a snort. “Fine. We accept your surrender.”

“Oh, you have some balls Mr. Northrop, don’t you?” Mozek said. “They are nearly as big as that witch’s you traveled with. Where is she anyway?”

No one replied.

“I’ll take that to mean she passed on,” Mozek continued. “That’s a shame. I’m sure she would have given me some good thought for food.”

“You mean ‘food for thought’,” Martin corrected.

“No, I mean, ‘thought for food.’ Her brain would have been just as tasty as her lover’s.”<sup>124</sup>

“Watch it, or you’ll be joining your brothers soon,” Jeremy growled.

“Why so rude, Mr. Northrop?” Mozek slipped a pinky into his huge nose and dug around in there and licked off his findings with a long agile tongue. “Anyway, my brothers were just pawns. I knew better than to trust them. Too much like our mom’s side of the family, I think. I sent them to kill you knowing you’d likely kill them. That way I did not have to do it myself, when the time came, and they tried to gang up on me for the power. Though I must admit they were pretty pathetic, I thought they’d at least be able to take one or two of you with them, or a handful of your new dwarven toadies.”

Blodnath spit.

“Who or what is your mother?” Martin the Green asked.

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<sup>124</sup> Chance was killed by Mozek Steamwind. He had his head ripped off and his brain eaten.

“Oh, now, Mister the Green, that would be telling,” Mozek’s smile faded. “But she is a crafty one. She almost scares even me. I’ve sent her on ahead. Don’t you all worry your delicious little heads about her, she is out of your league.”

“What do you want?” Jeremy asked.

“I am only here to help you,” Mozek smiled again. “The army of Gothanius, if you can call it that, threatens the innocent lives of my... ahem...people, and I have already found what I am looking for. Like I said, I sent my mother on ahead to ready it for my coming. So, you might as well give up on that account and deal with this threat that way your little gnomish friends can have a little bit more time of peace before the end comes for them and everyone else in this little part of the world, and beyond, and what a gloriously horrific and painful end it will be.”

Mozek giggled again.

“We will stop you,” Jeremy said.

“Oh will you? How will you do that when your own companions are willing to sacrifice your lives for their own agenda?”

“What in the name of Krauchaar is this guy talking about?” Blodnath blurted.

“Richard the Red,” Mozek said, turning his head to look at Martin. “I know all about him, and Mister the Green here denied knowing him even when it could have saved poor Chance’s life to do otherwise.”

“I didn’t know anything about him!” Martin protested.

“Mm-hmm,” Mozek let out a breath, “Sure, you didn’t. And I’m sure you will continue to maintain that the Academy of Wizardry has no designs of its own on Hurgun’s Maze, even though they have sent one of their craftiest alumni to this part of the world, and his little apprentice.”

Mozek winked.

“I am not his apprentice,” Martin replied.

“No matter,” Mozek said. “We’ve already found the Maze. And while Richard the Red will prove a more entertaining opponent than you, in the end if he gets in my way, he will die a painful death as well. Maybe I’ll even dominate him and have him kill you first. That might be fun.”

The gnome cracked his knuckles.

“So, I must me going,” Mozek Steamwind continued. “Let me reiterate. There is no point in seeking the Maze. It will be too late even if you were to find it. Try to save the gnomes if you can, or better yet leave Derome-Delem altogether. I am sure you will have some years of peace elsewhere before the storm reaches beyond this island.”

With that Mozek took a step backward, as if to leave and Derek could not hold it anymore. He let his arrow fly and it sped towards the interim chief, flying right through him as if he were insubstantial.

“Fools,” Mozek chuckled, and disappeared without fanfare.

It was silent for a long time before anyone even moved.

Derek opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it again. In the dim light of the fire behind them no one could see him do so. Blodnath just harrumphed and began to circle the camp again to remain alert.

“Do you think he has been watching us all along?” Jeremy asked Martin, moving over to the watch-mage.

“Most likely,” Martin replied.

“And do you think he could kill us all?”

“Probably, you saw what he did to Chance as well as I did,” Martin said. “Perhaps we should wake the others.”

“What’s the point? He’s gone, and like he said himself if he wanted to kill us, he would have tried already. Might as well let the others get their sleep; they’re going to need it,” Jeremy said, displaying his occasional flashes of wisdom and practicality.

“You know, we may have to work with Richard to defeat Mozek,” Martin said, almost to himself. “Isis help us.”

“Huh? I thought we already were,” Jeremy said, quizzically.

An hour or so later when Kazrack and Ratchis were awakened for their watches, they were told of Mozek’s visit.

Ratchis did not hide his anger at not having been awakened.

“It doesn’t matter,” Martin said. “It wasn’t *really* him. It was just a projection.”

“A what?” Ratchis asked, scowling.

“A vision, an illusion that allows him to sense its surroundings as if he were here,” Martin explained. “He was probably nowhere near here.”

“He was probably already at Hurgun’s Maze,” Jeremy added groggily, crawling into his bedroll.

“We should be extra careful what we say from now on,” Kazrack said. “We could be being watched at any time.”

“I think he already knows where he is, Kazrack,” Jeremy said, and pulled his blanket over his head to block out the dawn he knew would soon be arriving.

## **Anulem, 7th of Prem – 564 H.E.**

Ra’s Glory rose as it always has since the beginning of time, but it brought little hope to the Fearless Manticore Killers. The soldier they had found as bait for the evil gnome ambush the day before, awoke screaming as he saw Kazrack kneeling beside him. He frantically tried to escape the dwarf. In his weakened state he was more successful at hurting himself than escaping, but Kazrack stood and Jeremy, who was awakened by the scream, hurried over.

Jeremy was able to calm the man who was certain that the dwarves were just some other form of evil gnome.

“My name is Jeremy. What do we call you?” Jeremy asked in his calmest voice.

“I am Ephraim.”

“We are here to stop the evil gnomes,” Jeremy tried to explain.

“It is going to take more of you than you have here,” the man began to get hysterical again, and Martin the Green walked over. “You don’t understand. They came from everywhere, and used fire and wild animals and...and...” His voice cracked. “They used foul magicks. They tricked men into marching into pits full of stakes and then cast spells that made their corpses rise and pull themselves off the stakes and attack us.”

The man began to weep, and Martin placed his hand on his shoulder awkwardly.

“I had to strike down my own best friend,” Ephraim wept. “He came at us with cold dead eyes, murmuring my name... And he obeyed the command of his green-skinned gnome with white hair and green eyes. It was horrible. Horrible!”

As Martin and Jeremy spoke with the man, Kazrack went over and told Beléar about Mozek’s coming in the night. As the dwarf spoke to his elder, Ratchis walked over mid-prayer and placed a hand on the dwarf’s head casting a healing spell on him. The half-orc friar did not want his companions protesting, even though the dwarf still suffered visible wounds on his unarmored body.

The half-orc then stepped over to see how progress went with the soldier. One look at Ratchis and it took another twenty-minutes to get him from hiding behind a tree.

“I have to get back to the castle,” the man suddenly said, standing up straight and seeming more than a little crazed. “I have to tell the king about the evil gnomes in these woods. They are a danger to us all. They mocked us! They animated the dead! They said how they’d feed our babies to their wolverines. I saw one rip off a man’s arm with his bare hands!”

Meanwhile, Ratchis and Kazrack were discussing what to do about Ephraim, it became increasingly clear that allowing him to go back could be the exacerbating element to an already volatile situation, as his tale could lead to war between the Garvan gnomes and the humans of Gothanius.

Captain Adalar walked over to them, twisting a knot into his beard. “Why not just take him prisoner, if he is a danger to the gnomes?” He suggested after he heard what was going on.

Martin and Jeremy had also walked over leaving the man with Beorth, who seemed to do the best job of keeping him calm. Derek just watched as if he were a guest in the camp, standing just far enough away to not intrude, but close enough to hear the important parts.

“Then Gothanius will have an excuse for war against the dwarves as well,” Martin said, overhearing the captain. “We have no authority to take him prisoner.”

Kazrack turned to Martin. “You must come with me to help convince him to return with us to the gnomes and see the truth about them and how an evil minority duped him and his people.”

Martin agreed to try.

They walked over to the man, who was asking Beorth why he traveled with so many dwarves.

“I don’t remember,” Beorth replied.

“I am Kazrack Delver,” Kazrack said, kneeling before the now sitting man. “I would speak with you.”

Ephraim slowly nodded.

“You’ve already met Martin,” Kazrack said. “He is your king’s servant. The kingdom’s watch-mage, he speaks with some authority of your monarch.”

This seemed to confuse the man, but he again nodded.

“I have family here in Derome-Delem, do you?” Kazrack asked.

“Uh, yes... A sister, Laura,” Ephraim choked out.

“I fear my family will suffer from the ravages of war between our peoples. Stopping war is a good cause. Don’t you agree?”

Ephraim nodded.

“It is important that you report the truth of what has happened here to your people and to your king,” Kazrack said. “And you can only learn that by coming with us to see the gnomes. This is the only way war may be avoided.”

Ephraim became visibly upset and began to stand again. “What truth? I have only seen the gnomes’ trickery. I don’t want to see anymore!”

“Please stay calm and remain seated,” Martin said in as soothing a voice as he could muster. “We need to discuss this so you can understand the consequences of your actions.”

Ephraim sat back down.

“What do you know of Menovia?” Martin asked the soldier taking his turn with the convincing.

This question made Ephraim’s strained and wrinkled face twist in even more confusion.

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Please, humor me...”

“They worship Set and keep slaves, I guess,” Ephraim said.

“They are humans, correct?” Can you not see what would happen if a stranger went to Menovia and judged us all by their actions?”

“Everyone knows humans,” Ephraim said stubbornly.

“You have a duty to your people and your king to find out the truth and tell them the truth—” Kazrack began to go on, but Ephraim grew suddenly angry again and stood yanking himself away from them.

“What does a grubber know about my duty to my king? If this truth is so important why not let the watch-mage come with me to Twelve Trolls so he can tell his version alongside mine?”

Martin hesitated and coughed.

“We need to know exactly what happened and what is happening before I give my story to the king,” Martin said. “The whole point is that we don’t have enough information.”

“Maybe you don’t, but I certainly do...” Ephraim gulped loudly. “Didn’t you see the walking dead in Gothian uniforms?”

Martin nodded.

“But you yourself admitted that someone was using trickery,” Kazrack was desperate now. “That was more trickery! Or it could have been.”

Ephraim just shook his head.

“I am going back,” the man insisted weakly. He began to cry again. “Unless you plan to prevent me.”

“No one will prevent you,” Beorth said walking back over. “That I promise you.”

Martin sighed. “I only ask that you give me time to draft a letter to king for you to take with you explaining our position as well as possible.”

Ephraim agreed, and the watch-mage undertook the drafting of the letter.<sup>125</sup> In the meantime, the soldier was given some

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<sup>125</sup> The letter read:

*TO HIS MAJESTY, KING BREVELAN III,*

*I send this letter in the care of Ephraim of Earthport, the last survivor of the expeditionary force sent into the region north of Greenreed Valley. Ephraim has much to tell regarding the trials he experienced in the destruction of that force and the slaughter of his fellows. For my part, I have obtained additional information regarding the situation there, that might put that situation in new perspective.*

*A normally peaceful gnome village to the north of Greenreed Valley has been infiltrated by a family of gnomes that have the blood of a demon within them. This miscegenation has polluted their bloodline with evil and granted them great power, with which they have subjugated their peace-loving fellows. For so-long that the hell-gnomes control the area they pose a threat to any humans that intrude, as witnessed by the fate of the expeditionary force. I have combined my team with a band of dwarves that seek to destroy the hell-gnomes and free their innocent cousins from bondage and terror.*

*Should we succeed the threat will be abated and the gnomes shall become our peaceful neighbors once more.*

rations to eat, and was given a suit of armor from that collected from some of the dead soldiers, by Beorth who also gave him a long sword and scabbard.

Meanwhile, Ratchis and Kazrack talked with Adalar and Beléar some more.

“I still think we should take him prisoner and drag him with us,” Adalar said.

“We cannot responsible for him if we end up in another fight, and he is tied up and defenseless,” Kazrack said. Beléar nodded.

“I will not allow him to be taken prisoner against his will,” Ratchis said. “He has committed no crime, except to suffer at the hands of the evil gnomes. He does not deserve punishment for that.”

Captain Adalar harrumphed.

“And what if this means that more people will die?” Beléar asked.

“Sometimes that is the price of freedom,” Ratchis replied.

And so, as noon approached, Ephraim was directed on how to return to Summit, and given food to last three days.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come back with me?” Ephraim asked Martin, fear coming over his face as he suddenly realized he would have to go back to town alone.

“We have a duty to perform and a truth to uncover,” Martin said solemnly. “Time is of the essence.”

“Also, one of the undead escaped and we need to track it back to its masters and make them taste the vengeance of my god, Anubis,” Beorth said, as if sliding off his compassionate visage to reveal that part of him that loathes the undead even if all other memory were gone.

Ephraim nodded weakly and began to march away, looking back over his shoulder once.

The group finished packing the last of their things and made their way to where the battle had taken place the day before – from there Ratchis, Derek and Helrahd would search for the wight’s tracks.

**End of Session #39**

## **END OF “OUT OF THE FRYING PAN: BOOK TWO: CATCHING THE SPARK**

*To be continued in “Out of the Frying Pan” – Book Three: Fanning the Embers. . .*

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*I would advise that no further troops be sent into the region unless and until our force can suppress this threat. Given the other hostile factors in the region, Gothanius can ill-afford to lose any more of its defenders in this time of crisis.*

*Yours With Respect,*

*Martin the Green*