

Out of the Frying Pan

Book II: Catching the Spark

A D&D Story Hour

Written and Compiled by Osvaldo Oyola

With special thanks to Eric Gershik, John Giotta, Ken Ip, Helene Villaume, Brian Weaver, who were the game's starting players, Eric Minton, who joined soon after, the other players who joined the game much later, Jon Svendsen, Matt Urbanski, and Jesse Pynigar, and to Sean Teasdale who frequently served as sounding board and collaborator for all things Aquerra.

AQUERRA

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

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Out of the Frying Pan – Book II: Catching the Spark (part one)

Cast of Player Characters (in order of appearance)

- Martin the Green - a human illusionist sent to Gothanius by the Academy of Wizardry.
- Kazrack Delver - a dwarven fighter of an immigrant family, returned to his homeland
- Ratchis of Nephthys - a half-orc cleric/ranger dedicated to an abolitionist god.
- Jana of Westron - a human girl with a mysterious past that dabbles in witchcraft.
- Beorth Sahkmet - a human paladin dedicated to Anubis, guardian of the dead.
- Jeremy Northrop - a human fighter from Neergaard, seeking adventure.
- Derek Jamison - a young human ranger sent by Martin's order to assist him.

The story so far:

Recent graduate of the Academy of Wizardry, Martin the Green made his way to Westron to meet up with a man named Briad Ketchum who was leading a group of young men to the Kingdom of Gothanius in Derome-Delem. However, the man would not let the young alumnus join the group unless he signed a contract that required him to join the effort to slay a dragon that plagued that kingdom and in return gain citizenship, land, and monetary reward. Martin acquiesced. He met several of the others traveling to the obscure kingdom, including Simon and Peter, who he became friends with. He also met Cheribuck, who warned that he had seen three of the others picking pockets and conning folks in the market of Westron. They traveled upon the Golden Scrag to Princeton, in Derome-Delem, a backward place where knights patrolled the land around tiny fiefs. There a young woman named Maria joined the group. She seemed to have some skill with the sword and bow. The group traveled from there to Bountiful, where Martin spent a day conferring with Alexandra the Lavender, the Watch-Mage there. While here, Cheribuck had to stop James from beating up his two younger (and softer) brothers.

The group left the road there, and traveled through thick woods, via ways that Briad said he knew to avoid the "cursed" town of Stonebridge. However, while spending a day beside the Tall Twin River, the group was attacked by orcs. Three of the group were killed, but Martin discovered that Tanweil had killed the vast majority of the orcs on his own. Cheribuck, James and Maria had seemed to hold their own well also. Demoralized somewhat after the deaths, the group crossed the river and made a harrowing trip up into the mountains, to a trail that led to Northfork Wall and eventually Twelve Trolls. Arriving at Castle Gothanius, they found several other groups of would-be dragon slayers had also arrived.

Prologue¹

Martin wiped his sweaty palms upon his Academy robes and then realizing what he was doing, placed his hands behind his back to stop himself. He nervously examined his robes that were various shades of green for sweat stains, and the suddenly realized that Daniel had made a left turn towards large double doors.

"This must be the audience chamber," Martin thought. He had been eating his mid-day meal, when the castle steward had approached him and had said that the king wanted to meet and speak with him right away. "I guess I'll have to get used to this kind of thing," Martin thought. "I am a representative of the Academy of Wizardry now, wherever I may go."

Martin took a deep breath.

¹ This prologue was played via AOL Instant Messenger to catch Eric Minton (who played Martin) up with the campaign at this point and acclimate him to the setting. This meeting takes place on the 5th of Syet, 564 H.E., the same day Crumb's Boys reached Northfork Wall.

"Are you okay?" Daniel asked.

"Yes, I just, um, have never addressed a king before," Martin replied. "Any important protocols you can advise me on, well, I would appreciate it."

"Fine. You will kneel and bow in his presence and not stand until given permission. You will not look him directly in the eye, and you shall address him as 'your majesty.' I assume that any other basic graces of good manners I can leave in your hands?" Daniel paused before the doors that were flanked by guards in plate mail, wearing the gold and white tabards with the star of Gothanius upon them. The guards bore ransours.

Martin bit lower lip, "Yes. Thank you for your help."

"Tom the Silver seemed to know these things naturally, I assumed they taught you them in that school of yours," Daniel said, gesturing to a guard who went inside the doors to announce them.

"Tom and I were trained for somewhat different tasks. I assume that you came to know him reasonably well during his time here?" Martin replied.

"Reasonably. He was a good man," Daniel said, looking down. "It was a shame what happened to him."

The doors, which were carved with intricate patterns of mountains and flames, opened again. Daniel led Martin through them. Beyond was a small curtained off area.

"Wait here a moment, I will announce you, when you hear your name, and the curtain opens you may step through...and remember what I told you."

"Yes. Thank you for your help," Martin repeated, weakly, and Daniel disappeared through the curtain.

There was some indecipherable whispering and after a few moments Martin heard Daniel's voice state aloud, "Martin the Green, Watch-Mage and esteemed Alumnus and Representative of the Academy of the Wizardry."

The curtain opened.

Martin stepped through the open curtain looking around to take everything in, while trying not to gawk. He hoped he succeeded.

The audience chamber was not as impressive as he imagined it would be.

Atop a raised dais were two thrones, one more ornate than the other. Three smaller ornate chairs sat on a slightly lower (but still raised) level. A velvet curtain of burgundy was draped behind the thrones, along with a shield holding the coat of arms of Gothanius. At the left and right of the chamber stood more plate-mailed guards, and tapestries on the walls behind them held scenes Martin could not pay close enough attention to make out. The king sat in the more ornate throne. He appeared to be in his 40's with a thick, but well-kempt brown beard. Martin recognized the captain of the guard from the initial inspection upon his arrival with the others. He was standing off the dais to the right.

Martin walked forward at a slow, even pace, his eyes respectfully downcast, his face in the shadow of his longish shaggy hair, in Thrician style. He frantically looked for scuffed spots on the floor to indicate where prior supplicants might have knelt, as he forgot to ask just where this kneeling business took place.

Not seeing any spot that is more or less scuffed than any other, he cursed himself inwardly for not asking the right questions. He stopped about halfway to the throne and got down on one knee, bowing.

"You may stand, Martin," the King said in a soothing baritone. "We cannot express enough how happy it makes us to have a representative of the Academy of Wizardry here once again to help our humble nation."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," said Martin, rising. He keeps his eyes on the King's feet, his gaze occasionally rising as far as the man's hands. "I am pleased and honored to be here on the Academy's behalf."

"So, they *did* send you. . . "

Martin gulped back a "damn!" and hoped the king had not noticed. "It would ill-become the Academy to neglect the Kingdom of Gothanius, Your Majesty. We are all saddened by the death of Tom the Silver, but the duty remains."

Though the chamber felt drafty to the young Alumnus, Martin felt a drop of sweat slid down his back. The king let out a joyful laugh, "And here we were worried that you had simply come to fulfill the call for citizens and heroes. But of course not, the Academy does not send their graduates so lightly. We had sent word that we need a new Watch-Mage some time ago. We were afraid that the message had never arrived. This is grand news that needs to be announced to Kingdom. We have been without what was once one of our closest advisors and protectors for too long. Did you know Tom the Silver?"

Martin smiled politely, carefully avoiding the King's gaze. "I am afraid that I did not, Your Majesty. But he was well-regarded among the Alumni of the Academy, and many of my fellows have spoken well of him. I cannot hope to fill his shoes... quite literally, I fear, for I would not wish to mislead you here. I am not, in fact, his successor. The Academy is—was—still in discussion as to the best possible candidate for Watch-Mage of Gothanius when I left. But until Tom's successor arrives, I am authorized to act in his stead, and I will gladly fulfill that role to the best of my ability while I am about my other duties."

There was an awkward pause.

"So, they sent a temporary watch-mage. . . strange that they should bother. . . but still to have someone here with a wide knowledge as they do instill at the Academy will be useful. . ." the King paused again. "Did you sign a contract when you agreed to come here?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Would it please you if we were to strike that contract null and void and simple appoint you to the roles we have for one with your talents here in the kingdom?" the King asked, leaning forward.

"I am at your disposal, Your Majesty," Martin replied.

"Of course, you are," the king smiled. He sat back in his throne and crossed his legs. "Now, we need to talk about these young men that have found their way to our fine kingdom. You have traveled with them what impression do you get in general?"

Martin gathered his thoughts and the replied, "They are young and healthy, for the most part, but few have any training for combat of any sort. Some of those few who are so trained are scoundrels and blackguards. As a whole, you have a good force of potential farmers, but whether they can be of service in slaying a dragon is in doubt."

The king was silent for a time.

"Is it not often said that heroism is found where least expected? I am sure among these young men there are some who are up to the task, and as for these scoundrels and blackguards... Well, I will have you point them out to Captain Merrick" he gestured to the captain of the guard. "So, they can be rounded up and escorted away."

"Ah. That is a great responsibility, determining who is a scoundrel and who is not... I would wish additional time to make that determination properly, and to determine which are redeemable and which are not." With a smile, Martin added, "It is also said that a thief at the table is safer than a thief in the stable, when one's horses are concerned."

The King stood and walked up to Martin clamping a broad hand down on the young Watch-Mage's shoulder, smiling broadly. "Such wisdom they give you in the Academy. . . We are surprised at the youth of these great advisors. . . "

But then the king's face became grave again, "But your comment leads us into the first mission we want to give you for your time in Gothanius." He turned and walked back to his throne and sat. "As you know, we are sending out these would-be dragon-hunters in groups of five. We know good and well that not all will be as dedicated to this task as we might hope. We will not judge these young men too harshly in this endeavor, as long as they cause no harm, and as long as their cowardice does not lead to the harm of Gothanius' subjects. This is where you come in. We want you to be the representative of the Crown in the field, so to speak."

Martin listened to the king carefully.

The monarch continued, "Of course, your safety is of our utmost concern. We cannot allow such a fate as befell Tom the Silver to befall you, but again, such are the dangers of your station."

Martin felt as if he might swoon, as the waters of his position swelled over his head. He gathered his wits and asked, "That would be a great and formidable responsibility, Your Majesty. What would it entail?"

"As you know the majority of our Alder-villages lie within the valley to the west of here, and it is the new area of our expansion—after the defeat of the Fir-Hagre Orcs—that the dragon appeared but has moved into our more settled areas, the closest Alder-village to Greenreed Valley is called Summit. We shall send you there," the king explained. "You will be set up as a guide and advisor for these groups that travel throughout these two valleys searching for the dragon. You will also collect information on their progress, and we shall leave it in your hands to judge who among those groups can be excused of their duty and return to Twelve Trolls for whatever reward we deem them worthy of. The groups will be advised to find you in Summit."

"I would be glad to assist, Your Majesty. However, my other obligations to the Academy may require me to travel somewhat within the realm of Gothanius and the adjoining areas, and so I would prefer to have some liberty to move about while fulfilling this task. Would that be possible, Your Majesty?"

"Well, it would be a waste of your talents to keep you chained in one place, of course, you might need to travel out of Summit to investigate some of the reports of these groups for yourself. Certainly, you must travel there as well which may take as little as two days, but could take longer if the weather does not permit easy travel," the king replied.

"Then I accept, Your Majesty. In the meantime, if I might be so bold, might I request access to Tom the Silver's quarters, that I might begin to put his affairs in order?" Martin asked.

The King smiled. "Do they teach you precognition at the Academy as well? I was about to offer you his quarters to stay in. I will have Daniel show you to them, and perhaps he can show you the library and the trophy room, where a monument to our former Watch-Mage's service and sacrifice can be found."

Martin nodded, and took a deep, shuddering breath. "Thank you, Your Majesty. I would be honored."

The king clapped his hands, "Bring us a flagon of wine to share and drink to the coming of this representative of the fine and influential Academy!"

A servant came from behind the wall where the throne sat, bringing two goblets and poured a huge serving of wine for each of them.

The king raised his glass and Martin did as well, smiling when he saw his hand was shaking much less than he had expected it to.

The king toasted, "To the Academy of Wizardry, may it help increase the influence of our benevolent nation, so it may take its rightful place among the grand nations of Aquerra!"

"To the Academy!" Martin said. He waited to see if the king drank, and then drank down the wine hurriedly, so they would finish at the same time.

"Daniel, will now show you to your new quarters, and then the library. We will speak again before you leave. Daniel will arrange for you to travel to Summit with one of the groups - if we think that they are appropriate to keep you safe," the king said.

"There is safety in numbers, Your Majesty. Thank you for your concern."

Daniel walked over to Martin turned to the king and bowed. Martin handed his goblet to the servant that had brought it and bowed deeply to the king.

"Go with our good graces," the king said, and the steward led Martin out of the audience chamber. The Watch-Mage remained very conscious of his breathing to avoid hyperventilating.

"I think the King likes you. Remain clever, but not too clever and you will do well," Daniel said, leading Martin through the dining room to a rear hall and a stone stairway leading up.

"I think I can manage that," Martin said quietly, and his thoughts went to the banquet meant to initiate the dragon-hunt in only two days' time.

Ralem, 8th of Syet – 564 H.E.²

There was a soft knocking on the door of Martin's new quarters. This suite of rooms he found himself in, separated from the friends he had made while traveling here to Gothanius, had once belonged to Tom the Silver. But Tom the Silver was dead, and Martin was still unsure how, and now here he was filling his shoes, however temporarily, and feeling the weight of the responsibility on his shoulders, and the fear that accompanied it. Martin the Green had searched the room thoroughly looking for some clue, or journal or sign from his predecessor, but all he found were some dusty common components, and a crap-covered bird perch he assumed had belonged to Tom's familiar.

Martin answered the door. A young servant girl stood there with his freshly washed Academy robes over her arm.

"Here you go, sir," she said with a shy smile.

Flustered, Martin took the robes with a mumbled "thank you," not sure of what to do next. She just stood there and looked at him and he at her.

There was a long pause.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" she finally asked. She had been waiting to be dismissed. Martin inwardly berated himself, not being used to the niceties of castle living.

"Um, no, thank you very much," Martin replied.

The servant wished him a good afternoon and left, and Martin closed the door. At the Academy, students were responsible for dropping off and picking up their own laundry, and it was students themselves who did the washing. He laid out his robes on the bed and went back to the desk where he had been preparing a letter to his Academy contact. The last group of "dragon-slayers" had arrived that afternoon and the banquet in the honor of all who had answered the king's call did not need to have been delayed as had been feared.

As Martin scribbled, he felt something furry climb up his back and onto his head. He felt little furry paws on his forehead as little brown eyes looked into his. "I want a nut," a voice said in his head.

² Part of this portion of the story took place via instant messenger, but part of it is a re-ordered portion from Sessions #11 and #12.

Martin reached into the pouch he kept at his side at all times and pulled out an acorn and handed it to his squirrelly familiar.

“Yummy,” the squirrel said telepathically.

Martin scratched the rodent’s head and said, “Now leave me alone for a little while, Thomas. I want to finish this before the banquet.”

“Nuts at the banquet?” Thomas inquired.

“Probably not, Thomas. You can’t come anyway,” Martin replied, and he could sense Thomas’ annoyance as he climbed down and took his spot under the bed again.

A few hours later, dressed in his robes of varying green, his hair pulled back in the best pony-tail he could make, Martin made his way down to the Great Hall with a cluster of many other young men, who were eager to eat the good foods the castle had to offer and to finally hear the details of the great mission they would likely risk their lives trying to accomplish.

The Great Hall was packed with the young men, most in the finest clothes they could find among those the castle staff had provided them. The chamber held three balconies, from two of which hung tapestries that showed the symbols of the alder-villages of Gothanius, which Martin had seen the day before in the trophy room.³ In one corner a group of musicians sat with their instruments, surrounded by a choir of young boys. They were all silent, waiting for some signal that the royal family would make their entrance. A good number of what were obviously nobles mingled among them, eyeing the uncouth visitors and would-be heroes nervously. They were decked out in their finest clothes and jewelry. The doors to the dining room were held open by ceremonial guards in shining plate mail and golden tabards, bearing ranseurs. This room was also full of young men from many places in Aquerra, but most had the typical Herman-Lander look, olive skin, dark hair and brown or green eyes.

Martin had just started looking around the dining room to spot his friends and noticing that he had missed the first course when the horns announcing the coming of the royal family rang loudly in the Great Hall. Martin turned and went back into the hall as a rush of young men came out of the dining room and he lost Maria in the crowd, whom he had just spotted.

The horns rang out again, and the great double doors that Martin had taken into the audience chamber two days before opened. From the curtain beyond, emerged a man in fine dress, with curly golden locks and boyish face. He stood to the right of the doors and spoke: “Presenting the most honored family of our Queen: The Queen’s Mother: Selma Pritchett!”

A woman approaching venerability, wearing very tight and low cut clothing came through the parted curtain. She wore what seemed to be an inch of make-up and she hungrily eyed all the young men clapping for her before standing to the left.

“The Queen’s lovely sisters, Brea and Vivica!” Two homely middle-aged women dressed as young princesses might be came through the parted curtains. They curtsied in tandem and then stood to the left beside their mother.

“The Royal Architect, Baulch Stonefingers!” A gaunt dwarf with sunken eyes and a frazzled beard walked through the curtain. He wore a burgundy hood, which he pulled off as he walked out and nodded his head to the politely clapping crowd.

Next, the Royal Hunter (a strapping young man with a well-kept goatee dressed in the ceremonial clothing of a fox hunt) and the Royal Smith (a stout man with a mustache, who looked uncomfortable in his pleated vest and bow tie) were announced.

³ The towns and villages of the Kingdom of Gothanius are called “alder-villages” as aldermen appointed by the king run them, and make up a council of alders that help advise the king.

There was another fanfare on the horns and the announcer cleared his throat, “And now the Royal Family!”

The applause swelled. “The Royal Princesses!” the crier said. “Princess Marion!” A pretty little girl of about 12 or 13 came through the parted curtain. She wore a dress of pink and lavender with flowery pattern on the trim and a daisy in her hair. She curtsied, red-faced and shy and then hurried to stand beside her grandmother.

“Princess Tracel!” A short and pretty girl of about fifteen, with a round face and soft curves walked out of the parted curtain. She wore a dress of powder blue and had fine golden-brown hair pulled into two braided bunches on the top of her head. As people applauded, she curtsied and then waved and stood beside her younger sister.

“Princess Veldicca!” The next princess was taller than the last two, with darker hair in a long braid and light blue eyes that shone brightly. She had pale skin, and wore a dress of light green, and kept her hands folded in front of her lap when she bowed. Princess Veldicca looked perhaps a year or two older than Tracel. She stood with her sisters.

“Princess Deirdre!” Princess Deirdre was shorter and much thinner than Tracel, with lighter brown hair that ended at her chin. She looked almost boyish and was an indeterminate age somewhere in the range of Veldicca and Tracel. She wore a dress of darker green with a tall collar and golden buttons.

“Princess Selma!” A tall woman with a sleeveless dress of a cream-color came marching through the curtain, and then catching herself, changed her gait to one more becoming a princess. She had a slightly darker complexion, dark hair like Veldicca, but green eyes like Deirdre. Selma’s bare arms were very muscular. She was definitely the oldest.

There was another fanfare, followed by the announcement of the heir to the throne, “Crown Prince Brevalin the Fourth!” A tall young man, perhaps only a year or two older than the oldest princess came through the curtain followed by a heavily armored guard. The prince was perhaps half a head shorter than his tallest sister and had curly dark hair, and fine clothing of black with golden trim. He bowed to the resounding applause.

There was a pause and then a much longer fanfare, which was followed with a soft theme played by the musicians. “And announcing their royal majesties, may they live long and in good health, King Brevalin the Third and his Queen Rosemerta!”

Everyone looked up, and upon the balcony above the doorway came the king with his wife two steps behind him. The king wore his finest kingly robe and tall crown, and the queen was similarly draped, her dark hair in long braids over her shoulders.

Everyone got down on one knee and bowed their head and there was another fanfare.

The king spread his arms open, “You may rise, my guests and subjects!”

All obeyed.

“We want to personally welcome you for answering our call in this our time of need,” the king said, addressing the crowd. “You young men are the future of Gothanius, a fresh infusion of blood that will carry us to a new strength and place in the world through heroism and cleverness. We also want to thank the alderman and their families who are present and their representatives, for their wisdom in leadership will help to form and guide this strength.”

The king paused and a smattering of applause, became stronger as other joined in.

“Now, we know that many of you have journeyed hard and long to be here and are anxious to learn the details of this endeavor and get started, but we ask you to be patient a bit longer. Daniel the castle steward will be briefing all of you after dinner, but before we eat I we do want to make this announcement in regard to some rumors you may have heard: You all *will be* asked to form groups of five to undertake your hunting and slaying of the dragon. However, the reward has been increased. The monetary portion has been doubled to 10,000 pieces of silver (to be divided by the successful group) and more importantly the five who return victorious shall gain the hand in marriage of my five remaining beautiful daughters!”

There was a gasp, a pause and then a cheer, but Martin looked at the princesses' faces and could see that this was news to them.

The king continued, "And now we eat another course and afterwards there will be music and dancing, and do not be shy. Introduce yourselves to the princesses, for who knows? One day soon you may be a hero and choosing among them for your own bride."

With that the king retreated away from the balcony with the queen and there was more fanfare, and people began to seek seats in the dining room. Martin followed them back in there, and at a far table he saw Simon and Peter taking seats next to each other and chatting with a blonde fellow in a white shirt and black vest. At the end of the table was a smaller fellow in a similar outfit, but with a huge bush of curly hair, and a tall man of horrid looks, red nappy hair and wearing a white toga cinched with rope belt and bright blue tights. Martin made his way towards them.

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Session #12

“This is our friend Martin the Green,” said Peter. “He traveled with us from Westron. He’s a Watch-Mage.”

“Well, not technically a Watch-Mage,” Martin said to the gathered companions. “But I am an alumnus of the Academy.” He was about six feet tall with shoulder length sandy brown hair that was shaggy and uneven in the back and wore the familiar robes of an Academy of Wizardry graduate in shades of green.

“Wow, they doobled the rewahrd,” said Chance.

“Yes, however, I am not that interested in marrying a human princess in a land that was stolen from my people,” said Kazrack, as servants poured a spicy tomato soup into their bowls and sprinkled cheese on top that grew soft as it touched the steaming broth.

Ratchis smirked, “I don’t think you are going to have to worry about that.” He lifted the bowl to his lips blew on the hot soup and began to slurp it down.

Chance pulled the big man’s arms down. “Ya cahnt do that,” the Wallbrookian said. “Ya gotta use a spoon.” He handed Ratchis a soup spoon.

Maria smiled as she sipped her own soup. Martin looked at Ratchis with a nervous smile, and the woodsman felt his face grow hot.

“You all traveled here from Westron?” Jana asked.

“Yes, we were recruited by a gentleman named Briad Ketchum,” said Martin.

Several more courses were served, along with more wine and more pitchers of ale. The companions ate and chatted with their new acquaintances, and the meal was interrupted several times for toasts initiated by a tipsy nobleman in honor of the king. They could see Finn, Frank, Gwar and others eating and talking happily at the far end of the same table.

“So, do you plan to travel with the twins and Maria to hunt for the dragon?” Beorth asked Martin.

“Well, perhaps, but my mission here is slightly different, as I was sent by the Academy, and the king may have a different role for me to fulfill. However, if I do go, most likely it will be with them,” Martin replied.

“Well, perhaps our groups can work together? There has been no stipulation that the groups are required to set off alone,” said Kazrack, being practical as always. “If there really is a dragon out there, ten would stand a better chance than five.”

“Well, that seems very reasonable. Even if I do not end up traveling with Simon and Maria and the others, I will try to mention your idea to them. It would seem to be safest,” Martin said.

Everyone ate the succulent pheasant in near silence, with Chance only occasionally chastising Ratchis for his table manners. The servants began to clear the table again, even more quickly than before.

“The king must be done eating,” said Martin. There was a fanfare of horns and then the band struck up and people began to move back into the Great Hall.

“Dessert shall be served after some dancing and the briefing is given,” someone announced to the crowd.

The many young men made a border about the dance floor, and others went to fight over the few free chairs in the chamber. Chance and Jana stood on the western edge of the dance floor and watched as a few noble couples walked out to dance. Princess Deirdre, who was only about five feet two inches tall and had reddish hair and a green dress walked across the dance floor and the crowd parted for her without a word, many of the lads staring at her boyish

beauty. The princess took a seat with the musicians before a lap harp, which she took and began to play beautifully accompanied by the band. Nobles applauded softly and politely, joined by the would-be heroes.

“Ah neva been inna cahsel buhfuh,” Chance said to Jana. “Ahve you?”

“No, Chance, I haven’t,” Jana said.

“Ya know ya luke very pretty in thut dress,” Chance said, looking down at his feet bashfully.

“Thank you, Chance,” Jana said with a sly smile.

“May I have this dance?” said a soothing tenor from behind them.

Jana and Chance turned to see Markle standing there, in a black shirt and jacket, and black pants and shining boots. He was holding his hand out to Jana. He had shaved and washed, and now his good looks were more than apparent.

“Sure,” said Jana, taking his hand and letting herself be led out to the dance floor.

Chance’s sneer followed them.

Markle danced beautifully, and Jana felt a little out of her depth, but the handsome Verdunian glided around with her in tow, making her feel as if she were almost floating.

Jeremy stood by Maria who wore a sneer as she watched the women in their dresses dancing with elegantly dressed men.

“Would you like to dance,” Jeremy said gesturing to the dance floor.

“Oh, you think I can’t?” Maria said confrontationally. She grabbed his hand pulled him on the dance floor.

Kazrack and Ratchis stood by Simon and Peter who talked excitedly about dragons. The dwarf craned his head looking to see if he spotted the Royal Architect but could not seem him. Ratchis pretended to listen to what they said, but he really watched Jeremy and Maria dance. Chance made his way across the dance floor to where the youngest princess Marion was twitching to the music and looking around wide-eyed for someone to dance with.

“Ya like ta dance?” Chance said to the girl, trying to figure out if she had even reached her thirteenth summer yet.

“Uh-huh,” she replied, nodding her head vigorously.

“Well come on then,” he said, and in a moment, they were acting like two childish fools in the middle of the dance floor. Chance swung around Marion and she screamed in joy, making the castle guards that lined the ways peer at them nervously.

Jana looked over from where she danced with Markle and smiled knowingly.

Beorth stood not far from the musicians and noticed that one of the princesses had pushed her chair back behind the crowd watching the dance and pulled a book out from under her dress and began to surreptitiously read it. He was standing by her trying to see what it was she read when she looked up at him. It was Princess Veldicca, her bright blue eyes shining from behind a border of luminous black hair that fell over her shoulders.

“I’m sorry,” the paladin said meekly. “I was just curious about what you were reading.”

“Oh, you like books?” the princess asked with the slightest bit of a smile.

“Yes, I like to read when I can find some books to read. Religious books, mostly,” Beorth answered.

“Oh, I’d love a religious book. I have read all the books in our library about ten times each, and I’m getting kind of tired of them,” Veldicca said. She gestured to the book she held on her lap. “This is the second of a three-volume set on kobolds.”

“Oh, sounds... um, interesting,” said Beorth politely.

“Oh, it is. Did you know that even though both kobolds and gnolls are dog-like there is no evidence that they are in any way a related species despite what many sages say?”

“Really?”

Meanwhile, Jana and Markle continued to dance, even though the song ended, and another slower song began.

“So, tonight is the night,” Markle said, softly into her ear. “Are you sure you won’t be joining us?”

Jana smiled, as she was whirled around, hardly needing to pay attention to her feet, “I already told you I will do the part you asked, but I will not go beyond that.”

“Well, I will come to you tonight and let you know when it is starting. After that all you have to do is keep your friends out of it. It should not be too hard,” Markle said, and then dipped her.

“And while I will consider our debt fulfilled. I want you to know that there can be further reward just for your little part. When it is all said and done, or if you need a place to go, look for us in Ogre’s Bluff in seven days,” Markle said.

“Ogre’s Bluff?” Jana asked, as they glided past Princess Tracel who was now dancing with Jeremy, when Maria had abandoned him to talk strategy with Simon and Peter.

“One of the small villages far to the west. If you make it there, I’ll find you,” Markle said.

“Okay,” said Jana.

“You know you dance excellently. Have you ever had any lessons?” Markle asked the young witch.

“No,” she replied with her sly pretty smile.

“One would never have known.”

“So, how do you feel about your father promising your hand in marriage and that of your sisters to whomsoever slays the dragon?” Jeremy asked Princess Tracel.

“Well, I hope it is someone handsome,” Tracel said, blushing innocently while blinking her big round eyes on her cherubic face. “Normally, I’d only want someone of noble blood, but someone who is a hero that my father deems a noble will be one, so that will do fine.”

“Oh, heh, Um... What about your sisters? How do they feel about it?” Jeremy asked.

“Well, Marion is kind of too young to really understand what this all means, and Veldicca and Deirdre are always busy with books or music, so who knows, and Selma, all she cares about is acting like a man, learning how to use a sword, and talking back. It is very unbecoming for a proper lady.”

“But you want to get married?” Jeremy asked.

Tracel looked at the Neergardian slyly and then smiled, “Yes, I do. I was so envious of our eldest sister when she

got to marry that Prince from Rhondria.”

“Oh, I thought Selma was the eldest,” said Jeremy.

“Oh, no. The eldest, Mariah, had to be married to create a bond between our kingdom and Rhondria,” Tracel explained.

They continued to dance through to another song.

“Listen, I was hoping that we could meet another time and talk. I wanted to . . .um, ask you a favor,” Jeremy asked.

Tracel cocked her head and a knowing smile came across her face. “Oh, a rendezvous!” she squealed, and then whispered. “How about tomorrow after mid-day meal in the garden?”

“That would be fine,” Jeremy replied.

The song finished and the blare of horns announced that the briefing would now start. A huge banner was unfurled of the front balcony and upon it was a map of Gothanius. Upon the map they could see Twelve Trolls, all the alder-villages, the area leading into Greenreed Valley and many icons of a dragon’s head obviously displaying the place the wrym had been spotted.

A man with curly dark hair, dressed in an off-white tunic and with a clean boyish face that made him appear too young to have the air of authority that surrounded him, stepped before the gathered crowd of would-be dragon-slayers.

“Hello,” the young man said. “As many of you may know, my name is Daniel and I the steward of Castle Gothanius and aid the king in every way I can. As you can see the map above is one of the grand Kingdom of Gothanius. You will be receiving a copy of a similar map as you register and leave the castle to begin your hunt.”

Kazrack raised his hand.

“Please save your questions for after I am done,” Daniel said. “As His Royal Highness has said, you will be breaking up into groups of five for this mission. Starting at noon tomorrow you may register your group and leave for the valley beyond and go where you will find the dragon and deal with it. Starting tomorrow after breakfast, weapons, armor, and some other general equipment will be made available to you in the trophy room. You have three days starting at noon tomorrow before you *must* leave the castle and begin the hunt, though obviously the sooner you leave the more likely you are to avoid bad weather on the road and have a chance to find the dragon before anyone else does.”

Daniel pulled a long pointer from behind his back and gestured to the banner/map. “As you can tell the most dragon sightings have been within Greenreed Valley, but also in the vicinity of Summit and Ogre’s Bluff,” the steward said. “We recommend you make your way to one or the other and begin your hunts there.”

He paused and scanned the crowd, “Now, any questions?” Kazrack’s hand was already in the air. Daniel looked the crowd over to see if there was someone else he could call on.

“Is there a person available; a witness to the dragon that we will be able to question?” Kazrack asked.

”No,” replied Daniel. “Any other questions?”

“How big is it?” asked Kazrack.

“It is said to be at from 60 to 80 feet long,” said Daniel.

“Does that include the neck and tail?” asked Kazrack.

Daniel sighed, “The information I have does not rightly say.”

Simon raised his hand and the castle steward happily called on the pudgy kid.

“I heard that the dragon is green in color. Is that true?”

“Yes, eyewitness accounts say that the dragon is green,” Daniel answered.

Kazrack raised his hand again.

“Yes,” Daniel said to the dwarf resignedly.

“Any particular trends in how and where it attacks?” the dwarf asked.

“Many of the accounts say that the dragon enjoys attacking merchant caravans, particularly those with many wagons and beasts of burden,” Daniel explained. “Any more questions anyone?”

Kazrack raised his hand again.

“No?” The steward ignored the dwarf. “Okay, thank you. A dessert of strawberry-flavored ice is now being served in the dining room. Enjoy!”

The crowd began to disperse, and long lines formed to get their dish of the dessert.

As Jana walked into the dining room to get in line, she noticed Devon walking with his bowl and eating the sweet treat, getting back on the back of the line. But as he walked, he slammed into a tall lithe hawk-featured man dressed in a long black cloak.

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going, dimwit!” Devon said loudly.

“Sir, I would inform you that it was you that was not looking where you were going, but obviously your lack of intelligence is such that you would not understand me if I deemed a lowly cretin like you as worthy of an explanation,” the man replied.

“Who you calling names, you pansy-talker!” Devon cried. “I will smash your face flat as a board!”

“Oh, what a witty comeback!” the man said. “I would find your ignorance quite entertaining if you did not have the breath of ox.”

“Why I oughta!” Devon pulled back his meaty fist, but suddenly Markle was right there, pulling the tall man way.

“Sorry about that,” Markle said to the man in the black coat.

“Why look, the ape has a keeper. It is good that they let the peasants take such jobs to pass their time. Do you clean up after his manure as well?” the man said to Markle.

Markle sneered, and Devon moved to get at the man again, but Markle held him back. They walked to the dessert line. The hawk-faced man, walked towards the back hall that led to the room all the “dragon-slayers” were staying in.

Jana smiled while observing the exchange, and then saw Chance swinging a spoon full of the dessert in wide-loops saying, “Here come the butterfly!” as he fed it to the young princess Marion. She’d slurp it off the spoon with a big smile and moony eyes directed toward the poofy red-haired Wallbrookian.

Kazrack was waiting on the long line when he saw the dwarven Royal Architect walking by. So, he left his place in line and stopped the dwarf.

Baulch Stonefingers was likely a good sixty years older than Kazrack. His brown beard had streaks of steel gray in it, and the little hair on his balding head was gray as well.

“Excuse me, sir,” said Kazrack.

The dwarf turned, “Yes?”

“Oh, I was just surprised to see one of my brethren here and thought you might know of another dwarf in Gothanius, a rune-thrower, his name is Beléar Gritchkar,” Kazrack said.

“I find it fairly dubious that there are any other dwarves in Gothanius, but just because I am a dwarf does not mean I would know if there was,” the Royal Architect said with grating attitude.

“Oh,” said Kazrack taken aback. “I um, am sorry to have disturbed you.” The younger dwarf walked back to the dessert line.

Ratchis finished his dessert, enjoying the cold-sweet treat and walked over to where Maria stood talking with Simon and Peter.

“I was thinking that our two groups should work together,” Ratchis said to the warrior-woman. “It would be much safer that way.”

“Heh,” she replied. “Thanks for the offer, but I think we want to forge our own way and see what we can accomplish on our own.”

“But against a dragon, if there really is one, and whatever other dangers there are, ten would do better than five. And we also have the problem that there are six among us, but there are four among you, so maybe one of us can travel officially with your group,” Ratchis explained.

“Well, we are really looking at a variety of people to be the fifth in our group, like Tanweil for example who I think is an excellent fighter and can take direction,” Maria smiled. “Maybe we can arrange for our groups to meet and have an exchange of information for our mutual benefit. We’ll discuss it and get back to you.”

She turned back to her companions, and Ratchis’ shoulders slumped. He walked across the great hall as the music began again. He went through the dining room to the rear hall and up to his room. Chance returned to dancing with young Princess Marion, and Beorth continued to chat some with Princess Veldicca, and listened attentively to Princess Deirdre when at one point she played a harp solo. Jeremy continued to drink and watched the line of young men ask Princess Selma to dance and have her angrily refuse.

Upstairs, Ratchis found the hawk-faced man who had tussled with Devon sitting on a bunk, pouring glassfuls of wine, and sipping them.

“Ugh, I must share a room with such a large brute?” the man said, looking up at Ratchis. “This arrangement is getting worse all the time.”

Ratchis just grunted, tore off the clothes he had been lent, and proceed to do his evening push-ups.

“Must you breathe so loudly when you do such savage rituals?” the man asked. “I may have to ask for another room. In a second it will smell like pig’s sty, not that this whole kingdom doesn’t smell like one.”

Ratchis grunted again and ignored the man, and soon went to bed falling straight to sleep.

The rest of the evening continued without event. Eventually the music and dancing ended when the King announced his retirement for the night. The nobles left the castle, and all the young men—inwardly making plans for the hardships to come—made their way to their beds and sleep.

Jana, however, sat in her bed fully dressed behind the screen they had set up for her, waiting for Markle's word that she be prepared to stop the others. The minutes stretched into an hour or more perhaps, when suddenly she snapped awake realizing she had dozed. Someone was rapping on the screen.

"Come in," she whispered, expecting to see Markle standing there.

Garcon walked behind the screen.

"Oh, my Jana, I have something I must tell you now that we have arrived here in Gothanius," Garcon said.

"Garcon, I do not have time for you right now," Jana replied.

"Oh, through many days and nights, across many miles and up and down stony hill and along the rushing rivers of this rough land I have marched only to be by your side," Garcon continued.

"Garcon, leave!"

"I know you play coy, but how can someone reject one who loves another so deeply and that he has come here for no other reason than to be by your side and cast aside all other loves, loves that did not appreciate the depth that one could feel for another. Jana, you must understand..."

"Garcon, it's the middle of the night, can we please talk about this another time?"

"But Jana, I have to tell you..." Garcon pulled off his hat and the powdered wig beneath, revealing short brown hair. Now she could see in the dim light of the low lantern she had by the bed that sweat was wiping away the face powder Garcon used to lighten his complexion.

"Oh gods," Jana said, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Yes, Jana. It is I, Arnold," he who had formerly been Garcon said. "I have watched and waited. Letting one love die and another come to grow in my heart for you, Jana. All for you," Arnold said. "Your skin like the caramel sweets sold in spring market, and eyes that shine like the waters of the Wizard's Sea. I dream of you all the time, and I awake in the morning and see you again and I thank Isis that she allows my dreams to bleed into my waking life."

"What are you doing here? Where did you come from?" Jana asked.

"From the moment I first looked into your eyes I knew there was something special about you. When I came to the Slim Stiletto to meet you and found out you were coming here, I decided that a change would be a good thing and that I would come too and prove that I too can be heroic, and make you love me," explained Arnold.⁴

"You have to leave right now," Jana pushed him towards the screen.

"Don't play hard to get," Arnold said, falling to one knee. "Let me recite a poem I wrote for you."

"Jana, it's time," a voice said softly, as the screen was being pulled back. Markle stepped in and his eyes narrowed as he saw Garcon/Arnold there. "What's he doing here?"

⁴ *The Slim Stiletto* is the Inn where Crumb's Boys all first gathered in Verdun, and where Jana and Arnold were supposed to have a date. See Session #1.

“He’s crazy. I don’t know,” Jana replied flustered.

“What is *he* doing here?” Arnold asked, and then turned to Markle. “Don’t think I won’t fight for Jana’s love, because I will.” He reached for his rapier.

“Arnold, stop!” said Jana with a hiss. “And be quiet, you will wake people.”

Markle sneered, “Just take care of it. I don’t care what you have to do, and if I were you, I’d stay in here for at least ten minutes. Until we meet again.”

Markle slipped away.

“He is lucky he left, or he would have seen that I really am a great swordsman,” Arnold said.

Jana momentarily ignored Arnold/Garcon, and with a mental command her little green companion slipped out from under the pillow up the wall, across the ceiling, and through the crack of the door.

“To Jana, my love...” Arnold was starting his poem.

“Arnold, you have to keep it down,” Jana whispered.

Arnold quieted his voice and continued, “As I turn my mind to the thought of the warmth of Ra’s Glory reflecting off the surface of the blue-green sea, I am reminded of a similar warmth that comes from basking in your presence...”

He continued on and on and on. and Jana allowed him, if only to keep him busy, but suddenly there was a thump and muted growl in the hallway, and in a moment her familiar came scurrying back into the room, the voice in Jana’s mind was a scream, “Big animal! Big animal! Big animal!” The tiny lizard slid up Jana’s leg and took her normal spot of safety under the collar of the witch’s blouse.

Kazrack awoke, thinking he heard voices coming from behind the screen.

Jana covered Arnold’s mouth, “Shh! Don’t speak. Let me just look in your eyes for a moment.”

The dwarf walked over the screen, “Jana?”

“Huh?” Jana said in her best groggy voice.

“Can I talk to you about something?” Kazrack asked.

“Can’t it wait ‘til morning?” Jana replied in a feigned croak.

“I guess,” the dwarf walked back to bed and laid down, sleep enveloping him again.

But now Ratchis stirred as there was another sound from the hallway.

Arnold pulled his mouth free, “What was that? Are those villains up to no good? I will check and prove myself to you.”

“If you want to make me happy you will stay where you are,” Jana told Arnold.

Ratchis sat up and rubbed his eyes, but remained in bed, just listening.

“I knew you’d come around,” said Arnold leaning forward for a kiss.

“Uh, read me some more poetry,” Jana said, dodging the smooch. “Just do it quietly.”

“Certainly,” Arnold/Garcon replied.

In another room Beorth woke with a start, someone was shaking him.

“Beorth, weck op!” Chance was saying. “Somethin’ strange is hoppening.”

“What is it?” said Beorth, suddenly alert.

“Ah heard some strange nuzzes from the hall,” Chance replied.

The paladin of Anubis got out of bed and went to the door with Chance close behind. He paused and listened, hearing nothing. He gently pulled the door open.

The hallway was very dark, with only the slightest light coming from a sconce much further down the hall. Beorth placed one foot out into the hall to get a better look to the left and right and felt something sticky and slick under his foot. He paused and stooped down and ran his finger along the substance.

“Blood,” he said, in his typical passionless voice. “Wake, Jeremy and the others. This seems to be smeared all up and down the hallway.”

“Whot’s gun on?” Chance asked.

“We’ll find out,” said Beorth. “I am going to wake Martin the Watch-Mage.”

Chance woke Jeremy.

“What’s going on?” Jeremy asked, annoyed.

“There were strange noises and now there is blood all in the hall,” Chance explained.

“First chance in forever to sleep in a real bed, and there are strange noises and blood in the hall. I should’ve known,” Jeremy replied getting out of bed. “The guards should be getting here soon. We should just wait before we run off doing anything crazy.”

Chance ran out into the hall, trying to leap over the thick track of blood, but just ending up sliding towards the door where Ratchis and the others stayed.

Jeremy stood in the doorway. “Hey, be careful, you are spreading that around,” he said pointing to the blood.

Chance opened the door and went in and Ratchis immediately sat up, “What’s happening?”

Chance was startled.

Ratchis stood up.

“Thar’s blood ol over the hallway,” Chance said. “Beorth’s gone ta wake the Watch-mage.”

A handful of the lads sleeping in the room began to grunt and stir; more than one “Quiet!” erupted from the slumbering forms.

Ratchis walked over and shook the snoring dwarf, “Kazrack, trouble.”

The dwarf awoke, while Ratchis went to Jana. He knocked lightly on the screen.

“Quiet, I’m trying to sleep!” called a groggy voice from across the room, which led to quite a few more “Shhhhhhs”.

“Jana?” Ratchis said, as he pulled open the screen.

“Drat! More the interruptions of my admission of love,” said Arnold/Garcon.

Jana emerged from the screen.

“Chance said there were noises and now blood in the hall,” Ratchis said.

“Really? I haven’t heard anything,” said Jana.

“Hey, whus is he doin’ in there wit’ ya?” Chance said to Jana, sneering.

“A rival suitor?!” said Arnold said stepping to Chance.

“Back oof, or ah’ punch ya lights oot,” said the gambler.

“Arnold, stop!” said Jana.

By this time a few of the others were actually sitting up in bed, “What the hell is going on?”

Another voice said, “Will you shut the hell up?”

In the meantime, Kazrack had moved to the door and saw the wide swath of blood in the hallway. He also saw Jeremy standing in the doorway of the other room.

“Hey, I just notice that Devon and Markle and the other guy aren’t in their beds,” said Jeremy.

“Oh my, oh my,” Martin the Green said, rubbing his forehead nervously as he came around the corner. He suddenly noticed his robes were dragging in the blood, and he lifted them up.

Beorth followed, “The blood goes all the way up the hall, and past Martin’s door.”

“It looks like it does down this way as well,” said Kazrack, pointing past towards the stairs.

Ratchis came out to the hall followed by Chance and Jana. Arnold followed Jana.

“Who is he?” asked Kazrack. “He looks kind of like Garcon.”

Jana sighed, “Long story. What is happening?”

“Someone was killed,” Beorth said.

“We need to stay calm,” said Martin, nervously. “We have to find a guard or the steward and report this.”

Ratchis walked past him, trying not to make tracks in the blood, “We need to see what happened first.” He kneeled down and examined the blood, as Beorth retrieved a torch. “Looks like the source of the blood is this way.” They followed the blood back to its source, which led to the room where all their weapons had been taken from them and stored. The door was smashed open, and here the blood was spattered all over the walls and door.

Ratchis stepped in and saw the room had been quickly ransacked. The guard they had seen standing before the door all day was nowhere to be seen—except for the blood.

“Weapons have been removed from here,” Ratchis said.

“What is this door?” Kazrack asked Martin referring to a large iron-reinforced door perpendicular to that that led to the weapon storage room.

“It goes to the Royal Quarters,” answered Martin. “We can’t go that way. The guards will attack first and ask questions later. We, uh... I have to go downstairs and find Daniel or the Captain of the Guards. I know where their quarters are. They are in this wing.”

Martin turned, as if to go back down the hall towards the stairs and then stopped and turned back and then opened his mouth and then closed it again. Everyone just looked at him.

“I, uh... Ratchis, would you come with me, and you others, could you please keep people from wandering around or touching anything? The danger may not be over,” Martin added.

Ratchis and Martin made their way down the stone spiral steps. The tall woodsman led the way, going cautiously. The blood continued down the stairs but became thinner as they came to the second floor. Martin directed Ratchis to a door, and then knocked on it.

“Daniel?” the young Watch-Mage called. “There has been some trouble, and perhaps a murder. Daniel?” There was no answer. Ratchis tried the door and it was locked.

“Captain Merrick’s room is over here,” said Martin walking in the direction of an adjacent hall. Ratchis grabbed the shaggy-haired Thrician by the shoulder and pulled him back.

“I go first,” he said.

They came to another door and this time Ratchis knocked loudly, “Captain!” he called.

“Captain,” said Martin. “It is I, Martin the Green, there seems to have been some kind of incident. There is trouble.”

Again, there was no reply. “We should go down to the ground level and see if there is anyone around,” said Martin.

Ratchis led the way to the steps going down to the ground level, but at the top of the spiral steps stuck out a pair of booted feet. Ratchis crept forward and pulled the body up a bit to see the beheaded corpse of a castle guard.

“OH MY!” gasped Martin covering his mouth and turning away.

“Come on, we’re going back up,” said Ratchis brusquely.

Upstairs, Ratchis informed the others of what they had found. By now, others of the would-be dragon-hunters were awake and displaying a mixture of nervousness and curiosity.

Ratchis made his way to the weapon storage room, and began to put on his chain shirt, and grabbed his swords. Kazrack, Beorth and Chance followed suit, while Martin went back into his quarters and retrieved his satchel of components.

“You shouldn’t do that,” Jeremy called from where he still stood in the door, refusing to come out into the hall. “We could all get in trouble.”

“Ef something is ripping the heads uf people around here, Ah fer one want me sword n’ armor, dahm the consequences,” said Chance.

“Hmmm,” Jeremy rubbed his chin. “You have a point.” And then carefully, as to not to step in blood, made his way to the weapon storage room. Jana followed grabbing a crossbow and a club.

“What do we do now?” asked Beorth.

“We wait right here until some guards show up and we tell them what happened,” replied Jeremy, putting his chain shirt on. “There is no need to go wild, running around the castle looking for trouble.”

“Normally, I would agree with you, but, uh...” Martin swallowed. “I think something is seriously wrong. I suggest we do search, but first perhaps Ratchis and I can go up to one of the towers and see if any guards are up there.”

“We’ll wait here, for now, but if the king and others are in danger we need to act soon.” replied Kazrack.

Again, Martin and Ratchis left the others and made their way to the steps that led up to the tower. Ratchis slowly pushed open the trap door and felt the cold air rush in, as something dripped on him from above. He came up to see blood splattered everywhere up here as well. The corpses of three guards were badly torn apart. Martin came up as well and muffled a cry.

They could see the red glimmer of fire at the castle’s front gate to their left and could hear the distant voices of men crying out in their attempts to deal with the flame.

“There must have been some kind of attack at the gate,” said Martin.

“It is a distraction for whatever is going on here in the castle,” replied Ratchis.

“How...”

Martin’s question was left hanging in the cold air as both he and the half-orc noticed movement in the tower across from theirs, closer to the front of the castle proper. A tall dark man with dark hair was climbing atop the low wall that ran around the edge of the tower, holding on to one of the four posts that held the tower roof up. Crouching there a moment, he looked right at Ratchis and Martin and then, as if in slow motion to them, he let go of the post and began to tumble forward off the tower, but something even stranger began to happen.

The man’s skin grew darker and his arms elongated and stretched downward, as if the skin were becoming leather and growing to connect along the side of his torso. The man’s legs collapsed upward and inward, becoming short claws, and his face stretched forward, as his ears bloomed outward, and black hair grew all over his changing body.

And then, before Ratchis and Martin could even draw another breath, where a man had been tumbling from a tower, there was a huge bat with a wingspan of nearly twelve feet, flapping into the night with a screech.

“Whu-what was that?” Martin said, when he realized that he could move and speak, and the horror of the sight had begun to subside.

“Come on, the King’s in danger,” Ratchis said, opening the trap door to allow Martin to go down first.

Downstairs, Ratchis told the others about the fire at the gate and the dead guards on the tower, but Martin went directly to the door Martin has pointed out as leading to the royal quarters and began to knock as loudly as he could.

“Hello? This is Martin the Green. There is some kind of trouble! I think the king is in danger,” he called through the door, but there was no reply.

Ratchis pushed Martin aside and kicked the door with all his might. The large oaken door, reinforced with slats of iron, shuddered but did not open. He tried and failed again.

“Let me help,” said Kazrack. They slammed their shoulders against the door together, but the door held.

“We will have to find a way to the Royal Quarters from downstairs,” said Martin.

“I don’t think we should go wandering around castle,” said Jeremy.

By this time most of the would-be Dragon-Hunters were awake and were spilling into the hall trying to see what was going on, tracking blood all over the place.

“I don’t think we *all* should,” said Martin. “Beorth, would you stay here and watch over the others and make sure no one disturbs the storage room or tries to go through that door?”

“Of course,” replied Beorth.

“Ratchis and Kazrack, would you come with me?” Martin asked.

“No way I am staying here when there is something to be done,” replied Kazrack.

“I will stay here,” said Jana.

“And I too shall stay, for this vision of loveliness, this diamond in the rough will need me to watch over her, though my excellent skills as a swordsman would be very useful to you if villainy is afoot, but even ones such as I need to make sacrifices,” said Arnold/Garcon.

“Oh, gav it op!” said Chance. “Ya nut a bleedin’ swashbockler, but ah’ll stay with Jana and Beorth ta.”

Kazrack and Ratchis looked to Jeremy. The blonde Neergaardian sighed.

“Well, I guess I’ll go with you guys to keep you out of trouble,” he said.

Jeremy went down the stairs first, followed by Kazrack. Martin and Ratchis took up the rear. They made their way past the headless body on the stairs and found the head a crunched up pulpy nearly unidentifiable thing at the base of the steps, not ten feet from the corpses of two other guards.

“Looks like he was ravaged by an animal,” said Ratchis, he pointed to bloody boot prints that led towards the dining hall. “An animal obeying someone.”

They made their way through the back hall to the doors to the dining room. Kazrack pulled open the door, while Jeremy covered it with his crossbow. The dining room was silent and empty, wooden chairs piled atop the long now barren tables.

Ratchis thought he heard something behind the large double doors that led to the Great Hall beyond, and rushed past Jeremy, pushing open the great doors hurriedly.

Kazrack, Jeremy and Martin rushed after him.

Ratchis paused. In the area beneath where the king had addressed the banquet from a balcony lay the body of another guard, and a second guard was being mauled by a huge brown bear.

Ratchis knew it was too late for the guard and waited, but Jeremy took up a spot to the right of woodsman and fired his crossbow, striking deep in the bear’s flank. The animal roared, and the four companions braced for it to charge, but it did not.

Instead, the bear backed up to the single door across from the one they had come through and stood there, growling, and watching the party.

Martin hurried over to the guard to check for signs of life, while both Kazrack and Jeremy loaded their crossbows. The guard was certainly dead. Kazrack fired and missed, but Jeremy scored another hit, while Ratchis just waited to intercept the bear if it charged.

Martin left the guard in the growing pool of blood and taking out a handful of colored sand cast it at the bear and

spoke some arcane words. The sand transformed into an explosion of multi-colored lights that enveloped the bear's head. The beast shook his head and roared.

"Damn!" said Martin. The bear got up on its hind legs and roared again.

"Shoot it!" cried Ratchis.

Jeremy and Kazrack who were busy reloading, both fired and hit. Kazrack's went deep into it's flank, but Jeremy's disappeared into the bear's neck. Blood gurgled forth and the animal swayed and began to tumble forward, but before it could hit the ground it disappeared.

"Where did it go?" Jeremy asked.

"Magic?" said Kazrack.

"It could have been an illusion, except these guards are really dead and the caster would have to be somewhere nearby, unless of course he is very very powerful," Martin said.

"Which way should we go?" asked Jeremy.

"Well, we should be able to get to the Royal Quarters by way of the audience chamber or above through the balcony," said Martin.

Ratchis walked over and checked the doors to the audience chamber and they were locked.

"The balcony it is then," said Kazrack.

"How do we get up there?" asked Martin.

"Well, you could magic us up there or something," said Jeremy.

"I cannot, um, do that," said Martin.

"Heh," replied Jeremy. "Then we'll grab one of these long table and flip it over on the narrow end and use it as a ladder of sorts."

Kazrack, Jeremy and Ratchis worked together to flip the table over, but it immediately began to slide backward, so Ratchis held it in place as the others climbed up, and then Kazrack and Jeremy held the table legs in place while Ratchis came up.

Kazrack and Ratchis stood to either side of the door, while Martin knocked. Jeremy was stuck holding the table up.

"Hello?" called Martin. He knocked again and waited. They could clearly hear the sound of someone on the other side.

"We can hear someone there," said the Watch-Mage. "The King could be in danger. We've come to warn you."

"In the name of the King identify yourselves. None may enter the Royal Quarters without his majesty's leave!" said a voice from the other side.

"It is I, Martin the Green, and uh...three of the other dragon-hunters. We have found castle guards dead and wild animals about and there is a fire at the front gate. There is some real trouble afoot, we think the fire is a distraction to allow someone to do harm to the king."

"You should not be wandering the castle at night, and none shall enter the Royal Quarters," the guard on the other side said.

“Well, perhaps if you could come and help us find the perpetrators, or send someone to help us,” suggested Martin.

“None of the Royal Guard may leave their posts under any circumstances. The immediate protection of the king is our concern,” the voice said.

“But we are telling you the king is in danger!” cried Kazrack with frustration.

“And I am telling you that the king is safe here with us, and no one shall get us to open this door short of the Captain himself,” said the guard. “It is he you should seek out if there is danger about in the castle.”

“Um, guys,” said Jeremy in a strained voice. “Could you hurry up? This table is getting heavy.”

“Well, could you bring the king to the door so we can talk to him?” asked Kazrack.

The laughter from the other side of the door was clearer than the talking had been.

“His majesty is not summoned by any man, least of all a stranger on the other side of a door in the dead of night when the castle has been attacked,” the guard said dismissively.

“Argh,” cried Kazrack, upset with their failure.

“There is no way they are going to let us in,” said Martin. “Should we head to the gate and try to find the Captain?”

“We cannot risk not being believed or being delayed and whoever is in the castle with magic animals accomplishing whatever it is they are doing, if they haven’t already,” said Ratchis.

“We could smash down this door, and make sure the king really is safe. Those guards on the other side of the door may be lying,” said Kazrack.

“And get into a battle with the Royal Guards? I think not,” said Ratchis.

“I think we should climb back down,” said Jeremy, sweat beading on his brow.

“Yes, I think we should try the door the bear was in front of. I think it was strange it did not charge us, maybe it was just trying to delay us,” said Ratchis.

“Well, it is either that or go out to the front gate and find the Captain, and that is exactly what someone may want us to do,” said Martin.

Kazrack helped Jeremy hold the table as Ratchis climbed down and then he held the table from below as Martin climbed down, followed by Jeremy and finally Kazrack. The Great Hall was cold and spooky, the splattered blood of the guards and their bodies akimbo juxtaposed with the fine tapestries and the unattended instruments of the musicians left in the corner.

The four of them went through the door that led to the east wing.

“This is where the library and the trophy room are,” said Martin.

Ratchis walked in first, peering into the dark with his darkvision, Martin followed with a lantern, then came Kazrack and Jeremy. Ratchis crept a bit ahead, a short hall connected to his right, and as he turned to note a spiral staircase going downward, his vision was obscured by the shadow of an animal that leapt up onto his head and shoulders.

Martin stepped back as Ratchis struggled to detach the black and white furry animal that was furiously tearing at large man’s face. Kazrack ran up to his companion and shoved his halberd point right through the creature. It squealed as the broad blade burst its very body with sudden violence. However, the squeal ended abruptly as the

animal disappeared.

“That was a badger!” Jeremy laughed. “You got tore up by badger!”

Ratchis growled, dabbing at the deep scratches on face and neck with torn piece of cloth. “It came from that stairway,” Ratchis said, and led the way down.

Meanwhile, upstairs Beorth, Chance and Jana stood in the hall, keeping the others from coming out into the hall. Arnold/Garcon was out there with them.

“Ah guess you were too busy talkin’ ta this guy to hear whut wess gunn on,” said Chance snottily.

“You will address me as Arnold or Garcon, or you and I sir will have some words,” said Arnold/Garcon.

“Arnold be quiet,” Jana said, as Chance’s hands curled into fists. “And Chance, he was just bothering me, you know how he is.”

“Oh, kind of like you looked sa bahthered when ya wuss dancing with yer boyfriend arleer tonight,” said Chance.

“My boyfriend? What are you talking about?”

“I am more than a mere boyfriend,” said Arnold/Garcon. “I am the love of this woman’s- - - “

“Shut up, Garcon!” said Chance angrily. He turned back to Jana. “Aye! Ya know who ahm talkin’ `bout. Markle! Ah saw ya dahn-cin ahl clawse n’ ahl.”

“Oh, Chance!” said Jana.

“Come ahn, admit it!”

“Whatever,” was Jana’s only reply.

Beorth just looked away, uncomfortable with the situation.

The spiral stone staircase came to a barren stone room with two doors. One door had a small barred window in it, the sound of air rushing through the window could be heard, and the cold air stirred in the room. The other door creaked in the wind. It was open.

Kazrack cracked the door open a bit more, while Jeremy reloaded his crossbow. The dwarf peaked in. There were narrow steps leading down into a room filled with barrels, crates and kegs. Ratchis stepped past them and tried to throw the door open, but something heavy seemed to block it from opening more than a few inches. Jeremy, Ratchis and Kazrack all pushed together, and the resistance quickly gave. There was the sound of something falling and bursting, followed by a dripping sound.

Now that the door stood open Ratchis could see that the short stone stairway into the sunken room was covered in a black oily liquid. Ratchis leaned back and did a broad jump over the steps and down into the room but misjudged landed badly. He was stretched painfully on steps, his back covered in the viscous substance.

There was a sudden movement and sound in shadows of the room, Ratchis looked over as torch lit up and was tossed in his direction. He instinctively flinched, but the torch fell below him, and the oil all burst aflame.

Devon ran out of the shadow through a doorway in the opposite wall, "Somebody came through!"

Ratchis forced himself to control his breathing and spoke words calling to his goddess, Nephthys, to grant him her *Divine Favor* and he stood, the flames licking at his clothing.

Kazrack leapt from the landing to the right onto a crate he thought would hold his weight, but there was a crunching of wood as one leg painfully burst through, stranding him there. He cried out from the painful split, while Martin and Jeremy moved onto the landing.

Ratchis ran off the steps, patting his clothes out, and could see now that a lantern light from the next room. Kazrack pulled his leg free and rolled off the crate. Martin and Jeremy came down the steps, for the fire had flared up suddenly and then died down.

Ratchis pushed a crate before him into the room to act as a shield, but then came round the left side of it deeper into the L-shaped room. There he could see Markle and the hawk-faced man he had argued with earlier standing on either side of a small dark archway. Martin came up behind Kazrack who was now ducked behind the box, waiting for someone to move it.

"Devon's in there!" said Kazrack.

"Who?" asked Martin.

Markle moved cautiously forward, holding a short sword in his right hand. With his left he reached into a small red bag on his belt and pulled out what appeared to be a ball of fur. He threw it sidearm at Ratchis, and as it tumbled towards him it grew and grew, taking the form of a large wolf that landed before the half-orc and bit at him, but missed.

"Damn, Jana!" cried Markle. "I'll choose someone better next time."

Martin moved into the room, and he and Kazrack felt a wave of dizziness come over them, but they shook it off. Ratchis hurled a javelin at Markle, and the handsome man dodged enough to make it strike his studded leather armor at an awkward angle, but he could feel the bruise start to swell.

Martin spoke an arcane word and three small globes of light began to dance around the wolf's head. Jeremy leapt over Kazrack's head onto the crate but felt the sharp pain of a blow to his rear right flank. Turning, he saw Devon had emerged from the darkness of the other corner in this part of the room. Kazrack moved around the box and fired his crossbow at Markle and missed. The wolf seeing him more open took a nip at the dwarf and missed.

Ratchis pulled a dagger to go along with his drawn short sword, and moved to attack the wolf, which was too wile for him. The lights moved from the wolf which seemed to ignore them to circle Devon's head, he was taken aback, and the spray of bright colors that followed from Martin sent him reeling. This gave Jeremy an opening which he exploited, drawing blood with both his blades. The wolf continued to bite at Kazrack, but the dwarf's armor proved too strong for the animal's teeth to puncture. Markle charged at the dwarf, stabbing with his short sword, but the dwarf parried the blow, impressively displaying skill at keeping both foes at bay. Kazrack felt another spell wash over him to no avail.

Ratchis tried to take advantage of the wolf's distraction with Kazrack, but both his blows went wide. The lights flipped back over to Markle's head, but he ignored them, as Martin moved over to strike a blow against the stunned and blinded Devon's shoulder with his staff. Suddenly, Devon's head cocked, and as Jeremy's longsword came down for what would have been a killing blow, Devon parried it with his cutlass, but winced as the short sword bit him. He disengaged from combat.

Kazrack, Markle and the wolf, all struggled with each other, but only Markle's blade found purchase, causing the dwarf to spit blood.

"I knew you wouldn't be able to mind your own business," Markle said. "Really unfortunate for both our parties."

From the corner of his eye, Ratchis could see the hawk-faced man tracing something in red on the wall behind him. But there was nothing he could do except stab forward with a deep blow into the wolf's haunch that made it yelp pathetically.

Martin the Green twiddled his fingers in Markle's direction, but the rogue shrugged off the *daze* effect, and continued to fight.

Jeremy turned and went to finish the wolf but missed as Devon came swinging wildly at the Neergaardian. "I may not be able to see, but I can still getcha," he said.

More blows were traded, Markle felt the bite of Kazrack's pole-arm, but the dwarf felt both the wolf's teeth and Markle's blade. Kazrack staggered but kept his feet.

From the other side of the room the hawk-faced man was heard to declare, "Come from the fiendish pit!"

The circle the man drew on the wall burst into bright flame and from it emerged a red hawk, whose very feathers flickered like flame, and filled the room with a sulfurous smell. It flew right into Ratchis' face, heat seeming to emanate from it. Ratchis slashed at the bird with his knife as he made a blind stab at the wolf. The bird dodged, but the sword found purchase in the wolf, and with a howl it slumped and disappeared.

Martin came over and took a swing at the hawk with his staff, but the bird was too quick, screeching an unearthly screech as it dove and fluttered. Devon and Jeremy continued to struggle with each other now that Devon had recovered his bearings and vision. Kazrack desperately tried to get a more solid blow in on Markle, who was looking gravely wounded, but he was too quick and skilled.

The warlock in the corner of the room moved into position and fired a ray of green light at Jeremy, but the ray went wide.

"Why must you do this?" asked Markle. "Why don't we stop this now? We go and you go, and forget about the whole thing?"

"Do you expect us to forget all those guards you killed?" Ratchis replied, coming at Markle with a flurry of blows, even as he ducked out of the way of the fiendish hawk's attack.

Markle had no response, but was hard pressed to block the attacks, feeling the cut of Ratchis long knife again. Martin continued to swing at the hawk and continued to miss, being over-cautious about striking Kazrack or Ratchis by accident.

Devon and Jeremy continued to trade parries and blows, and the blood ran down their armor in bright gout. Jeremy noticed something and his eyes went wide open, "Devon isn't human!" he cried.

Devon only smiled.

Ignoring Jeremy, Kazrack found the opening he needed and a hard blow to the hip sent Markle down into an unconscious heap.

The warlock fired another green ray, this time striking Ratchis, but the Friar of Nephthys shook off the effect.

"Martin, bind Markle," said Ratchis, moving over to where Jeremy and Devon struggled. The fiendish hawk tried to slow the large man's progress but failed. Ratchis delivered two strong blows to Devon. Before Devon could react to having two opponents Jeremy followed up with two strong blows of his own, and the one who had always been a thorn in their side dropped to the ground.

"I surrender!" cried the warlock, dropping to his knees.

“Call off the hawk!” cried Kazrack, who was still struggling with it.

With a word from the warlock, it disappeared in a sulfurous “poof!”

Martin and Ratchis moved to stabilize Devon and Markle, while Kazrack covered the warlock.

“Make even the slightest gesture I interpret as casting a spell and I will skewer you,” said the dwarf.

The two rogues looked as if their wounds had already stopped any bleeding.

Jeremy pointed to Devon, “I saw his wounds healing of their own accord!”

End of Session #12

AQUERRA

Session #13

Upstairs, Jana, Chance and Beorth waited in the hall, with Arnold/Garcon standing in the doorway. Suddenly, the sound of the door to the Royal Quarters opening coincided with the sound of armored figures hustling up the spiral steps. In a moment, castle guards surrounded them.

“Drop your weapons!” one of the guards commanded, and Chance, Jana and Beorth complied. “Why do you have weapons and wear armor?”

Before any of them could reply, a guard came running up the hall, “Sir! The weapon storage room has been broken into and the blood seems to have its origin there!”

“Yes, that is why we have our weapons,” said Beorth.

“What?!? You killed the guard and broke into the armory?” the guard in charge asked.

“No,” said Beorth quickly. “We were awakened in the middle of the night by noise and came out to discover blood in the hall. We took our weapons from the room, which had already been broken into, and my friends went to investigate, while we stayed and protected those who are the king’s guests and made sure no one else went into the storage room...by order of Martin the Green.”

“You and you,” he pointed to Chance and Beorth. “Come with me.”

He stopped in front of Jana and pulled her weapons from her hands, “You go back to bed, young lady. You shouldn’t get involved in these kinds of things.”

Jana smiled, and went back to the room, noticing that Arnold/Garcon had already slipped back in and was in his bunk.

Chance and Beorth were taken down to the great hall to wait. They could see the blood splattered everywhere and the bodies of the guards were being taken away.

“Ach! Ah hope tha others ah ahl-right,” said Chance.

Meanwhile, in the bowels of the castle, the three villains were bound.

“I’m telling you; I saw Devon’s wounds close up of their own accord,” maintained Jeremy.

“Well, we can’t worry about that now,” replied Ratchis. “I know of priestly spells that can cause the same effect, maybe this spell-caster here did something. But what is more important is that the little guy is still missing.”

“What was his name again?” asked Jeremy.

“I think they called him ‘the Square’” replied Kazrack.

“Where is he?” Ratchis asked the bound warlock roughly, pushing him with the toe of his boot.

“He is gone into the vault to find the treasury we sought,” said the warlock.

“What?” Jeremy declared. “That is what you wanted? You guys are thieves?”

“There is literally a king’s ransom in there,” said the warlock. “Do not look down your simple nose at us.”

“Shut up,” Ratchis kicked him lightly again, and then stood to flank the door that led to the darkness of vaults

below. It was open, but a crack. "Square! Come out of there and surrender. If we have to come in there after you, I promise you will die, but if you just give yourself up now, you will make it a lot easier on all of us."

There was no reply.

"Come out, Square! It's all over," Jeremy called into the darkness.

"He's not going to listen to you," said the warlock.

"Figures," said Ratchis, pulling his sword, and looking to Jeremy. "Martin, watch the prisoners."

"Okay," the Watch-mage replied, as Kazrack brought him a black case that appeared to have belonged to the hawk-faced man.

Jeremy counted to three, and then kicked open the door. Kazrack was covering it with his crossbow.

Ratchis stepped into the darkness, and Kazrack followed, unloading his crossbow and taking up his halberd again. The area beyond was a series of narrow corridors with round stone seals in the wall at about chest height at regular intervals. Ratchis and Kazrack crept down the corridors carefully, when they heard the sound of metal scraping on stone, and then a clang. They jogged in the direction of the sound, and found a tiny alcove with a metal grate.

Ratchis lifted the grate and peered down. The air below was moist and fetid, but the passageway was too narrow for him or Kazrack to follow.

"Looks like he got away," said Ratchis.

"Makes sense that they would have had an alternate way out of here," replied Kazrack. "Not that I know how Devon could possibly fit down there."

They made their way back out of the lower vaults as castle guards burst into the room.

"Drop your weapons and get on your knees!" they commanded.

The four companions obliged, though Kazrack did it reluctantly. The Captain of the Guard, Edwin Merrick walked in.

"What in the hells is going on here?" he demanded, looking at Martin.

"We were chasing thieves, that..." Kazrack began.

"Was I talking to you?" the captain said. "Martin, I ask again."

"Um, sir, we were pursuing these thieves you will find bound here. Two were taken in battle, but one gave himself up. One seems to have gotten away through a grate in the lower vault," Martin explained.

"Yusef! Take four men and check out the lower vault," the Captain said to his men. "You four, stand up and line up."

They were surrounded by guards and brought back up to Great Hall, where guards watched Chance and Beorth.

The captain gave orders to his men and then went into the royal audience chamber.

"I'm glad to see you're alright," said Beorth. "Did you get them?"

"One of them got away," said Kazrack, disappointed.

“No talking!” commanded one of the guards.

They were forced to stand there for nearly forty-five minutes, when finally, the captain returned.

“The king has been awakened. You will answer his questions now,” the captain explained. “Remember, no disrespect to the king, or I will personally spend my off-duty hours beating the tar out of you in the dungeons. And do not speak unless specifically addressed.” His gaze lingered on Kazrack.

They were led into the audience chamber. The king was already seated on his throne.

“On your knees!” The Captain issued his command to the party, and they obeyed. “Your highness, these are intruders we caught in the treasury.”

“Very well, Captain Merrick. Thank you, your vigilance and hard work pleases us,” the king said. He was wrapped in his kingly robes, but his eyes looked sunken and dark. “Martin, you may rise.”

“Thank you, your highness,” said Martin, bowing his head.

“Now, tell us what has happened.”

Martin began to tell the tell of the sounds, the blood in the hall, the dead guards, the animals, and the confrontation with Markle, Devon and the unnamed warlock.

The king cleared his throat.

“It pleases us that these rogues were caught, and the captain assures us that the fourth in their group will likely be caught, as it is known where all the drainage grates end up. However, there is still the matter of your running about the castle armed without leave.”

“But your majesty, we only did it in your service,” said Kazrack.

“Shut up,” Ratchis hissed to Kazrack.

Martin the Green tugged on the dwarf’s sleeve and put a finger to his lips. The king’s eyes widened, and then narrowed with annoyance.

“We must still think of a proper punishment for your actions, so we shall pronounce our sentence tomorrow after the mid-day meal. You shall be brought before us again,” the king said. “Until then, sleep well, and again we thank you for your efforts.”

“Thank *you*, your majesty. Your highness has been very generous,” Martin replied.

The party was shown out and returned to their rooms for an uneasy sleep for what was left of the night. On the way, Beorth asked Ratchis, “I get the feeling Martin did not tell the king the whole story, what happened?”

“Markle said that Jana knew that they were going to attempt this robbery. He even implied that she was supposed to help them,” Ratchis replied.

“Oh,” was all Beorth said in reply.

Isilem, 9th of Syet – 564 H.E.

Very early the next morning, Beorth stopped by Martin’s quarters to confer on the events of the previous night.

After a bit of time, they decided that they should find Jana and talk to her about it and went to find her. However,

she was not present.

Beorth and Martin were just walking out of Jana's room when they noticed her coming down the hallway. She seemed to be upset about something and in a hurry to get to the sanctuary of her room. Beorth stepped in front of her and said, "Ah! Jana! I am glad that we have found you. Martin and I have some serious matters to discuss with you."

For a second, Jana's breath caught in her throat and she rolled her eyes, "I am sure that you do."

Martin gestured toward his suite. "Would you care to step this way?" he asked while quickly unlocking the door to his room.

"After you," Beorth said, as he motioned for Jana to step into the room ahead of him. After all three were in the room, Martin moved back to the door and Jana could hear the key turn inside the lock.

"Please make yourselves comfortable," the Watch-Mage said as he waved his hand around the room. Jana lowered herself onto the simple divan while Beorth and Martin placed their two wooden chairs slightly in front of and to the side of Jana's position.

Beorth took a deep breath and began. "Jana, as you know, the others have accused you of something very serious. They say that you knew what Markle and his 'friends' were planning to do last night."

Beorth paused for a moment, inhaled and then slowly let his breath out. "Jana, what I need to know is what exactly you knew about Markle and his plans..."

Jana looked up at Beorth, "I knew nothing of their plans...."

"But that is not what the others are saying. They are saying that you had prior knowledge of what was to happen, and you chose not to say anything to anyone."

"Listen to me when I tell you that I did NOT know exactly what they were planning..."

"Exactly what they were planning?" Beorth asked, "But you DID know something was afoot?"

Jana looked back at Beorth in silence.

"Jana, I need to understand..." Beorth sputtered. "I want to know... Jana, I need..." Beorth cast a look of entreaty at Martin. "Help me, Watch Mage."

Martin who had been listening quietly, turned his eyes toward Jana and simply said. "He wants to know; can you be trusted?"

"Trusted? By whom? And for what? What does THAT mean?" Jana replied.

"Look, Jana," Beorth continued, "these are very serious allegations against you. My first impulse is to turn you over to the Royal Guard and let them question you."

"Well, you will do whatever you want."

"Ten men have died as a result of your inaction and the life of the King was put in danger because you failed to tell anyone what you knew. I must know what you knew, Jana. You have to tell me what you knew. If I am satisfied that you didn't know anything, I will let the matter go and I won't turn you over to the Guard."

"You have to believe that I didn't know what was going to happen. I knew that Markle was planning something, but I did not know exactly what it was." Jana insisted.

"Did you suspect that Markle was involved in the murder of the guard?" Beorth asked.

“I thought he was.”

“You thought he was, and you didn’t tell the others? Why didn’t you tell them when you knew that they were walking into danger? Were you scared to?”

“You guys don’t know Markle like I do. You have no idea what he is capable of. He and his friends are *very* dangerous.” Jana explained. “I was scared, not for the group, but rather for myself. Markle and his friends can cause great harm to me.”

“If you knew they were dangerous and were planning something, why didn’t you turn them in or warn us ahead of time? We could have stopped them or protected you...” Beorth wanted desperately to believe her.

“Protected me? PROTECTED me? Do you think that you are safe from him now that he is in the King’s dungeon?”

Beorth had never seen Jana so passionate about anything. “Markle is a very powerful man and his reach is far longer than you know... he is still a threat even if he is a prisoner.”⁵

“What is he planning, Jana?” Martin asked.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Or you don’t want to say?” Beorth added.

“I don’t know.”

Beorth sighed.

“Jana, you are a young girl, and I don’t blame you for being afraid of Markle. I also believe that you didn’t mean our traveling companions harm, but...” Beorth could not finish.

“But” intoned the Watch Mage, “would you do the same again?”

Jana paused and thought for a moment before answering, “Had I known the extent of the danger and what Markle was planning, I would not do the same again.”

Beorth watched Jana for a moment and settled back into his chair, “That is all I need to know.”

Martin glanced over at Beorth and then leaned forward in his chair. “But there is the OTHER matter to discuss...”

“What other matter?” Jana groaned.

“It has been said that you have been seen using magic.” Martin began.

“Yeah, so?” Jana replied.

“So where does it come from? No one has ever seen you study a spellbook or use arcane symbols.”

“I do not have a spellbook nor do I need one.”

“Well, then, where does your knowledge of magic come from? Are you self-taught?”

“What I know was taught to me.”

⁵ Jana was playing up her fear of Markle in hopes of getting off the hook.

“So, you studied as an apprentice with someone?”

“No, not exactly,” Jana hesitated.

“Well then who taught you?”

“A friend.”

“Who is this ‘friend’ of yours? What is his name and what does he look like?”

“I will not tell you his name. He is a small creature with wings, a tail and mottled white skin,” Jana said.

Martin glanced over at Beorth who was obviously shaken by the reply. “And when does he teach you?”

“He comes when I ask him to,” Jana said as if it were the most common thing.

“Is he a god of some sort?” Beorth asked.

“No, he is not.”

“Well, is he a demon?” Beorth continued.

Jana’s reply was a flat and simple, “No.”

“Has he ever asked you to commit an evil act?”

Jana chuckled. “Evil? What is evil? I have never really sat down and thought about it.”

“Well, you are sitting now. Now is as good a time as any to consider it,” Beorth said, thoughtfully.

The room was still and quiet for long moments. “I have never harmed others for my magic, and I have not done anything ‘evil’ to gain my powers. I use my powers to protect myself.”

“You must understand that magic of your kind can be potentially very dangerous,” said Martin.

“And you are saying yours is not?” Jana retorted.

“Mine was taught by the Academy. It is codified and tested. It is safe in and of itself, not like witchcraft,” Martin said.

“You know nothing about witchcraft that your precious Academy did not teach you,” said Jana with some venom.

“And that is all I need know, the Academy does not teach falsehoods,” Martin insisted.

“Can I go now?” Jana said.

“We are not holding you here Jana,” Beorth said gently. “We just wanted to talk.”

“Feels more like an interrogation to me,” Jana said, throwing an evil eye at Martin.

“I apologize,” said Martin, and Jana cocked her head thinking she heard sarcasm in his voice. “I am sure you are hungry. We will meet you at breakfast.”

Jana walked to the door and tried the knob, and then turned and looked back at the Watch-mage.

“It is locked,” she said.

“Oh, dear, my apologies,” he got up and unlocked it for her.

Martin and Beorth spoke for a few minutes more and then followed Jana down to breakfast.

At breakfast the feces hit the fan. . .

The Dining Chamber was full of young men excitedly talking about the previous night’s events and about their plans to leave and hunt the dragon.

Ratchis finished chewing down a piece of toast with a slice of lard on it, when he turned to Jana, “So, how much did you know?”

“Huh?” she replied.

“Don’t play dumb,” Ratchis said. “What did they offer you for your help?”

“Who? What?”

“Markle and the others, what did they offer you and why didn’t you tell us what was going to happen?” Ratchis was persistent. “We know you were supposed to help them. Markle told us as much.”

“I am not going to talk about this,” Jana replied.

“Oh, yes you are,” insisted Ratchis.

“Whut is this about?” Chance asked.

“Markle cursed Jana last night, when we faced him, because she was supposed to help them, and I guess he figured she had told us about what they planned, as she should have,” Kazrack said.

“It is not as if I actually helped them,” Jana said.

“But you didn’t tell us either,” said Ratchis angrily. “And because of those bastards a lot of innocent guards were killed!”

He slammed his fist on the table.

“Um, Ratchis, could you keep voice down a bit? People are staring,” said Martin.

“The thing is. . .” Kazrack started.

“I just don’t know if we can trust you,” interrupted Ratchis. “We need full disclosure on everything.”

“Yes, how can we have someone for a companion that...” Kazrack was interrupted again.

“I want to know now,” said Ratchis.

“Ratchis, if I could speak,” Kazrack tried again.

“I want to hear from Jana,” said Ratchis.

“Okay, good,” said Kazrack, not listening to Ratchis and continuing. “I think it is fair to say that we can judge by Jana’s past actions that if she knew that the guards were going to be killed, she would have made a different

decision. My problem is that by not warning us she allowed us to go into a dangerous situation without all the members of our group.”

“So, why didn’t you tell us, Jana?” Beorth asked in his usual subdued tone.

“I, uh... I was scared. I didn’t know exactly what they were going to do, or what they’d do to me or to any of you if I told,” Jana said in a tone not common to the world-wise girl.

“I find that hard to believe,” Ratchis said.

“Believe what you will then!” she snapped back.

“Look,” said Kazrack getting everyone’s attention. “We have all done something as an individual in the past that has failed the group at one time or another. We should be forgiving of Jana.”

“Fargive uh fer what? She din do nuthin”” said Chance, speaking for the first time.

“Yes, she did, Chance,” said Kazrack. “She committed an error by omission.”

“I don’t understand why you all making a big deal of this. It all worked out for the best, didn’t it?” Jana said.

“That is not the point!” Ratchis said loudly.

“Attention everyone!” came the voice of Daniel the castle steward from the front of the dining chamber.

“Immediately after the meal, the trophy room will be open for you all to come and pick out some weapons and equipment. Beginning at noon, groups of five may come to this room to register, get their map, and go on their way. Thank you.”

Many people began to end their meal, but the companions were not done with their discussion.

“I have a simple solution to this whole problem,” said Kazrack. “A little thing I will ask each of you to do, that will relieve us of any suspicion.”

“What is that?” Jeremy asked, with suspicion in his voice.

“I only ask that we all make an oath to put the good of the party before ourselves,” Kazrack said with a smile.

Everyone groaned.

“What?” asked the dwarf, puzzled.

“That’s stupid, Kazrack,” said Ratchis. “I thought you had a real solution.”

“It *is* a real solution,” said Kazrack. “We all just make a promise to think of the group first.”

“I will not make that promise,” said Ratchis.

“Why not?” asked Kazrack.

“I will not make it either,” said Jana. “Why set myself up to be a liar?”

Kazrack looked at her as if he knew she would say that.

“Why not?” asked Kazrack. “We are a group with common goals. We are companions who rely on each other. We should not keep things from each other or work against each other!”

"I agree," said Ratchis. "I'm sure Beorth and the...others..." He looked to Jana with a sneer, " would agree."

"So, making the promise is no big deal," the dwarf insisted.

"No, it is a big deal," said Ratchis. "I will not make such an oath, because only one thing comes before me and that is my goddess, not this group, not anything."

"Anyway, a promise is worthless," added Jeremy. "People can promise anything and still do what they want."

"But a man who is having a doubt about whether or not something is the right thing to do, and who has made an oath is more likely to come down on the side of the oath made," said Kazrack.

"Ach! Kahzrahk, thas just stupid," Chance said. "How kin ya expect people ta mahk a promise they may not kep? Ah know I cahnt mahk such an oath."

"Are you saying you plan to betray the group?" Kazrack asked amazed.

"Plahnin'? No," Chance replied. "But ya nevah know whut is gunn hoppen. Bad enough ya might be farced ta do somethin' ya friends won't like, but ta brek a promise in addition is horrible."

Kazrack sighed.

"If we are all friends then I do not see why we cannot make this oath together," said Kazrack. "And now that I see all your hesitance, I have to wonder if it is even possible for me to continue traveling with you all."

"Okay, okay," said Jeremy, with a forced smile and a bit of a patronizing tone. "I promise to put the group before myself, okay? Right, Ratchis? Go ahead and promise."

"I promise to behave just as I always have," Ratchis said.

"We know," said Jeremy with a sigh.

"My actions and attitude should speak for themselves," Ratchis added. "I do not need to make an oath to prove my willingness to help and to be a friend."

"I will make the promise if you want me to," said Beorth. "But my oath to Anubis always comes first."

"Well, of course," said Kazrack. "I am not asking anyone to promise to betray their beliefs."

"I still will not do it," said Ratchis.

"Nor will I," said Jana.

"Ach! Me too," said Chance.

Martin remained silent.

"Then perhaps I need to leave this group. If you cannot make such a simple promise, especially if you are saying that you are already doing it," Kazrack looked at Ratchis. "I do not know if I can trust you."

Kazrack stood to leave.

"Wait," Martin finally spoke up. "There is another matter of business I think your group needs to discuss. Beorth and I spoke about it earlier."

Everyone looked to the tall mage.

“It appears that Jana...” he paused. “...is a witch.”

“Yeah, so?” said Kazrack.

“Witchcraft is a very dangerous and non-traditional form of spell-casting,” said Martin.

“Or maybe, it is more traditional than your little Academy would like to admit,” said Jana acerbically.

“She’s a witch, so what?” said Kazrack. “You are a wizard. She is a witch. If you were a woman, you’d be a witch, too.”

Jeremy snickered.

“No, it is not just a matter of gender, it is a matter of form,” Martin tried to explain. “Male witches are warlocks, female wizards and still wizards.”

“So, you’re a witch?” Jeremy asked Jana, recoiling a bit.

“You could say that, yes,” Jana replied.

“The why didn’t you ever tell us?” the Neergaardian responded.

“Because of ignorant people like him,” she pointed to Martin the Green.

“Well, I just need assurance that you learn and practice your magic in a safe way, because we both know that most witches do not,” Martin said.

“Says you,” was all Jana had in terms of a reply.

“This witch-stuff doesn’t matter so much to me except that it is even more reason for a promise to be extracted from everyone in terms of good behavior and cooperation,” said Kazrack.

“Are you still going on about that?” said Jana.

Kazrack stood, “I must require this oath from all of you if only because without it I cannot trust some of you enough to travel with you,” Kazrack said looking at Jana, and his eyes drifting to Chance as well.

“But Kahzrahk,” Chance said. “Ya friends wit’ someone becahz they’re ya friend, nut becahz ya make a promise.”

“Well, I guess we are not all friends then,” said Kazrack and stormed off.

The rest of the companions sat in silence for what seemed a long time.

Finally, Ratchis spoke, “Might as well see what equipment they have to offer us before we are supposed to meet with the king.”

The half-orc stood and walked towards the trophy room, and Jana and Chance left as well.

“Martin, what does Jana being a witch really mean?” Jeremy asked.

“It means she summons extra-planar beings to gain her magic,” said Martin.

“Extra-planar?” Jeremy cocked his head.

“She summons demons that teach her spells, demons she controls but that could come out of her control and be free to wreak havoc in our world,” Martin explained.

“That’s not good,” said Jeremy.

Ratchis went to the trophy room where tables of weapons, armor and other equipment were set up among all the trophies on display. Dozens of the lads hoping to win the reward, walking among the trophies and picked through swords (long and short), crossbows, daggers, clubs, maces, suits of ring mail and scale mail, shields and other items like coils of rope, backpacks, and whetstones. Among the trophies were two stuffed brown bears on their rear legs and growling, a mountain lion, a moose head above the hearth, and that of 12-point buck on a perpendicular wall. A huge tattered flag with the crest of Gothanius also hung on the wall.⁶ What drew Ratchis’ attention the most were two stuffed orcish specimens. They had a reddish glint to their short piggish body hair, and were dressed in studded leather, carried spears, and wore horned helmets. He stood and stared at them for a long moment but was distracted by Kazrack passing him carrying a dwarf-sized chain shirt.

The dwarf stopped, “I want you to know that this whole thing had nothing to do with you, but to be fair to others I thought I would ask the oath from everyone, when it is Chance and Jana that I mostly want it from.”

“It doesn’t matter,” replied Ratchis. “I don’t think a promise of any kind from anyone is going to make a difference in how anyone acts.”

Kazrack sighed, “I disagree.” The dwarf left the trophy room. Ratchis picked up a bunch of equipment he thought he might need, including a heavy crossbow and a long sword.

Beorth made his way to the chapel on the castle grounds, hoping to find a priest of Ra there that he might confer with about the necklace he now carried from the crazed man in the mortuary⁷. Unfortunately, all he found was a deacon, who helped administer the morning services and lit candles in the evening.

After the mid-day meal, they everyone except Jana gathered again in the audience chamber to be led in to see the king. They got down on one knee and listened to the king.

“We have thought long on this matter, and have decided to be generous,” the king said. “Your *punishment* shall be a great honor, a simple task that we shall give unto you that will do your efforts to do right credit, while you still endeavor to fulfill the task you were originally summoned here to do.”

“Thank you, your highness,” said Martin.

“Thank *you*, Martin,” the king replied. “We are sure that it was your fine influence that kept these fine men in line in their effort to help, and since you did do such a good job, they will escort you to your post in Summit and make sure you get there safely, and then this group of five can go on the dragon-hunt after accomplishing that.” The king paused, but when the great thanks he expected did not come. He frowned.

“This means that you five must officially register as a group and must wait for Martin to be prepared to leave before you can go,” King Brevelan added. “The five of you may go along on your business. There is one last thing we must speak to Martin the Green about in private.”

⁶ The crest of Gothanius is a quartered field on shield with opposed yellow and red, with a white star (on red) in top left-hand corner.

⁷ See Book I: Gathering Wood – Session #8

As the others walked out into the Great Hall, Beorth asked, "What about Jana? She makes six of us."

"I don't even think she should count," said Kazrack.

"We might be better off without her," said Ratchis.

"Ah cahnt buhlieve ya guys!" said Chance. "Jana has always been ar friend. She's helped us wit' ar wounds and used her spells against ar foes. We know we cun trust her becarze we always have had ta!"

No one said anything, but the group dispersed.

Jeremy ran out to garden, late for his rendezvous with Princess Tracel. He found her still waiting, chattering with her ladies in waiting. She was dressed in a coat of fine mink pelts and wore her hair in a tight bun. Her eyes shone brightly in the shocking glare of the sun on the snow.

"Princess! I'm sorry I am late," Jeremy said.

Tracel walked away from her ladies and shooed their attempt to follow, approaching the Neergardian.

"I knew that you were among those that had to speak to my father," Tracel said with a side smile. "Is it true that you and your companions defeated thieves trying to break into the Royal Treasury?"

"Well, it is true that *I* did, and that my companions were there," Jeremy winked.

"Oh," Tracel covered her painted mouth with the tips of her fingers. "It must have been very dangerous!"

"Dangerous? To the thieves maybe, the only reason they are still alive is because I am merciful," Jeremy said cockily.

"Oh, I am so sure that you will be the one to defeat the dragon," Tracel said, siding up to him closely. "You are so brave and skilled and...handsome!"

"Well, thank you," said Jeremy, feeling his face heat up a bit. "Um, but...I was, uh...hoping you could help me in a way that would help my mission to slay the dragon."

"Really? What? Anything!"

"Well, you see I need something from town, and I can't leave the castle to go to town, but I need this thing to help me on my trip," Jeremy explained.

"Well, I cannot go to town myself," Tracel said, and Jeremy's shoulders sagged. "But I can have one of my servants go. What is it you need?"

"You see had someone I really cared about, a friend who died on the hard journey up here," Jeremy said, his lower lip pouted out into an exaggerated sad face. "And I just want a way to remember him, something to help my morale on the road."

"What is that?"

"A cup, a mug of sorts, that has his name on it," Jeremy said.

"Is that all?" Tracel said. "What is the name?"

"Malcolm," Jeremy replied. "M-A-L-C-O-L-M."

"I will have one of my servants fetch it for me," Tracel said. "I must go but meet me here again at the same time

tomorrow.”

“Will you have the mug for me?” Jeremy asked.

“Um, no,” Tracel seemed confused. “It will take me more than a day to get it. I only meant so that we could see each other and talk more. Don’t you want that?”

“Oh!” Jeremy exclaimed. “Yes, of course. I’d love to.”

The princess hurried off with her ladies in waiting, and returned towards the castle, passing Ratchis who was on his way out to the garden to do his daily exercises.

He was in the middle of doing his 180 push-ups, when he heard someone walk by and stop. He looked over to see one of the princesses standing there watching him. Ratchis stood.

“You look pretty strong,” she said.

Ratchis said nothing. The princess’s beauty was almost painful against the backdrop of the snow-covered garden.

She wore a fur cape and hood, but no coat, only a light shawl over her brown dress, which looked much too plain for her. She had a dark complexion like a Herman-Lander, dark hair, and green eyes. Ratchis remembered her muscular arms from the night before. It was Selma.

“Of course, the size of one’s opponent does not matter to a prepared warrior,” Selma said, eyeing the long sword Ratchis wore. It was the one he had gotten from the trophy room.

Ratchis grunted, “You know how to use a sword?”

“Very well actually, though my father tries to forbid me to practice anymore. He says more than the most basic martial training is unbecoming a princess. I say that men are frightened of women being able to best them in combat. What do you say?”

“I say that anyone can and should do anything they want,” Ratchis replied. “As long as it doesn’t hurt anyone that is.”

Selma smiled, “So what if I said that I could best you in battle, I just a woman?”

“I would wonder if it were true, but I would not doubt it just because you were a woman,” Ratchis said.

“Heh,” was Selma’s only reply. “If I thought we could spar without our getting in trouble I’d like to see the truth of this...”

She walked away towards the castle.

Ratchis just stood watching her walk out of his view, and then began to jog about the castle grounds looking for a spot where there were no guards. Eventually, he found a quiet and isolated area between the rear wall and the castle-proper, and then hurried back to the castle.

Meanwhile Chance had gone to find Kazrack, who was sharpening his halberd blade.

“Kahzrahk, Ah wanted ta talk wit’ ya,” the Wallbrookian said.

“What is it Chance?” Kazrack said, without looking up.

“Ah wanted ta make eh bet wit’ ya,” Chance said.

“A bet?” the dwarf stopped and looked up.

“Aye! A bet. If I win ya ferget ahl this stuff about the promise n’ everything, if Ah lose then ah’ll not only mek the promise, ahl get Jana ta do it tuh,” Chance explained.

“I do not think I can leave such a thing to a wager,” said Kazrack. “It is too important.”

“Whaddya mean by that?” said Chance, getting slightly angry. “Leaving it ta uh wager is leavin’ it in tha hands of the gods. If it is es good enough fer Bes, it es good enough fer us.”

“Well, what is the bet?”

“Ah betcha ah kin knock down that dar with one hand!” said Chance with a big smile. He pointed to the door.

“What? Really?” Kazrack said. “It must be a trick.”

“No trick! I will knock it down with one hand all by myself and no magic,” Chance assured him. Kazrack’s brow wrinkled as he thought and looked back and forth from the door to Chance.

“Wait a minute,” Kazrack said. “You are just going to knock on the door and move down knocking lower and lower. *Knocking down the door!*”

“Damn!” Chance said. “Ya know whut Kazrack, here was uh perfect opportunity ta just give in without losing face, but no.”

“I can’t do that,” Kazrack said. “I cannot travel with people I cannot trust.”

“If you could trust us before, ya kin trust us now. Nothing has changed,” said Chance and he left the room, passing Jeremy who had come to speak to Kazrack as well.

“Is Kazrack in there?” Jeremy asked Chance.

“Ya, good luck, ya’ll need et!”

Jeremy walked in, “Kazrack, I wanted to talk to you about Jana.”

“Ok,” said the dwarf, getting back to his blade sharpening.

“Martin said that Jana is a witch,” said Jeremy.

“Yes, I know,” said Kazrack.

“Martin told me what that really means,” said Jeremy.

“What does it mean?”

“It means she controls demons!”

“Yeah, witches, watch-mages, all those folks control demons,” said Kazrack.

“Martin does not control demons,” Jeremy replied.

“Well, that’s no good. He should control demons, someone has to, can’t let them run around wild causing harm,” the dwarf reasoned.

“No, that is not how it works,” said Jeremy exasperated. “She summons them. She brings them to this world to learn magic from them, but they could get free and hurt people!”

“Oh,” Kazrack said as if deep in thought. “I guess that is another reason to not trust her, I guess.”

“Well, if the five of us leave her behind you can forget this whole promise thing and we can continue on our way,” Jeremy suggested.

“I can’t do that,” Kazrack said. “Originally, I wanted the promise mostly because of Chance and Jana, but now Ratchis’ response troubles me. I just don’t understand why he would not make the oath.”

“Some people just don’t like to be told what to do,” said Jeremy. “Friars of Nephthys least of all.”

“That is not a good enough reason,” replied Kazrack. “A dwarf would never make a decision based on that.”

“Ratchis is not a dwarf,” said Jeremy. “But he is stubborn enough to be one if you are an example.”

Jeremy left.

Up in Martin’s quarters, the Watch-Mage taught Beorth how to play King’s Men, while Ratchis returned to the Trophy Room and collected some more gear.⁸ He carried another sword and a suit of ring mail outside and dumped it in the isolated place he found, being careful to not be seen by any guards. He then went back into the castle and stopped a guard.

“I am looking for Princess Selma,” he said. “Do you know where I can find her?”

The guard looked confused. “The princesses cannot be disturbed and cannot be seen without permission of the king or queen,” the guard replied. “Why are you looking for her?”

“I have a gift for her,” Ratchis replied, and wandered off to find her. He made his way to the east wing and looked in the library. In this small room with less than a dozen books he saw Princess Veldicca. She sat in a lovely dress with a large book on the table before her. She looked up startled.

“Oh, if you need the library, I will leave you to it,” she began to close the book.

“Um, no, your highness, I was just looking for your sister,” said Ratchis, feeling his face warm again.

“Which one?”

“Oh, uh... the oldest...Selma?”

“I’m not sure where she is, but if I see her, I will tell her you are looking for her,” Veldicca said politely. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Ratchis and thanks,” he walked back out into the Great Hall where he happened to see Selma crossing from the dining hall.

“Oh, uh Selma!” said Ratchis.

The eyes of Princess Selma’s handmaiden widened incredibly at the half-orc’s daring to address royalty like that. Selma cracked a small smile despite her surprise. “Yes?”

⁸ *King’s Men* is the Aquerra equivalent of Chess.

"I uh, wanted to know if you, uh, wanted to come outside with me for a little while, I uh... have a surprise for you," Ratchis said.

"What is it?" the princess asked.

"A place for us to spar," Ratchis whispered. "I got you some armor and a weapon. I thought you might like the diversion."

Selma laughed, "Are you mad? Do you think we could do such a thing anywhere in the castle without being seen? And do you know what would happen to you if you were caught fighting even in a friendly spar with a princess?" She laughed some more, and Ratchis just stood there silent and embarrassed.

"Thank you for the effort," she said, patting his shoulder. "Maybe in some other time and place. I appreciate it." She walked off with her servant, still laughing some.

Ratchis stood there dejected for a moment and then retrieved the items he had stowed and headed back to the trophy room. He found the place empty. He dropped his extra gear and looked around. The two orcish specimens seemed to stare at him in silent agony.

Gritting his teeth, Ratchis drew his long sword and with two solid blows chopped the heads of both specimens and then kicked them over. He calmly walked out of the Trophy Room.

That night at dinner, Finn and Carlos came by their table and explained that the two of them were going to form a group with Frank and Gwar and a fellow they met from one of the other groups and head out the next morning.

They wished him luck and he thanked them for their help.

After dinner, Kazrack found Daniel the steward to ask him a few questions: "To whom do I speak if I have questions about the contract I signed?" Kazrack asked him.

"I can answer any and all questions regarding this matter," Daniel replies.

"Very good then. Has any consideration been given to the fact that one of the Princesses would be forced to marry a dwarf if my group should win?"

"Forced?" Daniel's eyebrows raised. "Regardless, you are being presumptuous in saying your group will be the one to succeed. As to the details of such an eventuality, I am not at liberty to discuss such a matter. However, I get the impression that you are trying to imply something specific. Have at it, I do not mean to be rude, but I have a castle and the whims of a king to attend to."

"I will try to be brief as you are so busy. I got the impression, perhaps mistakenly, that the Princesses would be married off to the group that completed the quest. If my group were to succeed, I doubt any of the Princesses would be happy to marry a dwarf and, in light of this, I thought it prudent to suggest we alter my contract. Shall I continue - or is there a better time for me to approach you?"

"Alter how?" Daniel asked.

"I would suggest allowing me to act as an individual instead of as part of a group. If I succeed, I would ask only for the monetary award and a land grant equal to what five men would have received." Kazrack explained.

"Unfortunately, that is not possible," said Daniel. "First of all, the king gave specific instructions that you and your companions accompany Martin the Green to Summit. You are required to do this. If after accomplishing this fact and making sure that Martin the Green is there safely and settled you choose to travel onward by yourself that is

your choice—a foolish choice if you ask me, but your choice none-the-less. However, no contracted individual will get more land and resources than one man can easily use. Though we do have some land that could be prospected and become very profitable when compared to other parcels of the same size.”

“Very well then, I have one other request of you,” Kazrack said.

“Yes?”

“Would it be possible for me to use the forge on the castle grounds to repair my armor and that of my companions?”

“I think I can arrange it for tomorrow, but you will have to use your own resources,” replied Daniel.

“That will be fine,” said Kazrack. Very well then, I thank you for your time.

Osilem, 10th of Syet – 564 H.E.

Early the next morning Kazrack grabbed a small snack from breakfast and then went to use the forge.

The others sat around the table at breakfast and found the Dining Hall to be emptier. Several groups of young men had already left for their journey to seek out the dragon.

“We have a problem,” said Beorth. “We are a group of six and we may only travel as a group of five. What are we to do?”

“Perhaps one of us can find another group to travel with and maybe meet up with us later,” suggested Ratchis, not looking up from his eggs and sausage.

“But I guess that *someone* must be Jana, since the other five of you have been given a task by the king,” said Martin.

“Well, she is a witch,” said Jeremy, ignoring the fact that she was sitting right there. “Let’s just leave her behind.”

At that moment there was a commotion at the podium, where one of Daniel’s assistants was registering those groups ready to leave the castle for the dragon-hunt.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN I DON’T COUNT?!?” It was Maria’s voice, echoed by the sound of Simon and Peter trying to calm her down.

“It doesn’t mean you can’t come,” said Peter.

“We still need you,” said James. “We’ll all share some of our reward with you.”

“That is not the point!” Maria declared. “Not only did they wait until the last moment to inform us, but they also have no right to say that the contract is void because I am woman!”

She stormed off.

“Ah guess that answers that question,” said Chance smiling.

Breakfast ended and everyone went on their way to do what they would to pass the time and think about the problems of party dynamics that faced them. Jeremy went back upstairs to sleep, while Martin prepared the list of things he wanted the court to provide him for the journey to Summit. Beorth made his way out to the shrine of Ra to pray, while Jana—who knows how she spent her time.

Ratchis walked out to the garden to do his daily exercises, but was met by Edwin Merrick, the captain of the guards

and four of his men.

“Ratchis?” the captain asked.

“Yes,” the Friar of Nephthys replied.

“I need to ask you some questions,” Captain Merrick said with a sneer.

“What about?”

“About some property that was destroyed in the Trophy Room,” the Captain replied. “Will you give your weapons up and come with me please?”

Ratchis looked at the guards that had fanned out. He paused and then slowly drew his sword and handed it to the Captain, who merely pointed to another guard who took the weapon. The Captain turned and Ratchis followed. The guards fell in line behind them.

As they approached the guardhouse, Ratchis could see the front gatehouse scored by fire. The stones were black, and the ground was muddy and covered in ash. However, the damage did not look as bad as it might’ve been that night.

In the guardhouse, the Captain sat, while Ratchis remained standing. Two guards remained in the room, watching.

“Tell me what you know about the damage to the king’s trophies in the Trophy Room,” the Captain said.

“I know nothing of it,” replied Ratchis with an even voice.

The Captain looked at him for a long time.

“You are of orcish descent, are you not?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Fir-Hagre?”

“Darksh,” Ratchis replied.

“Well, the trophies defaced in the Trophy Room were specimens of the Fir-Hagre.⁹ They terrorized our people for years, but by the efforts of the king we wiped them out. Those were his prized possessions,” the Captain explained.

Ratchis remained silent. He could feel the tension in his body; his muscles were like one tightening coil ready to spring forth in sudden violence and anger.

“Where were you yesterday afternoon?” the Captain asked.

“I was training in the garden and then I went upstairs and took a nap,” said Ratchis.

“Really? Who saw you?”

“The Princess Selma saw me. I’m not sure if anyone else did.”

“One of our guards puts you in the Great Hall in the afternoon. And one of the servants says she saw you enter the library, which is right across from the trophy room.”

“Yes, I saw one of the princesses there and her retainers,” Ratchis replied.

⁹ The Fir-Hagre is the orcish tribe driven out of Greenreed Valley.

“Perhaps you were making sure any possible witnesses were indisposed,” said the Captain.

“Are you accusing me of this?” Ratchis asked. “What would I gain from doing such a thing?”

“You are part orcish, they are orcs. Perhaps their presence there offended you. Who knows?” The Captain leaned forward. “I only know that right now you look like the most likely suspect and the time and place fits. So, if you don’t mind, I am going to have to ask you to stay here in one of our cells while we look into this some more.” Ratchis hands tightened into fists, and he felt his blood boiling over and a pressure in his head. He breathed out long and low.

“I hope you won’t give us any trouble. This will be a lot easier for all of us if you just come along,” the Captain said, slowly standing.

Ratchis relaxed.

“Fine,” he replied. Ratchis followed the guards out a door and down some steps to a lower floor lined with cells. He was searched and placed in the tiny cell. The cot was too small for him and the floor was covered in dirty straw.

The figure in the cell next to him was sleeping, but stirring, looked up.

The man smiled broadly. It was Markle.

“I should have known I’d see you in here,” he said.

End of Session #13

AQUERRA

Session #14

Markle sat up and rubbed his face with both hands, wiping the sleep from his eyes. He looked relaxed. Ratchis had never seen him smile so much.

“So, what’d ya do? Strangle her?” Markle asked Ratchis/

“I am accused of defacing the king’s trophies in the Trophy Room,” Ratchis replied. The cot groaned beneath his weight.

Markle laughed, “Did you do it? Don’t worry I won’t judge you poorly.”

Ratchis did not reply. There was a long silence.

“So, what did she tell you?” Markle asked. Again, Ratchis did not reply.

“Look, there is no reason for us not to talk. I did what I had to do; you did what you felt you had to do. I hold no grudge. So, I am going to prison. I have been in prison before, most of my life actually. I adapt,” Markle looked through the bars at Ratchis, still smiling.

“If you tell me what Jana knew then I can tell you what she told me,” Ratchis replied.

“Heh, well, she never knew exactly what we were going to do, but she knew when and she was to help us keep you guys from getting involved,” said Markle. “She was supposed to be paying back a favor I did for her.”

“Since Jana didn’t do such a good job for you, perhaps you can tell me what favor you did for her?” Ratchis proposed.

Markle laughed again, “Well, turnabout is fair play and all. Just ask her this, I bet she doesn’t even think I know about this... Ask her who Rindalith is.”

“Who is he?”

“Just ask her. Did you know that she was placing you and your whole group in jeopardy? In danger? She is,” Markle said with a smirk.

Ratchis thought about what Markle said and eventually fell asleep sitting up.

As Kazrack hammered at the party’s armor, and Beorth spent his day in the shrine of Ra, and Jana sat bored in her room, while Chance spent his free time trying to start up card games with the other “hunters” and Martin went over his list again and again, Jeremy went out to meet with Princess Tracel one last time.

It was just after mid-day meal, and he had only been waiting a short time in the increasingly cold wind when he saw her approach with her ladies-in-waiting. They waited at a safe distance as she and Jeremy stepped between tall and now-barren rose bushes.

“Oh, Jeremy,” Tracel said breathily, her face obscured a bit by a woolen scarf. “It is so good to see you again.”

“Oh yeah, well... It was just yesterday, and I spied you across the way at dinner,” Jeremy replied.

“Ooh! I knew you were looking at me!” Tracel said. “I wasn’t sure, but I should have known.”

It was quiet for a long moment and she blushed.

“So, um, do you have the mug?” Jeremy asked.

“I told you it’d have to wait a day,” she said, with furrowed brow.

“Oh yes, I’m sorry. I am just distracted by my coming journey and by um, you... uh, of course.”

She blushed again. “Will you be leaving soon?”

“I think we are leaving tomorrow some time, but we haven’t discussed it much. My companions are all about doing their own thing.”

“They are probably waiting for your leadership and guidance,” speculated Tracel.

“Probably.”

Martin the Green came downstairs and after asking around, found Daniel giving orders in the Dining Hall. He waited until the castle steward was done and then approached him.

“I have completed my list of needed supplies for my journey,” the Watch-Mage said. “I know some of these things will not be available, but I figured I would try.”

“Okay,” said Daniel, looking distracted. “I will see to this as soon as I can. When do you plan to leave?”

“I think we will be ready tomorrow,” said Martin. “Oh, and I was also hoping for a mule or donkey to help carry my gear.”

“That can be arranged,” said Daniel. “Oh, and you might be interested to know that one of your would-be companions has been taken into custody.”

“Oh? Who and for what?” Martin said, nervously.

“I believe his name is Ratchis? The big one,” said Daniel. “It is a shame really, but he has been accused of defacing the orcish trophies in the Trophy Room.”

“Oh,” was all Martin could say.

“Well, it should be all cleared up one way or another soon enough,” said Daniel. “The others should still be more than enough people to escort you to Summit. But before you leave, make sure you come and find me. I will have some last-minute instructions and a token from the king to take with you.”

“Of course,” said Martin.

“Speaking of which, the case that was found on that warlock that you and the others captured has been brought to your room for you to examine. His Majesty has said you can do with it what you like,” added Daniel.

“Oh, oh, thank you,” said Martin the Green, forgetting all about Ratchis in his curiosity and rushing back up to his room.

He found a servant with the black valise waiting by his door about to knock. Thanking her, she took the bag into his room, placed it on a table and slowly opened it.

“What’s that?” a chattering voice said in his mind. “Smells funny.”

Martin could feel his familiar crawling up on to the top of his head.

“I’m about to find out what it is, Thomas,” replied Martin.

“Nuts? Could there be nuts in there?”

“I doubt it.” Martin the Green looked inside to find the bag built to hold things securely, with little movement and no breakage.

The bag held two bottles of wine. One was half empty, but the other was still tightly corked and full. They had no labels. It also held two wine glasses in a recess designed to cushion them. The case also held on one side a smaller box that he opened to reveal an alchemist’s kit. There was a silver candleholder and several candles, most were burned down to a nub, but there were a few unused specimens. The bag also held a velvet pillow, some fine clothing and a small red leather bag tied beneath the lid.

Martin spread several items from the valise on the bed and cast his *Detect Magic* spell, but only the leather bag had any aura of magic.

Martin picked up the bag and looked inside. It was empty.

“Nuts?” Thomas chittered.

“Quiet now, I’m working,” Martin admonished. He slipped his hand into the bag and felt a fuzzy ball at the bottom. He pulled his hand out and looked inside. There was no such thing. He slid his hand in again and again and felt the fuzzy ball. He grasped the ball and pulled it slowly out and opened his hand. It was gone!

He repeated his experiment with the same results.

“What’s in there?” Thomas asked again, sniffing.

“I’m not sure,” Martin said to the squirrel, taking a moment to scratch his head. “Let me try something else.”

Martin slid his hand back into the bag and grabbed the fuzzy ball and this time yanked it out, tossing what was in his hand away from him. The tiny ball of hair spun in the air and grew and changed. It landed on the bed as a bobcat. It had dark brown fur with deep rust highlights. Thomas dove into Martin’s hood, and the Watch-Mage himself flinched. However, the animal just cocked his head and looked at Martin, as if waiting.

“Now, just sit right there,” Martin said, nervously. The bobcat sat.

Martin’s eyes opened widely.

“Stand up,” he said to the cat. It stood.

“Roll over!” The cat rolled over.

“Hmmm,” Martin the Green mused. “Turn back into a fuzzy ball!”

The bobcat cocked its head again.

“Um, get back in the bag!” said Martin, holding it open. The cat leapt and reversing its transformation, disappeared into the red leather bag.

Martin felt back in the bag and there was another fuzzy ball.

“Fascinating...”

The day passed without further event. Jeremy sparred some with Beorth. Kazrack worked until he could do it no longer, and Jana sat bored in her room. Ratchis awoke with a start when he heard the sound of keys in a cell's metal lock. Markle was being moved.

"Your turn to be taken to the lower dungeons, scum," said a guard.

Markle turned to Ratchis, "Until we meet again."

"You won't be meeting anyone ever again," said the guard pushing Markle roughly.

"Oh, I know" said Markle with a grin.

Ratchis yawned, and stretched out on the floor, knowing to save his energy whenever he could.

Ratchis had long been awake, watching the tiny square of sunlight move across the floor of his cell, when the Captain of the Guard, accompanied by two other guards came to him.

The cell was unlocked.

"Come on," the Captain said. "Today is your lucky day. It seems that someone else confessed to the crime. You are being released."

Ratchis said nothing and got to his feet.

"Follow me," said the Captain and led him back up to the office.

As Ratchis ducked his head through the doorway, he saw a lovely figure standing there waiting for them. She was draped in a fine ermine wrap, and stood nearly six feet tall, her dark hair tucked in a fur hat. She wore a blouse of tan cloth and a blouse that passed for "plain" in noble circles. She stepped towards Captain Merrick and Ratchis. It was Princess Selma.

Merrick dismissed the other two guards.

"Thank you, Captain," the Princess said. Ratchis just stared at her, and then looked back at the Captain and then back at her.

"It appears that the Princess has confessed to defacing the specimens," Captain Merrick said with some anger in his voice, but not looking at Ratchis, who he was addressing. "This is now a situation to be handled *in private* by the king. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," said Ratchis, nodding and still looking at the Princess. She did not smile.

"You are free to go," the Captain said.

"Captain, please give us a moment alone to talk," the Princess said, looking at Ratchis.

"But your Highness!" The Captain protested.

"That was not a suggestion, Captain," the Princess said, sternly.

The Captain's eyes narrowed, and he turned to Ratchis, pointing a finger at him. "Do not forget you are in the presence of royalty!"

He walked out.

“Thank you,” Ratchis said to the princess when the captain had left.

“You owe me more than thanks,” the Princess said. “I just wanted you to know that as far as I am concerned, I just saved your life and as such you owe me a great deal. I’m not sure in what way you are going to repay me, but it never hurts to have a big guy who can fight owing you a favor. Understand?”

Ratchis nodded.

“Good, now get out of here before he changes his mind, or I do.”

Back in the castle, the rest of the companions were coming down for a late breakfast, enjoying the comfort of a good bed for one last night. Martin was so late, eventually a servant brought him a tray of food, while Kazrack rushed down, afraid he’d miss out on food. He bumped into Ratchis, who was slowly coming up the circular stairs.

“We should leave today,” said Ratchis without enthusiasm.

“I will be forced to travel with the group for the next two days at least,” said Kazrack.

“About Jana: despite what she did, I think we should give her a second chance,” said Ratchis. “While I do think she betrayed us, I think if she had it to do over, she’d do it different.”

“I have not decided what I will do after that. It seems that going off on my own would not be more profitable,” was the dwarf’s only reply, and with that he continued on to breakfast.

At noon, Princess Tracel nervously anticipated for her last meeting with Jeremy. She waited in the garden for her would-be hero to come to her. She had thought of him all night.

She smiled broadly at him as he approached, and she took a step as well, standing closer than she had ever dared before.

“Do you have the mug,” he said, his eyebrows arching in a meaningful way.

“Yes. Yes, I do, and another gift, if you’ll take it,” She looked long and hard in his eyes, her love searching out for the reflection of his own.

“Um, uh . . . of course,” Jeremy said, with a tone of confidence only she could hear.

“Here is the mug with the name of your lost companion,” Tracel said, her voice ringing brightly like a bell of admiration. She stepped even closer, forgetting herself. “I had a servant retrieve it. I find your cherishing the memory of your brother-in-arms very heroic.”

She handed him the mug. It was wrapped up in cloth. He slid it in his pocket without looking at it.

“Thank you,” he said, trying hard to conceal his emotions from her, as she looked on knowing the true deep appreciation in his heart. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“I have something else for you,” Princess Tracel said, her eyes wandering down his face, to his square jaw and his neck that flowed into strong and manly shoulders.

“Oh, what is it?” He feigned surprise.

“I want to ask you a question first,” she said, breathlessly. “If you succeed... If you slay the dragon... Will you come back *for me*? Will you choose me from among my sisters?”

There was a moment of silence between them, and the increasingly wicked and cold wind was the only sound, as if they dared not even breathe in this moment of love revealed.

“Uh, yes,” Jeremy said, worried about sounding sincere.

“Oh, oh, Jeremy!” she cried, warm tears rolling down her red, cold cheeks like crisp late autumn apples. “I am so happy.”

She looked around surreptitiously, and then placed a small kiss on his cheek.

“Was that it?” he said, his blue eyes sparkling.

“Oh, you are kind to say that a simple kiss from me would be a gift,” Princess Tracel said. “But I have a token to take with you on your quest, as every good knight who has a lady should do.”

“Uh, yeah, that’s what I meant,” Jeremy said, looking hard at her face.

She drew a white article of clothing from her bosom and placed it in his hand. It felt very silky.

“It is to be wore outside your armor, or tied to the saddle of your horse,” Tracel said, remembering the many tales of knights and maidens she had heard from her nanny. “But being from Neergaard, I’m sure you already know that.”

“Yes, of course,” Jeremy said, obviously too overcome with the moment to say anymore.

“Well, I am sure you have much preparation to see to before you leave today,” Tracel said, thinking herself very reasonable.

“Yes. Uh, yeah, I’ll see you when I get back,” Jeremy said, too shy to reveal everything he was feeling.

“When you come riding in upon a white stallion to claim me as your wife?” Tracel said, her smile widening again.

“Yuh-yeah,” said Jeremy, leaning forward as if it were a shared lovers’ secret. She took the moment to kiss him again, and then covering her mouth as she tittered with a joy she had never known, she ran off.

Jeremy watched her for a moment and then walked back into the castle. He caught a glimpse of the first flakes of snow as he entered. Up in his room, he looked at what Princess Tracel gave him. It was a piece of satin underwear. He felt some heat on his cheeks but tied it haphazardly to the scabbard of his long sword, and then slid it back on his belt so his cloak would cover it most of the time.

He proceeded to unwrap the mug and look at it. Carved in one side were the letters, “M-A-L-C-O-M.”

“Hmm, spelled wrong,” Jeremy said to himself, but then lifted the mug in the air. “Oh, well. Malcolm would never have known it anyway. From now on we always drink together, until we have drinks at your place!”

The companions spent some time taking care of last-minute details before leaving. Kazrack strapped an almost ridiculous amount of equipment to his back and walked out to the front gate.

“Ho, there!” said one of the castle guards. “What is your business at the gate?”

“I want to leave the castle and go to town,” said the laden dwarf, large flakes of snow swirled around him.

“None may leave the castle grounds without their group and none may return until their mission is accomplished,” said the guard.

“But I am only going to town to buy supplies and sell off some other goods,” said Kazrack.

“The Crown will provide you with supplies when you register your group,” said the guard.

Kazrack sighed, annoyed, and returned to the castle proper.

Jeremy and Beorth came down the stairs carrying their packs, going to meet the others and register.

“You know Beorth, I was thinking you should put your foot down and not let Jana travel with us,” said Jeremy.

“Excuse me?” Beorth looked at Jeremy in bewilderment.

“She’s a witch!” said Jeremy, lowering his voice. “You know what that means! She summons demons and bends them to her will. She can ensorcell men, and do all sorts of mean, terrible nasty things.”

“I have never seen Jana do any of that,” said Beorth.

“How do we know we haven’t been enspelled already?”

“I’ll keep your opinion in mind, but it isn’t my place to say she can or cannot travel with us,” said Beorth.

“Well, I, for one, plan to watch her closely,” Jeremy insisted as they came into the dining room, where Chance and Ratchis waited.

“Where are the others?” asked Ratchis.

“I am right here,” Kazrack said, entering the room.

“Jana is still upstairs,” said Jeremy.

“And Martin had to talk to the steward before we leave. He said to meet him outside,” Beorth informed them.

“I’ll get Jana,” said Ratchis, which he immediately did.

“Jana, we are ready to leave,” the half-orc said to the girl who was still packing her things.

“I am coming,” she replied, slinging her bag over her shoulder, and moving towards him.

“We can talk about your friend Rindalith later,” said Ratchis curtly and turned to lead the way.

Jana stopped in her tracks, and her eyes opened widely. After a moment, she regained her composure and followed.

In the dining room, the five of them registered their group, an assistant to Daniel the Castle Steward taking their names.

“What do you call yourselves?” he asked. “I mean, does your group have a name?”

“We don’t have a name,” said Beorth.

“We are the Warriors of the House Divided,” said Kazrack.

“What?” the steward asked.

“Warriors of the House Divided,” Kazrack said again, and it was written down.

“Thassa stupid name,” Chance said.

“Your gear will be waiting for you in the courtyard,” said the steward.

“What supplies do we get?” Kazrack asked.

“The same as everyone else.”

“Which is?”

“I don’t know.”

They met up with Martin the Green and their supplies (two weeks rations, a gallon of water, one flask of lamp oil, flint & steel, and a woolen winter blanket) in the courtyard. There was a cold half hour wait for Martin’s mule and possessions to be brought out by a stable boy. The tension in the air was palpable, as no one in the group said a word to each other. Finally, they were off, Martin feeling the weight of a golden medallion that bore the king’s sigil and a letter of introduction in his breast pocket.

As they came through the gate, the party turned right, using a narrow path that went down into the ravine about the castle and then back up into the nearby mountains. However, Kazrack did not turn and continued on straight into town.

No one said a word.

Ratchis led the way, and Beorth, Jana, Chance, Jeremy and Martin (fighting with his mule the whole way) followed. The snow came down harder and harder. The wind whipping it up into their faces, as they marched right into it. They had only gone a few hours when they decided they had to stop. The castle would still have been in view if it had not been for the snow, but Ratchis found a rock ledge that formed a shelter that would do for the night. It was even tall and deep enough to allow the mule to get out of the weather as well. The remains of a fire showed that they were not the first to use this place for such a purpose.

Ratchis started a fire, as Jana tried to show Martin how to handle the mule a bit. They discussed their aims, and decided they’d try to get to Summit via Ram’s Head.

About two and a half hours later, Kazrack arrived.

“I thought you left the group,” said Jeremy.

“I went to town to sell off my old armor,” said the dwarf. “I told Ratchis I would be traveling with the group as far as Summit.”

Ratchis was silent.

Watches were set for the night, and no one spoke hardly a word to each other. On his watch, Jeremy sat by Jana and watched her very closely.

Tholem, 11th of Syet

In the early morning, Ra’s Glory reflected off the over a half-foot of snow all about them. The air was crisp and whispered unintelligibly across the snow’s surface, occasionally sending cascades from the rock ledge above them.

They ate a cold breakfast, packed up the mule and began their journey north by northwest towards the alder-village of Ram’s Head (according to the map they had been given) in order to avoid the Ogre Scar.¹⁰

Ratchis, Jana, Chance, Beorth, Jeremy, Kazrack and Martin marched half the day, slowly moving up the mountain,

¹⁰ The party had found out about the “Ogre Scar” in the briefing. A mysterious deep tear in the earth, it is known to have been home to ogres, and is a place than many Fir-Hagre orcs fled to at the end of the Orc War.

through deeper and deeper snow. Ratchis led the way, pushing through the snow with his long muscular legs, and setting a pace the others found exhausting. In time they came to the edge of tall ravine about 120 feet across. It was crossed by a rickety rope bridge, that swayed in the wind that came whipping down the canyon. The mule brayed nervously, and as the party discussed the safety of the bridge, Jeremy took it upon himself to test it out.

He slowly made his way across the bridge, his weight lessening the wild bucking, but still it swayed, and he was about halfway across when losing his balance, he slipped face first onto the bridge, his feet dangling over the side. The bottom of the ravine was over 100 feet below him.

The party watched in horror as he struggled to get back up on the bridge and then crawled slowly to the other side. He stood and turned.

“The bridge is fine!” Jeremy called across. “Come across one at a time!”

“Come back!” called Ratchis. “The mule will never make it across that.”

“It will be fine. Mules are sure-footed!”

“We have to go another way. Come back!”

“Fine!”

Jeremy stepped onto the bridge, thought it over and then got back down on his hands and knees and crawled safely across.

“The mule could have made it,” he said on the other side.

“Excuse me if I don’t take your word for it,” said Ratchis.

“I will have to speak to Alderman of Ram’s Head about this bridge,” noted Martin. “This is unacceptable.”

The party headed back southward at a quicker pace, and while it the sun had started to sink by the time they got back to where they had camped the night before, they pressed on towards the village of Three-Trees to stay the night there. They moved down into the valley and found themselves walking through large orchards, with tiny mal-formed apples frozen on the limbs of trees.

The village was a tiny collection of cottages, protected by log bunkers guarded by lightly-armored soldiers with bows.

There was a small inn at the center of the village and the companions went in and lowered their aching forms around a table and ordered food and drinks and arranged for lodging for the night. Two middle-aged men sat at the bar talking, and one kept looking over his shoulder at the party as they talked.

“In the morning we will head north to Ram’s Head,” said Ratchis.

“From the map it looks like it is a longer way to Summit, but we will be able to avoid the Ogre Scar,” said Kazrack.

“Mind if I join you?” said a voice. They turned to see one of the two men. He had thinning brown hair, and a pot-belly. He wore nicely-kept clothes, and his skin looked darkened by the sun. He pulled up a chair “My name is Joseph the Brewer. Where are you all from?”

The group was silent for a moment.

“I take it you are one of these dragon-hunting groups?” Joseph continued. “I have seen a few of them traveling through last couple of days. I travel all throughout Gothianus selling my beers and ales, but I am wintering here in Three-Trees.”

“I’m from Neergaard,” replied Jeremy.

“Neergaard, huh? Had some Neergaardian mead once, good stuff. Not many dragons in Neergaard I assume, not with all the knights there and all,” Joseph reasoned. “But the dragon here, oh it’s a mean and scary one, that’s for certain.”

“You’ve seen the dragon?” said Kazrack, happy to have a possible lead.

“Oh yes,” Joseph said, his smile disappearing. “It was just this past summer.”

“What did it look like?” the dwarf questioned.

“It was fifty or sixty feet long, and bright green like Ra’s Glory shining off the muck of a pond in mid-Quark.¹¹ It came out of nowhere, attacked my little caravan. It breathed a jet of fire on a wagon of ale and it just exploded. Everyone fled and scattered. It was terrible,” the brewer said.

“Were many people killed?” asked Martin the Green.

“None that I know of, but a good amount of property was destroyed. I lost that whole shipment. It cost me a bundle. I hope you get it,” Joseph said, a hint of anger creeping into his voice.

“No one was killed, fascinating,” mused Martin.

“In all the tales of dragons I have ever heard they usually kill a lot of people,” said Kazrack.

“Well, I don’t want to disturb you too much, but if you ever need ales of any kind, let me know. I brew all kinds of seasonal ones. In fact,” he turned to the barkeep. “Hey, Johnson, get these fine men (and lady) a round of that pumpkin ale on me.”

The night went by without event and the next day after a breakfast of oatmeal, they were headed northwest again.

Balem, 12th of Syet – 564 H.E.

There was less wind the next day, and this made the cold bearable. They crossed a snow-filled plain and passed no signs of life. At mid-morning they crossed a stone bridge that went over what must have been (according to the map) the Kelzain Stream. Ratchis then turned them on a more northerly course.

As the day waned, they crossed wagon ruts running east/west in the hard earth, and further on they could see the tell-tale signs of civilization atop the nearby foothills. As they climbed up a steep trail Ratchis discovered, they could see the thatched roofs of yurts.

Ram’s Head was a village atop a plateau in the shadow of a tall dark mountain scored with paths and ledges. All the houses were low round buildings of log and thatch, with a corral nearby. The muddy streets were strewn with straw and the droppings of sheep and goats.

They knocked on a random door and Martin asked which house belonged to the Alderman, and followed the directions there, after finding out his name was Morrur.

Martin knocked on the door to the alderman’s yurt. The voice of boy came from behind the door, “Who’s there?”

¹¹ *Quark* is the fourth month of the year and middle month of summer. Aquerra’s months are as follows (in order): {spring} Prem, Sek {summer} Ter, Quark, Keent, {autumn}, Ese, Syet, {winter} Oche, Nuiet, Dek, Onk.

“My name is Martin the Green. I am a Watch-Mage and am working for King Brevelan Gothan III. My companions and I have come to see the Alderman.”

There was a pause and then another, deeper, voice said, “Do you have proof you are who you say you are?”
“I have a letter of introduction from the King,” replied Martin.

“Slide it under the door,” the voice said.

Martin paused and looked at the others. Jana shrugged her shoulders, and then the Watch-Mage slid the letter beneath the door.

They waited a few moments and then finally the door slowly opened. A tall man with graying dark brown hair in rustic clothing of leather and wool answered the door. Ratchis immediately noticed the hand axe he held low to one side. He looked perhaps in his early forties, but his arms and chest looked very muscular, his face was care-worn.

“My name is Morrur. I am the alderman of Ram’s Head,” the man said, and then gestured to the boy of about fifteen years behind him. “This is my son William.”

The alderman handed the letter back to Martin and showed the party in. “I’m sorry about my initial greeting, but one cannot be too careful in this part of Gothanius,” Morrur said. “Between gnolls from the north and bandits, it can be dangerous. But that is done with, I am sorry that my home is not as nice as some other alderman’s places, but Ram’s Head is a humble village. However, you are welcome to stay here the night.”

“We greatly appreciate your hospitality,” said Martin the Green.

“William,” said Morrur to his son. “Take care of their pack animal and then bring in more firewood.”

“Yes, sir,” the boy said and ran out.

“Have a seat around the fire,” Morrur said to the group. “Make yourselves at home, though I’d like to learn all your names.”

The party spread out around the fire pit in the center of the one room building and told the alderman their names.

The floor was dirt but covered in fur blankets and burlap pillows. The smell of something cooking in a pot above the central fire, just barely smothered the smell of a barn.

“So, you are the new Watch-Mage, and are on your way to Summit,” Morrur said.

“Yes, my companions are seeing that I get there safely, where I can help to aid and oversee the hunting of the dragon,” replied Martin.

“So, Summit is getting a Watch-Mage then. It figures,” said Morrur with a sigh. “Aside from the dragon that place is relatively safe since the Orc War finished and pretty wealthy. Here in Ram’s Head, we struggle to just get by.”

There was an awkward silence.

“Of course, some aldermen have more favor than others. They are more popular, invited to Royal Balls and get whatever they want, while others suffer,” Morrur continued, until he caught himself. “Not that I am placing the blame in any one place. His Majesty the king, does a good job, and I am sure he knows what he is doing sending you to Summit to overlook this project of his, but when it is done, I wonder what will become of you.”

“Well, I am only the interim Watch-Mage. I am sure such a decision will be made when the time is right and another alumnus of the Academy is assigned to Gothanius,” said Martin the Green.

Morrus stirred the contents of the pot and then began serving it into wooden bowls.

“It is a local favorite,” he said. “Stuffed tripe stewed in a black sauce.”

“We have something very similar in the part of Thricia where I am from,” said Martin.

William came back in and immediately began to pour the group wine from a gourd.

“You mentioned gnolls before, do they come to these parts often?” asked Ratchis.

“They come down from the north in the winter. The harsher the winter, the more frequent and devastating their attacks. They come looking for food, which can be livestock, but can also be people,” explained Morrus. “Every man in this village has learned to fight because of this and I lead the militia, but we still lose about a half dozen men every year, if not more.”

“Oh,” said Ratchis, and turned to his bowl of black steaming food.

The party ate hungrily and then their full stomachs and the warmth of the Yurt took over and they dropped off to sleep one by one.

Teflem, 13th of Syet – 564 H.E.

The wind woke them. It battered the thatched roof angrily and sounded at times like a growl rolling across the sky. “Good morning,” said Morrus, stirring the pot above the fire. “It is a gusty day out.”

The companions stretched and got their things ready and ate the re-heated tripe from the night before, now crusty from where it stuck to the bottom of the pot. Ratchis had seconds.

“I was wondering if you know anything about the dragon,” asked Kazrack, as he crunched on the breakfast, and brushed crumbs from his beard.

“I don’t know much. It has not been seen this far north or east,” said Morrus. “I’d be curious to find out more about it myself.”

“Well, this man named Joseph told us he saw it attack his wagon. He said it was long and green,” said Martin.

“An bredhed far,” added Chance, with his mouth full.

“Joseph? Joseph the Brewer?” Morrus asked, incredulity.

“Um, yes,” replied Martin.

“Well, I’m not calling him a liar, but I wouldn’t believe everything that man says. He has a heart of gold, but he tends to exaggerate a bit.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” said Martin.

They thanked Morrus for his hospitality, and he welcomed them back anytime. They found William outside preparing Martin’s mule and thanked him as well. The wind whipped like a cruel taskmaster, but they headed west by southwest, hoping to make Summit by mid-afternoon at the latest but they had barely marched an hour when the gusts began to bring volleys of snow upon them.

Ratchis tried to pick the right direction and lead his companions to safety, but visibility was almost nothing and now the wind rarely stopped biting with its cold and cruel teeth. In time they came to a frozen stream that covered in

snow was hard to spot and led to wet feet. Ratchis turned them south, hoping to find an easier place to cross the stream and perhaps find a landmark that could help him find their place on the map. He knew they should find be finding a woody place soon, and this either meant they were near the Ogre Scar or near Summit.

They finally crossed the stream, but Jana and Martin began to stumble, but they could all feel the deep cold in their bones (except, however, for Ratchis who had placed Nephthys' blessing on himself to protect him from the elements). Only the deepening gloom let them know that evening was upon them, for they had not seen the sky for hours, everything was a uniform gray from horizon to horizon.

By the time they came to the tree line they were searching for, they were all stumbling a bit, and Chance was helping Jana to walk. Ratchis led them a few score yards into the wood and found them a tree to sit beneath. He and Kazrack worked to clear the snow out from under it, and then the half-orc took the last of the tinder he carried and built a small fire.

"I am going to explore a bit, while you all stay here," said Ratchis. "Hopefully we are closer to Summit than to the Ogre Scar and we can make a last push. If we are near the Scar, we may need to get out of here anyway, so rest up and conserve your strength."

With that he jogged off.

The others did what they could to warm up. There was not much wood for the fire, though Jeremy threw some pinecones into it. Beorth wrapped himself in a blanket.

Jana looked pale, and she shivered as she felt a sleepiness come over her.

"Are ya okay?" Chance asked her.

"I don't feel so good," she said groggily.

"Ya should wrap this a little tighter about ya" Chance said, pulling her cloak closed about her. "Sometimes feeling warm is all about being a little lucky," he added with a wink and brushed her cheek with his hand. Suddenly, she felt the cold seep out of her body. It was as if it were no colder than an early autumn day.

"Luck?" said Kazrack. "It has nothing to do with luck."

Jana smiled a Chance.

"Everything has ta do wit' luck," Chance said to the dwarf. "Jass sometimes ya gotta mek yer own luck."

"What does that mean?" the dwarf asked.

"Et mens that ya gotta tek chaunces en life," explained Chance. "Ya gotta give luck a chance ta kick in and help ya out. Et es not considered bad luck when ya try something crazy n' it fails, but et es good luck when et sacc-seeds. Bad luck comes when ya don't try anything."

"That does not make any sense," replied Kazrack.

"Et meks more sense than ya know."

It was nearly two hours before Ratchis returned, and the fire had died out. The Friar of Nephthys had an armful of firewood and re-ignited the blaze.

"I found Summit nearby. The ridge it sits upon is only a mile or two away. We can definitely make it. Take off your boots and socks and put them, and your feet, by the fire to dry and then we'll get moving."

"Where'd you get the wood?" Jeremy asked. It looked cut and split.

“I borrowed it,” Ratchis replied.

The party warmed their feet by the fire, and then marched towards the tall ridge the town of Summit stood upon. The snow continued to pile up, and the dark town shimmered white in the places where light could be seen to peek through the windows of houses.

They walked up the main street, which ended in a square with a two-story inn at one end. As they entered, the warm place, they could see the carved sign that read “The Sun’s Summit Inn”.

Inside, the common room glowed with the light of the hearth, and of a few lanterns in the real glass pane windows. The bar was directly across from the entrance, and there was a hearth was against the right wall. There a bard strummed on a lyre and sang softly, flanked by a tall muscular man that rivaled Ratchis in size.

There were about a half dozen tables and benches, some of which were occupied. An elderly couple sat across from each other at a table to the right, while two men sat and ate and drank at the bar. Four figures sat at the table closest to the door and to the left.

The party took a table to the right of the door, across from the four who looked like they might be travelers as well. Two busty barmaids were serving the people in common room, and Martin went over to the barkeep, a man who appeared too young to have his steel grey hair to ask about rooms for the night.

The four men at the next table were being loud, or actually one was being loud (with interspersed laughter from another). He was tall and had a long sword at his belt. He had dirty blonde hair, and well-kempt beard, and pale skin like Jeremy’s. He faced away from the door. Across from him was a short squat man with a bowl of thick black hair, and dark sun-soaked skin. He wore wolf furs, including a hood made from the head of a wolf that rested on his back. He had a huge two-handed battle-axe resting on the table but gripped tightly in his hands. He sat, teeth gritted, showing no emotion, his shoulders taking up all the room on the bench. Beside the dark man was a skinny weasel-faced fellow, who also had long hair and lots of acne scars on his face. He laughed shrilly at everything the blonde man said. Across from the weasel was a rotund bald man, who only had tufts of black hair sprouting from behind his ears. Despite, his girth, he looked strong and a large round nose and a double-chin. He wore black priestly robes with a silver belt cord and had a nasty headed mace at his side.

Martin returned from the bar and sat down, “The innkeeper will be arranging for us to get three rooms, two doubles and a triple. He is also sending over a barmaid to take our orders.”

The companions sat there, just wanting to enjoy the warm, and dry off, their boots and cloaks, leaving a puddle of melted snow underneath them, but the conversation of the other travelers destroyed the illusion of peace.

The tall blonde man was telling the story of a gang-bang in a ship’s hold and the weaselly man responded to his every boast with shrill laughter.

The topic of the other group’s conversation was wearing the patience of the companions, and finally Ratchis turned to them and said loudly, “Keep it down!”

“I don’t think so,” said the blonde man, without turning to look. The weaselly-faced man bared his teeth and squat man’s knuckles turned bright white as his grip tightened on his axe.

The man continued his story, “The next day I wake up and the poor bugger is all red and sore and covered in yellow pus. The whore was diseased! If she had been around, I would have given her such a slap!”

“Yeah, yeah, ya would’ve slapped her! Yeah, yeah!” the weasel-man said, with his shrill laughter.

“So, we were in port in Ursula City, so I went into town to the temple of Fallon and I go right up to the priestess in

there and...get this... I whip out my tally-wacker and I say `lay your hands on this!’”¹²

The two men burst into gut-shaking laughter. The other two did not react very much, but the weaselly man could not stop.

“Lay your hands on this! Ha! Ha! Ha! That’s so rich! Oh! That’s a good one!”

The barmaid served their food, and the party ate with the joy of no more loud stories erupting from the other table. The bard played a soothing song, and then walked over to the other table where he seemed to know the others.

“Hey,” the weasel-faced man called over to the party’s table. “Hey, you guys hunting the dragon?”

“Yes,” said Jeremy.

“Well, so are we, and ya might as well give up because we are gonna find it first,” he said with his twisted grin.

“Well, I hope you run into it first, too,” replied Ratchis.

Suddenly, the wind outside the inn picked up into a howl that increased in pitch, ending with a loud thump on the roof that could be heard through the whole second floor above them. Several glasses in the common room bursting. The boards creaked and moaned as if some great weight had been dragged across the building and the fire in the hearth flared up. The howling wind returned, and this time seemed to come in gust straight down the chimney and all the lanterns and candles in the place went out, along with the hearth.

The barmaids began to scream, and the elderly couple just repeated “Oh my! Oh my!”

“Jana, we need a light,” said Beorth, and with a word from the young girl from Westron, the mug of ale before her gave off a bright light that filled half the common room.

Gibb, the barkeep, lit up a lantern and everyone looked around to determine what had happened. One of the barmaids had ducked behind a table, and the elderly couple immediately stood to leave, obviously shaken.

“Gibb, I am going to walk Nelin and Letia home to make sure they are safe,” said the brutish bouncer in a gentle tone, and began to lead the couple out. He took a moment to glare at both parties as he approached the door. “I had better not hear there was any trouble from you people while I was gone.”

“We were just leaving anyway,” said the tall blonde man. “We have a dragon to slay.”

“Yeah, no blizzard can stop us,” said the bard.

They gathered their gear and marched out after the bouncer and the elderly couple.

Ratchis and Kazrack decided to go outside to investigate the sound, while Martin and Jana spoke with one of the barmaids who still obviously nervous, was refilling their drinks.

“Does this kind of thing happen often?” Martin asked her.

“Oh, nothing this bad,” she said and then whispered. “Some people say this inn is haunted, but usually it is little things, figures out of the corner of your eyes that are gone when you turn your head, creaking footsteps in an empty room, that kind of thing.”

“Really? And it never has manifested itself so violently before?” Martin continued with his probing.

¹² Ursula City is a medium-sized city in the northern portion of Sandspine Island in the Kingdom of Neergaard. It was re-named for the late Queen, mother of current king Edmund Crownen I.

“Oh, I wouldn’t call that violent, sir,” the barmaid said. “Spooky, yes. Violent? No. But you are right to say that nothing that extreme has ever happened before, but please don’t tell Gibb I said anything. The owners like to keep such rumors hush-hush.”

“Is Gibb one of the owners?” Jana asked.

“No, the owners are away,” the girl replied.

The two men at the bar, bid the barkeep good night and went up to their rooms.

Outside Ratchis was climbing up to the roof. He used the uneven stones of the chimney. Kazrack watched on from below. Ratchis could see a line in the snow about a foot and a half in from the edge, as if something had been dragged across the length of the roof. Snow was pushed down to the edge of the slightly angled roof and was falling over in big clumps as more piled on it from the sky. He carefully made his way across the roof and examined the mark, while checking for any tracks, but could find nothing else unusual. As he approached the chimney again, his feet suddenly slipped out to his left and he slammed into the roof with his hip first, the bit of snow beneath him cushioning the fall.

Ratchis held himself in place and could feel the area beneath the snow was very slick, as if covered by oil, but he could not see anything there. He slowly began to get to his feet again, and this time when he slipped, he tumbled feet over head and right off the roof, landing painfully despite the snow bank.

Ratchis was lying there for a second, trying to regain his breath, when Beorth came out of the inn, bearing the light-emanating mug. Kazrack came around the corner.

“Hit an icy patch?” Kazrack asked.

“No, it was just slick. It was weird. I felt for ice, and there was none,” Ratchis replied, as Beorth helped him up.

“Well, Martin spoke with one of the barmaids and she said this place is haunted, but that nothing this extreme has ever happened before,” Beorth said. “If it *is* a haunting, I am duty bound to investigate it.”

“Well, I am going to go back up on the roof and checking out that slippery spot,” Ratchis said. “Kazrack, can you stand watch again?”

“For what?” the dwarf replied.

“Because I am climbing on the roof of an inn in a strange town and people might find that strange,” said Ratchis with a tone of exasperation.

Ratchis climbed back up the chimney and this time took a rope with him. At the top he tied the rope about the chimney and then tied the other end about his waist, keeping the slack looped in his left hand. He then examined the spot that had been slippery before and found it was only normal wetness from snow. Perplexed, he went back downstairs.

Back in the common room, Chance grabbed his pack and made to go up and choose one of the three rooms the party had rented, but Jana stopped him.

“Um, Chance,” she said softly. “I’m scared. All this stuff that is going on is freaky. Do you mind if I stay with you tonight?”

“Ya scared? Come now, Ah’ve seen ya face down that ondead thing n’ fight gooblins n’such. Why would ya be scared now?” Chance asked confused.

“I just am. Please?” A mischievous look came into the young girl’s eyes.

“Oh!” Chance said, with a sudden realization. “Well, if ya scarred, ah understand completely!”

Chance took her hand and led her upstairs.

Beorth and Martin went up to find a room to use. They found that the party had been given three adjacent rooms on the east side of the inn.

As they entered the room, Beorth thought he heard something skitter across the floor.

“Did you hear that?” the paladin asked the Watch-Mage.

“No. What?” Martin asked.

“I’m not sure, let’s look around. It’s better to be safe than sorry,” Beorth replied.

Martin began to look under the beds while Beorth noticing movement in the window stepped over to it. He looked and saw it was only his own reflection in the glass pane. He stepped a bit closer to get a look out the window, wondering if maybe someone or something was behind the inn. Suddenly, his reflection moved independent of his own movement, turning to look at him. Beorth was startled as the figure’s eyes turned red and actually taking form reached forward and wrapped its cold hands around the paladin’s throat!

“Well, there is nothing under here, Beorth,” Martin said, not seeing his companion struggling to pry the ghostly fingers from his neck. “Beorth?”

Martin the Green turned to see Beorth struggling, his throat turning black and blue beneath the translucent grip. Finally, he pulled himself free by pure strength, stumbling back into Martin who was moving forward to try to help. They turned to look back at the window. It looked as any window should.

Kazrack, Jeremy and Ratchis came upstairs. Jeremy and Kazrack took the center room, which had two beds, while Ratchis went to the end room, which the innkeeper had explained, had a double bed and one normal sized bed.

The large half-orc pushed open the door, to find the lantern light turned way low and to hear a rustling of sheets and blankets in the double bed. Ratchis grunted and walked in, dropping his pack on the floor and slipped out of his armor. Chance’s head popped out at the top of the blanket, while girlish giggling could be heard from beneath it.

“Oh, we, uh... Yill beh stayin’ in here then, eh?” Chance said.

Ratchis did not reply but pulled back the blanket atop his bed and lay in it.

“Aye, well that’s fine. Just sleepin’ anyway. Good night,” Chance added.

Ratchis pulled the blanket over his head and tried to fall asleep, but after a few moments he heard the rustling and giggling coming from the other side of the room.

Kazrack walked out of his room, trying to get away from Jeremy’s ceaseless jabbering. The dwarf wasn’t even sure what the young Neergaardian was saying as he just tuned out the foolishness. At the same time, Beorth and Martin came out of their rooms to report the incident with the reflection in the window.

“There is definitely something strange going on around here,” Kazrack said when it had been explained to him. “We should go talk to the innkeeper.”

Kazrack began to make his way down the stairs when he heard screaming from below. He ran towards its source. Surprised by the dwarf’s sudden departure, Beorth and Martin were startled and did not hear the screaming until a few moments later, joining the dash towards the sound.

The screams were coming from the other side of the inn. Kazrack came around a corner to a doorway to a small

bedroom. One of the barmaids was standing up on one of two beds in the room shrieking.

“What is it?” Kazrack asked, unslinging his heavy flail.

“Rats!” the barmaid cried. “Rats under the bed! Big ones!”

Kazrack let a slight chuckle escape his mouth and scratching his beard in bewilderment over how someone could be so frightened by a little creature. He knelt down to look at the vermin beneath the bed. In the shadows there, he saw three small rodents. They squeaked at him and then suddenly, their eyes turned into two points of pulsating red light, and they grew in size, actually causing the bed to buck upwards as they charged at the dwarf, biting him deeply on the shoulder.

Kazrack stepped back as the rats, now the size of small dogs, their gray fur interspersed with sharp red hairs that rolled across their body like fire. The barmaid began to scream even louder. Beorth and Martin arrived, but the tall and armored paladin blocked the doorway, not allowing the Watch-mage to see what was happening. Kazrack brought his flail down on a rat and smashed it with one blow. It exploded into a bright flash of light, which caused the two warriors to flinch, turning their heads away.

Kazrack and Beorth swung their weapons at the vicious fiendish rodents, but their size and speed were such that the two warriors had a hard time connecting with their blows.

Upstairs, Ratchis sighed loudly and sat up, tired of the tittering, shifting, lip smacking and giggling from the other bed. Grabbing the blanket, pillow, and his pack, he stormed out of the room. He began to walk down the stairs to spend the night by the hearth when he heard the sounds of curses and battle from below. He dropped everything, but his sword and took off towards the sound.

Martin tried to get a look past Beorth who stabbed at the dexterous rats with all the skill he could muster but failed to connect.

“What are they?” Martin asked.

“Demon rats!” cried Beorth. The barmaid’s screaming reached a new register.

Martin began to chant the words to his *daze* spell but could not get a good enough line of sight for it to be successful, so he settled for remaining vigilant for an opportunity to cast the spell.

Kazrack managed to smash the other rat and it too exploded into a bright flash of light, just as Ratchis arrived behind Martin in the narrow hallway.

“What is going on?” Ratchis asked.

“Demon rats emerged in the maids’ room,” explained Martin.

Ratchis stopped and listened. He noticed a cold breeze coming from further down the hall and around the corner and could hear the sound of door slamming over and over. He cautiously walked over and peered around the corner to see a side door to the outside flapping in the wind. Ratchis stepped into the doorway and looked around outside.

“Nephthys, grant me your light so that I may see what dangers threaten us and this place,” he said and suddenly his hand glowed brightly.

He continued to look around, when he noticed a larger amount of snow falling on him from above than the level of snowfall indicated. He looked up, and thought he heard someone, or something move away from the edge of the roof and towards the other side of the inn. Ratchis took off around the back to intercept whatever it was.

Kazrack and Beorth continued to struggle with the last rat, while Martin waited, but finally Beorth’s sword found its aim and he buried the blade into the creature. Again, the rat exploded into a bright flash of light and while, Kazrack

was able to close his eyes in time, Beorth felt the light burn his eyes.

“I’m blind!” the paladin cried, and stumbled back out of the room into Martin, just as Gibb the barkeep came running up.

“What is going on?” Gibb asked.

“Demon rats attacked one of the barmaids,” Martin said.

The proprietor pushed past Beorth who was rubbing his eyes over and over to no avail and made his way into the room. Martin began to lead Beorth back up to their room, while Kazrack tried to explain what happened to Gibb. The barmaid refused to come down from off the bed.

Ratchis raced around the inn, and on the other side he came face to face with ghostly figure of a woman with a billowing dress and shawl. He could see the phantasm clearly but could still see the snowy ground behind her. She floated a few inches off the ground, but was very tall regardless, nearly six and half feet.

“Go away!” the apparition said, her voice like a cracking ice. “You are not welcome here!”

Ratchis held the chain at his waist and called to his goddess, “Nephtys, fill me with your divine energy that I may expel this poor tortured soul from this world!”

“Don’t make me angry,” the ghost-woman said and floated closer to the half-orc. As it approached, its visage became twisted and its white translucency became corrupted, erupting into a black shadowy form with blank spots for eyes. It reached out to touch Ratchis, but he ducked and called to Nephtys again, this time to temporarily enchant his weapon.

Ratchis swung at the creature, but his sword passed straight through it, and despite the cold he could feel sweat begin to bead on his forehead. The ghost-thing continued to reach for him, and as he swung, Ratchis ducked and moved to avoid its touch. But he could only avoid it for so long. Ratchis felt the cold touch of the apparition on his chest and the strength of his muscles begin to leave him, sucked out through the creature’s hand.

Ratchis brought his long sword through the creature again, this time feeling the slightest bit of resistance, and he could see the smallest amount of shadow-stuff come spilling out from where the sword had been and then dissipate. However, his moment of joy was brief, as he felt the cold touch of the creature again, and his arms became heavier, as his strength left him. The majority of his blows went right through the thing.

“Anybody! I think I need some help here!” Ratchis cried.

Upstairs, Chance cocked his head and moved the blanket from over him and Jana.

“Didja hear that?” he asked the girl. “Sounded like Ratchis.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” replied Jana. “Don’t worry about it.”

“It sounded like it came from outside,” said Chance, getting out of bed and going over to the window. “Ratchis is in trouble!”

The Wallbrookian ran towards the door buck-naked and realizing his nude condition snatched a blanket off the bed and wrapped it around himself and then took off downstairs. Jana glanced out the window and saw Ratchis struggling with the shadow creature and grabbed her crossbow and began to load it.

Chance came barreling down the stairs, holding the blanket around his waist in one hand and his short sword in the other, barely keeping from tripping. He raced past Martin and Beorth in the hall, and past Kazrack who was making his way to the common room downstairs and to a side door near where Ratchis was fighting. He then halted about fifteen feet away from the creature.

“Oh me god! What tha hell is that!?”

Ratchis looked for a moment at Chance and then regretted it. He felt the cold hand of the creature go straight through his chest and out the other side, as more strength than the two touches before was drained from him. His sword arm felt as if it were lead, and his legs felt anchored to the frozen ground.

Kazrack came rushing out of the inn after Chance, and despite the fact that he had never in his life ever seen such a creature did not pause to come to his companion’s aid. Jana, thinking she had a shot let a bolt loose at the creature, but it landed way short.

Martin began to slowly lead Beorth back down the stairs to see what was going on.

“I’ll make my own way down,” the paladin said. “Go ahead and see if someone needs help.”

The Watch-Mage did not pause and barreled down the stairs and out the side door.

“Oh Bes, grant us some luck!” Chance chanted, but it seemed that Bes was not listening because again, Ratchis felt the cold attack of the shadow.

Jana fired another bolt, and it landed only inches from Kazrack.

The yelling and frenzied combat was finally heard by Jeremy, who opened the window, and peered out from directly above the conflict. He watched as the shadow-creature turned on a surprised Kazrack and drew strength out of the dwarf with its cold touch. He watched both Kazrack and Ratchis’ blows ineffectively go through the thing.

Martin invoked his *shield* spell and stepped closer to the combat, so Jeremy did what any adventurous person would do. He leaped out the window, sword in hand, and joined the fray! He attempted to use the momentum of the jump to attack the shadow, but only stumbled into the melee awkwardly, distracting Kazrack who felt the deep cold of the creature’s touch once again.

And still the party’s blows were ineffective, Martin knew it was time to use magic in this offensive and cast a spray of a variety of bright color at point blank range. However, instead of having the effect he desires, the creature seemed to absorb the colors, and now they swirled over the surface of the creature.

“Isis preserve us!” Martin cried, as Jana fired her crossbow again, and the bolt landed between Ratchis’ legs.

“Run away!” Chance began to yell. “Weh cahnt beat it! Run away!”

The ghost-shadow-thing turned its now colorful swirling face toward Martin and when it reached out and touched him, the colors on its incorporeal body swirled down its arm and flashed upon the young Watch-Mage. Fortunately, Martin was able to resist his own spell, but he felt the cold strength drain of the creature’s touch.

“This isn’t real,” Martin said to himself. He rubbed his eyes, closed them, and took a deep breath and said it again with more emphasis. “This isn’t REAL!” He opened his eyes, and the creature was still there. And yet, to the weapons of the others, it was as if it were not there.

“Run away!” Chance continued, but the ineffective blows continued, but at least the creature could not seem to decide which of the party to attack.

Beorth came stumbling through the doorway, “What is happening?”

“Stay inside!” Chance said to the paladin. ‘It’s a ghost!’

“A ghost! Where?” Beorth said, turning towards the sounds of the fight. Jana continued to send crossbow bolts into the thick if the fight, not doing much but creating a deadly rain.

The creature reached for Jeremy. “I will suck out all your souls!” it said in its eerie voice, finally speaking again. The Neergaardian leapt out of the way, and Martin ran from the combat and into the in.

“Help!” the Watch-Mage cried.

“Anubis! Hear my call and send this abomination away!” Beorth cried, clutching the silver jackal head around his neck.

“No, you are facing the wrong way,” Chance said, taking Beorth’s shoulders and turning him towards the thing. But it didn’t matter either way, either this thing was not undead, or it was beyond Beorth’s faith to turn.

The thwang of Jana firing another bolt was heard by all, and it hit the creature dead on, and then passing through it buried itself in Ratchis’ thigh.

“Ow!” the Friar of Nephthys cried with rage. “Stop! Firing the damn crossbow!”

The shadow was finally able to touch Jeremy, but the hardy Neergaardian resisted sufficiently so that only the slightest bit of strength was drained from him.

Filled with rage Ratchis swung his sword right through the shadow again and felt the slightest resistance, pulling a huge chunk of shadow stuff free from the thing. It threw a fist into the air and dissipated with a shriek.

Both Kazrack and Ratchis slumped to the snowy ground.

End of Session #14

AQUERRA

Session #15

But there was no time to rest. . .

Even as Chance began to hop around because of the deep cold once the adrenalin of the fight left him and he realized he was still basically naked, a great clamor arose from inside the inn.

Martin ran back inside and looked in the kitchen. Pots and pans were flying across the room. The utensils once hanging from pegs on the wall, sailed across the room one at a time. It looked as if some invisible force were moving around the room doing this.

As the Watch-mage cast his *Detect Magic* spell to see if he could figure out what it was, Kazrack peered from behind him, and Ratchis looked in at the events through a rear window. He could see that it was a magical force moving about the room, and that its source was conjuration, but even as he was determining that it was a simple spell that posed no threat, the force leapt into the iron stove and banged around in there for a moment before exploding back out of it in the form of a small being of fire that cracked and moved as it came towards the two companions in the doorway.

Jeremy ran past them back into the common room where the barkeep was drying mugs with a towel. The middle-aged man looked up from his chore, “Hey, what’s all the racket?”

“There’s trouble,” Jeremy ran about as if looking for something.

“More rat-things?” Gibb asked.

“What rat things? Jeremy asked as he approached the other door back into the hall. “Have you seen anyone suspicious besides my friends?”

The flame creature struck Martin with a flaming pseudo-pod and he cried out as his robes caught fire. He turned and fled out of the kitchen doorway and back out the door past Chance and Beorth and throwing his flaming body into a snowbank, rolling around.

“What is happening?” Beorth asked still blind and confused, standing at the side door to the inn with Chance. Ratchis came around the corner crying “Where’s the well?”

Kazrack thrust his halberd through the fire creature, to no avail. The flame-thing returned with another pseudo-pod, but Kazrack moved backward and avoided the blow.

Ratchis noticed that the well was beside the snowbank that Martin had thrown himself into and hustled over there. Martin got back up and ran back towards the inn, even as Kazrack scored a hit on the creature, which made it visibly waver for a second.

Jeremy came back out into the hall and began to open random doors looking for the spell-caster that he thought must be behind this. The flame creature struck Kazrack and set his tunic ablaze.

“Kazrack! Git aweh from the far,” Chance called from his vantage point by the outer door.

Ratchis grabbed the well bucket and filled it with snow.

While Martin went into the common room, and Chance and Beorth stood there as if they were both blind, Kazrack continued to struggle with the fire-beast.

“What’s going on?” Gibb the barkeep asked Martin, noticing his charred robes and wet state “What happened to you?”

“What’s this about the inn being haunted?” Martin asked, ignoring the question.

“Oh, don’t believe those stories,” Gibb said. “Uh...Is there a fire?”

“See for yourself,” replied Martin. “Got a bucket?”

“Um,” said Gibb. Martin did not wait; he grabbed two mugs and filled them with dishwater.

Kazrack cried out as the thing struck him with its searing tentacle of flame once again, and then began to retreat back into the kitchen.

“Get out of there!” Chance cried.

“Point me in the right direction, Chance,” Beorth said pulling his sword. “I have to help Kazrack.”

Chance turned the paladin towards the door and pushed him outside, making room for Ratchis who came running in with his bucket of snow.

Again, Kazrack charged forward and drove his halberd blade into the flame thing, and it wavered and disappeared into a puff of smoke.

Jeremy could not see any wizard, so he decided that he’d better get other people to safety and ran upstairs yelling, “Fire! Fire! The inn is on fire!”

Meanwhile, Ratchis dumped his bucket of snow on the flaming chopping block, but for some reason ignored Kazrack who was now frantically trying to splash the beer dribbling from a beer tap on himself to put his flaming clothes out. Martin came running in and chucked the water at Kazrack, completely missing. Finally, Ratchis used his great strength to tip the table the chopping block was on and pour the snow on his dwarven companion. The fire was snuffed, but Kazrack lay there singed, wet and quietly hiccupping from all the beer he “accidentally” imbibed.

Ratchis lay his hand on Kazrack’s head, “Nephthys, heal the stone head of this dwarf who has fought for you many times.”

Kazrack immediately felt the worst of his burns soothed, as the skin magically grew over them.

Upstairs, Jeremy continued to run around knocking on doors screaming.

“Fire! There’s a fire downstairs,” he called. “Jana! We have to get our stuff and get out!”

The gentlemen who had been sitting at the bar earlier in the evening came stumbling out their rooms and ran outside in the nightshirts.

Jana came out of her room and looked at Jeremy who was frantically grabbing as many packs and things from the room he shared with Kazrack as he could.

She sighed and went downstairs to see what was going on for herself.

Back in the kitchen, it turned out the figure who had been trying to put out the fire was a dwarfish human named Stump, who was the inn’s cook.

“What’s going on?” he asked, as Chance led Beorth into the kitchen as well, and Ratchis helped Kazrack to his feet.

“It could be a mischievous spirit,” commented Beorth. “Have any children ever died here?”

“No. No children have ever died here,” said Gibb coming into the kitchen. “Stump! What happened?”

“I heard a ruckus going on outside and in the hall, so I came to the door of the kitchen to see what was going on, but as I walked towards the door I saw a gremlin run past the door and down the hall. I hurried and looked and saw three gremlins disappear into the secret door,” Gibb said.

“Gremlins?” said Martin.

“Secret door?” said Kazrack.

“Yes, Gremlins,” said Stump. “They were small and gray and wore red pointy caps.”

“The secret door leads to the storage basement,” explained Gibb. “The owners had it installed as a goof, I guess. No one is supposed to know where it is, but I think everyone in town does because at one time or another someone who works here has shown them.”

“Can you show us?” asked Kazrack.

As Gibb took the party down the hall to show the secret door, the three merchants came running down in their nightshirts yelling “Fire! Fire!”

Jana came down behind them, calmly.

“Is there a fire?” she asked Chance.

“Not anymore,” said Chance. Jana turned around and went back upstairs.

“Stump, show them the secret door, I have to go catch up with our patrons,” Gibb said with a sigh.

Stump showed them how a section of wall near the stairs could be pushed in such a way that it slid out of the way on a rail, not really being stone at all.

“What’s down there?” asked Kazrack.

“Casks of wine and beer, spare dishes and utensils, dry food stuff, flour and the like,” Stump replied.

As the “hauntings” (or whatever they were) seemed to have stopped, the party gathered in the largest room they were renting and talked about what they would do the next day. It was decided that Martin would go speak with the alderman and the group might spend some time resting to regain their strength sapped by the shadow creature but to begin their investigation of the area below the inn the day after that.

As they got ready for bed Beorth said to Martin, “Everything is a big white blur now, instead of big black one.”

“Good,” said Martin. “Perhaps that is a sign of recovery.”

“Martin, I smelled something familiar before,” said Thomas’ voice in the Watch-Mage’s head.

“When and What?” asked Martin.

“Before now, and I don’t know,” said Thomas.

“Was it a plant or an animal?”

”I don’t remember,” said Thomas.

“I’ve been saving a hazelnut...”

“Ooh! Gimme the nut!”

“Was it a plant or an animal?” Martin asked again.

“An animal, maybe...maybe a person,” said Thomas.

“So, it was a person from the Academy?”

“Maybe. Gimme the nut! You promised me the nut!”

Martin gave him the nut and Thomas greedily chomped it down.

“Gimme another nut!” the squirrel said.

“Later, Thomas,” said Martin getting in bed. “Tomorrow.”

Anulem, 14th of Syet – 564 H.E.

The next day, most of the party remained in bed as Jana went from person to person tending to their wounds and making sure they got the proper rest and treatment for what ailed them. Beorth awoke early and found that his vision had returned. Giving Anubis thanks, he ate a small breakfast and went exploring on his own to see if there were any local graveyards that might be a source for the haunting-like effects of the previous night.

Jeremy and Martin had breakfast in the common room, while Gibb went out to fetch the constable so he could be told about the events of the previous night, and so that he might talk to Martin the Green.

So, after eating, Jeremy went to explore the inn and Martin met up with Maxel.

Maxel was a man in his late twenties, with broad shoulders, dark hair and a round face with patches of peach fuzz. He had bright green eyes, and a friendly smile. He wore a long sword at his side, but no armor and he offered Martin a large and calloused hand.

“I serve as constable here,” he said. “Gibb told me there was some trouble here last night with...ghosts?”

“Yes, well, we are not sure what the cause of the disturbance, but it is imperative that I speak with the Alderman,” Martin said.

“Well, perhaps I can arrange for you to dine with the Alderman tonight or the night after,” Maxel said, looking uncomfortable.

“I have been sent by the His Majesty Brevelan IV. I am a Watch-Mage,” Martin said, gathering his confidence.

“Oh, really?” Maxel said. “In that case, I will take you to see him right away.”

Maxel led Martin into the town, where people were clearing snow from the front of their houses and seemed to be visiting each other and talking friendly. Many people waved to Maxel as he walked by.

“Maxel, I need my hoe refitted with a new head,” one man called. “I’ll be by the shop this afternoon.” Martin looked to the constable, puzzled.

“I am the town smith. I only serve as constable when needed, which thankfully since the orcs were cleared out of Greenreed Valley has been infrequently,” Maxel explained.

Meanwhile back at the inn, while Kazrack and Ratchis continued to sleep to regain their strength and Chance and Jana found an unoccupied linen closet in which to spend some private time together. Jeremy was pushing at the secret door they had been shown the night before and finally got it open. He took a lantern off the wall and crept

down the narrow stone steps into the basement storage room, and began to carefully explore it, as he could see no other way out of it other than the way he came in.

Martin and Maxel came to a humble cottage just off the center of the town. Maxel knocked on the door and after a few moments a young boy answered it.

“Hey, Phester, Your father home?” Maxell asked.

“He’s around back,” the boy said. “Feel free to go around.”

Maxell ruffled the boy’s hair, “You staying out of trouble?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy said with an embarrassed smile.

Around the back, a middle-aged man was mending the gate that obviously was used to keep animals penned in, but there were no animals there at the time.

“Henry, I have someone here that has to see you,” Maxel said.

“Really?” the man barely looked up. “Well, I kind of had my day filled up by fixing my pens, and I would like to get it done before my boys get back with the flock.”

“There have been strange things going on, and even if there hadn’t, I have been sent by the King,” said Martin.

“You have?” The alderman looked up.

“I am Martin the Green, Watch-Mage and for the time being I am an emissary of the king, here to help with the hunt for the dragon.”

“Oh! You’re a Watch-Mage! Why didn’t you say so?” He wiped his hands on his apron and offered one to Martin.

“I don’t like to wave it around if I don’t have to,” Martin replied.

“Well, excuse me if I seemed rude, but I have a lot of people coming to see about the smallest things sometimes, and I need a way to avoid them,” He smiled an embarrassed smile that was the perfect reflection of the one his son had shown earlier. “Not that I shirk my responsibilities, but setting priorities and precedents are among the tasks of a leader. Anyway, I am talking too much, and you aren’t at all. I am Henry Horton, and I welcome you to our humble town of Summit.”

He turned to Maxel, “I assume you checked his credentials.”

“Um... Ahem...Uh”

“Here is my letter of introduction from the King,” Martin said, handing Henry the envelope. “And I also have a medallion he gave me that has his personal seal.”

The alderman looked at the letter and then handed it back.

“Come, let’s go inside and have some tea and be warm and talk in comfort,” he said.

“I would like that,” Martin said.

“Maxel, you are welcome to join us, of course.”

Inside, the alderman's young son brought a tray with tea and small biscuits smeared in lard.

"You say there were strange things going on?" Henry asked, stirring honey into his tea. "Are you referring to the disappearances?"

"Disappearances?" Martin said, taking a bite of one of the biscuits.

"There have been a handful of people missing, shepherds mostly who have not returned with their flocks," the Alderman said. "It started two weeks ago or so."

"Really?" Martin said. "Do you think the events at the inn can be related?"

"No reason to think so. There have always been little stories about the inn, people jumping at shadows."

"My dear sir, last night the shadows were jumping at people," Martin quipped. "Something is going on. Do you think the disappearances are being caused by the dragon?"

"If so, it has changed its behavior," Maxel said. "All reports state that it attacks people on the roads mostly; Caravans and the like... Not lone herd boys out with their flocks."

"Obviously, this is going to take some measure of investigation," Martin suggested.

"Well, the first thing we need to do is get your comfortable for your appointment here," the Alderman said. "Maxel will take you over to the Widow Beatrice's where she runs a boarding house. Then in the spring we can have a house built for you if it looks like you will be staying here longer."

"The boarding house will be fine I'm sure, Alderman..."

"Call me Henry."

"Henry... but I also have companions who the king sent with me who may be using Summit as a headquarters in their hunt for the dragon."

"I am sure the Widow Beatrice will have room, the young people she had staying there left a day or two ago," Henry said.

"Do you think you could tell me the names of the people who disappeared, and where I could find their families? Maybe they can help provide a clue as to what is happening," said Martin.

"Well, they came and reported it to me," answered Maxel. "But if you think you might be able to learn something more from them, it'd be a good idea. Someone might even be able to lead you out to where they were last seen."

"Why doesn't Maxel take you over to the boarding house now, and then you can return with your companions for a late supper?" Henry suggested.

"I would be happy to return, but I am not sure how many of my companions will be able to as they are severely injured from last night's unusual events. Could we postpone it until tomorrow?"

"That would be fine," said the Alderman.

Maxel took Martin across the street and down two houses to a larger rectangular house.

The Widow Beatrice was a tiny little old woman. She greeted Martin happily and explained the rules.

"Well, it's 15 pennies a week for the larger room, which holds four, and eight coppers a week for the small one that holds two. This includes two meals a day, but I won't withhold ya some teas in the afternoon if ya want it...and of

course curfew, one hour after sundown. I expect a month of rent in advance,” she kept a friendly look on her wrinkled prune face the whole time she talked. “Last kids to stay here were nice and all, but they took off without paying off the week. Nice girl, but she seemed mixed up in man’s business, which is never good. She was traveling with a pair of twins. Odd little fellows, very talkative, very smart, wizards no doubt.”

“Was her name Maria, by chance?” Martin asked.

“Why yes it was!” the Widow Beatrice said. “Oh my! Is your name Martin the Green?”

“Yes, it is,” Martin replied surprised.

“Why, yes, she left a message for me to give to you. Told it to me right before she left; said it was really important, but for the life of me I can’t remember it.”

“Have you no idea what it was?” Martin asked with some urgency.

“Um, no... Well, something about you needing to know that she went somewhere to investigate something. She took them twins with her and there were two other young fellas.” The old woman scrunched up her face in deep thought but came up with nothing more.

“Well, how long ago was this?” Martin asked.

“Oh, three or so days ago, before the big storm,” Beatrice replied. “Wish I could remember what it was she told me to tell you.”

“I wish you could too,” Martin mumbled, and then added so that she could hear him. “Well, I must inform my companion about what I have learned and that I have secured us a place to stay while here in town. I will be back later this evening thank you for your time.”

Meanwhile, Jeremy was moving boxes around in the basement, checking the brick wall for irregularities. In the very back corner on the right wall, he noticed what seemed to be a seam that was three feet by three feet about one foot off the ground. It ran counter to the line of brick in the rest of the wall.

He felt around the seam, and then pushed hard and felt something catch and then release, as the square of false stone swung downward and into the darkness beyond. A draft of cold air billowed up and out of the hole, and Jeremy raised his lantern to peer inside, when from the darkness emerged number of bat-like creatures that seemed to be made of the darkness themselves. They silently swooped at him with their tiny red eyes glowing, and he tried to bat them away, but only felt their cold bites which immediately made him feel dizzy and uncoordinated; his joints and muscles felt tight and swollen.

Jeremy leapt up and out of the storage room, but the bat-things followed, biting again and again, until it was a struggle to have the coordination to get up the narrow stairs. The Neergaardian felt fear wash over him as he leapt through the first secret door and pulled it closed behind him. He stood leaning there against, breathing hard when noticed the black shadowy forms of the creature slipping through the door cracks, coming out into the hall to continue their chase.

Jeremy backed away from the door and turned to run into the common room and the shadow-bats followed. Yet, as he came into the sunlight streaming into the inn from outside, he heard a hiss like a small flame being suddenly snuffed. He dared a glance and saw that as the bats came into the sun it was as if they suddenly dissipated.

Upstairs, Jeremy told Martin (who had returned soon after from the Alderman’s) and Beorth about what he had found and what had happened. They agreed that the others must be told and that these “gremlins” must have accessed and escaped from the inn through there.

“Didn’t we agree to not do anything until tomorrow?” asked Ratchis annoyed, and still feeling very weak from his fight with the shadow thing.

“Yes,” said Jeremy.

“So, what the hell were you doing down there!?!?” He lost his temper, but his lack of strength turned from a bellow into a wheeze as the question ended.

“I figured, why waste time? I thought I ‘d reconnoiter a bit and be able to give us a jump on what to do next,” Jeremy explained.

“But now that thing is open down there and we don’t know what is going on and what might be down there, and we are trying to rest a day and recoup our strength!”

“We can just block it up,” reasoned the Neergardian, clearly confused as to why the half-orc was so angry.

“Because now whoever lives down there knows we’re coming and they can make a plan to come after us,” Ratchis sat up in bed and groaned, swinging his thick legs over the side. “Like we’re planning to go in there after them.”

“But weh dunn ahve uh plahn,” commented Chance incredulously.

Ratchis growled and began to strap on his armor and get his gear together.

“So, I assume we’re going,” said Kazrack, leaving the room to get ready without saying another word. He seemed slow in step from his drained strength as well.

Ratchis grumbled as he collected his things, and Chance kept looking over at him as he put his own leather jerkin on and got his gear together.

“Whuts ‘e sayin’?” Chance asked Jeremy.

“He’s saying we’re all going to die or something,” the Neergardian replied.

”Gunna dah!? What’s goin’ on?” Chance sounded alarmed.

Ratchis swung around on the two of them. “I will tell you what is going on,” he frothed, pointing at Jeremy. “Because this one here is so damn impatient, we are forced to go into a situation that might kill us all!”

The Friar of Nephthys stalked out of the room.

Jeremy turned to Chance, “I have no idea what he’s talking about.”

The party met in hallway outside of the first secret door, and after a delay involving what they should bring and not bring and who was strong enough to carry what, they made their way down into the basement, and Ratchis crept forward to examine the other secret hatch, and look with for tracks, before the others ruined any that might be there.

“There are small boot prints in here, like a child’s... and it looks like it was made by the kind of mud made by melting snow wiping dirt off a boot as it slides off,” Ratchis the others.

“Dahm, he’s good,” said Chance.

“Perhaps there is some truth to these stories of gremlins,” said Martin.

Ratchis explained that the tiny room beyond seemed as if it were naturally occurring and the basement must have

just brushed it when it was dug. He also described how it led to a narrow and low passageway that seemed to slowly pick its way down.

They decided to follow it.

The way was long and hard. Beorth, Ratchis and Jeremy spent most of the journey crouched as to not bump their heads, and mid-way down Jana's light spell ran out and she had to recast it.

They passed through a broader cavern that branched off into several narrower natural tunnels. Ratchis spent a half an hour going over every inch of the floor. He found the trace remains of a campfire and half a muddy footprint that told him the way to go. After a short rest and eating some quick rations, they continued.

Finally, after having traveled over two hours, the tunnel opened into a broad cave. Sunlight streamed down into the cave, and they could see a plain of white ahead of them through a thick bramble at the very base of the bluff, which they realized they must be on the other side of from when they approached Summit. This was Greenreed Valley. Again, Ratchis went ahead, down to the bramble and quickly found sight of the small boot prints in the fresh snow. They could be easily followed. He led the way.

They traveled northward along the edge of the large circular ridge that made Greenreed Valley. After marching for over an hour they saw what looked to be a column of steam or smoke several miles away to the west.

They continued onward, traveling through a nearly perfectly round tunnel through the ridge and out to the north.

On the other side, there was thick pine forest interspersed with pockets of barren deciduous trees. Ratchis continued on, and the party followed him, only stopping when he waved a hand and then hopped forward to examine some patch of ground. By now Ra's Glory was low in west and the shadows were long, but finally they came to something.

In one large patch of barren deciduous trees, they found an area penned in by branches and vine in such a way that there was a canopy of snow over one small round area about 60 feet in diameter. Within, there were only random patches of snow, and there was pool, where run off collected down a half-uprooted tree.

Within, a dirt track led to an earthen home, whose walls were supported by the bowing roots of the half-rooted tree. The roots still sunk way down into the earth providing strength. It had a little rounded door and a small round window and a metal chimney sticking out of the top.

"What do we do now?" Ratchis asked.

"Politely knock on the door?" Martin suggested. Ratchis scowled.

"It looks like a halfling house, I think," said Beorth. "Or what I have heard they look like."

"Or a gnome's house," said Ratchis.

"Gnomes!" cried Thomas' voice in Martin's head.

"What about them, Thomas?" Martin replied

"That is what I smelled that time before in the other place in the town," Thomas chattered.

"Do you smell it here?" Martin asked.

"Uh, no... Maybe..." The familiar began to sniff the air. "Maybe I can sniff better with a nut in my tummy."

Martin fed him a hazelnut.

The party approached the small house. Kazrack looked in the window, while Martin sent in Thomas to have a look and a sniff around.

“Gnomes! Smells like gnomes!” Thomas cried in Martin’s head.

“Any in there?” Martin asked.

“Nope.”

Ratchis and Martin went inside. The little place held four small bunks, a large trunk in the center covered with a tablecloth, a pot-bellied stove, a pile of wood and a food store. They looked around a bit and Kazrack and Jeremy came in a few moments later and the tiny place was crowded.

“Um, guys,” Jana called from outside. “Could you come out here?”

Jeremy came out first, and a voice said from the edge of the clearing in the thick bramble that formed its border. “Get to the center of the clearing and please don’t make any funny moves. We don’t want to have to hurt anybody.” The voice was nasal and spoke quickly.

“Who are you?” Kazrack called out, coming outside.

Martin followed, but mentally commanded Thomas to stay in the house.

“Gnomes!” Thomas said.

Ratchis hesitated inside.

“Please come out where we can see you,” the voice called again. “And gather in the center. You have weapons trained on you, if you were wondering, and there are more than us than there are of you.”

“Who are you to command us to do so?” Kazrack called.

“I am asking the questions here,” the voice said, and now they could see a small stout form in a chain-shirt with a warhammer in his hands. He had skin the color of slate, a bulbous nose and wore a helmet. “What are you doing in this home of traitors?”

“Traitors? What traitors?” asked Jeremy.

“Those who were staying here have gone against the commands of our interim chief. We were to bring them to him, but we have found you instead.”

“Oh, so this is all a big misunderstanding, and we can go,” said Martin.

“Not so fast,” said the gnome. “You have still trespassed on our territory and were found in the safehouse of the traitors. You must be brought before the interim chief.”

“We followed the tracks of what must be some of your people—these ‘traitors’—here from the town of Summit where they were up to much mischief and endangered people’s lives,” explained Ratchis.

“Again, I ask, who are you?” Kazrack added.

“I am Captain Fistandlus Ironhammer of Garvan, and you shall be our guests,” the gnome said, as two more armored gnomes silently came out of the border of brush. These two had short bows aimed at the party. “Please drop your weapon belts and any other dangerous items and lay down on your stomachs with your hands behind your backs.”

Kazrack reached for his halberd which was leaning on his shoulder, and the gnomes’ bow strings tightened as two

more gnomes breached the border of brush to point their own bows at the rear of the party. Ratchis pulled his crossbow and aimed it at the gnomish captain.

Fistandlus Ironhammer came forward towards Jeremy, who was in the front of the group a bit, with his hammer ready to strike. Kazrack waited for the gnome to strike to charge him with his halberd.

Chance lay on the ground, face down with his hands behind his back. Jana followed suit.

“Do you not recognize the authority of the Watch-Mages?” Martin asked, desperately.

“There is no need for this,” said Beorth.

“There is no need at all,” said Fistandlus. “Like I said, there are more of us than you.”

“Get ready to fan out and shoot if someone attacks,” Ratchis said through gritted teeth.

Two small animals with heavyset body, short legs, dark fur, and a bushy tail came through the brush, one on each side of the group, between the flanking gnomes. They growled menacingly. They were wolverines.

“You must be brought to see the interim chief and that means getting bound and blind-folded to be led the heart of our lands,” the captain explained. “You are trespassers, but we will have you as our guests. No harm will come to you, but we cannot trust you to not reveal where it is we live.”

“I will not be bound,” Beorth said, with something close to anger and lifted his staff into a fighting position.

“Why don’t you send one of your men to go fetch your interim chief, and we’ll wait here and talk to him when he arrives,” suggested Kazrack.

“The interim chief is away and will not be back for a little while. He cannot come here regardless. You will be brought to our village and wait for him,” the captain said.

“Well, if we’re not going to go with you and your chieftain will not come here, then I might as well wait here in comfort,” said Kazrack and promptly plopped himself on the ground to sit, stubbornly.

Jeremy sat upon the cold ground as well, and Ratchis let out a long low breath of frustration.

“We will not let ourselves be bound,” said Ratchis. “But we have no desire to come into conflict with you.”

There was a moment’s pause, and the gnome captain hesitated as if contemplating his options.

“We will surrender our weapons and come with you peacefully, if talking to your chieftain –“

“*Interim* Chieftain,” the captain interrupted.

“Interim Chieftain, then. If talking with him is required, and also it might be helpful to us,” Ratchis finished.

Again, Fistandlus Ironhammer paused, and finally he said, “Surrender your weapons and consent to be blindfolded. You may walk unbound, but none may see the way to our hidden home.”

“I consent,” said Ratchis.

“Me, too,” agreed Chance from his place face down on the ground. The rest of the group concurred, and everyone sheathed or dropped their weapons and then loosened their weapon belts allowing them to slip to the ground. More armed and armored gnomes emerged from the brush and collected the weapons.

The party was instructed to get on their knees, allowing a gnome to come up behind and blindfold each in turn.

Before his eyes were covered, Kazrack noted that there were at least eight gnomes here. The party's weapons were collected, and Martin felt the magical bag he carried being tugged from his belt along with his satchel of components.

They were then marched in a single file line.

"It's amazing what this group has to go through to make an oath," Kazrack commented.

After they had walked for nearly an hour, the gnomes began to chatter among themselves in their fast and high-pitched language.

"Dunn worry, Jana," Chance said, in not enough of a whisper. "Ah won't let any gnomes hurt'cha."

"Shhh!" said Martin from behind him.

"Ah kin kick a gnome's arse!" He added fiercely.

"Shhh!" Martin repeated more vehemently.

One of the gnomes walking along side Kazrack spoke to him in the dwarven tongue, "We have one of your kin as our guest as we speak. I am sure he will be glad to have another of his kind to keep him company."

"Guest?" Kazrack asked, pleasantly surprised to hear his mother-tongue but still slightly worried.

"Yes, he came into our territory almost a moon ago, and has remained our guest until the interim chief returns," the gnome said, with a friendly tone. "My name is Obenhammer, by the way, but you can call me Obie, everyone does."

"It seems strange that one of your kind would be traveling with these humans and a dwarf," the Captain said to Ratchis, as they walked. "You are lucky you were not alone, or your fate might not have been so pleasant."

Ratchis grunted in response.

"But do not worry, you are our guest now and as such will be treated well and are safe," Fistandlus added. "You *do* speak well, where are you from?"

"Nikar," Ratchis replied.

"Never heard of it," the captain said.

"It is a place where humans, gnomes, halflings and even dwarves live together in peace."

"Sounds like a terrible place," Fistandlus said flatly.

Onward and onward, they walked, the gnomes directing them to step over large stones and roots, or round deep snow drifts.

"We are going underground now," Captain Fistandlus Ironhammer said after they had marched perhaps four hours or more.

They made their way down a short rock embankment, and soon they knew they were underground because the wind dwindled to almost nothing, and that air had that damp earthy smell to it. They marched for about another twenty minutes and then stopped.

"You can take off your blindfolds," Captain Fistandlus said.

The party did just that and found themselves in a barren and damp cave. Two of the gnomes were working on

getting a fire going, while another seemed to be digging up a sack of dried foodstuff that had been buried in the corner. They must have used this place often.

“We camp here and continue our journey in the morning,” the captain explained.

Martin let out a strangled sigh of anxiety.

“What’s the matter?” Jana whispered to him.

“I left my spell book and my other gear at the inn. I didn’t know we’d be gone this long,” the Watch-Mage whispered back.

“Heh,” Jana said with a smirk.

They settled down and the large dried mushrooms were passed around.

“I assume the humans of Gothanius do not know your community is here,” Kazrack said.

“No, and we want to keep it that way,” said the Captain.

“Yeah, the humans are greedy and settle in land and then claim it belongs to them alone. They try to make everyone follow their laws, and they rip up the trees and plant their own crops and drive out the animals. It is horrible,” said one of the other gnomes.

“Yeah, humans are terrible. They have no respect and think they can own everything,” added another gnome.

“And more and more of them are coming into the valley, and that is too close, I think,” another gnome said. Obviously, this was a point of contention because there were a few moments of heated discussion in gnomish, which ended with one gnome saying angrily, “I wouldn’t trust a human as far as I could throw him.”

“Excuse me, but some of us have feelings, you know. Can you keep it down over there?” Jeremy said between bites of the bitter mushroom.

“It’s not our fault you’re human,” said Obenhammer.

“But if the humans are taking a land where there is nothing, what harm does it do you?” Kazrack inquired.

“Nothing?” the gnome Captain raised his voice for the first time, and then composed himself. “I find that strange coming from you, a dwarf, because that is such a human perspective. A human can look at a beautiful field, alive with wild oats, and shrews and moles and gophers; he can look at a forest full of trees older than you or I, with squirrels and birds and all kinds of animals and see nothing. Nothing but a place to rip up for their own profit. Is the earth itself nothing? Humans tend to build against the world, and not with it. It makes no sense. They will hunt an animal to extinction. They will pluck every flower of a certain kind for miles around if they think it is pretty only to let it die in a vase in their house. It makes no sense.”

At that same moment, Martin remembered Thomas. The squirrel was not with him!

“Thomas!” the Watch-Mage thought reaching out to his familiar with his mind. “Where are you?”

“In the woods somewhere, trying to find you,” the squirrel replied.

“What happened to you?”

“You told me to wait in the house, so I did. But when you did not come back for a long time, I decided to try to find you,” Thomas replied.

“Are you okay?” Martin asked.

“I’m going to sleep now in a hole in a tree. I’m tired,” Thomas said.

“Okay, find me tomorrow, and try not to get eaten!”

The conversation with the gnomes was still going on...

“Could it be that therein lies the reason we ended up where you found us?” Ratchis proposed to the Captain. “We have reason to believe that whoever lives in that house we found endangered not only us, but the humans in the town of Summit.”

“And you did mention traitors,” Martin added.

“No one is allowed—” one of the gnomes was cut off by a glare from the captain.

“That is none of your concern. You will talk to the interim chief and if he deems it necessary, he will tell you what you need to know after you have told him what he wants to know. Until then you will be our guests,” Fistandlus said. “But we have more marching to do tomorrow, so we should all get some rest.”

“Is it much further to your home?” asked Martin.

“No, not far at all,” said the Captain.

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The next morning the party was blindfolded again and continued their march. The day was blustery and the refreshing warmth of the sun breaking through the clouds and trees was infrequent. They walked on and on, at the slow pace of the previous day. Martin remained in contact with Thomas who was still following their trail.

At what they guessed was midday they stopped to eat, being handed slightly stale bread with slices of cheese on them.

“Is it much further?” asked Martin.

“We are almost there,” said one of the gnomes.

“You mentioned that the interim chief was away, how long will we have to wait for his return?” Kazrack inquired.

“Oh, not long at all,” Captain Fistandlus Ironhammer said.

They got up and marched for another hour, and then were stopped and turned clockwise a few times, and their marching order was readjusted and then they continued.

The sun was so low by the time they were told to halt, that through their blindfolds almost no light came through. Around them, the party could hear the hushed tones of scores and scores of voices.

“You may remove your blindfolds,” the Captain said.

The party found themselves amid four hills situated in a diamond shape around them. The hills were scored with paths, stairways, doors, passageways, and tiny round windows. Snow was deep in many places but had been carefully cleared from paths and doorways.

But of course, what the party immediately noticed was that these paths and doorways and the greenway they stood on was filled with more gnomes than any of them had ever seen in their entire lives.

“Ah nevah sin sa many gnomes!” Chance said with a gasp.

The gnomes were dressed in woolen clothing died in bright yellows, greens, reds, and orange. Many wore knitted long stocking caps and had white mustaches and an occasional beard beneath their prodigious noses.

“Cousins!” the Captain announced. “These are our new guests. They will be staying in our guest quarters with Distil. Please make them feel at home.”

He turned to the party, “Please step forward and introduce yourselves one by one, so that my people may know who you are.”

Martin stepped forward, “I am Martin the Green, Alumnus of the Academy of Wizardry.”

“Hello Martin!” the crowd of gnomes replied friendly.

“Me name’s Chance!”

“Hello Chance!” the crowd said, and Chance smiled broadly, filled with a welcome feeling.

Jana, Jeremy and Beorth took their turns, and when Kazrack announced his name the cheering “hello” the crowd was littered with a few voices saying so in dwarven.

Finally, Ratchis stepped forward and said, “I am Ratchis of Nephthys.”

“Oooooooh, it talks,” the gnome community said as one, and then after an awkward pause said, “Hi, Ratchis!”

“Obenhammer, Ashkenbach, take them to the guest quarters and tell your uncle I will come to see him shortly,” the Captain ordered two of his men.

Martin called to Thomas in his mind, “Are you near?”

“Yes, I met some moles. They told me which way to go. Boy, do they talk in a funny accent,” Thomas replied.

The two gnomes led the party up a narrow path that led to an arched doorway in the middle of the right hillside. Beyond the door was a low hallway of bare earth (about 7 feet high), they were led (Obenhammer in front, Ashkenbach in the back) past a bunch of smaller doors that lined the hallway to the left and right, and into a large round area that looked like a combination kitchen and common room.

“Uncle Distil!” Obenhammer called.

A small door opened in the opposite side of the room and out came an older gnome with a long pointy white beard, but nearly bald. He wore gray clothing that was at odds with what most of the other gnomes wore, and his particularly large nose was riddled with swollen blood vessels.

“Uncle Distil, these are new guests that we and Fistle, I mean, Captain Fistandlus brought in when we were looking for ... well, you know who we were looking for,” Obenhammer said.

“Thank you, Obie,” Distil said, and then he turned to the party. “Welcome, Welcome! It is good to have more guests. I want you to make yourselves at home. I’ll show you to your rooms, and then while you make yourselves comfortable, I’ll rustle us up some dinner. We don’t have a lot of room, so it will be two to a room, if you don’t mind. My name is Distelbowden by the way.”

He led them back down the hall and the party took rooms. Martin and Ratchis took one room, Ratchis noted that the doors had latches on the outside that looked like they could be used to padlock the doors shut, though there were no locks.

“The bed might be too small for you,” Distil said to Ratchis. “But we can get a bigger bed built for you while you are here.”

“Um,” Martin interrupted. “How long do you expect for us to be here?”

“Oh, not long,” Distil replied.

“Oh, my...uh, friend, a squirrel might come around looking for me. I wanted to make sure he’d be let in and not hurt,” Martin said.

“Oh, you are a friend of the animals? We wouldn’t hurt a squirrel. You can speak his language?” Distil said.

“Kind of,” Martin replied.

Jana and Chance took a room together.

“I am feeling kind of tired,” Chance said through a yawn. He looked at Jana “What about a nap?”

Jana giggled and nodded. They went into their room and closed the door.

Jeremy and Beorth took the last room Distil made available to them.

Their gnomish host turned to Kazrack, “I assumed you’d want to bunk up with one of your kinfolk we have as a guest here as well. He stays in a room beyond the common area.”

Distil led Kazrack through another door and down a hallway similar to the one where his companions’ rooms were.

He knocked on a room door and a black-haired dwarf with a long beard streaked with white answered the door.

“Beléar, one of your kin has come to be our guest. I am going to have him stay with you if that is okay,” said Distil.

Beléar nodded silently.

Kazrack had to close his mouth. “Beléar Gritchkar?”

"Kazrack Delver. I was expecting you. The runestones told me your name. You have traveled far," Beléar said. "Come in."

Kazrack entered the room and Distil left to prepare dinner.

"I am glad to find you at last Father," Kazrack said solemnly. "Ever since I met your brother Bardolph¹³ I have sought your wisdom. Ever since leaving Verdun I have had a growing sense of being a hammer without an anvil... I have trouble with the group I travel with, and the reasons I am here in Derome-Delem trouble me too. It seems to me that if I follow the ways of our people than I will be betraying my people. I need counsel, Wise One."

Beléar looked right into Kazrack’s eyes, “This is a grave thing you say, but before I protest, I would like to hear why you say this. But I will tell you that at this point you are neither hammer, nor anvil, you are but a hot piece of metal, shapeless and ready to be pounded into something for the first time in your life. Or you can avoid the hammer and become but just another piece of slag.”

“While in Verdun I was given the choice of fighting, and possibly dying, in a human war I neither believed in or, in my opinion, was obligated by law to participate in. At the time it seemed I was given the choice of becoming an outlaw or joining a band setting out to slay a dragon terrorizing the countryside. While it was true that the country

¹³ Kazrack met Bardolph Gritchkar in Session #10.

was ruled by humans who had stolen the land from dwarves, I reasoned that slaying the dragon would be the lesser of two evils as the people in the country rarely have anything to do with what their rulers decide. As I traveled through this land, I decided that most of these people wouldn't care if they owed allegiance to a dwarven king or a human one and thus I had even more reason to search for our lost king.¹⁴ So I felt I was doing the right thing clearing the land of a dragon, helping innocents, and making the land a better more stable place for a future Dwarven King to rule. Since then, however, I have encountered these human kingdoms and if any are good it is only in comparison to the others. I'm not even sure a dragon exists and since I'm sure there is a land rightfully owned by Dwarves but instead held by the undead.¹⁵ I am drawn east... And if the dragon exists, I am only making the position of what I view as an usurper, more stable and thus more difficult to deal with when our king returns."

Kazrack took a deep breath.

"Adding to this is the sense that I don't belong in the group I have traveled with until now. One amongst them betrayed us and while I was willing to forgive (thinking it an error in judgment not likely to be made again) I wanted the group as a whole to swear an oath of fealty to the others. I felt that codifying ones thoughts would effect later action. I was rebuked harshly by the entire group, which stunned me as I expected resistance only from those I thought actually needed the help of an oath. One refused out of fear of a conflict between the oath and his god's ways. I respect this being devout myself, but quite frankly I feel this was only an excuse as most would request the oath be worded to avoid conflict or, as I would, just assume that one's oaths made to one's god or family supersedes any other oath. The others refused, saying an oath would be meaningless, which I disagree with, but if they believe it true then they refused to do a small act which would make another happy—something they should have been willing to do for a friend—and if they did believe it to have meaning then they both lied and refused because they feared to be bound by an oath. Why should I travel with a group fearful of swearing to be faithful to each other?"¹⁶

Beléar remained silent.

Kazrack continued, "So I have two compelling reasons not to continue on this present quest but feel that to turn east to deal with the undead lands would be the right thing to do for our people but would be betraying the teachings of Hodenar.¹⁷ I know I have rambled... help me Father: how do I stay true to our ways?"

Beléar was silent for a long time.

Finally, he spoke, "You think too much. Your thoughts are too much in the future, and even too much in the present, and not in the past, in the history of our people where all wisdom sits."

He sat and invited Kazrack to join him in a stone chair at his side. "I know of no dragon. And if you speak of the land of the Bzontra, once called Elgaard and other names, and obviously you know nothing of that Dead Land, or else you would not speak of it as if it were a kitchen to be cleaned. As for your companions, I know nothing of them and cannot comment about them specifically but if one has truly betrayed you then he is not your friend and cannot be trusted—people should be judged on their actions—better an oath unspoken and good actions done, than an oath spoken and broken. Rune-throwers know words should never be spoken lightly, for in them is power. Was it not the mere word of Natan-ahb that stuck against the raw ore of reality like a hammer would and made the world?"

Beléar was silent again for a time.

"But all of this is moot. This is not what matters. What matters is your devotion to the gods. Are you ready to prove this? Are you ready to serve your people, or will you allow all these petty things to distract you and serve only yourself?"

¹⁴ There has not been a unified dwarven kingdom under one dwarven monarch since early in the Third Age. Dwarven prophecy has it that one dwarf will come in time to accomplish this once again and become such a king.

¹⁵ Kazrack is referring to the land of Dralmohir, east of the Little Kingdoms and lost to powerful undead over a thousand years ago.

¹⁶ **DM's Note:** The majority of this exchange between Kazrack and Beléar took place via email between sessions.

¹⁷ Hodenar is the dwarven god of trade, travel and music.

“I have acted as I have always with the good of my people in mind and will always continue to do so. I have sought your wisdom to learn how best to do this.”

Kazrack paused looking for words.

“I recognize the power of an oath which is why I wanted one made. I think words influence action—as proved by Natan-ahb's making of the world—and bad actions are often the result of no forethought. A man with a hot temper is more likely to control his temper if he vows to do so. I feel everyone in my group has good intentions but may act improperly unless they have an oath to remind them. But I see the wisdom you try to give me: I cannot control them but can only control myself. But I need more wisdom to do so. Can I learn that from you? I am ready to learn if you are ready to teach.”

Beléar stood and let out a long low breath. He turned back towards the younger dwarf, "I am ready to show you how to reach for wisdom. But are you truly ready to learn? I said I know of no dragon. Does that mean there is no dragon? I sense much impatience in you, Kazrack. Now, it is my turn to tell you of oaths. The oath you make in devoting yourself to Natan-ahb and the others of the dwarven pantheon is not one lightly made. Your own desire, your own opinions mean nothing in comparison. They will forever be second to this. Are you ready for this? Forget all other oaths for now. None should matter as much to you as what is immediately before you. Forget all other lands now, all that should matter is the earth beneath your feet."

Kazrack did not hesitate, “I have already sworn to devote my life to the will of the Gods. I am ready to learn from you how best to do that and will swear to it.”

Beléar and Kazrack locked wrists and shook in the way of the dwarven tradition.

There was a knock on the door. “Dinner’s ready,” said Distil through the door.

They ate at a low table in the common area.

Another blonde gnome joined them, along with Obenhammer and Ashkenbach.

The new gnome introduced himself Briendel, “It’s an elvish name!” he announced, proudly.

They ate in silence for a while, eating the roasted mushrooms dipped in a spicy black sauce, with a bread that was so soft and smooth it didn’t need any butter, and a tasty grain paste. They also had a side of roasted beetles, which not everyone partook of.

After dinner they sipped *kafka*¹⁸ and Martin posed a question, “How long do you think it will be until the Interim Chieftain is back so we can speak to him? You see I left some kind of important stuff back in Summit, and I need to get it.”

“Oh, he only went off to do some errand or something very hush, hush, he’ll be back pretty soon,” Distelbowden replied. “What did you leave behind?”

“Uh, my spellbook,” Martin replied, dejectedly.

“Ooh, you are wizard?” Briendel said with great enthusiasm. “What can you do?”

Martin pulled a piece of wool from his pocket and spoke an arcane word with a gesture and a huge butterfly, with a three-foot wingspan and bright yellow wings with blue spots, hovered over the table.

“That’s nice, I can make one too,” Briendel said, and with a word and a gesture a similar butterfly hovered beside the first and then roared like a lion.

¹⁸ *Kafka* is a coffee like beverage made from steeped subterranean mushrooms. It is common to dwarves and gnomes.

“Oh, I would like to do that,” Martin said, looking happy for a moment.

“Maybe my brother and I can teach you, and you can teach us some good spells. We’ll talk about it soon, but now it is time to go to the public house,” Briendel said. “You guys coming?”

The party looked to Distil, except for Kazrack who looked to Beléar.

“Of course, you are our guests, our home is your home and what is a fine evening without a trip to the public house?” Distil said. “You go ahead. I gotta clean up here and I’ll catch up with you.”

Beléar spoke to Kazrack, “Go ahead and enjoy the evening with your companions, it is said ‘warriors that cannot drink together should not kill together.’ Tomorrow, your training begins.”

The companions began to file out, but Ratchis hung behind helping Distil dump plates and bowls into a large wash bin.

“I wanted ask you, you keep calling your leader the ‘interim chief’, where is the real chief?”

“Oh, he’s away visiting the elves,” said Distil, matter-of-factly. “Trying to get their help in terms of what to do about the humans.”

“The elves? Which elves?”

“Don’t know.”

“And where is the interim chief?” Ratchis asked,

“No one knows. Off on personal business with his brothers, whatever that is,” Distil replied.

“And you said he will not be gone long, how long is that?” Ratchis continued with his questions.

“Oh, not too long at all.”

“Can you give me an estimate?”

“Oh, he’ll be back by the end of winter at the longest, I’m sure. Not more than a blink of time,” Distil said dropping soap flakes in the water.

Ratchis thanked him and jogged out to catch up with the others.

The public house was directly across from the door in the hill the party was staying at. It was a one of the few actual buildings in the place, but was still built into the hillside, and had a large wooden patio in front for lounging with one’s drink.

The place had such a low ceiling that Ratchis did not even try to go in. It was thick with gnomes in various states of drunkenness, and many were singing a long-complicated fugue-like song in their language that went in rounds. The walls were inset with dozens of casks of beer and ale that were labeled with various runes. There was no barkeep, but only a pile of mugs, which anyone could take from, and help themselves to any of the varieties available.

Ashkenbach went in and got a mug of beer for Ratchis, who sat himself down on the cold patio. Jeremy went in and looked confusedly, mug in hand, at all the casks. A young gnome tugged on his sleeve and pointed to a cask way out of his reach.

“That one is really good,” the gnomes said. “Pumpkin ale. Could you get me some? I can’t reach.”

Jeremy helped the gnome and got some of his own and found it delicious. He topped his mug off again and went outside to sit with the others.

Kazrack got what the gnomes called a “Black Beer,” and sat near some of the singing gnomes and tried to join in, but could not get the right tone and cadence of the song, and his normally deep rich bass, sounded off-time and out of tune whenever the song came round to his group. The gnomes all stopped and laughed, pointing at the dwarf, good-naturedly.

Kazrack joined the others outside as some gnome drunkenly raised his mug in the air and said, “To our new guests!”

“To our new guests!” all the gnomes cried, and the party smiled and drank. A gnome began tune on a squeezebox and the singing began a new, and suddenly benches, table and chairs were moved out of the center of the public house, and dancing began.

Chance and Jana sat together on one side of the patio and Jeremy came to sit next to them.

Kazrack sat by Ratchis. Martin sat by himself.

“Where’s Beorth?” Ratchis asked.

“He stayed behind to pray and meditate,” the dwarf replied.

Jeremy frowned as Chance and Jana made eyes at each other, but suddenly Chance sat bolt upright and cocked his head. “Duh ya har that?”

Jana got a mischievous, flirty look in her eye and smiled, “Why yes. I think we should do something about that...” She moved to stand and go back to their room.

“I knew you’d understand,” Chance said hopping to his feet and kissing Jana on the forehead and then he ducked his head and ran into the public house. “Don’t wait up for me!”

In a back corner, they could see him joining a game of dice. The gnomes seemed to be playing for small bright gems.

Jeremy laughed and Jana shrugged her shoulders.

A female gnome walked up to them. She had wispy gray hair in a bun and had cute round blushing cheeks. “Um, excuse me?” the gnome said, coming up to Jana. “But are you a girl-human?”

Jana was a bit taken aback, “Um...yeah.”

“Oh, no disrespect intended. I just never seen one before and I was curious what they’d look like if they were as ugly as human men, but you are kind of pretty, except for the nose thing...”

“Oh, I wouldn’t judge all human women based on her. There are a lot of better-looking ones,” added Jeremy.

Jana grimaced at the Neergaardian.

“Don’t worry,” the gnome girl said to Jana. “I know some make-up tips that will help accentuate your nose. My name is Gidda. Come find me soon and I’ll show you how.”

Jana smiled.

The party had one more drink, and then Ratchis announced, “Let’s go back to our quarters where we can talk in

private. I have something to tell you all.”

So, the party went back towards their rooms. Jana tried to signal Chance, but someone had put the dice in his hand, and it was as if nothing else existed.

“Leave him to his fun. We can get more accomplished without him there anyway,” said Kazrack.

As they crossed the greenway, Thomas came barreling up Martin’s leg and onto his shoulder.

“Oh, I am so glad to see you, Thomas,” said Martin to the squirrel in his mind. “But you sure did take a long time.”

“Sorry, but I never been on my own in the woods before. It was scary, but kind of fun,” replied Thomas.

“Here is a nut,” Martin fed him a hazelnut.

“The ones I had in the woods were fresher,” Thomas said with a slight hint of disgust.

Martin cuffed Thomas across the snout, not too hard but perhaps harder than he intended.

Everyone stopped their walking and just looked at Martin. Thomas paused and looked deep into Martin’s eyes and then leapt off his shoulder and disappeared into some nearby trees.

“Thomas! Come back! I’m sorry,” Martin cried aloud and then remembered to think it towards his familiar. “I am just under stress and worried. I didn’t mean it.”

But Thomas did not reply.

The party gathered in Ratchis and Martin’s room and took spots around the place. Jeremy went and got Beorth. Martin hung his head.

“Well, I thought this would be as good a time to tell you as any. Actually, I have two things to tell you. I have already told Kazrack and Beorth the first one, which is I have reason to believe that the King of Gothanius plans to sell all of us dragon-hunters into slavery.”

Martin’s head bolted up, “What?”

“That is why I originally agreed to join Crumb and you guys, to see that that would not happen,” Ratchis replied.

“What’s the other thing?” Jeremy asked.

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Session #16

Ratchis told him.

“Three months!” Jeremy cried.

“At least,” Ratchis added.

“But they said ‘not long’” Kazrack said.

“I guess when you live as long as a gnome three months isn’t long,” observed Jana.

“I live a long time,” said Kazrack.

“Gnomes live longer,” Beorth said.

“Are you sure?”

“If there is one thing I know, it is when things die,” Beorth said, his face deadpan.

“I think we need to return to Ratchis’ first point,” Martin said. “Which is, how do you know the King of Gothanius plans to sell us into slavery?”

“Well, I don’t know for certain, but I overheard some slavers I was tracking talk about it. They mentioned caravans of young men being brought to Gothanius to fight a dragon, but that they’d end up as slaves. That is why I joined the group,” Ratchis explained.

“Then why the ruse?” Martin asked. “Why actually send them out to fight the dragon?”

“Fodder,” said Kazrack. “He probably thought he’d get the dragon problem taken care of and get some slaves at the same time and not have to pay anyone.”

“We have to get out of here,” Jeremy said. “I am not going to spend three months with these gnomes.”

“Well, I will be training in my religious studies with Beléar and that may take quite some time,” Kazrack said. “I do not plan to leave before then unless Beléar does. However, while we are here, we can find out as much as possible about the area, Gothanius and the dragon. Perhaps we can talk to whomever the interim-Interim Chief is.”

There was a knocking at the door, and it opened. Distil stood there.

“Time for Last Meal,” he said cheerfully.

“You mean the last meal of the day?” Martin inquired.

“Yeah, the fifth meal before you go to sleep. Anybody want some warm milk and muffins?”

The group sat around the table once again. The muffins were soft and delicious, with large chunks of walnut in them. Ratchis shoved two into his mouth whole and Chance (who had just stumbled in drunk) cleared his throat.

“Oh, you must really like those,” Distil said to Ratchis. “I’ll remember to make more tomorrow.”

At that moment there was a loud crashing sound at the door to the first room off the hallway the party was staying in.

Bang!

Bang!

Something or someone was slamming against the door from the other side arrhythmically.

“Looks like our other guest is getting restless again,” Distil commented, clucking his tongue.

“Does your guest want to come eat with us?” Martin asked.

“We don’t know if it actually eats,” Distil said. “It doesn’t really have much of a mouth as far as we can tell.”

“It?”

“Yes, I’ll let it out, but I have to warn you, it is not exactly a pretty thing,” Distil said, walking over to the door that still continued to bang.

The old gnome opened the door and jumped back. What looked like a long thin leg of some kind stepped out cautiously, and then suddenly it rushed out.

Everyone gasped.

Out of the room and down the hall into the common room came the strangest creature any of them had ever seen .

“Whut en da Nine `ells is at?” Chance cried.

The thing was about four feet tall. It was a four-sided pyramid of pinkish flesh. In the middle of each of the upper faces of the pyramid it had a spindly arm and a spindly leg, a single large eye and what looked like some strange bill of some kind. The elbows on the arms looked like they bent in a 180-degree angle, and its hands were fingerless. And it made a sound like a stuck gear or a strangled goose or both.

“Haaaaahnt! Hoornt!” It said as it walked towards the table. It stopped by Jana and turned its body to look at her with another of its eyes. It was a large blue unblinking eye. She shivered.

“Haaaaahnt! Hoornt!”

“What is it?” Jeremy asked Distil as he walked back into the room.

“We don’t know. It just showed up in our territory one day,” Distil explained. “It will kind of follow you around or go where you say if you push it hard enough. It tends to go in one direction until it can’t anymore.”

And then as if to prove Distil’s point, the creature walked straight into the wall, its legs still moving futilely for a moment until it turned and then turned again walking back towards the table. It then stopped and laid the bottom part of its body on floor, tucking its legs upward.

“Is that some kind of talk?” Kazrack asked. “The noise it makes?”

“We think so,” Distil said. “When the master illusionist, Creedadal was here he cast a spell that allowed him to understand what it said, but it only said one thing over and over, Hurgun’s Maze.”

“Hurgun? Who’s that?” Martin asked.

“The Stone Wizard...” Distil said incredulously. “Where are you from?”

“Thricia,” said Martin.

“Don’t teach about important people in Thricia?”

“I guess not,” Martin said, sounding a bit offended.

“Haaaaahnt! Hoornt!” The creature stood up again, putting all eyes on it again. It walked over to Beorth who handed it a spoon. It took the spoon squatted down and started trying to dig into the earthen floor with it. Watching this creature use the spoon for such task enraptured everyone. Even as the metal spoon, bent and failed to break the earth, the creature continued attempting to dig with it for a few moments. It then stopped, stood again, and passed the spoon back to Beorth.

“Fascinating,” said Martin. “I would like a chance to work with him some and see if I can figure out a way to communicate with it.

“Sure, another time, though. Come on little fellow,” Distil said to the creature, walking around it to push it back towards its room. “We only keep it locked up for its own good, because if not it will hurt itself banging into things or grabbing stuff. We let it out occasionally to stretch its legs when it gets restless.”

Distil was gone for a moment and then walked past the table towards the sideboard. Martin looked up and saw Thomas riding Distil’s shoulder.

“Thomas!” Martin called in his mind.

The squirrel turned and looked at him with a stern glare. He turned back as Distil fed him some nuts.

“I guess this is your squirrel friend,” Distil said to Martin. “I always feed squirrels nuts. Squirrels are our friends.”

“Thomas, would you like a piece of muffin?” Martin called to Thomas.

“Does it have nuts in it?” Thomas asked.

“Yes, it does.”

“Ummm...okay,” Thomas leapt onto the table and over to Martin who gave him some muffin.

“I’m sorry I hit you,” Martin said, rubbing the squirrel under the chin.

“If you do that again I’ll have to report you to the familiar’s guild,” Thomas said.

“That’s fair,” Martin replied, wondering if there was any such thing.

Kazrack addressed Distil, “I was wondering if there was an interim Interim Chief we might talk to.”

“Well, that would be a silly title for someone, don’t you think?” Distil said with a smile. “The Interim Chief will be back soon enough. He has the authority to decide what there is to be decided. But as for myself I am deciding to go to bed.”

Jana was shaking Chance awake, as he had passed out with his head on the table. She helped him up and over to their room.

“Ahve got a present fer ya, Jana” Chance mumbled.

When they got into their room, he pulled a lovely pendant with a large sapphire on a silver chain from his pocket and put it around her neck.

“Ah got that fer ya,” Chance said.

“Thank you, Chance. It is very lovely,” Jana replied with a smile. She leaned forward for a kiss, but Chance was already crawling into bed, moaning about how the room had suddenly started moving.

Beorth and Jeremy also went to bed, their muscles aching from the day's long march, but Kazrack and Ratchis slipped into the latter's room to talk privately, leaving Martin alone in the common room. The Watch-Mage fell asleep on a comfy chair with Thomas on his stomach.

Meanwhile in the room, "So what are your intentions in terms of the group?" Ratchis asked the dwarf.

"Well, since you have refused my friendship, I look upon you as partners. So, I'll treat you as I would treat a good partner: With respect, but little else," Kazrack said.

"You are being ridiculous," Ratchis said. "I have never refused my friendship to you. Nephthys is, in part, goddess of friendship but I saw no need to change my ways because you felt that getting some promise was more important than our friendship."

"I didn't see the need for you to change. I mean, I saw the oath as an instrument of change, but not for you specifically."

"It is beyond my small brain to understand how this could be of such significance to you," Ratchis said. "Unless in Verdun, such words have such significance."

"An oath *should* have significance," said Kazrack. "And someone who has no fear of breaking it or betraying his friends should not have any reservations about making the oath."

"Well, I have to live by my own principles, and I will continue to let my actions speak for themselves," Ratchis insisted. "And I don't believe that an oath will change people's behavior. Do you think Jeremy would not have gone into the inn's basement if he had sworn the oath?"

"No, that has nothing to do with the oath; that was just Jeremy's mind being too nimble for his own good," Kazrack said.

"Well, I think you would be better served to simply judge our group by their actions," Ratchis said. "I need to get some sleep. We'll talk about it more another time."

Kazrack went back to the room he shared with Beléar, while Martin woke with a start hours later and stumbled to the room, he shared with Ratchis.

Isilem, 16th of Syet – 564 H.E.

Morning came with a bell ringing in the common room, but Kazrack was already awake, on his knees, his forehead pressed to his prayer stone. He would not be allowed to leave that position all day, as Beléar surrounded him with burning blocks of incense.

The others came bleary eyed into the common area where Distil was cooking up flapjacks, and a whole stack of sausage lay on a plate on the table. A young gnome, with a full head of blonde hair and a big bright smile, was setting the table.

"Good morning," he said cheerfully.

"That is my nephew, Cornelius," Distil said.

The party took their spots around the table (except for Kazrack who was praying and Chance who felt too sick to get out of bed) and started in on the food.

In a few moments, two more gnomes came in. It was Briendel and a gnome dressed just like him, who looked just

like him,

“This is my brother, Socher,” Briendel said.

“Yeah, I have a real gnomish name, not like his faerie name,” Socher said with an evil grin.

Briendel hit his brother with his hat, and then both burst into giggles. They joined the others at the table, eating heartily.

A few moments later Obenhammer came in and joined them as well.

“I already had first meal, but I can nosh on a little something,” he said, wrapping up some sausage in a flapjack and dipping it into a bowl of syrup.

“I was thinking we can trade a spell or two today,” Briendel said to Martin.

“What kind of spells do you have?” Socher asked.

“Well, as I said last night, I am a student of illusion magic, but unfortunately I appear to have left my spellbooks behind,” Martin replied.

“Oh, you should never do that,” Distil said, pouring himself some Kafka.

“Perhaps there is a way you can help me get a replacement while I am here,” Martin said looking at the gnomish twins.

The two gnomes looked at each other and finally Briendel said, “After First Meal, we’ll take you up to Creedadal’s laboratory. We can talk about it there.”¹⁹

“Who is Creedadal?” Martin asked.

“The Master Illusionist,” said Briendel.

“He can do things that would drive you mad,” said Socher in a mockingly creepy voice. “Like make your nightmares come true and haunt you for the rest of your life.”

“Oh, I’m not sure I’d want to learn that one,” Martin said.

After the meal, Martin went up to a series of chambers way up in one of the other hills, which required ladders to climb from room to room.

While this was happening, Ratchis spent the morning in deep meditation, praying to Nephthys for guidance, and Beorth and Jeremy went with Obenhammer for a tour of the community, as the gnome was off-duty that day. Jana spent the morning, caring for Chance.

“Obenhammer, how many gnomes live here?” Beorth asked.

“You can call me Obie,” the gnome replied.

“You’re damn right I will,” said Jeremy.

“Huh?” said Obenhammer.

“Nuthin’” replied Jeremy. “Where are the gardens?”

¹⁹ Much like halflings, gnomes have five meals a day. First Meal, Midday Meal, Tea, Supper and Last Meal.

“It’s winter... but I can take you to the moss and mold growing chambers if you want to see those,” Obenhammer replied, happily.

“So Briendel and I talked it over and we’ve decided that we’ll help you get a new spellbook, if you help us,” Socher said.

”Wow! That’d be great. What can I do?” Martin asked.

“Well, you can help keep the lab clean. Organize and label material components and maybe scribe a scroll or two for us once you do get some spells scribed in your new book out of those you still have prepared,” Briendel said.

“That sounds fair,” said Martin.

“Yeah, normally Creedadal would make this decision, but he left me in charge,” said Briendel.

“No, he left *me* in charge,” Socher protested.

“No, me!”

“You wish!”

They suddenly fell into a lengthy argument in their own tongue. After about 20 minutes without their seeming to take a breath, Martin began wandering about the lab looking at jars of components. They seemed to be labeled in three languages.

After another half-hour, the two gnomes stopped arguing.

“Well, we’ve decided that we’ll alternate days for being in charge,” Briendel said.

“So, which of you is in charge today?” Martin asked.

“I am,” said Briendel

“No, I am!” said Socher.

And they fell to arguing again.

Meanwhile, Obenhammer had brought Beorth and Jeremy to the community smithy. Dozens of gnomes labored in leather aprons crafting metal goods of all kinds, from armor to farming implements, to wheels and cogs to weapons.

“We make all the metal goods our community needs right here,” Obenhammer said, and then waved over a gnome in goggles with long wavy black hair and a long burn scar on his nose. “This is Migdol, the head smith.”

“Well met,” Migdol said. “Enjoying your stay?”

“Pfft,” was Jeremy’s only answer.

“Oh yes,” replied Beorth stepping in front of Jeremy and stretching out a hand to shake Migdol’s. Migdol just looked at his hand funny. Beorth took his hand back.

“So, you make armor and weapons here?” Beorth asked.

“Yes, we are stocking up on such items for certain possible eventualities,” said Migdol. “Maybe if you are here long enough, we can make you a nice suit of something.”

“Oh, that’d be great!” replied Beorth.

“Oh, I don’t think they’re skilled enough to make one in your size,” said Jeremy scoffed.

“What?!” Migdol cried. “I can make armor in any size!”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah!”

“Let’s see you do it then!”

“Fine!” Migdol called over two young gnomes who began measuring both Jeremy and Beorth for armor.

“You want a helmet?” Migdol asked Jeremy. “Let me get Herschel. Herschel! Herschel is in charge if making helmets and nose-guards, not that you have much of a nose.”

“Well, it is not as nice and shapely as yours,” Beorth said.

“Why thank you!”

Everyone was gathered back together for the midday meal, except for Kazrack who still had his head against his prayer stone.

The afternoon waned and evening fell, and some of the party went back to the public house, including Chance who was feeling much better.

It seemed they were settling in for what might be a long stay.

Osilem, 17th of Syet – 564 H.E.

It was morning again; another early meal, and the sound of busy gnomes passing by outside, or poking their head in to say hello.

Beorth followed Ratchis’ lead and spent his day in deep meditation, exercising his faith for Anubis. Ratchis did the same as he had done the day before, though in the afternoon he asked Distelbowden if there was perhaps some task or job he could help the gnomes with, and the elder gnome promised to find something for him.

Martin found his way to the quarters that Socher and Briendel shared and from there they went to Credadal’s lab and he began his chores. In the afternoon, he practiced illusions with Socher, while Briendel bound his new spellbook.

Kazrack spent the morning on his hands and knees on the snowy ground, while Beléar watched him from a top a large stone. He was looking for the flat slate-like rock that would become the foundation for his runestones – the holy emblem and tool of the priesthood of the dwarven gods. The majority of his training would be focused on crafting these runestones—learning the letters of the xoth.²⁰

²⁰ Xoth is the ancient dwarven language first taught by to the dwarven people by their gods. It is only used by rune-throwers now and is well-guarded secret.

Jana spied Kazrack just as he solemnly selected the stone he sought. She had spent the day wandering as far around the perimeter of the gnomish community as she could manage; testing the bounds. No one stopped her, though those that saw her waved. One gnomish soldier told her that it wasn't safe for her to wander so far, and later she saw him watching her from a distance, so she returned to her quarters.

Chance was just waking up when she returned. She noticed he was getting dressed but had no socks or shoes.

"Oh hey," he said weakly as she came in.

"Did you lose your shoes?" Jana asked him.

"Ah bet `em... annah larst" He looked up with a sad face. "Can I borrow that necklace I gave you?"

"Sure," Jana said without thinking twice.

"I promise I'll give it back," Chance said.

"I know you will," she said, and they fell into each other's arms.

An hour later, Chance slipped the necklace off her neck as Jana slept and went off to get his shoes back.

Immediately after First Meal, an armored gnome arrived, asking for Jeremy.

"Um, I'm Jeremy," the Neerguardian said,

"Okay, come on, you are supposed to come with me," the gnome, whose name was Hatzel said. "We are going to need your help with drills and sparring today."

"So, you want me to teach the gnomes?" Jeremy asked as they left for the armory where he could pick up his gear.

"Not exactly," Hatzel said. "We want to use you as sort of an example."

"Like how to fight big folks?" Jeremy asked, being shown where his chain shirt and his short sword were.

"Exactly."

At supper everyone gathered together in the common area to eat. They were joined by Obenhammer, Hatzel, and Cornelius. Jeremy was sore from the practice he "helped" with and had to sit on a pillow. The game of gnomish tag²¹ that they ended the drills with hadn't helped either.

Before they knew it, another evening was spent in the pub (except Kazrack and Beorth) and another day was gone.

Tholem, 18th of Syet – 564 H.E.

And another day came and passed much quicker than they thought days could pass.

Chance was not seen all day. Jeremy went out to help Hatzel with some other task and ended up watching gnomish children in the nursery. Martin started the long process of transcribing his prepared spells into his new spellbook, after doing more chores, which included equally distributing an amount of ectoplasm of a troll's ghost from one large to several smaller containers. Jana wandered out in the nearly stony hilltops and the forest, looking for a

²¹ Gnomish Tag is a game that incorporates elements of tag, hide and go seek, and Johnny Ride the Pony. Actually, tagging someone involves tripping them, forcing them down by sheer numbers or leaping over them and slapping them on the head.

deserted spot. Ratchis continued with his absolutions in the morning and helped lugging stones out of the mine in the afternoon.

Kazrack continued with his priestly study and began carving his first runestone.

Beorth spent the day much as Ratchis did, but in the evening, he tried to tell a tale in the public house as a form of payment for the armor the gnomes were making him, but the gnomes all agreed afterward that he should avoid telling stories in the future.

“Let me tell the story of the 13 Tzaedikil,” Migdol said.²²

And the day ended.

And two days turned into a week...

Kazrack continued diligently with his runestones. The others continued with their tasks and pursuits. Jeremy came to like working in the nursery, and Martin joined in readily with Socher and Briandel’s playful fights. Snow began to fall heavily, and entire days were spent indoors, and when it cleared up the gnomes employed Ratchis’ strength to clear paths.

Chance would disappear for three days at a time, sometimes returning clad in jewels and with many gifts for Jana, other times, shivering, coatless and shoeless.

Beorth spent most of his time to himself, and sometimes would go an entire day without eating or speaking.

Every night there was the tradition of the public house.

However, despite how comfortable the party became, they still felt some anxiousness, and wondered when and if they could leave.

Jeremy began to ask Distil everyday, when the Interim Chieftain would be back and Distil said the same thing, “Soon enough.”

Then he began to ask that the party be allowed to speak to Captain Fistandlus Ironhammer. One night after dinner, Kazrack had gotten Distil to admit that if there was an emergency while the Interim Chieftain was away that everyone would do what Captain Fistandlus said to do.

“So, he is the leader,” Kazrack had said.

“No, he’s just the one who would know what to do if there was an emergency,” Distil replied.

“So, he is next in command?” Kazrack insisted.

“No, he’s just smart, and everyone respects him,” replied Distil.

Finally, one day when Jeremy asked for what seemed like the hundredth time, Distil said, “I have had word sent to

²² There is a legend common to all gnomish communities about the 13 Tzaedikil. These gnomes are said to be chosen by Fezzik Istvan himself. They are said to be exemplars of good and gnomish behavior—kind, helpful, full of good cheer, and ethical in all choices. There is no way to tell if a gnome is one of Tzaedikil, but gnomes always treat each other kindly because you never know who might be one and to mistreat him would be to make Fezzik angry. Each time a Tzaedikil dies, another is born or chosen (or however it happens—the legends vary on this point), but they are always peaceful and it is said a Tzaedikil would rather die than lift his hand to kill another living thing.

him. He is out on extended patrol but should not be back faster than you'd think."

And so, the party waited, and one day while Kazrack was repeating the Twelve Blessings of the Work Day, Beléar cocked his head.

"Continue," he told Kazrack. "I have to check something."

He walked out of the room, closing the door behind him and down the hall to the common area. The place was silent. Distil was not around, and all of Kazrack's companions were off doing one thing or another, and then he heard it again. It came clearly from Jana's room. The screech of a fiendish and unholy beast!

Beléar pounded on the door to Jana's room. He could smell something like brimstone wafting out from under the door and heard a shuffling inside and another low inhuman sound like metal being scraped against stone or bones, but in the cadence of a voice.

"Open the door," Beléar said through the door. "What are you doing in there?"

"Don't come through that door!" Jana cried.

A moment later (after Beléar banged some more), Jana opened the door. She looked flush and the scent of sulfur surrounded her.

"What were you doing in there?" Beléar demanded.

"And it became your business what I do, when?" Jana replied in her best snotty tone.

"I heard the cry of fiend from in here," Beléar said.

"You heard no such thing," Jana said, her regularly practiced frown curling into a smile at the edges.

"And what is that smell of sulfur then, girl?" Beléar said. He cocked his head to look around the young witch. "And what is that!"

The old dwarf pointed to a circle drawn in blood on the ground, a piece of bone discarded beside it and what looked like the skull of some animal in the center of the circle.

"None of your business," Jana replied. "Please leave."

"Very well," Beléar said in his deep voice. "But understand that I am watching you."

Jana slammed the door.

Much later, as Kazrack finished a rune stone, Beléar spoke to him.

"Kazrack, tell me of the one name Jana," the priest said.

"Whenever someone was in danger, she would be the first to suggest not helping, but when we agreed to help, she would risk her life with the rest of us. This is a contradiction I have not yet resolved," Kazrack replied.

"I think she is involved in something that is a danger to herself and all those around her," Beléar said. "There was a circle in her room and the smell of brimstone."

"Oh, she controls demons," Kazrack said casually.

“What?!”

“Yeah, she controls demons,” Kazrack repeated.

“You mean you *know* she summons demons?” Beléar said incredulously.

“Shouldn’t they be controlled? I mean, they shouldn’t be let to go running around loose,” Kazrack said naively.

“She is summoning them first,” Beléar explained. “Who knows what kind of foul tasks she is having them accomplish!”

“Oh,” Kazrack said, finally truly understanding.

“This has to be told to the others, and to the gnomes,” Beléar said.

“I agree,” said Kazrack. “Beléar, I wanted to ask you about something else.”

“Go ahead.”

“We helped free this town of a curse of undead, but while doing it found this amulet that seems evil and cursed. We could not destroy it by strength. I was hoping you could look at it and tell me what you think?”

“I will look,” said Beléar.

Later, Kazrack fetched Beorth and the Ghost-hunter of Anubis showed the old dwarf the amulet he had been carrying since back in Stonebridge.

Beléar laid the amulet down on a table, spoke some words and let a handful of runestones scatter about the object. He examined the stones and then spoke, “Yes, this thing is evil. It comes off of it in waves.”

“I never thought to check for that,” said Beorth glumly. “How can we destroy it? Ratchis tried to smash it, but even his great strength failed.”

“An item of this power has several ways it might be destroyed. For example, the fire of a dragon, the faith of a powerful priest, or being dropped into the Bottomless Pit of Derome-Delem,” Beléar said. “Unfortunately, it is beyond my power to destroy. It seems that you may need to carry this burden longer.”

“The way of the Gods is revealed with patience,” said Beorth.

“You speak as a dwarf would,” Beléar said, with the first smile either Beorth or Kazrack had seen the old dwarf give. “Kazrack, this is a good companion. I can sense much stonish wisdom in him.”

At supper that evening, Distelbowden let the pyramidal-creature out of its room again.

“Haaaaahnt! Hoornt!”

“You know it only makes two sounds,” Martin observed. “It could be a clue to its language. It could be similar to the samples of gnomish written language I have seen, only two symbols.”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Distil “I’m illiterate.”

“I’m learning my letters,” said Cornelius happily.

“Haaaaahnt! Hoornt!”

“Why don’t we take it outside and give it a shovel?” Kazrack said.

“Because the gnomes don’t need big holes in the ground?” Ratchis said.

“To clear snow,” Kazrack said exasperated.

“He’d be good for digging graves,” said Jeremy.

“That’s morbid,” said Martin.

“Well, it’s true,” said Beorth.

“Haaaaahnt! Hoornt!”

“Martin,” Beléar suddenly said, and the table was quiet. The old dwarf had never addressed any of them at dinner before. “Do you make circles in your own blood in your room?”

Martin paused and shot a confused look at everyone else.

“No, that would be witchcraft,” Suddenly, Martin’s eyes widened, and he looked over at Jana.

“Here we go again,” the young witch said with a sigh.

“Earlier today Jana summoned some fiendish creature. I heard it and smelled and saw the circle of summoning in blood on the ground, and notice the bandage on her hand,” Beléar said.

“I told you before, that is none of your business,” said Jana.

“If you are summoning creatures against their will to do yours, then it is my business,” Ratchis said coldly.

“I was not *summoning*. I was merely contacting a token,” Jana explained.

“What is a token?” Kazrack asked.

“Remember the goblin shaman we fought when we first got to Derome-Delem? I took it from him. It is how those of my kind learn spells. Each token has a creature from another world that is bound to it,” Jana explained.

“Against their will?” Ratchis asked.

“I do not know,” Jana replied.

“Nor do you care,” said Ratchis.

Jana merely shrugged her shoulders.

“Beorth,” Martin addressed the bald paladin. “Earlier when you told me about the pendant and what Beléar told, you mentioned being able to tell if something is evil. Can you do that to this token?”

“Yes, I can,” said Beorth.

“Perhaps you should,” Martin said.

“Perhaps I’d better,” Beorth added. “Jana would I be able to tell if the token was evil?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why are you summoning things you know little about?” Jeremy asked Jana. “You don’t seem to know very much

about this, maybe you should give it up.”

“Why dunya give the garl ah break?” Chance said. “She’s never dun anything ta make us thank she’s uh dahnger ta us.”

“I cannot travel or work with someone who binds beings against their will whether they be good or evil. Nephthys will not tolerate it and nor will I!” Ratchis said, his anger very evident. “It is akin to slavery.”

“I am sorry. I did not mean to be a destabilizing influence on your group,” said Beléar. “I will adjourn to bed and allow you to sort this out on your own.”

The dwarf stood to go to bed, and everyone watched him, but Chance who leaned in close to Jana and whispered, “But... you yourself are not a demon, right?”

“No, Chance,” Jana replied.

“Whew! Good,” Chance said, and then he suddenly stood speaking in a louder voice. “Time to be off. Got a game to bet on.” And with that he left.

Ratchis stood as well. “I’m sorry, but I will not violate my own principles and those of my goddess. I want evidence that such a thing is both not evil and not a form or charm or slavery.”

“And who’s going to give it to you?” Jana said smarmily.

Ratchis grunted and walked off to his room.

“What if you summon it in front of us?” Kazrack proposed. “That way we could all see and understand for ourselves?”

“No way I am doing that!” Jana protested. “I cannot risk that one of you might do something stupid.”

“What would happen?” Kazrack asked.

“Don’t worry about it. I am just not letting that happen,” Jana insisted.

“What if only one person was there with you and promised to not do anything, except listen to your instructions very carefully and to not interfere in the summoning,” Martin suggested.

“It is not a summoning, *really*,” Jana said.

“What about Beorth? Would you allow Beorth to come observe?” Martin said.

“Hmmm,” Jana mused. “Okay, but it can’t be until tomorrow.”²³

“Beorth is that okay with you?” Martin asked the paladin.

“Yes, I’d be happy to represent the rest of the group,” Beorth said.

“And report back to us,” Kazrack said.

“Of course,” Beorth said. “I will give you a detailed account of what I observe.”

²³ A witch may only summon a token creature once per day.

Osilem, the 24th of Syet – 564 H.E.

The next day began as all the others had, with First Meal, and then Jeremy going out to help take care of the young gnomes in the nursery. Kazrack continued with his training with Beléar. Martin went to go help Socher and Briendel and finally learn a new spell from them, and Chance did not return even after the sun had come up. Ratchis began the first of what would be seven days of fasting and self-mutilation in an attempt to summon a vision from his goddess.

Beorth and Jana went to the room she shared with Chance after the first meal.

“Okay,” she told Beorth. “I want you to sit quietly in that corner and don’t say a word no matter what. And no matter what happens, do not approach the circle, address the creature, or distract me. Okay?”

Beorth nodded.

Jana removed a piece of bone from her bag and placed it on the ground in front of her as she got down on her knees. She then pulled out her knife and cut her palm, squeezing it into a fist to make the blood flow faster, then dipping the bone into the blood, she traced a circle about four feet in diameter. She withdrew the baby wolf’s skull from her bag and placed it in the center of the circle and began her chant.

It was low and long but became faster and louder. Suddenly smoke began to billow out from the skull’s eye sockets and mouth. The inside of the circle became obscured, but even though Beorth could smell the noxious odor coming out of the token, the smoke itself did not seem to leave the circle.

There was a sudden flash of movement in the smoke, and it dissipated a bit, lowering down to reveal a creature that made even the usually stoic paladin shudder.

What was standing within the circle of blood was a skeletal creature nearly nine feet tall. It had decaying skin for a face, stretched taut on an oblong and inhuman skull. It was crouched to avoid the ceiling, and it had a tail curled up over its head with a cruel bony barb on the end.

It let out a horrific screech that no throat could make. It could only be described as infernal. Its head swung around wildly taking in its surroundings. The room seemed darker and colder to Beorth. Jana never flinched. Her gaze was directly on the creature’s face and nowhere else.

“You called us again, mortal girl,” It said, its voice was a sound like bones in being split by a butcher. “So frightened of us were you the first time that you sent me away quick, my delicious morsel? Do you not know that it does not do you well to anger one of my kind? Being summoned makes us hungry.”

“Your hunger is not what I summoned you to talk about,” Jana said steadily.

“Oh, you plan to sate us with that tender morsel we see in the corner?” The creature craned its head towards Beorth. It smacked its chops disgustingly. “Bring it closer to us, mortal-girl. We want to smell its fear better before we devour it. It looks pale and lovely. Delicious.”

“No one is being eaten today,” Jana said again.

“Let it speak to us itself. Let it say it does not want the pleasure of being devoured,” the creature insisted.

“No,” Jana said angrily, and the creature stopped its swaying and looked directly at her.

“You seem less scared of us than you did of whatever was at that door the first time, sweetness,” the creature leaned way forward to meet Jana’s gaze at equal level. “Break the circle and we will take care of whatever bothers you. Free us and we will owe a great debt.”

“You will not be freed, and you will not be fed,” Jana said. “You will do what you have been brought here to do and

that alone. Tell me what you have to teach me.”

“Oh, we could teach you many things,” It straightened up again and its bones crackled with the motion. “We could teach you how to suckle the black sorrow from the breast of a new mother who has had her child murdered by its father. Ooooh, delicious.”

“No, you know what it is I want,” Jana said. “Spells. Magic.”

“You *are* mortal aren’t you?” Not appreciated are the more delicate horrors of your plane and mine,” It crouched again, its tail swishing back and forth.”

Jana and the creature discussed several spells it might teach her for a few minutes, while Beorth listened.

“Or we can offer you a piece of information,” The creature’s face twisted into its version of a smile. “Something that you might want to find out *before* we find out.”

“What kind of information?” Jana asked.

“Oh, we hear things in our infernal realms, rumors, legends, news... Perhaps a piece of it would be interesting to you and yours. All you need do is free us.”

“I will not free you,” Jana replied.

It shrieked again in anger. “If not free in your world, then destroy the token and free us in ours. Do you know what it is like to serve a hundred generations of imaginationless goblin scum, lower than larvae, they are. We long to roam our home freely without fear of being called back here.”

“I will consider what you have offered me,” Jana said and with that she waved a hand and dismissed the creature. Beorth breathed for the first time since the thing had appeared.

“So?” Jana asked, breathless herself. “What will you tell the others?”

“I don’t know yet,” Beorth said, and returned to his room to meditate on what he had seen.

At lunch everyone (except Chance) gathered in the common area. Ratchis walked in but sat in a chair away from the food and refused to eat.

“So, Beorth, what do you have to report?” Martin asked.

“Well, the creature she summoned... it was a ghastly creature,” the paladin said.

“Some of our own group aren’t all that attractive, but they’re good people. The question is: was it evil?” Jeremy quipped.

“It was a tortured soul,” Beorth said.

“What does that mean?” Kazrack asked.

“Is it evil?” Ratchis asked.

“From all appearances, I would say... Yes.”

“So, this thing is basically your prisoner?” Ratchis said, turning to Jana.

“No, he is just bound to the token,” Jana said.

“So, he doesn’t have to come if summoned?” Ratchis said.

“Well, some of them fight harder than others to not be summoned,” Jana explained.

Ratchis grunted.

“I don’t think any of the creatures bound to my tokens can be called exactly innocent,” Jana said.

“How many of these token things do you have?” Jeremy asked.

“Some number,” Jana snapped. “Why do *you* care?”

“I cannot abide the enslavement of any being!” Ratchis roared. “My goddess does not give me the luxury of traveling with slavers. I do not differentiate between these beings and human life, gnomish life or orcish life. It cannot be tolerated. I will not tolerate it! Getting up from his chair, Ratchis grabbed a fork off the table and went to his room, slamming the door.

“Jana?” Kazrack said quietly after a moment. “Can you learn magic from Martin?”

“No.”

“Do you mean it’s impossible, or that you just don’t want to do it?”

“Are you suggesting that I renounce my ‘evil, witchy ways’ and start learning magic anew?” Jana asked, spewing sarcasm.

“Yes,” replied Kazrack.

“You are deluding yourself,” said Jana, folding her arms across her chest.

Kazrack stood and walked over to Ratchis’ room.

He found the Friar of Nephthys bending the tines of the fork back and forth to break them off, and then sharpening them.

“Is that a weapon?” Kazrack asked.

“Of course not, it is an instrument of cleansing,” Ratchis replied.

“How does it cleanse you?”

“Pain is a method I will use to prepare for my prayers,” and with that he pierced his left eyebrow with the sharpened bit of metal.

Kazrack winced, “Do you need help?”

“I need to do the preparations alone,” Ratchis said.

So Kazrack returned to his training, and Martin spent the afternoon practicing illusions with Socher and Briendel. That night the Watch-Mage slept on the floor in Beorth and Jeremy’s room, as he did not want to disturb Ratchis’ personal ceremony.

Tholem, the 25th of Syet – 564 H.E.

The next day Captain Fistandlus came to see them.

The party gathered sullenly, their foul moods evident on their faces. Chance had finally returned but was sleeping.

“Distelbowden sent me a message that you wanted to speak to me,” Fistandlus said with less of a cheery air than the party had become used to in dealing with the gnomes.

“We want to know about the Interim Chief,” said Kazrack. “When is he coming and when can we leave? We cannot stay here all winter.”

“You are our guests,” the captain said. “Are you not comfortable? Are we not good hosts? Why this impatience? What are a few months spent somewhere warm with kind people?”

“We have other places to be. Things to do, the dragon for insistence,” said Jeremy.

“Dragons are a thousand years old if they are a day, what will one more winter matter?” the captain said. He then sighed and sipped the kafka Distil had brought him. “Look, the truth is that the rules state you cannot be dismissed until the Chieftain or the Interim Chieftain get to ask you questions. I don’t know if I’d try to stop you from leaving, but you really don’t have much of a choice. The winter is hitting pretty hard out there and you’d never find your way back. In fact, as I came back from patrol not long ago, I saw a big storm coming down from the northwest. You might as well stay comfortable. The Interim Chief will be back soon enough. I know you’re human but show some patience.”

“I am not human,” Kazrack said.

Captain Fistandlus Ironhammer shook his head and spoke again, “I have the defense of this place and my people to worry about. I have to go. I hope you are enjoying your stay and tell Distil if you are wont for anything.”

The Captain left and everyone went back to whatever was they were doing to pass the time.

Teflem, the 27th of Syet – 564 H.E.

Ratchis did not eat for the next two days and followed the piercing of his right eyebrow with the left one and then the right nipple, and then he cut open old scars on his arms and let the blood run fresh. He felt light-headed when he stood and would see or talk to no one.

Jana called Beorth to her room; Chance had disappeared the night before and was still not back.

“I am going to summon the token creature again,” Jana said to him. “I want you present again as a witness that I intend to use this thing for good and not for evil.

Beorth simply nodded.

Closed in her room, Jana began the ceremony again. She drew the circle in her blood, her hand now red and raw from all the times she had done it and began her chant.

There was a longer pause this time, and for a second Beorth thought perhaps that she had failed, but suddenly the acrid smoke billowed from the wolf skull a second time and in it appeared the fiendish creature. Again, it bellowed a chilling cry, and seemed enraged, rocking back and forth in the tiny confines of the summoning circle.

“You summon us again, mortal-morsel,” the creature said, the cadence of its voice like an arrhythmic axe chopping wood. It looked around and settled its gaze on Beorth. “Have you changed you mind and will feed us this white

tender giblet you have here?”

“No,” said Jana sternly. “I want one of the spells we spoke of.”

“Oh, is that all?” the creature drooped its head down to face the witch, menacingly. “You bore us. Let us free to stretch our legs and claws.”

“You know that is not going to happen,” Jana said.

“We are tired of this trap. We will give you something special. Something we have kept a long secret from the long line of vermin that had the token afore you did. Free us on our own plane and this we will give to you.”

“And what is that?” Jana asked.

The creature paused and leaned backward, and Jana could see its hips bent equally far back, its huge rib cage and spine at an odd angle, its wide shoulders tipped forward. It was a mockery of nature.

“The ability to make more tokens,” the creature hissed. ²⁴

Jana smiled.

“Do you make the promise and know it is binding?” the creature asked.

“Yes,” said Jana.

The next six hours were spent with Jana and creature exchanging strange words and gestures that Beorth could not understand. The time stretched out into an eternity, and the paladin’s head pounded by the time the creature was once again dismissed.

Without pausing, Jana went outside and rooted around in the snow until she found a large stone and came back inside. Hefting it above her head, she brought it down on the skull smashing it into a million tiny pieces.

“We’re even,” she said to the pieces and then she looked at Beorth and smiled.

That evening at Last Meal the party was gathered together, even Chance, who again was looking glum and was not decked out in the gems and jewelry of before. He kept nodding off at the table.

Beorth explained to them what had happened that afternoon (omitting the part about Jana learning to make more tokens).

“...And the end result was that she set the spirit free,” Beorth concluded.

There was a pause.

“You don’t sound very happy about it,” said Martin.

“Oh, I am very pleased,” Beorth replied in his typical flat tone.

²⁴ **DM’s Note:** Jana is the first witch being played in Aquerra, so this campaign was a bit of a playtest. Originally, *Create Token* was going to be a series of spells, but on reflection I decided it worked better as an item creation feat. Even though Jana did not have an available feat slot, we made a compromise. She could have the feat if she agreed that her next available slot (at 6th level) would have to be used for that and I would grant her one extra known spell of 2nd level from a specific list of spells that token creature had available to make up for the change. She chose *blindness*.

“How many more do you have?” Ratchis asked Jana. He looked pale, and his shoulders drooped some.

“Yeah, did you destroy all the other ones?” Jeremy added.

“There aren’t ‘all the other ones’,” Jana said. “The one you had objection to is now gone.”

“Beorth, you were there,” Ratchis said, weakly. “Tell me more about what this summoning is like. How does she coerce it to do her will?”

“I don’t think it was coercion,” Beorth said, as if he were thinking hard about it. “More like, it proposes something, she proposes something; an agreement is reached between the two.”

“But it roared in pain, I could hear it from my room,” Ratchis said.

“It appeared with a scream of rage, not necessarily pain,” Beorth replied.

Ratchis paused. “Based on what I know,” he said. “I will not try to remove the token from you by force, but I cannot call you companion. When we leave here, I will go my own way and those who want to come with me may, but you are not welcome.”

Jana sighed angrily.

“As far as I can tell that creature was bound in punishment for something it did in its own plane,” Jana said. “It is paying its debt.”

“Where did you get that?” Ratchis asked.

“That’s what it told us,” Jana said.

The half-orc looked at Jana skeptically.

Frustrated, Jana woke Chance and dragged him off to bed.

Ratchis looked to Kazrack, “We agree that her actions are - -“

“Unacceptable?” Kazrack guessed.

“Reprehensible,” Ratchis said. “No better than a slaver’s.”

“Perhaps we can influence her actions, help her to make better decisions,” Kazrack mused.

“Perhaps, but I do not have time for that right now,” Ratchis said. “I plan to offer my aid to the Interim Chief in dealing with the humans of Gothanius, that might mean that I may stay behind when the rest of you leave.”

“But what about the contract?” Kazrack asked. “If it turns out the king brought us here under false pretenses then breaking the contract is not a problem for me, but if not, we have a responsibility to help with the dragon.”

“We’ll see what the Interim Chief says,” replied Ratchis. “My mind is not totally made up. I am still awaiting a vision from my goddess. Only then will I know for sure.”

Anulem, the 28th of Syet – 564 H.E.

Ratchis woke up to a blurry world. His stomach lurched and squirmed and he and tasted bile come up in the back of his throat. He drank some water and quickly spat it out. It had been four days since he had eaten.

He walked into the common area where some of his companions and gnomes were gathered eating some meal. Ratchis was not sure what time of day it was. They spoke to him, but the voices sounded as if they came far down a long narrow cave.

Ignoring them he scooped up some firewood from over by the stove and walked outside, forcing his massive frame through the deep snow.

Digging a hole in the snow, he plopped down the wood and began a fire, which he sat over, a blanket positioned over the hole so he could breathe in the smoke and feel the intense heat. He did not know how long he had done this, when he suddenly stood and swayed in his disorientation.²⁵

Ratchis heard the warped and distant sound of a metal cup being dragged back and forth against cell bars. And then there were voices...

“Come on McCreevey. Time to go to the salt mines,” said a gruff voice.

“Oh, going to make a slave out of me huh?” a voice like a mouth full of greasy cracker crumbs said. “I ain’t done nothing.”

“You killed a man, and this is your debt. Work,” the other voice said.

Now Ratchis could see cell bars before him and the form a dwarf and two humans dragging a manacled man away.

“Their making me a slave, junior,” the man said, as he dragged past Ratchis’ cell.

But then Ratchis heard a familiar voice of another man - It was soothing and reassuring.

“I understand your worry Ratchis,” the voice said. “But that man made a choice and that choice cost him his freedom, but the choice was made freely. He has a debt to pay.”

Had time passed? Ratchis thought he might have spoken, asked a question about the manacled man that someone was answering across a table. Where did the table come from? He did not remember speaking. Ratchis could see a swirl of bright colors before his face twirling faster and faster, until he felt a sensation as if he were floating a few feet off the ground and moving feet first to somewhere else.

Ratchis awoke to a strong smell and a warm towel being pressed to his forehead. He tried to lift his head up but felt dizzy.

“What were you doing out there?” Distil’s voice said. “You nearly killed yourself.”

Ratchis opened his eyes and could see Cornelius handing Distil a large steaming cup of something.

“I was trying to talk with my goddess,” Ratchis croaked.

“Next time, try praying,” Distil said, “Now, I want you to sit up and drink this.”

Ratchis obeyed, but his mind was on his vision. What did it mean? He did not feel any closer to knowing what to do about Jana, and he still felt a red-hot fury that cloaked his disappointment when he thought about her summoning beings against their will.

“It is going to take you a few days to recover,” said Distil.

“Where else do I have to go?” Ratchis said, lifting his head and sipping the black tea.

²⁵ Ratchis was actually using what he knows of orcish shamanism to gain his vision, hoping that Nephthys would indulge him.

End of Session #16

AQUERRA

Session #17

Days became weeks and weeks passed into a month and more. The party continued to do the things there were doing. Kazrack was nearly done his dwarven runic alphabet. Ratchis recovered and continued with his intense prayers to Nephthys; expanding the spell repertoire he had access to. Beorth also supplicated Anubis for days on end, until he too found that he could channel his faith and the divine will of his god to have spell-like effects.

Jana kept to herself, walking in the nearby woods or spending days locked in her room with Chance (who still spent more time gambling with gnomes than with the rest of the companions). Jeremy continued helping the gnomes with their “big people fighting” training sessions and working in the nursery.

Snow spilled from the sky like a million exploded down pillows, and some days, Martin stayed with Socher and Briendel, for it was just too hard to get back through the snow to the guest quarters. He learned a couple of new spells in this time as well, trading them for ones he had. Ratchis helped to dig trails from entrance to entrance, but Chance, Jeremy and Jana had snowball fights against groups of gnomes who had dug bunkers in the deepest snowdrifts.

Overall, despite the occasional impatience waiting for the Interim Chief and the tension between Jana and Ratchis, they were fun days of games, talks, good food, and parties in the public house.

One morning in deep winter, Kazrack woke up extra early to grab a bite to eat before what he felt would be one his last days of training. He had already channeled the powers of the dwarven gods to cast some simple spells and he felt closer to casting the spell of curing and the spell that would temporarily enchant his weapon. The snow was nearly four feet deep outside.

Cornelius came into the common room from a door leading to another hall of rooms.

“How did you get here?” Kazrack asked. As far as he knew the door buried under tons of snow was the only way in and out of this place.

“Through the door,” said Cornelius, putting water on to boil.

“That door?” Kazrack pointed down the entrance hall to the door that led outside.

“Course not! I used the other door.”

“What other door?” the dwarf asked quizzically.

“Oh, I can’t tell you about that *that* door!” Cornelius said with a sly smile.

Everyone else soon was waking up for First Meal, which young Cornelius began to prepare.

“You must store a lot of food and resources for weather like this,” Kazrack commented.

“Yes, we do,” said Cornelius with a smile. “Some people are ants, and some are crickets.”

“I like that story except for the end,” Jeremy said.

“What’s wrong with the end?” Cornelius asked.

“Well, I *liked* that cricket...”

“Yeah, everyone does,” said Cornelius. “The ants take him in and give him food and take care of him all winter.”

“Oh, you must be talking about a different story,” said Jeremy. “The way humans tell it, the cricket dies.”

“What?!” Cornelius spat out his porridge. “That is just stupid. That sounds like a typical human way to look at things: `Hoard what you have. Don’t share with others. We don’t care if other people die.’”

He fetched a rag to clean up his mess, obviously upset.

“Who told you that is a human attitude?” Martin asked.

“No one had to tell me, that is just how it is,” Cornelius said. “That doesn’t mean *we* can’t be friends because what does it cost someone to be friendly? It is nice to be nice.”

“Yes, it certainly is,” said Beorth.

The day passed as many had, and evening came to find the party in the public house drinking ale and crunching on roasted beetles, which filled the bowls in the center of the tables. Ratchis stood outside the door looking in, while the other crammed inside where it was warmer.

The music was loud and the singing boisterous. It seemed to the party that these gnomes never had any lack of energy for partying. Every night was as raucous and enthusiastic as the last.

Suddenly, Captain Fistandlus burst in and the crowd immediately cheered. It was not often that he graced the public house with his presence in recent months.

He raised his hands in the air, “Quiet down everyone! I have an announcement!”

Melting snow dripped off his gray fur cloak and hat, and a puddle collected as he spoke, “the Interim chief is back!”

The cheer of “Yay!” punctuated by a few low “Boos” came out of the crowd of gnomes. A gnome handed the captain a frothing mug of ale and he raised it in the air.

“To the Interim Chief!” he toasted.

“To his finally getting back!” Jeremy croaked into the silent moment before a roar of gnomish voices repeated the captain’s toast.

The party returned to their quarters for Last Meal soon after, and found Distil serving walnut muffins, and warmed goat’s milk, while the pyramidal creature wandered around the common area. As the party entered it let out a loud “Haaaaahnt! Hoornt!”

Everyone sat to eat, but Martin experimented with the creature, casting an illusion of it, and having it intercept the creature’s progress around the room. However, the pyramid-creature walked right through it as if it were not there.

“Fascinating,” said Martin, and Thomas leapt from his shoulder to the table to grab a muffin.

“Haaaaahnt! Hoornt!”

The creature settled itself down on the ground, and a moment later Captain Fistandlus came in.

“Captain,” Distil said. “Can I get you a muffin?”

“Yes, Distil, that would be nice,” He looked at the party. “The Interim Chief is going to want to talk to you right away.”

“Does that mean in a few weeks?” Ratchis asked dryly.

Fistandlus Ironhammer frowned, “He’ll be ready to see you first thing tomorrow morning.”

Balem, 19th of Nuiet – 564 H.E.

The morning began as all other mornings had, with First Meal. Obenhammer was there, after having been gone for more than a week on “deep patrol” with Captain Fistandlus, as was Briendel and Cornelius.

The party ate in silence, just hoping that today would be the day when they’d at least get some answers and have an idea when they might get to leave this place. However, First Meal came and went, and lunch was coming soon before the Captain arrived, with two other soldiers and a fat gnome with hairy nostrils in a green tabard.

“Are you prepared?” the Captain asked.

“Yes,” Kazrack said.

“Yeah, it’s about time,” Jeremy sighed.

“I trust you know what behavior is expected of someone before a Chieftain?” Fistandlus looked each one of them in the eye.

The group nodded. Jana called to her familiar, who had remained clinging to the warm stone chimney for weeks now. It did not want to come, so she allowed it to remain behind.

They were led outside, and up steep steps made of flat rocks meandering up the side of an adjacent hill. Through a large set of doors, and down a bricked corridor, which was decorated with the profiles of gnomes. At the end of the hall, a circular room had stair leading up along with several set of doors going off in all directions. The party was let through one set of doors, through what appeared to be a sitting room of some kind, and into a huge room with a high ceiling.

The scent of burning incense filled the dim room, which had an earthen floor, strewn with large pillows. Seven of these pillows were positioned in front of a cushioned dais, upon which was a mound of pillows. Two braziers provided light and warmth, and the incense smoke could be seen wafting from them. On the dais was also a low table holding some glasses and a bottle of wine in a bucket of snow. The walls were hung with thick burgundy curtains, except the rear wall which was bare stone and had a staircase going up to darkened split level of the room.

A burly gnome of unusual height (nearly four feet) stood from the mound of pillows and stepped forward. He had whitish-green hair, and bright green eyes. He had an impressive nose with a hairy mole on it. He smiled broadly.

“Welcome,” he said, friendly. “It is good to meet you finally. I have heard much about you all since last night. I trust your stay has been pleasant?”

“But long,” said Jeremy. Martin elbowed him.

“The only thing greater than our hosts’ hospitality is the size of our hosts’ proboscises,” Kazrack said, returning the Interim Chieftain’s smile.

“Ah, a flatterer,” the Interim Chief said, and then turned to Captain Ironhammer. “Captain, you may leave us. Everything will be fine.”

“Yes, Interim Chieftain,” said the Captain and he left with his two soldiers. The gnome with the hairy nostrils bowed to the Interim Chieftain, as he walked out and closed the door behind him.

“Please sit,” the Interim Chief said to the party, and they each took a pillow. “I will stand, if you do not mind, so I can look you in the face as we talk. It will make both our necks much more comfortable in the long run, don’t you think?”

He giggled, and the party politely smiled.

“I am Mozek Steamwind, Interim Chief for the Garvan Gnomes until our true chief, Grallick Goldfist returns from his mission for our people,” he said.

“Now, I know you probably have a lot you want to ask me about, but I have a lot I want to tell you that just might answer your questions,” Mozek said. “And of course, I have some questions for all of you. I have tried to learn something about each one of by talking to some of my people since last night. They seem to really like you and tell me you were all very appreciative and nice and entertaining.”

He looked at each of them. “But I know more of the outside world than many of my people. They are sheltered and comfortable, and it is my job to keep them that way but we both know that is harder than it sounds, especially with the humans of Gothanius encroaching on our territory and looking to expand into what they call Greenreed Valley. However, the responses of some my kind hurtle us towards conflict, which would be unfortunate for all sides involved.”

“Um, Lord Steamwind,” Martin said meekly. “I am sorry to interrupt, but what is it that you want to happen?”

“I want peace between our people and the humans, and any other race... except kobolds,” Mozek replied.

“Well, it seems to me that our coming here and talking to you is good fortune for everyone then,” said Kazrack. “Martin represents the King of Gothanius, and we are his companions, perhaps he can arrange for you and the king to talk, in order to make some agreement over the dispensation of Greenreed Valley.”

“Your intelligence and wisdom evident Mr. Delver,” the Interim Chieftain said with a smile.

“I’m told that I have a great deal of mind, Lord Steamwind. My greatest difficulty lies in making that up,” Kazrack responded, and Mozek laughed.

“Unfortunately, what our people’s position shall be on the Kingdom of Gothanius is not in my hands, but in that of our true Chieftain,” said Mozek. “I am only a temporary leader, and do not have the authority to make such long-term decisions.”

The Interim Chief paused and looked them all over one more time. He paced back and forth as if in deep thought and then he spoke again.

“Mr. Delver, I admire your recent immersion into piety and the service of the Dwarven Pantheon. The dwarves are a wise and venerable people, steeped in rich customs and traditions. You make your clan and your people proud,” Mozek said, looking right at the dwarf. “However, I do find it strange that you are working for the crown of Gothanius, for they are no friends of the dwarven people. But perhaps you seek to change that. As I said, you are wise.”

“And Mr. The Green, the esteemed representative of the Academy of Wizardry, Watch-Mage. I find your presence here most curious; such a remote part of the world,” Mozek continued.

“All places in Aquerra are of interest to the Academy,” said Martin.

“Oh, I am sure they are,” Mozek replied. “So, what was your mission in being sent here?”

“I was sent as a temporary replacement for Tom the Silver, the former Watch-Mage of Gothanius, and have been assigned by the King of Gothanius to help oversee the hunt for the dragon that has plagued these lands in the last year.”

“Oh yes...the dragon,” said Mozek. “So that is the only business the Academy has here?”

“Yes,” said Martin. “As far as I know.”

“Oh,” Mozek stopped his pacing and walked over to the table by his mound of pillows, grabbing a few more blocks of incense, and he tossed one into each the braziers. “So, you would be surprised to learn that there is another Watch-Mage in the area?”

“Most certainly,” said Martin, wondering what the Interim Chieftain could mean.

“So, you are telling me that the Academy does not seek to interfere with how this area is ruled and who lives here?” Mozek asked.

“Not in any way aside from hoping that people are well-treated and that peace is kept and magic is not abused,” Martin explained.

“Because you know that can look bad,” Mozek said. “Some foreign organization sticking their nose in someone else’s business, could make things messier than they already are.”

“Lord Steamwind, I assure you that I serve the Academy in no other vein but to avoid such ‘messes’ and to help facilitate peace and happiness between all people.”

“Ms. Jana, no surname that I can find out,” he turned to the girl. “Jana of Westron then? Is that not how humans name themselves sometimes?”

“Yes,” Jana replied politely.

“It is less than appropriate to summon a creature of the Nine Hells to a place that has given you succor, don’t you think?”

Jana did not reply, but her eyes opened widely, all of her companions turned to look at her.

Finally, she found her voice, “I have not knowingly summoned any creature of the Nine Hells as you call it.”

“Come now, Ms. Jana,” Mozek said. “I am not so naive. I am only very curious as why you would do such a thing *here*. Why here? What is your connection to such creatures?”

“I have no connection to any creatures of the Nine Hells,” said Jana. “And anything that was summoned, no matter where it was from, cannot be summoned again.”

“Why not?”

“Because the means to summon it is destroyed,” replied Jana.

“Oh, good,” said Mozek his face turning from stern to a smile in less than a second. “I find it worrisome that someone would summon such a creature *here*.”

He turned suddenly to Ratchis.

“Mr. Ratchis, in times of old our fathers were taught that you could not trust humans, except for Friars of Nephthys.”

Ratchis smiled.

“Did they not help to keep that human kingdom of conquering the surface of Derome-Delem not too long ago? It was during my grandfather’s and father’s time,” Mozek said.

“Yes, the church of Nephthys decreed that the invasion by the Kingdom of Herman Land was an unjust war, and Friars were given leave to do what they could to stop it,” Ratchis explained. “But that was several hundred years ago.”

“Not too long ago to a gnome or dwarf, or an elf,” Mozek said. “And yet, one must wonder if those who would turn their backs on their own people are trustworthy at all...”

“A Friar of Nephthys has no obligation to any king or borders, but only to his own conscience and to his goddess, and even that he takes on willingly. We can be trusted to always fight for freedom,” Ratchis said, with pride. “I for one would give my life to defend the freedom of Greenreed Valley, especially if I felt the people of Gothanius would exploit and pose a danger to those who still dwell in it or near it.”

“I know you would,” said Mozek with a smile. He walked over and placed a calloused hand on the half-orc’s shoulder. “You are a credit to your kind.”

The Interim Chief walked back up to the dais and now turned to Beorth.

“Mr. Sakhemet,” Mozek said. “It seems strange that you would be here and not in Rhondria...”²⁶

Beorth simply waited.

“That poor nation of humans living within the shadow of the Broken Land Dralmohir,” Mozek stopped and thought. “Then again, it is perhaps wise to not be there, for what else but your own death would you find there? That place cannot be overcome by one man, nor by a hundred,”

“If that is so perhaps, I will find my peace there one day,” Beorth said softly.

“Nobody who dies there finds peace, Mr. Sakhemet,” Mozek said, in a serious tone.

“Ignoring a problem does not make it go away,” Kazrack said. “I too want to help do something about that land of undead, but that is not germane we need to discuss Greenreed Valley.”

“Yes, we do,” said Mozek. “But we also need to discuss you and your companions, Mr. Delver. Don’t you think I deserve to know something about you? You were found in the area inhabited by suspected traitors to our people and trespassing in the land we guard. We have treated you well and given you all you could ask for. I only ask this slight indulgence in return. Impatience gains us nothing.”

“Master Chance,” Mozek continued, plopping down on a pillow. “My people spoke very highly of you. They said you were an excellent player of games of chance and skill, and they you gamble with a knack they’d never seen before.”

“You blokes aren’t suh bahd yasleves,” said Chance through a laugh. “A coople ahve tams Ah thought they was gunn layv meh with no trousers!”

Mozek laughed and grabbed his belly. Jeremy, Jana, and Martin laughed too.

“Oh, you are something, Mr. Chance,” Mozek said, standing up and looking to Jeremy. “You, Mr. Northrop are a strange one. There is not much I could find.”

“Well, how did you do your finding? I’ve been among your people for a while now and I’ve been pretty open around them,” the Neerguardian replied.

“You’re pretty clever, aren’t you?” Mozek said slyly.

“I do my best,” Jeremy responded.

“Well, we need to discuss ways to avoid having your people and the Kingdom of Gothanius come into conflict,”

²⁶ The Principality of Rhondria is one of the Little Kingdoms and borders the Broken Land of Dralmohir.

Kazrack insisted, in his usual relentless manner.

“Oh, I yes, I want peace, but I have to wonder if the Crown of Gothanius even cares if we are here. As if the knowledge of our existence would slow them in the slightest; they basically wiped out the Fir-Hragre orcs, and while we are not orcs (no offense Mr. Ratchis), I think that is just how they deal with anything that gets in their way.”

“You seem to be implying that Gothanius knows about this community,” Martin commented.

“Oh, they most assuredly do,” replied Mozek.

“I thought this was a secret community,” Jeremy said.

“A secret to the majority of the people of Gothanius? Yes. To the Crown of Gothanius? This I doubt.”

“Anyway, I assume you do not want to stay here forever,” Mozek paused. “I assume you have obligations to investigate this...dragon...”

He paced back and forth twice and then spoke again, “But what if there were a way we could help each other? What if I helped you achieve your obligation and you helped me achieve mine, which are really nearly the same thing, peace?”

The party waited expectantly for the Interim Chief to continue, his face melted down from bright and friendly smile to one of grave concern and almost sadness.

“Grallick Goldfist, our Chief, has been gone, I am sure you know,” Mozek continued. “And perhaps you have heard that he has gone to seek the help of the elves that live near the human town of Ogre’s Bluff, wanting advice on what to do about the encroaching humans. But he is a mischief-maker, which is a fine gnomish trait, but he goes too far and perverts the ways of Fezzik Istvan.²⁷ I am afraid that he wants an excuse to fight the humans.”

“He wants war?” Martin asked.

“He wants war,” Mozek replied. “And he has said he will get the elves’ help in the conflict by any means necessary, and I am afraid that if he cannot convince the elves, he will use illusions and deceit to make an attack on the elves and make it seem as if humans had done it.”

“This guy talks a lutt, dunn he?” Chance yawned quietly in Jana’s ear. She shushed him with a wink.

“Furthermore,” Mozek had not stopped talking, “Evidence suggests that the dragon you hunt does not even exist at all but is a work of spellcraft. You see, the Chief took the Master Illusionist, Credadal with him.”

“The dragon isn’t real?” Ratchis asked.

“No, it is not,” said Mozek. Martin let out a low breath.

“So, here is my proposition,” Mozek continued. “I will allow you to go, instead of making you wait for Grallick to return as I probably should, but should your investigation of the dragon take you to him, and then you could stop him from his plans to spur on a war, and I would be free to be named full chief and negotiate peace and compromise with the humans.”

There was a long pause.

“How did you become Interim Chief? Did Grallick choose you?” asked Kazrack.

²⁷ Fezzik Istvan is the gnomish creator god and the leader of the gnomish pantheon.

“He chose my father, but he passed away unfortunately, and he assigned the position to me until Chief returns,” Mozek explained, the look of sadness never leaving his face.

“Why not simply tell your people?” asked Martin.

“My people are innocent. They are naive about their chieftain and would fail to believe that he was capable of such a thing, or their spirit would be broken if they did. It is in their own best interest not to know, especially if it is unavoidable and does come to war, then their morale would be low.”

“So, what are we to do?” Beorth raised his hand as he had done as a child to Monks of Anubis when he sought to interrupt their lessons with a question. “Are we to bring him back, alive for judgment, or to kill him outright?”

Mozek was taken aback and his mouth fell open a bit and seemed flustered as he answered, “Uh, if it can be done without killing, I would prefer it. Unfortunately, he is still technically the chieftain, and while the people might turn against their leader, it is unlikely.”

“There is no way in the Nine Hells I am going to go kill your chief for you!” Ratchis suddenly announced with great vigor.

Mozek smiled and let out a tittering laugh, “*Something* must be done, and I do not see much alternative. My father was the chieftain’s most trusted advisor, and I overheard many conversations I was never meant to hear, and I know that Grallick’s idea of good mischief is one where the most people are hurt. His family suffered much during what humans call the Mountain Wars.”²⁸

“Can you offer us, before we do anything, any evidence that you not just trying to become chieftain by any means necessary?” Ratchis asked.

“I can give no evidence, except my word,” said Mozek.

“But will not your people be angered? Would not this action lead to war?” Beorth asked.

“He would be far from home, and it would be many years before he was deemed truly gone and the cause of his disappearance investigated. In the meantime, I would use my position as Chieftain to prevent war. I think that in a year’s time if the chieftain does not return, I could present my proposal to be full chieftain to the people.”

“I will go and find your chieftain and talk to him and make my decision based on that. At least that way you’ll have a chance, which you will not if you expect us to go kill you chieftain,” Ratchis said in his usual gruff tone.

“We are not assassins, Master Steamwind,” Martin said.

“You must understand that the chieftain needs to be stopped,” Mozek said emphatically. “Talking to him is too dangerous. He has ways to cloud the minds of others.”

“I am willing to seek out this gnome,” Ratchis repeated. “And Nephthys will keep my mind from being clouded.”

“This is most unfortunate,” said Mozek, he stepped over to the brazier on the right and crushed a block of incense and crumbled it into the flame. “I really wanted to give you a chance to help. For example, Kazrack, I figured your loyalties would lie with the people of the earth and not with humans, but this course of action will only lead to the humans having the excuse they need to wipe us out. When this is all done, are you going to marry a human princess?”

“There are more of us than there are princesses anyway,” Kazrack said.

“Oh, and the girl will marry one, or the half-orc?” Mozek’s smile just got wider and wider. “Okay, then we come

²⁸ The Mountain Wars began in 409. H.E. when the Kingdom of Herman Land invaded Derome-Delem to annex it.

back in a circle then... There is another way you can help me. Mr. The Green is the one with that tidbit, I think.”

Mozek paused and looked straight at Martin, “What is a second Watch-Mage doing in Gothanius? Where does the Academy stand in all of this?”

“I have already told you. The Academy has no other goal but peace,” Martin said.

“Oh, and tell me of what race are most of the alumni of the Academy of Wizardry?” Mozek asked.

Martin paused, “Human.”

“And you are saying that they will not side with Gothanius, that they are not seeking to have influence here, to use its resources for its own agenda?”

“What agenda? What resources? And what Watch-Mage? I do not know what you are talking about,” Martin said.

“I do not believe you, Mr. The Green,” Mozek said, through gritted teeth. “I do not believe it is coincidence that you both are here. I do not believe that you do not know what is really going on, and why this place is important. I do not believe the Academy of Wizardry really cares about some backwater kingdom in the wilds of Derome-Delem. You will tell me what the Academy really hopes to do. You will tell me about the other Watch-Mage.”

“Martin?” Thomas’ voice sounded soft and weak. Suddenly, the squirrel’s body stiffened and fell like dead weight in Martin’s hood.

“Thomas!” Martin said aloud.

“Ugh, Ah dun fell suh well,” Chance said, doubling over and holding his stomach.

“Poison!” Martin cried, as he felt his own muscles begin to stiffen, and felt his lips and tongue gain the tingling sensation of numbness.

The whole party began to feel the effects of some toxin entering in their systems. They moved to stand but found their bodies did not obey their thoughts. Only Ratchis was not overcome.

“The incense,” Jana croaked.

“You...can’t...do...this... to...us, we’re human,” Jeremy said with great difficulty.

“Give up!” Mozek cried, his smile taking a cruel turn. He suddenly seemed to grow in stature, and his green eyes shone brightly and unnaturally; his skin took on a textured look almost like a scaly green hide. Two small green horns emerged from the top his head, and his fingernails turned into long black talons. “Don’t you know what you are facing now? Don’t you know that this bigger than all of you?”

Ratchis leapt up and charged at Mozek slamming his big hammy fists into the gnome’s face, but Mozek just smiled, ignoring the powerful blows as if they had never happened and casually drawing a handful of colorful powder from a belt pouch and spoke an arcane word. A spray of rainbow colors washed over Ratchis and he fell backward stunned.

Mozek just laughed. Ratchis shook it off and charged the gnome again, hoping to tackle him, but the gnome tightened his hands in fists like stone, and sent one into the large man’s gut, making him double over and miss his own blow. He felt as if his stomach had been ruptured, the Interim Chief’s strength was like nothing he had ever encountered.

Ratchis stepped back and called to his goddess, “Nephtys, please heal my wounds so that I may defeat this fiend and save my friends!” He felt the divine healing power of his goddess fill him, but again he felt another hard blow, this one on his chin. Ratchis tried again, punching Mozek twice more in the neck and face, but there was no apparent

effect. It was as if Ratchis were punching a stone wall.

And the stone wall struck back, plunging his fist into Ratchis' crotch. The half-orc let out a yelp and doubled over incapacitated, waves of pain flowing up and down his body.

"Now," Mozek said, kicking Ratchis over on his back with the tip of his foot and turning to face Martin who was still paralyzed. "Where was I? Oh yes, the other Watch-Mage."

The gnome still looking as if he sprung from some fiendish pit walked over to Martin and traced his jaw-bone with one clawed finger.

"Shall we start simple? What is the Watch-Mage's name?" He asked Martin.

Martin tried to shake his head.

"He doesn't know anything," Kazrack said through his swollen lips.

"I am not a fool to think that the Academy of Wizardry can be ignored, nor fool enough to believe their intentions are always benevolent. I know they want in on this, but how? To what end? What do they know? Martin, you *will* tell me."

"I...don't...know," said Martin.

"Oh, then who does know?" Mozek said. "Or better yet, how can I help your failing memory?"

The Interim Chief walked over to Ratchis and lifted his head up and held it locked in both of his arms.

"Who do I have to kill to make you talk, Martin?" Mozek asked. "Whose death do you want on your head?"

He laughed long and loud. "Probably not the half-orc," he said, and dropped Ratchis' head heavily to the ground. Martin tried to wince, but the muscles in his face did not obey.

"Shall it be the dwarf? Or how about the girl?" Mozek walked over to Jana and caressed her cheek. "It would be a shame for such a one who might be so useful to us would have to be hurt."

He was looking straight in Jana's eyes, but then turned back to Martin, "Because I want you to have no doubt that I will kill each and every one of your friends if you do not tell me. Or perhaps, the Academy trains you to see your companions as expendable?"

Mozek walked over to Jeremy, "How about this one? The mastermind behind the whole thing! Yes, I am not fooled, no one is as stupid as this one. No. He knows more than he lets on. Is he the real power behind this group? Is he the leader? TALK!"

Mozek's scream shook the room, and Martin felt himself fading fast, all he could do is mouth, "I don't know, please don't..."

"You can choose if you like Martin," Mozek said. "One of them shall die, who shall it be? Or perhaps I should just cover my eyes and point at one of your friends randomly. Yes, perhaps we should just leave it to chance. . ."

Mozek laughed again. "Leave it to chance, I like that, very fitting don't you think?" He walked over to Chance and grabbed him by the head. "I love it when my puns work out."

And with that he pulled on Chance's head with both hands and turned it abruptly to the right. There was a sickening crunch, and he continued to turn and jerk the gambler's head until it popped off the body. Blood exploded from Chance's headless corpse spraying the companions and the body collapsed on the pillows.

“Looks like his luck ran out,” Mozek said through a laugh, and then shoved a hand into Chance’s head and scooped out the insides, cramming it into his mouth and chewing.

“Where I come from we feast like this every night!” he said happily, talking with his mouth full of Chance’s brains, spewing bits that fell into Martin’s eyes as he spoke. Paralyzed, Marting could not blink them away. “Ooh, I’ve missed feasting like this, but it looks like I will be eating well the next few nights thanks to you, Martin. Every night I will bring you all in front of me, and every night that you do not tell me everything about what the Academy is trying to do, another of your friends will die. It is in your hands, my friend.”

Mozek chucked Chance’s head against the wall without looking, and it crumpled like a dried husk.

The party continued to struggle to move, but the darkness of unconsciousness overcame them. The poison finally finished the work it had started, and all was black.

Kazrack stirred.

Beléar was wiping the young dwarf’s sweaty forehead with a rag.

“Huh? Wha. . ?” Kazrack coughed, trying to sit up.

Beléar gently pushed him back down.

“Rest, you have been poisoned, but I think you have sweated it out by now,” Beléar said. “Now you will need a little rest.”

“How long have I been unconscious?” Kazrack asked. “How did I get here?”

“I was doing my prayers when you were tossed in here and the door was locked behind you,” Beléar said. “I am not even sure what happened, though I assume we are now their prisoners as opposed to their guests.”

Kazrack explained what had happened to Beléar. “I suspect the Chieftain is already dead and he just wanted us to take the blame.”

“Perhaps, but we must be ready at a moment’s notice to get out of here,” Beléar said.

Ratchis stirred. He was on the floor, his head pounding and foggy. He looked over in the dark and saw Martin lying on his bed. The Watch-Mage groaned and then sat up quickly with a gasp and then swooned. He held his head up with one hand, massaging his temples.

“Are you okay, Martin?” Ratchis asked.

Martin suddenly scrambled to reach into his hood and pulled the stiff form of Thomas the Squirrel out. Martin’s eyes widened as he held his poor little familiar in his hands.

“Is he...?” Ratchis began, but Martin held Thomas up to his ear and heard his shallow little breathing.

“No,” replied Martin. He laid the squirrel gently down on the bed and went over and lit the lantern on the nightstand.

There was the sound of a key in the door, and Ratchis motioned for Martin to be quiet, and he crept over to the door.

It opened and a tiny form carefully stepped in. Ratchis stepped forward with a fist in the air, and Cornelius dropped

his ring of keys and let out a cry of fear.

“Don’t hurt me!”

Ratchis lowered his hand, “I won’t hurt you, Cornelius, but we need your help.”

“I think bad stuff is happening,” Cornelius said, meekly, scooping up the keys quickly.

“Yes, it is,” said Martin going back over the bed to look after Thomas.

“You have to help us get out of here,” Ratchis implored.

“Uh, I...uh, I don’t know if I can, I’ll get in trouble,” Cornelius said, backing towards the doorway.

“We need the keys,” Ratchis said. “We need to free our friends and get out of here, or many people will die.”

Cornelius held the ring of keys to his chest, “I snuck the keys from Uncle Distil’s room, if he finds their gone, I’ll get in trouble.”

“I will not force the keys from you,” Ratchis said as gently as he could. “But we need them.”

“I’m gonna lock the door back up and then I’m gonna go get Cousin Obie. He’ll know what to do,” Cornelius said.

“Okay,” Ratchis said with a sigh.

“Don’t talk to anyone with green eyes,” added Martin.

The young gnome closed the door behind him, and they heard the key in the lock. Ratchis turned and saw Martin clearly in the light for the first time since they had woken up.

“Whose blood is this?” Ratchis asked, pointing to the large brown stain and dried bits of unidentifiable stuff on Martin’s robes.

“Not mine,” Martin paused, and cleared his throat. “It must be...It must be Chance’s.”

“What happened to Chance?”

Martin was silent for a moment and then he choked back a sob and breathed in deeply, “He’s dead... It... It tore his head off.”

The Watch-Mage buried his face in his hands and cried. Ratchis stepped up to him and clasped a hand on his shoulder. “You must be strong.”

“I will,” Martin said, wiping his tears on his sleeve.

“I don’t feel good,” Thomas’s voice said weakly in Martin’s head.

The Watch-Mage stroked his squirrel lovingly, “Ssssh, it’s okay. You’re going to be okay.”

Jeremy awoke a start. Beorth was standing at the door to their room listening at the door.

“I think someone just went down the hall,” he said.

“What is the last thing you remember?” Jeremy asked, shaking his head clear of its fog.

“Chance...” Beorth paused. “...dying.”

“What was that thing?” Jeremy asked. “It wasn’t really a gnome was it?”

“I don’t know,” Beorth replied. “It was some kind of fiend, I guess.”

“We have to get out of here,” Jeremy said, and then suddenly Beorth, without replying, took a few steps away from the door and ran shoulder first into it. The door shuddered but remained intact. The paladin ran back further and slammed into it again, to no effect. He rubbed his shoulder.

“I don’t think that is going to work,” he said.

Ratchis and Martin had waited for nearly an hour when finally they heard a voice at the door.

“Martin? Ratchis? I am going to unlock the door but keep it down.”

It was Obenhammer.

The gnome wore a face of deep sadness. He unlocked the door, and then moved down the hall to let out Jeremy and Beorth, and then Kazrack and Beléar.

“We have to get you out of here fast,” Obenhammer said. “Mozek’s supporters will be checking on you soon, so gather your things. He moved down to the door to the room that had belonged to Jana and Chance. Beorth knocked on the door and there was no answer. He swung it open and said softly, “Jana?”

There was still no reply. Beorth stepped into the dark room, followed by Ratchis. They found Jana curled up into a ball in the corner of the room silent.

“Jana, we have to go,” Beorth said gently. She did not reply. She did not even look up.

“Grab her things,” Ratchis said to Beorth. “And any of Chance’s things that might be around.”

Ratchis gently scooped up Jana in his mighty arms and carried her out of the room. Her eyes just stared forward, not registering anything around her, but swollen and encircled by black.

The party gathered in the common area and spread out their gear among themselves for easy carrying. Jana’s familiar came off the wall and crawled up Ratchis’ leg and into the folds of Jana’s skirt.

“We are going to need our weapons,” said Kazrack to Obenhammer.

“It is already being taken care of. I am leading you somewhere safe, for now, and others will meet us there with your weapons and from there we will direct you as to how to get out of here,” Obenhammer explained.

“What is that thing that returned pretending to be your chief?” asked Ratchis.

“Unfortunately, I think that really is Mozek,” Obie said. “I am going to take you somewhere where someone might be able to explain things to you a little better. We have to get out of here, follow me.”

Obenhammer led them through the door to the hallway that led to Distelbowden’s rooms and through that cozy suite out into another hall, and then down a series of shabbier and shabbier passages, and down a narrow stairway, and through several doors. Except for Kazrack, the party had to duck most of time as they moved at the frantic pace Obenhammer set. Ratchis carried Jana the whole time and she did not respond at all.

Finally, they were traveling down a round dirt tunnel only about 5 feet high. It went straight for a long time and then came to a round door, which Obenhammer unlocked and ushered everyone through.

Inside there waited four other gnomes, the party had never seen before. The party could see their weapons and armor on the floor in the corner, and Obenhammer went over and began to distribute them. One of the gnomes stepped forward. He wore his long silvery hair back in a ponytail and was dressed in studded leather armor and had a hammer at his side.

“My name is Greddadiddlerun,” he said. “You don’t know me, but I know you. Unfortunately, I was part of the group involved in what went on in Summit.”

The party looked at him with surprise, except for Jana who still remained curled in a ball on the floor where Ratchis had placed her.

“We have been trying to frighten the humans,” Greddadiddlerun explained. “In the Chieftain’s absence, the Interim Chief would not allow us to take that course of action, but we did it anyway and the next thing we knew we were declared ‘traitors,’ however, family and friendship cannot be undone by the words of an usurper.”

“What in the Nine Hells is he?” asked Ratchis.

“We are not really sure. We have reason to believe he is some kind of fiend.”

“How did he live among you so many years and no one notice?” Kazrack asked.

“Well, everyone always had their suspicions that he might be a vicious gnome, but there was no evidence,” Greddadiddlerun explained.²⁹ “His father did take a foreign bride, a gnome from far to the northwest people said, though we know of no gnomish settlement there. Strange things always happened around Mozek and his siblings, and they were bullies.”

“We are going to kill him,” said Ratchis quietly.

The gnomes just nodded their heads, and then Greddadiddlerun spoke again, “This is going to be hard on our people, but I fear for the life of our chieftain. Mozek left for several months as we know and some of us think he might have been trying to go after the chieftain and do something to him. We need your help. We need you to go to the elves near the human town of Ogre’s Bluff and seek out our chieftain and if not then to talk to the elves and get their help as to what we can do to get rid of Mozek and help with the encroaching humans.”

It was silent for a time.

“So, the haunting and such in Summit was you and other gnomes?” Martin asked.

“Yes, though something went wrong. Our spells began to act strangely, and we are not sure why,” Greddadiddlerun said. “We have been using spells and illusions to try to slow the human advancement. This was our chieftain’s original plan though he never instituted it while he was here.”

“So, the dragon was part of the chieftain’s scheme?” Martin asked.

“A dragon?”

“So, there is no dragon?” Martin asked.

“I don’t know of any dragon, but it is possible that the chieftain himself is behind it, since a complicated illusion like that would probably only be made by the Master Illusionist, who is with him.”

²⁹ *Vicious Gnome* is the catch-all term for gnome who had gone evil, making their usual tricks and jokes into cruel and often deadly things for their own enjoyment.

The weapons had been divided, and Beorth was kneeling beside Jana. He offered her water, but she pushed it away, and cradled her face in her hands, and began to sob quietly.

“Jana, you are among the living,” Beorth said. “You must act like it. Chance is gone and ...”

Jana began to shiver uncontrollably. The paladin just embraced her and did not say another word.

“Will you help us?” Greddadiddlerun asked.

“Yes,” replied Kazrack speaking for the group. “It is not your fault that you have been led astray by this leader, and we want an opportunity to avenge our friend.”

Kazrack noticed that Beléar was speaking quietly in the corner with another of the gnomes.

“Listen, we are going to need something from you to bring to your chieftain,” said Jeremy.

“A token,” added Martin.

“Yeah, otherwise why would he believe us?” Jeremy said.

“I will write you a note in our language, it would be nearly impossible for anyone to forge that,” said Obenhammer.

“Excuse me, Obenhammer,” said Martin, stepping up to him and kneeling to speak quietly to him. “But when we were taken, I had a small red bag of leather that was confiscated. Would you know where it is?”

“Yes, I remember. It was given to Greddadiddlerun’s group to use in their work,” said Obenhammer, pulling out a piece of parchment and a quill to write the note he had mentioned.

“Yes, I was about to explain to you the way to go,” said Greddadiddlerun, overhearing. “We are sending you to an outpost of one of our groups. You will find a cache of food there, your red leather bag, a scroll with a spell you might find useful, and some other resources.”

“Oh, I have no weapon in the meantime,” said Martin.

“Here, take my dagger,” Obie said, passing the watch-mage a fine silvery-dagger of gnomish make.

”Thank you,” said Martin, putting the dagger in his belt without looking at it.

“If you go out through that trap door,” Greddadiddlerun said, pointing to a wooden door in the ceiling. “Travel a quarter-mile south, to a hollowed out dead oak tree, very old and still standing. Hidden to look like part of the tree is a trap door which leads to a tunnel through the ridge and into the northern part of Greenreed Valley, from there you can go south out of the valley and to Ogre’s Bluff, perhaps a day or two away. While in the tunnel, just keep going as straight as possible; avoid any of the turn offs. You will find a room similar to this where the cache is and a trapdoor that opens up into a large thorn bush.”

The party shook hands with Greddadiddlerun and Obenhammer and wished them luck.

“We will be back with help,” Kazrack said, he looked to Beléar, who beckoned him over.

“These gnomes are going to lead me somewhere else, so I can get back to my own people and try to gain their help as well,” the older dwarf said.

“But...”

“You have your mission ahead of you, do not forget what you have learned. You are ready to be a full Rune-

Thrower, all you need to do is pray to Natan-ahb in the morning and gain the spell that will infuse your runestones with the divine power they were made to hold, just as we spoke about.”

“May Natan-ahb and all our dwarven fathers watch over you on your journey, and may we meet again,” Kazrack said. The two dwarves clasped wrists and shook.

The party climbed up through the trap door, Ratchis hefting Jana up to Beorth who waited above.

“I can walk on my own,” she said as came up.

They marched for about thirty minutes across the deep snow, the sharp wind cutting deep into them. The cold was intense, and they were happy to climb back underground when they finally found the oak tree and the secret passage below it.

After a few moments discussing which direction to go in, they decided to follow the way that went vaguely southward, as that was the right direction. The passage was raw earth, and rounded, only five and half feet high at its tallest points, and sometimes so low, Ratchis had to nearly crawl to make it through.

Occasionally, they passed the tangled roots of trees above them, and passageways and doors that led off to the left and right. They marched for what seemed an eternity, exhaustion and the after-effects of the poison whittling away at their alertness, until after many hours, they were walking mindlessly, and many could not even feel their legs any longer. Eventually, Martin swayed and nearly fell over.³⁰

“We have to stop,” said Beorth to Ratchis, who was leading the way.

Ratchis’ grunt of a response betrayed how tired he was as well, and they made a makeshift camp in the tunnel, just past where it had split into three directions (they took the one directly across the one they had come through).

The others slept fitfully as Ratchis watched over them, and then he woke Jeremy.

“Your turn,” Ratchis said.

“Yeah, okay,” said Jeremy groggily.

Ratchis handed him a skin. “If you start to slip into sleep take a sip of this stuff, but only one sip! It will help you stay awake.”

“What is it?” Jeremy asked curiously, and looking a little more awake.

“Narsh’che,” Ratchis said, slipping into his orcish accent. “Orcish Bloodwine.”³¹

Jeremy stood watch for several hours, until he felt he was nodding off. He stood and paced and whistled quietly, but his lids still threatened to close, so finally he took a mouthful of Ratchis’ drink. He felt the heat of the foul-tasting and viscous liquid pour slowly down his throat and spread out in his stomach like a wildfire. He gagged, and tasted his own bile mixed with the bloodwine come up to the back of his throat and then subsided.

“The orc wasn’t kidding,” Jeremy commented quietly, surveying the darkness with his newfound alertness.

A few hours later, he could no longer remain awake and did not dare drink more of that horrid stuff, so he awoke

³⁰ **DM’s Note:** At this point, if Martin had taken even one more point of subdual damage from the forced march he would have passed out.

³¹ *Narsh’che* is orcish bloodwine, used to instill bravery and alertness in orcs, it is brewed from nut of the sarvann tree (which is found in fetid swamps) and the dung of wild boars.

Beorth, who kept watch for another four hours afterward.

Finally, the party awoke, prepared spells, and continued on for another three hours, coming to another round door, beyond which they found a round room very similar to that which they had regained their weapons.

In a wooden chest they found about enough food stored to last them about three days, the red leather bag of animals (which Martin took) and a bone scroll tube. Inside the tube Martin found a spell scroll he could decipher without the *read magic* spell.

Jana however did cast the spell in order to decipher it and saw that the scroll was a spell that created a tiny hut that provided shelter from the elements.³²

Ratchis boosted Jeremy up through the trap door, and he found himself in the middle of a thick thorn bush, which a little hollow just in the center. The area around them was a thin forest of barren scrubby trees. Kazrack followed, also boosted by Ratchis and hefted into the small area by Jeremy. Jana and Martin came after, but now the entire area beneath the bush was full and there was no room for Beorth or Ratchis to come up unless someone else left the cover the thorns.

“One of us is going to have to go out there,” said Kazrack.

“Do you think it’s safe out there?” Martin said.

“Well, we are going to have to go out there eventually,” said Jana flatly, and began to crawl out of the bush. Kazrack stopped her.

“I hear something over there,” the dwarf said, gesturing beyond thorn bush to a clump of trees about forty feet away. “Sounds like gnome voices.”

“Martin, do you think you could send Thomas to look around?” Jeremy suggested.

“Thomas? Did you hear that?” Martin thought.

“I don’t wanna go,” Thomas said. “I’m scared.”

“If you don’t want to go, I won’t force you,” Martin said, reassuringly, taking Thomas from his robes and scratching him under the chin. “But you can just climb this tree right here and look around and tell us if it’s safe. Where would you be safer than in a tree?”

“Oh, okay...” Thomas leapt deftly from Martin’s hand, over the thicker branches of the bush and up onto a nearby pine that was very tall. He climbed up quickly at first, but then slowed down.

“Something isn’t right about this tree,” Thomas said.

“There is?” Martin inquired.

“Yeah,” Thomas crept up to the halfway point of the tree. “I smell... AHHHHHHHHH!”

An animal leapt from the shadows of the upper tree branches at the tiny familiar. It was a wolverine clinging to the trunk and coming down headfirst snarling viciously. But it was no ordinary wolverine, it had dark red fur that bristled in waves like a flame, and its eyes shone bright red; its breath was like steaming sulfur.

“Thomas!” Martin cried aloud, as the fiendish wolverine leapt forward to tear Thomas in half with one powerful bite.

³² The spell was *Tiny Hut*.

The wolverine's jaws snapped, but Thomas deftly moved out of the way, dashing back down the tree and into the hole the party had emerged from.

Jana and Jeremy began to load their crossbows, while Kazrack hurried towards the voices he heard thinking they were behind the appearance of this creature.

"They're over here!" he yelled, charging halberd in hand.

"Kazrack, don't..." Martin called after him, but the dwarf was intent.

"We need to make room for the others anyway," Kazrack cried.

Jana fired her crossbow at the wolverine, which made ready to spring down. She missed.

Beorth began to pull himself up and out of the hole, just as a second wolverine looking as the first did, burst through the thorn bush and tore through Martin's robes and flesh with terrible blows from its claws.

Martin turned and stepping back looked through the pain of his wound and flicked his wrist. A handful of colored powder and an arcane word, and a burst of colors exploded from his hand at the new creature. It reeled back, stunned, yelping with an unnatural voice.

"Jeremy, quick, kill it before it recovers!" Martin cried.

Beorth was through the hole and Ratchis was right behind him, but Beorth was taken by surprise when the wolverine in the tree leapt down upon him, tearing at his shoulder with a bite. The paladin pushed it off desperately, while Jeremy moved out of the thorn bush and fired his crossbow at the wolverine that had attacked Martin. The bolt buried itself in the creature's flank, as did another bolt from Jana who followed suit. The creature seemed to ignore the pain and the torrent of blood, and leapt at the young witch, ripping a huge flap of skin with flesh still attached to it, from her forearm. Jeremy dropped his crossbow and was reaching for his blades when he flinched, seeing two balls of light zooming towards him from his right. He felt the impact of the magic missiles and let out a groan, but turning his head, all he saw was darkness and shadow in the bushes from where they had emerged.

Kazrack meanwhile had slowed his pace and was swinging wildly in the air convinced there were invisible gnomes nearby, their voices drawing him further and further away from the fight.

Martin spoke some more arcane words, but there was no visible effect. Beorth stabbed the wolverine that attacked him with his longsword, while Ratchis moved in front of Martin and took an awkward swing with his own sword at the other one, missing.

Cringing from Beorth's blow, and losing steaming blood, the first wolverine began to back away from the fight, through the thin thorn bush, followed by Beorth, who pressed the attack.

Jeremy ignored the unseen spell-caster and stepped towards the wolverine slashing it in the face with his longsword to keep its teeth at bay while cutting a slice in its flank with his short sword. He held his blades crossed in front of him to block the incoming counter-attack and gritted his teeth. Martin unslung his own crossbow and frantically tried to load a bolt into it, cursing himself for not paying more attention in weapons class at the Academy.

Beorth hurried past the tree that the wolverine had leapt from to finish it, but he was blind-sided as a small, but stout form emerged from behind the tree as the paladin passed it. He felt the heavy crushing blow of a warhammer against his armor, and heard the metal scales crunch, and his rib cage contracted in agony. He was thrown down to the ground by the force of the blow.³³ Ratchis ran past the fallen paladin to hold the wolverine off, as it looked as if it were going to take advantage of Beorth's vulnerability. It took the bigger target instead, striking a superficial blow to the half-orc's shoulder.

³³ **DM's Note:** Knockdown rules are used in the Aquerra setting.

Kazrack finally gave up his futile search of the origins of the voices and turned running back to support Ratchis. “The voices were an illusion,” he cried. However, as he came close to the area Ratchis was in, the ground became extremely slippery. Nearly falling, Kazrack slowed his pace, and Ratchis slipped back and forth trying to stay on his feet. The half-orc took a swing at the wolverine, but the intended blow sent him off balance and he fell on his stomach with an “oof!”

At that same moment Jeremy was finishing off the wolverine on the other side of the tree, driving both his blades into its left and right fore-shoulders. As Jana reloaded her crossbow and waited to see if the figure that attacked Beorth came into clearer view, Martin stepped forward and fired his crossbow right into the head of the unconscious wolverine. It shuddered, and then disappeared into a puff of acrid smoke.

The figure stepped away from the tree. It was a gnome wrapped in a shabby jacket of some kind of scaly hide. He had white hair with yellow and green highlights, and bright green eyes, above his head a dull gray warhammer was as its apex and it swung down on Beorth (still on the ground) smashing into his hip. The fault of Beorth’s armor crumpled like paper and he cried out from the pain. Everything became blurry for a moment, and he shook his head to clear it. Jana fired at the gnome, who had stepped into view, but the bolt went wide.

“Anubis, please do not call me to you yet, so that these abominations may pay the price for their evil,” Beorth implored his deity, and placed his hands upon his chest, feeling the healing power of Anubis enter his body.

The remaining wolverine leapt upon Ratchis, who scrambled away but suffered a deep scratch on his forehead, and blood boiled over into his eyes, blinding him. Kazrack stepped forward, keeping his footing and slammed the wolverine away from the Friar of Nephthys with his halberd, drawing steaming blood from the creature. It growled in anger, steaming drool pouring from its now bloody maw. Kazrack took a moment to look up, and he saw that the gnome with the warhammer, began to grow, he increased a foot and a half in height with great laugh, swinging the hammer above his head with delight.

“The Watch-Mage is coming back with us,” it said, its voice the scraping of metal against metal. “Killing the rest of you is just the icing on the cake.”

Jeremy ran around the other side of the tree, and putting his head down, and his arms out he bullrushed the now five-foot, three-inch gnome, but the gnome whirled around, and slammed the Neerguardian in the side with his mighty warhammer. Jeremy gasped for breath and coughed up some blood, and though he felt he might be able to keep his feet, he fell to the ground anyway.

Jana moved behind Martin who was now on the rear side of the tree from the perspective of the actual fighting. The Watch-Mage pulled a piece of raw wool from his pocket and with a word and a gesture a long sword appeared hovering before him. Beorth leapt to his feet with a roar and brought his sword down on the evil gnome and feeling the resistance of the gnome’s chain shirt worn beneath his shabby jacket, but the heavy blow was still enough to make the opponent wince.

Ratchis pulled his wine skin from his side and poured the contents in his eyes to wash out the blood, giving a silent prayer that the wolverine would not rip out his kidneys while he did this. His prayer only went partially answered. He felt the claws in his back, but he was able to spin and fend off the thing, finally able to see. Kazrack ran forward to beat the thing off of Ratchis once again, but the ground was still unnaturally slippery, and he fell on his back with a yelp.

Jana stood immediately behind Martin, as they both crept forward to surprise the gnome from behind. However, they heard tinkle and crash and Jana looked down to see a clear crystal vial roll at their feet and break. It was empty, but a shadow was cast across the ground from their left. She looked up in time to see a second smiling gnome. He pursed his lips and a jet of flame erupted from his mouth enveloping both Jana and Martin.

Martin was able to leap clear of the worse of it, bringing the illusory sword around to float between him and the gnome while casting another spray of color. The spell fizzled away around the gnome to no effect, as it pulled a light mace from its belt. Jana on the other hand frantically patted at the flames that were licking up her furs and clothes. Even Beorth’s great cry of pain as the first gnome’s warhammer crunched into his shoulder did not distract her, but

Beorth wobbled and saw sparks of light floating in and out of his field of vision. The paladin slashed fiercely at his foe, striking him across the chest and drawing black steaming blood from it, but he overextended himself and felt something pop in his shoulder, as a new gout of blood erupted from the wound, and he fell over unconscious.³⁴

Jana fell over also, but to roll in the snow. However, the gnome took his opportunity, and she felt the glancing blow of the mace against her head. Meanwhile, Ratchis had crawled away from the vicious fiendish wolverine and was calling to Nephthys to make his faith into a shield to protect him from the villainous blows.

The remaining wolverine decided it liked the look of the prone dwarf struggling to right himself better than Ratchis who was now roaring like a wild beast. It took a swipe at Kazrack. The sudden pain was enough to get Kazrack to his feet, and with a deathly blow, he cut open the side of the creature. It let out a gasp and collapsed in the snow, melting it with the pool of blood collecting beneath it.

Blood billowed up beneath Jeremy, and formed a larger pool forming around Beorth.

Martin tried yet another *color spray* on the gnome, to no avail, while Jana leapt up to her feet and cast her *cause fear* spell. This also failed.

The enlarged gnome charged at Kazrack leaping over the obstacle formed by Beorth and Jeremy's bleeding forms and slammed the side of his hammer into Kazrack, who stumbled. Ratchis stepped up to his dwarven companion's side and felt his sword strike bone in the gnome's shoulder.

"I am going to kill you for that!" the gnome roared.

"You will meet whatever infernal gods you serve this day!" Kazrack replied, thrusting his halberd blade into the gnome's stomach, ripping away at its armor, and making it grunt in pain.

Unphased by their attacks, the second gnome stepped forward and with a word and a gesture, a fan of flame erupted from his fingertips, and both of the party's arcane spell-casters collapsed, the snow around them thankfully smothering the fire before they burned to death.

The large gnome with the warhammer, brought a blow down on Ratchis' thigh that almost dropped the hulking half-breed, but the Friar of Nephthys returned an equally devastating blow. The gnome stumbled and raised his hammer again, but Kazrack blocked the blow, and yelling, "My gods have judged you and found you wanting!" dealt a powerful counterstrike.

The gnome staggered for a moment, and whispering, "Mother," fell over.

"I feel sorry for your mother, but not for you," Kazrack spat, and he suddenly found himself cloaked in darkness. He could not even see Ratchis who he knew was standing only inches away from him.

Ratchis who was also enveloped in darkness called to his goddess, "Nephthys, grant me your holy light that I may defeat these servants of tyranny!" The darkness was countered by the light now emanating from Ratchis' sword, leaving the normal gloom of the morning to see by.

Kazrack now noticed the second gnome. It swallowed a living spider and took off up the tree behind him with arachnid-like skill, disappearing into the top branches.

Kazrack began to march in the direction of the tree.

"Kazrack, stop and help the others," Ratchis called.

"You help them, I will take of this remaining fiend," he said, pulling his crossbow from his back.

³⁴ **DM's Note:** Beorth was *disabled* at 0 hps, and taking a standard action caused him to drop to -1 hit points.

Ratchis sighed and grunted and kneeled beside Beorth, laying one hand on him, holding his belted of scored and broken chain links, with the other, “Nephthys, heal this brave warrior.”

He stepped over to Jeremy and said the same words; both stopped bleeding to death. Ratchis went over and checked on Jana and Martin, but they were stable and safe for now.

Meanwhile, Kazrack was covering the tree the gnome had disappeared into, waiting for a clear shot.

But then he heard a voice from the top another nearby tree, “Yoo hoo! I’m over here! I’m up here!”

Kazrack began to step backward slowly keeping the first tree in sight but adding the second to his possible trajectory just in case.

“Kazrack!” Ratchis called. “I hear voices!”

“I think it’s a trick,” the dwarf replied. “They did it before.”

“Come and get me! I’m over here,” the gnomish voice continued.

“Keep covering the first tree!” Ratchis commanded, and he began to gather twigs, branches and leaves and piled them beneath the tree the gnome had climbed into. Taking a flask of oil, he began to splash it on the gathered wood, and prayed to his goddess, “Nephthys, forgive me as I sacrifice this tree, but much more will be lost if I do not get rid of this evil which is a blight!”

Ratchis lit the tinder and watched it go up.

End of Session #17



Session #18

“Nephthys, guard me from the danger of this fire I use to flush out the enemies of freedom,” Ratchis said, invoking the power of his goddess.

The gnome up in the tree began to shake it, dropping snow on the fire threatening to put it out. But Ratchis was waiting with another pile of brush and branches and tossed it into the dying fire, while Kazrack took a shot at where he thought the gnome was shaking from as he could see a silhouette of movement.

With less snow in its way, The fire went up brighter this time. The tree shook some more and the fire hissed but did not die. Kazrack took a second shot but could not tell if he hit anything.

The fire crept up the trunk of the tree, and a column of black smoke lifted into the air. The tree sap popped and crackled. After a few moments, the tree began to rock again. It was fast at first, and then the arcs became slower and wider, and the shadow the tree fell over the spot where the prone bodies of Jeremy and Beorth lay.

Kazrack grabbed Jeremy’s leg and pulled him towards where Jana and Martin lay out of the way of the tree if it fell and ran back for Beorth as it began to come down with a might cracking roar. The small gnomish figure tumbled out of the tree and is landed, a cloud of smoke and tossed up snow around it.

Ratchis charged, and before the gnome had gotten to its proper footing it cried out in pain as Ratchis’ sword cleaved through it armor on the left side. The gnome spun on the half-orc with a forced titter and stepping back and lifted his hands to speak the words of a spell, but the pain made him lose his focus and the spell failed.

“Damn,” the gnomish voice said.

Kazrack picked up his halberd and ran into the fray, flanking the creature and striking it on the shoulder, the huge axe-head of his halberd catching for a moment on the gnome’s armor. Checking over his shoulder at the newly arrived foe, the gnome felt the bite of Ratchis’ sword again.

And again, he felt the weight of a blow from Kazrack, knocking him to his knees. The gnome climbed back to his feet, swinging around for a glancing blow against Kazrack’s side. But it would not be enough, Ratchis struck again and this time the gnome went down with a grunt, green and black blood pooling beneath him and hissing in the snow.

Ratchis called upon his faith to have his goddess heal Martin and Jana, while Kazrack stripped the gnomes’ bodies, looking for anything useful or valuable.

Martin and Jana were able to groggily sit up, while Ratchis hurried to prepare Jeremy and Beorth’s unconscious forms for travel.

“How are you feeling?” Martin asked Jana.

“Lousy,” Jana replied, rubbing her head where the gnome’s mace had struck her and wincing as her singed skin cracked when she moved. “We should rest here for an hour or two. I don’t feel up to moving.”

She retrieved a balm from her healer’s bag and taking some passed it to Martin. “Rub this on your wounds. It takes the sting out.”

“Are we ready to go?” Kazrack said, walking over with an armload of stuff.

“Not quite,” said Ratchis, walking over to the second gnome’s body and driving his long sword through its neck. “Nephthys, forgive me.”

The gnome’s body hissed and dissolved into a smoke. Ratchis did the same to the other gnome and the remaining wolverine corpse.

Kazrack handed Martin a vial of clear liquid, "One of the gnomes had this. I know your kind might have a use for this sort of thing."

Martin took the thing and put it away, scratching his head.

"Thomas?" Martin called mentally. "Where are you?"

"In the hole in the ground," came the frightened reply.

"You can come out now," Martin reassured him.

"I don't ever want to come out again," Thomas said. "Those things didn't smell right. They were unnatural."

"I know, Thomas, but they are dead now and we have to go," Martin the Green said to his familiar and the squirrel hurried out of the hole and into his robes.

"Would you like a nut, Thomas?" Martin offered.

"I'm not hungry."

Martin turned his attention to Kazrack and Ratchis who seemed to be having a disagreement.

"The weather is getting worse," Kazrack said, the snow billowy around him, and covering his beard in a white layer.

"I know, but those gnomes might have been an advance force for more gnomes," Ratchis replied. "We need to get as much distance between here and ourselves as possible."

"It won't matter much if we freeze to death," Kazrack said. "That hole is the best and closest shelter we have and who knows how long."

"You are going to have to trust in my ability to keep us alive in the wilderness, I guess," Ratchis said. "And we have the scroll the gnomes gave us."

Ratchis turned to Martin, "Be ready to cast that thing as soon as you can. It could mean someone's life."

Marin gulped and nodded, "Tomorrow morning would be the earliest. I need to prepare the spell that will let me read it."

"You didn't prepare it this morning?" Ratchis asked incredulously.

"Uh, I didn't think we'd need it," Martin responded weakly.

"I don't know how far I can go," said Jana interjected.

"You will go as far as you go, I guess," Ratchis said, more roughly than he meant to. "Uh, I mean, we have to get moving."

Kazrack reluctantly agreed, and they began to march what Ratchis thought was southward, Kazrack and Ratchis pulling Jeremy and Beorth along on blankets.

They marched on for an hour, until Ratchis decided that he should run ahead and scout out the coming terrain for a place to hide and/or rest. The half-orc took off, leaping through the thigh-high snow, while the rest did their best to trod onward and drag the unconscious party members.

Ratchis came running back into view an hour or so later.

“I think there is a place up ahead that might suit our needs,” he said. “I will have to check it out more closely, but we have another hour before hitting it, so I wanted to come back.”

It was closer to two hours by the time the others saw what he was talking about. It filled their gray and limited horizon. A stretch of steam or smoke that washed the sky into a looming grayness.

“What is this?” Kazrack asked.

“It could be a hot spring,” replied Ratchis. “Or at least I hope it is. You wait here. I will be back soon.”

Again, Ratchis took off out of sight, but this time he did not have far to go. The steam swallowed him when he was less than forty feet away. The wait seemed long in the billowing windy snow. Jana shivered.

Finally, Ratchis returned, and led them into the steam.

The transition was slow at first. The air within the steamy area grew slightly warmer and the snow became rain, and then the rain became mist. They walked down a slushy embankment to a depression where the ground was flooded with a foot and half of water in places. And the water was warm, and comforting, and small barren trees grew on small islands of muck.

They marched onward. Jana and Martin stumbling, while Kazrack and Ratchis hoisted Beorth and Jeremy from island to island.

“What manner of place is this?” Kazrack asked.

“It is a swamp,” Ratchis replied.

“I have never been in swamp before,” the dwarf said.

“They don’t usually occur in snowy areas like this, not this kind of bog anyway. But since it’s here, we’ll take advantage of it.”

“We should find out if this is a safe place for these men to recover,” Kazrack said.

“We have no choice,” Ratchis replied. “We will have to stay here two or three days.”

“Then we better make a more permanent shelter then,” Kazrack said.

They chose a larger and drier island. It had a barren tree and a small shrub, and Kazrack hung blankets between branches to make a make-shift tent to keep the wounded beneath.

Martin fell to the ground and fell immediately to sleep.

Ratchis helped Jana clean and dress Beorth and Jeremy’s wounds, and Kazrack looked for some firewood. Along with wood, the dwarf also found some strange things half-buried in the muck. It looked like burnt case of crossbow bolts, and a crossbow snapped in half and singed. He also found the charred skeleton of a human, still draped in a ring mail shirt.

“This isn’t good,” said Kazrack.

“No, it isn’t,” Ratchis replied. “We will just have to keep an eye out.”

“I found this on one of the gnomes,” Kazrack said, handing Ratchis a warhammer. “It is of exceptional quality and has some runes on it I do not recognize. I figured you might use it.”

“Are you sure?” Ratchis asked.

“Yes, I have my halberd and that takes two hands,” the dwarf explained.

The dwarf and the half-orc split the night’s watch, with Jana not getting much rest in order to wake up occasionally and administer to Beorth and Jeremy.

Anulem, 21st of Nuiet – 564 H.E.

With morning came prayer, and cold porridge crammed in a clay jar by the gnomes. Kazrack did not have time to cast his spell to enchant his runestones and be able to call on his gods’ power, for Ratchis called Nephthys’ blessing upon the injured and by midday they were aching, but able to walk without help.

It was decided that the best thing might be to simply get out of the swampy/steamy area and back out into the “normal” weather since they did not know what had caused the burned items and bones they had discovered the night before, and because they could feel the water around their feet growing constantly hotter and hotter, until it was almost too hot to walk through.

The mist seemed thicker today, and the party’s visibility was severely limited. Beorth and Jana and Martin walked in front, while Ratchis and Kazrack took the middle flanks and Jeremy brought up the rear, complaining that his legs and back hurt.

As they came up one of the larger islands, happy to be stepping, however momentarily, from the near boiling water that they walked in, they heard the sound of something slithering ahead of them in the muck. They had barely registered the sound, when coming over the other side of the tiny island, came four flaming balls at about head height, bursting through the mist with a loud hiss.

“What the...?” Martin almost said, as the thing in front of him sank into his vision.

It was like a giant snail, with shell five feet high and long, but its shell was black and was glowing red-hot in places. Steam blasted out from under its shell, and its long snail head was actually four heads like swollen flails, but made of flame. They swung around wildly, menacingly.

Martin reached into his red leather bag and felt for the ball of fur and tossed it at the thing, thinking “attack it!”. The ball of fur transformed into a large boar. It gored the creature in its fleshy fore-belly. The boar squealed in pain as the creature’s steam burned its face, but it did not retreat compelled by Martin’s command.

Ratchis called out, holding a hand to his chest and another to his belt of broken and scored chain links, “Nephthys, protect me from this monster’s flames!”

Beorth moved forward stepping in front of Jana and Martin. Jana stepped backward and with an arcane word the now familiar ray of green light emitted from her finger, but she missed the creature entirely, too worried about her footing. Jeremy moved out towards the creature’s right flank and loaded his crossbow.

The flaming flail-snail’s heads moved faster than its body did, and the two of the balls of flame came down toward the boar. The animal dodged forward out of the way of one and stepped right into the other. Its fur lit up in flame and it squealed pathetically, standing there until Martin commanded it to roll away and put itself out in the nearby water. Both of the other two heads crashed on Beorth’s head and shoulder, and the paladin let out a cry and collapsed, tumbling headfirst into the water. Fortunately, this put out his burning fur cloak, unfortunately he was underwater while unconscious.

Ratchis ran forward longsword drawn and stabbed the thing, getting a splash of steaming ichor on his hands, while Martin prepared his crossbow. Jana ran forward without thinking to help Beorth but came too close to the thing. It

struck her down with a flaming head, and soon she too floated face first in the water. Jeremy finally got into position and his bolt struck the thing below the shell, and it let out a loud hiss.

With more force than the first time it swung all its heads to strike Ratchis, and he ducked and weaved, but still two made contact, but his clothes did not catch fire, though he still felt the heavy thud of the monstrous flesh behind it. Kazrack stepped up and tried to cut one of the heads from the body with his halberd, but it reared up out of the short dwarf's reach.

Martin had the boar attack from the rear, but a jet of steam escaped from under its shell by the tail and the boar was burned again, and again it cried out in agony. Ratchis shoved his blade into the pulpy thing again and again. It hissed and reared and swung its heads, avoiding another bolt from Jeremy and coming down to strike at both Kazrack and Ratchis. Kazrack ducked and struck the creature, but against the shell and it seemed to do no good. Ratchis avoided one, but the other slammed him heavily and he nearly fell down.

Martin and Jeremy were having no luck piercing the thing's shell with their crossbow bolts, and the boar was attacking half-heartedly despite Martin's urgent commands to gore the thing.

Ratchis felt another hard blow from the flaming snail, but the second head that swung his way swung too long and chopped the water and the head went out, leaving a muck-covered round lump on the end of the slimy neck. Kazrack dropped his halberd and pulled out his flail, hitting the snail dead in the center top of its shell.

The creature let out a sound like a gasp, and a crack went through the shell and steam expelled outward in all directions, and then the thing stopped moving.

Ratchis yanked Beorth and Jana out of the water and lay them across his knee as he called for Nephthys to heal each of them.

Martin called the boar as he held his magical bag open, and it leapt up into the air and twirled back into a ball of hair and into the bag. Jana could barely walk, but they had to carry Beorth out of there, up the embankment and back past the perimeter of steam, where the snow still fell ceaselessly from the gray sky.

Ratchis began a fire, and Kazrack took a hatchet to a small nearby tree and made more tinder. As Martin plopped himself on the ground, Ratchis plucked the red bag from his belt.

"Hey!"

"Don't use this thing again," Ratchis said of the bag.

"Why not?" Martin asked.

"It could be evil, and as far as I am concerned it probably is," Ratchis replied. "It depends on how it works. Do you know?"

"Depends on what you mean by how it works," Martin said. "Are you asking if it makes a magical animal to do your bidding, or it summons one from somewhere else and binds it to your will?"

"Exactly."

"I don't know," said Martin. "Though I haven't thought of it before. But it could be too useful not to use."

"Give him back the bag," said Kazrack. "He is a wizard and would best understand its use. And we must trust him to not abuse its power."

Ratchis sighed and tossed the bag back to Martin, "Don't use it unless you absolutely have to, or if we do use it, we can use animals for other less painful tasks than the one you set the boar to do."

“That seems like a reasonable compromise,” Martin said, putting the bag away. “I will send a letter to the Academy about it, at first opportunity.”

The day was long. They sat huddled about the fire in the cold. Jana tended to Beorth groggily.

“I hate this place,” Jeremy muttered. “I should have stayed in Neergaard.”

No one replied, and suddenly Martin fell to his hands and knees with dry heaves. He turned and looked at the rest of the group, who just watched him numbed to the spectacle by the cold and misery.

“I’m sorry I have been so useless,” Martin choked out.

No one replied.

Night came and went with almost no discernible difference in light. Everything was a miserable gray.

Ralem, 22nd of Nuiet – 564 H.E.

With morning came indecision as to which way the party should travel: cut through the swamp area directly to what they thought was south, or go around it to the east, until they could move south again without being in the swamp.

“We saw some burnt equipment and then we saw something that can explain that, and we can keep watch for it,” Kazrack said. “I should hope that we can move faster than a slug.”

“But look at how hot and strange that area is,” Ratchis said. “There could be hundreds of those things in there, and we don’t know how far south it extends, what if we end up having to spend another night in there?”

“Are we even sure that south is the right way?” Kazrack said.

“That is the way the gnomes said to go,” Beorth said.

“Where on the map would this place be then?” the dwarf said pulling out the map the castle steward had provided all the groups of dragon-hunters.

They could not decide though they all generally agreed that it had to be somewhere in the top left hand corner of the map.

This of course did not help them come to a decision at all. In the end, only Kazrack wanted to go back through the swamp, and the will of the others won out. They began a slow march east by southeast, Beorth still aching and hardly conscious, hoping to get around the steamy area.

They journeyed for hours, only stopping infrequently to ration out water and a bite of hard tack. The wind blew the snow up in great whirls and right into their faces.

Their feet had grown numb as they found they could finally turn back to what they thought was the west, but in the distance was the looming shadow of the rocky ridge that marked the perimeter of Greenreed Valley.

“I hope we will be crossing to the right side,” said Kazrack.

“Look!” Jana said pointing to the darkness of the earthen incline. “There was the flickering of a fire light about halfway up the side. It looked as if it was emerging from with the ridge. It must be a cave.”

“I’ll go check it out,” Ratchis said, and made to take off.

“Wait!” Kazrack said, grabbing his cloak. “Shouldn’t we have a signal for you to let us know if we should go forward or run away?”

“Sure, I’ll yell.” And the half-orc took off.

The rest of the party waited what felt like over an hour, so finally they began to march towards the ridge, but were met up with Ratchis before they arrived.

“Maybe next time we should settle on two kinds of yells one that can mean move forward and the other which means run away,” Kazrack said.

Ratchis ignored him.

“It is a precarious ascent,” Ratchis said. “I found a cave, and there were voices speaking in common up there.”

“Anubis, the journey is long, and I am tired. Lend me your strength so that I may continue,” Beorth said, laying his hand upon his chest.

“Do you know what manner of people are in there?” asked Kazrack.

“No, but I do not trust anyone speaking common in this area,” Ratchis replied.

“But if they are speaking common then that means they are men,” Kazrack said.

“Men can be dangerous,” Ratchis said.

“Anything can be dangerous,” Kazrack said.

Jana nodded.

“I will go alone and ask to share their fire, that way I only endanger my own life,” Kazrack said.

“In our encounters so far, without any one of us, we’d all be dead. We all go, or none of us go,” Ratchis insisted.

“I agree,” said Jana. “It is too dangerous for anyone to go alone.”

“What about Thomas?” suggested Jeremy. “Martin could send him ahead to see what is in there. It’d look like an animal just coming in from the cold.”

“They might try to eat him if they are waiting out the storm and are hungry,” Kazrack said.

“But we need a place to wait out the storm,” said Beorth.

“No, we could go back northward a bit and Martin could use that scroll,” said Ratchis.

“Um...” Martin gulped. “I could?”

“Couldn’t you? Didn’t you prepare that spell you need?” Ratchis said his voice becoming a growl.

“Well, I kind of forgot,” said Martin.

“Don’t forget again,” Ratchis said through gritted teeth. “Now, can you ask Thomas if he’ll go scout for us.”

“I’m not going anywhere that people might eat me!”

“He refuses,” Martin replied to Ratchis.

“Fine than we have no choice, but to make our way up there as a group and maybe find another cave we can fit into. If so, we can avoid a confrontation, if not we will go and talk to these strangers,” Ratchis decided.

“We can go up there as a group, fine,” said Kazrack. “But we shouldn’t all go in at once, that might scare them into thinking they are being attacked. I’ll go in first, and if it looks too dangerous and we could all die I will say, ‘I’ll take some of you with me!’ and you’ll know to run. If it looks like we can take them, I will say ‘come forth my friends!’”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what we are going to do,” said Ratchis sarcastically, as he led them up the narrow rocky trails that switched back and forth up the face of the ridge. They could not find any other cave, so finally, Ratchis led them up to where the low mouth of the occupied cave was.

Kazrack stepped in first and walked down the narrow way, near to where the cave turned to the left and obscured whoever was in the rear with a fire and sounding as if perhaps they were playing cards.

“Ho! I am a traveler seeking shelter from the cold!” Kazrack cried out.

There was the sound of several pairs of scrambling feet, and a voice returned, “Who’s there?”

Ratchis slipped into the cave and clung to the wall, wrapped in a shadow.

“I am called Kazrack Delver,” Kazrack replied, and came around the corner.

The fire was smaller than the great shadows on the cave wall made it seem. There were three men standing with weapons at the ready. One was short and stocky man with a truncheon, he had dark eyes and hair and a swarthy complexion. He wore a shirt of rings. The other beside him was gangly and tall, with patches of black hair seeming to be equally spaced on his face as it was on the top of his head. He wore a suit of studded armor in poor repair. Behind these two was a third dark man of medium build. He held a loaded crossbow aimed at the dwarf.

At this man’s feet, leaning against the cave walls, with their hands tied behind their backs were four other men.

They were immediately familiar to Kazrack.

“I am seeking some shelter,” said Kazrack to the armed men. “How is it that you have these men bound here?”

“Let’s move,” Ratchis hissed to others hearing what Kazrack had said and began to creep forward.

“What business is it of yours?” said the stout man.

“Shh, Torsius! Let me do the talking.” said the man in the rear. He turned to Kazrack. “These men are deserters. We are bringing them back for the bounty.”

There was the sound of movement as the others came up the cave.

“Who is that coming?” the man in the rear asked.

“Do not be alarmed,” Kazrack said lifting one hand from his halberd and showing the men his open palm. “It is my companions.”

“Easy boys,” said the tall gangly one as if he has a mouth full of marbles.

Ratchis, Jeremy, Martin and Beorth came up behind Kazrack.

“It’s Martin!” said the stout one.

“Blimey! It *is* Martin,” said the tall one smacking his dry cracking lips loudly.

Martin waved weakly, “They are part of the group with which I traveled to Gothanius from Westron.”

“We have no objection to sharing our fire,” the man in the rear said. “Come on in. You are all welcome.”

They could now all see who was bound there. It was four of Crumb’s boys. Finn. Carlos, Frank and his brother Gwar.

“Kazrack!” said Finn excitedly.

“You keep it quiet,” said the man in the rear.

“How do you know they are deserters?” Kazrack asked.

“They were running away,” said the man obviously in charge.

“Yeah, they were running away!” echoed the stocky one.

“Carlos, did you desert?” Kazrack asked the dark-skinned foreign boy.

“Es verdad que estababamos corriendo cuando el glaive nos encrontramos, pero es porque viemos el mostro,” Carlos replied, rapidly.

“Just as I thought,” Kazrack said, looking at these men’s faces. “They did not desert.”

“Listen, we don’t want to fight or anything,” said the man in the rear, who Martin knew as Phillip. “We were deputized by this bounty-hunter who is working for the king, and he got us to help him round up these four, and one more who I think he is still looking for, because he had seen them run away from the dragon.”

“The dragon?” Martin said incredulously.

“Finn, you saw the dragon?” Ratchis asked the Herman-Lander youth.

“Yes, we did,” Finn replied. “It was huge and scary and it swooped down out of the sky and flew above us. It was like a wave of fear hit us, we all just started running, except Josef, and we don’t know where he is. We had no choice.”

“Sounds like these men are strategic retreaters, not deserters,” Kazrack commented.

“Where did you go after you saw the dragon, Finn?” Ratchis asked.

“We tried to get back to Summit, where we have been staying out the winter,” Finn explained. “But the Glaive and these guys came out of nowhere and wouldn’t listen to us. I tell you one thing that old guy can fight. Oh, and yeah, you know who is he, he is the old guy that wouldn’t talk to anyone when we traveled with Crumb.”

“These men are being unjustly held,” Ratchis said to the three armed men.

“Says you!” said Torsius.

“Hold on,” said Phillip. “Like I said, we don’t want to fight, and we are acting under the bounty-hunter’s orders. Why don’t you stay here out of the storm, dry off, warm up and we’ll all wait for the Glaive to return., and then you and he can work this thing out.”

“That seems reasonable,” said Martin.

Kazrack nodded.

“Put your weapons down, boys,” said Phillip, lowering his own crossbow. “Make yourselves comfortable in our little cave.”

The party walked deeper into the cave and took spots around the fire and waited. Ratchis noticed, a narrow crack at the back of the cave that seemed to lead to another chamber beyond.

“It *is* quite a coincidence that you ran into us, Martin,” said Phillip to the Watch-Mage, who was holding his boots above the fire.

“Yes, there are a lot of coincidences happening around here lately,” Martin replied dryly.

End of Session #18

AQUERRA

Session #19

“How did you become deputized?” Kazrack asked the three men, who were now circling up to return to their card game.

“We ran into him, the Glaive that is,” Phillip explained. “And he convinced us that it would be a good idea for us to become deputies, and we agreed—figured has ta be less dangerous than hunting for a dragon.”

“Finn, do you promise not to run away if we release your bonds?” Kazrack asked the Herman-Lander.

Finn Fisher opened his mouth to reply.

“You can’t do that!” Torsius shouted.

“I am not trying anything, these men just aren’t very comfortable,” Kazrack said.

“They’re not uncomfortable,” he turned to Finn. “Are you uncomfortable?”

“Well, actually...”

“See? They are fine,” Torsius said.

“Can we not leave things at the status quo until the bounty-hunter returns?” Phillip said. “He will be back soon enough.”

Jana tried to make herself comfortable in the rear of the cave, but Torsius kept looking at her and licking his lips.

“I just thought if they were untied, they could rest easier,” Kazrack said.

“Listen,” Phillip intoned. “You have to understand, we are just trying to do a job here. We’re not trying to cause you any trouble, so we don’t understand why you’re trying to cause us trouble, especially when we been trying to be hospitable by sharing our fire.”

“Just seems strange,” Jeremy interjected. “If he saw them run away then he was following them before they were deserters.”

“Yes, does sound funny, doesn’t it?” Ratchis added.

The tension in the room began to build again.

“We’re guests here,” Jana suddenly said, sitting up straight. “We should wait until their leader comes back to discuss it. I’m sure we’ll get all our questions answered.”

“Yes,” said Beorth. “We do want to make sure that the law is being properly adhered to.”

Kazrack leaned forward and whispered to Jana, “If we let them take these men they’ll be killed.”

“Yeah?” Jana said, without an iota more of caring than was needed in her voice.

“If we keep them tied up and it does come to a fight, they could stab them as they sit there,” Jeremy commented.

“Hey!” Torsius cried. “We wouldn’t stab a defenseless man! What do you take us for?”

“Yeah?” Kazrack said, surprised, and turned to the tall lanky quiet one. “And you?”

“Mumma-numma-summuh-uh,” Cottonmouth said.

“See? Him neither,” said Torsius.

They broke out the rations, chewing on what was last left of the meat pies the gnomes packed them.

“We got jerky if you want some,” Phillip offered. “I’m gonna get some from the back, and some more firewood. Ratchis, would you help me?”

Ratchis and Phillip went through the narrow crack to another smaller chamber. There was a bedroll in there and the signs of another smaller fire once having been lit in here. There was a pile of neatly stacked wood back there and a large pack.

Jeremy moved over to sit between Frank and Gwar.

“It sure is good to see you guys,” said Frank.

“Yeah, any luck yet? Have you seen the dragon?” Gwar asked.

“No,” Jeremy replied.

“You don’t want to see it!” Gwar said and he and his brother shuddered at once.

“Why?” Jeremy asked.

“*Peligroso. Muy Peligroso!*” Carlos said, from across the narrow cave.

“What is ‘peligroso?’” Kazrack asked.

“Danger, much danger,” Carlos replied.

“It was green, like the sun on the water,” said Finn.

“Sounds beautiful,” said Jeremy.

“Yes, but terrible as well.”

“Hey, I just noticed something,” Finn said. “Where’s Chance?”

The group was silent. Ratchis walked back into the main cavern and dropped a pile of wood beside the fire and began to break pieces in half and chuck them in. Finn just looked from face to sad face.

“He’s dead,” Ratchis finally said.

“Whut? What happened?” Gwar asked, his face sinking into one of consternation and sorrow with others.

“Wilderness is dangerous,” Ratchis replied.

“What do you mean?” asked Gwar. “Did he fall off a cliff, or freeze to death or something? Was he killed by a bear?”

“He was attacked by orcs,” said Kazrack.

Jana curled up in a ball again and wrapped her blanket around her, suddenly finding her sleepiness.

Martin meanwhile had leaned over to whisper in Beorth’s ear.

“Don’t trust these three,” the watch-mage whispered. “They’re thieves. Second-hand reports, but evidence enough to be cautious. I am going to sleep.”

Martin too, picked a spot and nodded off.

And soon everyone nodded off except Beorth and Ratchis, who kept watch and then later woke Jeremy and Kazrack to do the same.

Isilem, 23rd of Nuiet – 564 H.E.

The wind’s last howl turned into a gasp just before the sun rose, and everyone awoke to the brightness of Ra’s Glory peering into the cave mouth.

Martin stretched and looked up to see Ratchis standing right above him.

“Prepare that damn spell you need,” the half-orc growled.

“Uh, yeah,” Martin replied weakly. “I was planning on it.”

“You guys have magic?” Phillip asked.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” said Martin standing up.

“What do you mean by that?” Phillip replied. The Watch-mage just went over to his own pack and pulled out his spellbook. Phillip turned to Ratchis. “How about you? Do you do magic?”

“I am a Friar of Nephthys,” Ratchis replied.

“I like Nephthys!” cried Torsius, excitedly.

“Really?” asked Ratchis. “Why?”

“Because if you get in trouble and you are on the run, you can go to a temple of Nephthys and they’ll hide you,” Torsius explained. “That’s what me Pa always said. If you’re in trouble, go to a temple of Nephthys.”

The hours of the day passed without event. The party took turns going outside to feel the warmth of the sun on their face, and they nibbled what little food there was, and collected snow for melting into fresh water. Mostly, they rested out the aches and pains of the long journey and the rough weather, and they waited for the Glaive to return, but the sun began to sink, and he still was not back.

They sat around the fire once more, spread out and trying not to think about food, and the night was a deep and dark blue, turning blacker all the time.

“I don’t plan to leave these people behind,” said Kazrack, leaning into speak softly to Ratchis.

“I think it’s obvious what the King intends to do with them, or at least the people under him,” said Ratchis.

“I’m starting to wonder if there is any connection between the King and our friend in the valley,” said Kazrack.

“I know the agents of Set have the power to disguise themselves, and Menovians worship Set,” Ratchis mused. Martin stepped over to the two of them and joined the conversation.

Jeremy must have overheard, because he scooted over to talk as well, “We have no reason to think the king is involved. For all we know they are just obeying the law and our friends here really did run away, and if that is so if

we try to stop them, we'll be breaking the law."

"Jeremy, I joined up on the rumor that the king would sell these men into slavery. Now, on the first indication that people are running away he has someone ready to take them captive?" Ratchis said. "Now he can give these men 'mercy' and just sell them into slavery for 10 years, instead of prison or killing them."

"Then why didn't he just snag us all at the castle, then?" Jeremy asked.

"Word would have gotten out that all these would-be dragon-hunters disappeared or were taken captive," Kazrack said.

"This whole plot allows them to have some legitimacy in the eyes of others and not visibly ally themselves with Menovia or anger Herman Land," Ratchis added. "Even if this is not a slave plot, I neither trust, nor like the King of Gothanius."

"I just don't know if we'd be doing the right thing freeing these guys if the laws of the land say they have to go to jail," Jeremy said.

"Jeremy, there are the laws of man and then there are the laws of the gods. The first tell us what we ought not do in order to keep peace. The second tells us what is right and what is wrong, and these are more important than the first."

"Hey, what are you guys all huddled here talking about?" Phillip asked stepping over into their circle.

"We're philosophizing about what is right and what is wrong," said Kazrack.

"Well, count me in then," said Phillip. "I love this stuff! Once was gonna enter the seminary and become a priest of Ra, I was."

"I was just saying that the laws of any given society are their own and no more right or wrong than any others and should be obeyed whenever possible," said Jeremy.

"That's ridiculous!" Phillip said. "Look at Thricia!"

"Excuse me?" Martin said, coughing into his hand.

"Come on, Martin. You know what I am talking about. Thricia is decadent. You hardly have any laws there at all!" Phillip expounded.

"I think I know what Jeremy means," said Kazrack. "Like the way your opinion is no more valid than any other man's."

"What?" Phillip was now astonished. "Of course, it is more valid, I am Herman-Lander. We are the richest and most powerful country and why? Because we have a strong leader and a strong leader's opinion is more valid than all of ours put together. Where are you from that you would say any man's opinion would be worth the same as a king's? That is crazy talk, next thing you know people will want to throw down governments because they think they are just as entitled to rule, as if the gods did not pick the lines of kings for a reason!"

"I am not talking about toppling kings," said Jeremy, flustered. "I am just saying that the laws set up for a community are just as good or bad, depending on how well they govern."

"You are the most arrogant man I have ever met," said Kazrack to Jeremy. "Look at Wallbrook, from what I hear they are really lawless, if Malcolm was anyone to judge them by. Have the power to take something and it is legally yours. If you can't hold on to it, you don't deserve to keep it, they say down there. Is that a good law?"

"Jeremy, you're saying that if the Black Islands Barony ruled the world, then slavery and murder would be good

because they were the only society?” Martin inquired.

“No,” said Jeremy. “Because there would always be people like us who would fight their tyranny and form our own societies.

“I’m glad to see you are willing to do your part to keep the Black Islands Barony from ruling the world,” said Kazrack sarcastically.³⁵

“How did you get on this conversation anyway?” asked Phillip.

“It was going fine until you got into it,” snapped Martin.

“Cranky, aren’t we?” said Phillip, mocking a hurt face.

“Oh, enough of this!” Martin stood. “I am going to practice some illusions. Jeremy would you help me?”

Suddenly, a figure came stumbling into the cave, his hands tied behind his back, and landed face first on the hard ground.

“Looks like we have some guests,” came a booming voice from the cave entrance.

“It’s Josef!” cried Gwar, craning his neck to see the figure that had stumbled in.

A figure stepped into the light provided by the fire in the cave. He was tall and lean, but had broad bony shoulders, with a weatherworn face and brown hair that was mostly gray poking out of his helm and wrapped around his face in a beard. He wore studded leather armor and had a long sword at his belt and a spear in his hand. He dropped a small pack on the floor.

The party (except Martin) immediately recognized him as the man that had traveled with them wordlessly from Verdun. They knew now that he went by the name, The Glaive.

“That one is pretty good at hiding,” The Glaive said. “I had to track him for two days.”

The bounty-hunter kicked Josef in the rear-end and sent him towards his bound friends.

Ratchis stood and Kazrack quickly followed.

“Why do you have these men bound?” Kazrack asked.

“My, right to the point,” he cleared his throat. “I’m sure my assistants have told you. These men are deserters, and I have been hired by the Crown of Gothanium to return deserters and contract-breakers to justice. That is all I need say.”

“Maybe you can tell us how the dragon-hunt goes,” said Ratchis.

“That is not my job,” replied The Glaive, dryly.

“What is your job then?” Ratchis asked.

“I already told you, to bring deserters to justice.”

“I have heard the dragon is very fearsome,” said Ratchis.

³⁵ As I am sure you all remember, the party first ended up in Derome-Delem to avoid in fighting in the war against the Black Island Barony.

“And?”

“So, doesn’t make sense that some men would run to save themselves when they finally face it?” Ratchis conjectured.

“That is not my concern,” said The Glaive. “And I don’t have to justify myself to you.”

He walked closer to the fire and squatting down by it leaned his spear against his shoulder in order to warm his hands. He then looked up at Ratchis.

“Anyway, I overheard them planning on leaving the country,” the bounty-hunter added.

“Finn,” Ratchis said turning to the young Herman-lander. “Were you planning on leaving the country?”

“What? No!” Finn said, but not very convincingly.

“So, your assignment from the King of Gothanius was to look for deserters?” Martin asked.

The Glaive sighed, clearly annoyed at being asked the same question over and over.

“Yes, while Crumb was recruiting you boys, he was also recruiting me,” The Glaive said. “I have spent the last two months combing this backwater place, learning the lay of the land and keeping an eye on these ‘dragon-hunters’” He spoke the last word with contempt. “And these five are the first deserters I have caught, and I plan to take them back for the bounty.”

“What will happen to them?” Beorth asked.

“Not my concern,” The Glaive replied.

“How much are you getting for them?” Ratchis asked.

“Seventy-five pieces of silver each,” The Glaive replied.³⁶

“What if someone else paid you that amount?” Ratchis suggested.

The Glaive paused and smiled.

“I might be convinced to let them go for a competitive price,” he said.

“Or we could just free them,” Kazrack said.

The Glaive’s smile turned into a scowl. “Go ahead. I won’t try and stop you, but you’d be in for a whole world of trouble if you did something like that,” he explained.

“Well, I am willing to pay to free Finn,” said Ratchis, untying his money pouch from his belt.

“What?!?” Frank and Gwar said at once.

“I’d have to sell them as a set,” the Glaive said, his scowl turning back into a smile. “If I am going to save myself the trouble of going all the way back to Twelve Trolls, I don’t want any of them.”

“Can we have a minute?” Martin asked.

“Take all the time you need,” The Glaive said, grabbing some jerky and leaning against the wall to eat.

³⁶ Aquerra uses a silver standard. Seventy-five pieces of silver is quite a lot of money to most folks.

The party retreated to the back of the cave and began to talk about how much money they could pool together.

“I have almost nothing,” said Martin the Green.

“Don’t you get a salary as a Watch-Mage?” Jeremy asked.

“I sent it to my parents,” Martin replied, and Jana rolled her eyes.

“It chafes me to buy their freedom, but it seems to be the only lawful way,” Beorth said. “The little money I have I will donate to this cause.”

The party soon determined that they did not have enough coinage to pay for all five of the captives.

“I’m not sure the buying them will help anyway,” said Kazrack. “What if he frees them and, once we’re gone, he just captures them again?”

“We will have to bring them somewhere safe,” said Beorth.

“Aren’t we in a hurry to get to the elves and get their help?” Martin said.

“Can we allow five innocents to die just so we can avenge our friend?” Ratchis said.

Jana opened mouth to speak but stopped herself.

“They are not exactly innocent,” whispered Beorth. “I think they probably were going to desert.”

“Not innocent compared to what?” Ratchis replied in a hiss. “We all know they are good kids who are mixed up in something bigger than they are.”

“Point well taken,” Beorth replied.

“Wouldn’t they be safe with the elves?” Jeremy asked.

“Why would they be safe with the elves?” Ratchis said, frustrated with Jeremy as usual.

“He doesn’t know what he is saying,” said Kazrack. “He thinks elves will pop up everywhere like they are some kind of magical creature.”

Ratchis left the circle and walked over to The Glaive.

“What if we give you 40 silver pieces for each?” Ratchis said.

“Why would I agree to that?” The Glaive said, chewing on his jerky.

“We are saving you the trouble of bringing them all the way back to Twelve Trolls,” said Ratchis.

“And that includes the trouble and expense of keeping them alive and fed until you get there,” Martin added coming up behind Ratchis.

“I still have to split the bounty with my deputies, and 40 each does not leave me with much,” The Glaive said. “Make it 60 silver pieces and you have a deal.”

The party huddled up again and pooled their money, Jana paying a particularly large chunk. They paid the Glaive 300 pieces of silver. The Glaive tossed the money to Phillip to count.

“Can we share your fire for one more night?” Ratchis asked.

“Sure,” The Glaive replied. “But they stay tied up until morning and then you’d better be moving along.”

Everyone bedded down for the night, and Jeremy and Kazrack took turns staying up to keep an eye out, but by morning no schemes or ulterior motives became evident, and barely bidding adieu to their hosts, the party marched out of the cave and out across the field of snow back in the direction of the steamy area and general direction of Summit.

Osilem, 24th of Nuiet – 564 H.E.

When they were a few dozen yards from the ridge the cave was in, Kazrack and Ratchis began to cut the bonds off of the wrists of Finn, Frank, Gwar, Josef and Carlos.

“What a waste of rope!” Jeremy cried as the cut strands fell into the snow. “You should have untied them.”

Everyone ignored the blonde Neergaardian.

“Thanks so much for saving us,” said Finn. They all shook the party’s hands and smiled despite the cold. “We’ll find some way to pay you back every penny and then we’ll still owe you one. Right guys?”

The rest nodded enthusiastically, though Frank and Gwar’s faces seemed to be wondering how they were ever going to afford to give up such a large sum.

“We can get back to Summit with no problem,” said Finn. “You don’t have to walk us all the way.”

“Just so you know, we believe you *were* planning on deserting,” said Ratchis.

“Oh, of course we were,” said Finn. “This is the thing, I wanna go back home. I wanna get back to Herman Land. We used the ‘patrols’ as an excuse to hunt for ways out of Gothanius and back to civilization. We weren’t all going to go, just me and maybe Carlos.”

“I met a nice girl in Summit. I don’t need to marry a princess,” said Gwar.

“Yeah, and Carlos isn’t very popular with the fathers in Summit, if you know what I mean,” added Frank.

Carlos smiled bashfully.

“My advice to you is that next time you see the dragon and run away, scream ‘Regroup! Regroup!’ or something in case that bounty-hunter is watching,” said Kazrack.

They walked half the day, around the unnaturally steamy area.

“It is less than a day to Summit from here,” said Finn Fisher. “I think we can make it.”

The party discussed it and decided that it would be best to head to Ogre’s Bluff and let the others go the rest of the way to Summit on their own. They only waited long enough for Martin the Green to hastily pen two letters, one for the Alderman of Summit, and one for the Alderman to send to Alexandra the Lavender.³⁷

Finally, they were ready to part ways.

“Good luck with the dragon,” said Gwar. “I’m sure you’ll be the ones that do it.”

³⁷ The party met Alexandra the Lavender in session #7 (part I). Martin the Green also met her during his journey to Gothanius.

“May Nephthys protect you,” said Ratchis, and the party headed back southward, but moving a bit to the west to avoid the Glaive’s cave.

They climbed the ridge and made camp in a circle of small trees. On the other side of the ridge a forest went as far as the eye could see.

They looked at their map and decided their best bet would be to follow the eastern edge of the forest until they came to Ogre’s Bluff.

But first they slept.

Ratchis and Beorth took the first watch, and then awoke Kazrack to take the second.

The dwarf walked in circles ever-vigilant and trying to stay awake for the four hours he had to watch. However, he had barely watched for an hour when movement in the sky caught his eye. He turned and looked to see a large winged form, with a long neck and tail and a large body fly across the sliver of moon that shone that night.

He immediately woke Ratchis and Martin.

“I think I saw the dragon,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Martin asked groggily, and the dwarf described what he had seen.

“It looked like a dragon to me,” said Kazrack “And if that’s so, our working theory has some holes in it.”

“It could have been the gnomes,” said Ratchis. “Using their illusions like Mozek said.”

“If we have to take into account that there is really a dragon around here then we have to start worrying about being seen from the air,” Kazrack said.

Ratchis sighed, “Well there is nothing we can do about it now.”

“And the gnomes could have made an illusion from far away to help lend verisimilitude to their attempts to frighten people,” said Martin, laying back down.

Ratchis also went back to sleep and Kazrack finished his watch, waking Jeremy about three hours later as the sun came up.

“We didn’t wake you,” Kazrack said as Jeremy stood and stretched.

“Yes, you just did,” Jeremy replied.

“No, we had an incident earlier, and we didn’t wake you up,” Kazrack explained.

“Thanks,” said Jeremy. “I’d rather not get woken up in the middle night for nothing.”

Tholem, 25th of Nuiet – 564 H.E.

The party ate and discussed the dragon sighting and then began moving down the other side of the ridge into the forest.

“Didn’t Mozek say the dragon was fake?” Beorth said.

“And you believe him why?” Jeremy said, shaking his head.

“Why would he lie about that?” Ratchis asked.

“To get us killed by a dragon we are not ready for maybe?” said Kazrack.

“We aren’t ready for a dragon whether we know it is real or not,” said Jana dryly.

“Another possibility,” said Kazrack, the wheels and gears of his mind turning noisily. “Is that a real dragon heard the rumors and came to check them out for itself?”

“Well, then it is a friendly dragon because,” Ratchis said this next part emphasizing every word very precisely. “IT HAS NOT EATEN ANYBODY.”

“That we know of,” said Kazrack.

They dropped the subject as they had to turn to their left to follow the edge of the wood and not walk into it. They crossed a narrow strip of plain and then back into another forest and skirted the edge of it. Ratchis noticed a low rock wall poking up through the snow. He led the party that way and they walked along the outside of the wall that seemed like some kind of property marker.

Jeremy leapt up on to the wall and began to walk atop it.

“We should look for a gate?” said Kazrack.

“Why should we look for a gate?” asked Ratchis.

“This could mark the border of the town, or it could mark the property of someone who might know where the town is, or where we can find the elves,” explained the dwarf.

“I think we should keep the fact that we are looking for the elves as close to our chest as possible,” said Ratchis.

“The less people who know what we are really doing the better. We will just claim to be hunting the dragon like everyone else is. Martin, you can ask about the elves as if a curiosity or something.”

Martin had been looking at the top of the grassy hill on the other side of the wall, hardly paying attention to what was being said, when he saw two armored figures come over the crest and begin walking quickly in their direction.

“Ratchis! Armed men!”

The party stopped, and Jeremy hopped off the wall.

“Ho! Hold there!” one of the men called. They both looked young. The younger looking one was taller and looked as if he were trying hard to grow a mustache to go with the brown curly locks that stuck out from under his fur-lined helm. The other had a full mustache but was half a head shorter. They looked like brothers.

They wore studded leather armor and both wielded crossbows. They had long swords at their side and the shorter one had a spear strapped to his back.

“How now? What are you doing so close to the Alderman’s estate?” said the shorter one.

“We are…” Martin began.

“We’re hunting the dragon,” Ratchis said quickly.

“…dragon-hunters,” Martin shot Ratchis an annoyed look. “We’d like to speak to the Alderman if possible.”

“Well, you can’t come onto the property through here,” said the taller guard. “You have to go through the gate.”

“Yes, follow the wall around to the gate. I will run up to the manor and speak with the alderman if I can,” said the shorter one. He turned to the other guard. “Bryce, escort them around from this side, I’ll be right back.”

The guard named Bryce scowled, but obeyed as the other went jogging back over the hill. The party followed the wall, escorted by the guard who kept his crossbow trained on different members of the group the whole time. The wall turned eastward and went up the hill and the party followed.

Ratchis whispered to Martin, “If anyone asks you why you are asking about the elves, tell them we have reason to believe they may be in league with the dragon. That will sound reasonable.”

“We certainly don’t want to give the Gothanians any excuse to make war on the elves,” Martin replied.

“Then say we want to avoid them then,” said Ratchis.

“Ya know,” Bryce said loudly interrupting the whisperings. “The alderman is a busy man. He probably won’t have time to talk to you today. Every Tom, Dick and Harry who claims to be a dragon-hunter has been wanting to talk to him.”

“Would it help if we had a Watch-mage with us?” Ratchis asked.

“Well, maybe if you had said something before my brother went off to go tell the alderman you were here,” he said with some disgust.

They came to the wrought-iron gate and beyond it they could now see an exceptionally large house with three chimneys poking up from the roof. Shrubs and topiary were covered in snow, giving their decorative shapes a melancholy look. This alderman was obviously very rich.

Twenty minutes later the other guard returned.

“I’m sorry but the alderman is busy at the moment. He said he might be able to see you in three or four days and that you should come back and try again,” the guard said.

“Oh, could you show him this?” Martin handed the guard his letter of introduction to the guard, who looked at it puzzled. “It is a letter of introduction from His Majesty the King.”

“Why didn’t you give this to me before?” the guard said with a sigh. “I’ll be back.”

As he turned to head back to the manor, Bryce said, “Brochard, you already had the alderman’s answer. You shouldn’t bother him again.”

“If I don’t tell him that an emissary of the King is here, we can kiss our jobs good-bye,” replied Brochard.

They waited out in the cold for another twenty minutes, and finally Brochard returned, this time with an older man also armed and armored. He also bore a family resemblance to the young brothers.

“I am Morton Oldhall,” the older man said. “I am in charge of the alderman’s security. I am sorry to keep you waiting.”

He paused and looked at Ratchis up and down and then shot a glance at Kazrack.

He cleared his throat. “Please follow me.”

Bryce opened the gate, and the party was led up to the house, where the butler, Dornast led them into a parlor.

“Sir, Martin the Green, and...” The butler cleared his throat. “...friends. This is Alderman Silvestri.”

The alderman stood from a divan. He looked to be in his mid-forties, but still had a full head of golden blonde hair. There was a young girl of about 15 years, with the same wispy corn silk hair sitting on a wingback chair. She looked at the party and then turned her sad face back towards the fireplace.

“Welcome, welcome,” said the alderman with a broad and obviously fake smile. His lips curled a bit as he approached the party, looking at their wet and muddy and bloody clothing, and noticing the smell of days and days spent in the wilderness wafting off of them. “And these are your...guards?”

“They are my associates,” said Martin and introduced the party. Despite his ever-present smile, the alderman seemed none too pleased to have them in his house.

“You’ll be wanting to talk about the dragon then?” the alderman asked.

“Yes, and other creatures and races that we have heard rumors of,” Martin said. The others shifted awkwardly where they stood.

“What, you mean the elves?” Silvestri said.

“Yes, among other things,” Martin said.

“Well, there is not much to say about them,” Silvestri said. “They keep to themselves in their enclave out in the woods, and we keep to ourselves. But why don’t you go into town and get yourselves rooms at the Golden Plough and clean yourselves up and rest and then come back for dinner and we can talk about this at length.”

“That sounds fine,” Martin said, and then continued delicately. “I’m sure you’d be willing to help us in any way you can to fulfill the King’s business.”

The alderman’s mask of good cheer was flawed for nearly a second, but then the smile came back, “Of course! Let me write you a note so that the inn-keeper will put your room on my tab. It is the least I can do for the King’s servant.”

The party was escorted out after being told to return in three hours’ time and Dornast gave them directions into town and the Golden Plough.

They marched on a dirt track up a hill and through what appeared to be groves for growing apples and pears in warmer months.

“I don’t think gold would make a very good plough,” commented Kazrack as they marched, more to himself than to anyone else. “It’s very soft.”

They noted buildings in the distance and increased their pace with thoughts of a warm inn and real food.

“My people aren’t great farmers, but I’m *sure* gold wouldn’t make a good plough,” Kazrack continued.

The Golden Plough was full of loud and raucous people. A bard could barely be heard chanting a tune in a corner, and over the hearth was a mural of huge golden ram pulling a gold plough across a field, while a farmer and his family watch from the foreground. The common room was cozy, and the inn-keeper led them to a table and took their food orders and asked them if they’d need rooms for the night. Martin handed him the alderman’s letter.

“This here says only one room and three meals a day on the alderman and only for Martin the Green. Is that you?” Wilson the inn-keeper said.

‘Yes,’ replied Martin.

“Got a special room for you,” replied the innkeeper. “The rest of you need rooms too?”

The party nodded.

“I don’t like inns,” said Thomas to Martin from his safe perch in the Watch-Mage’s robes. “But at least it is warm.”

“Yes, it is,” replied Martin. “I’ll try to get you some fresh nuts.”

“Thanks,” said Thomas happily. “Or cheese!”

“Are we going to find the elves tomorrow?” Beorth asked the group quietly.

“Well, are we in a hurry?” asked Kazrack.

“Somewhat,” replied Ratchis. “But we need to balance our need to hurry with our need to be prepared. For example, my armor is nearly falling off, and I need to get it repaired.”

“Well, there is one last ritual I need to perform, before my place in the priesthood of the dwarven gods is officially granted. I need to enchant my runestones,” said Kazrack. “And once I do that, I can use them to ask the gods for some glimpse into the fruitfulness or futility of our choices. But I will need a full day for this.”

The party contemplated it.

“Beorth? What do you think?” Ratchis asked.

“I think that Kazrack’s devotion to his god should come first,” the ghost-hunter replied.

“Then it is agreed. I will spend tomorrow enchanting my runestones and the rest of you can do whatever errands you need to run,” Kazrack said.

The party fell to divvying up tasks for the next day. Jana would be going to the general store. Martin and Ratchis would go to the pawnshop and the armorer. Jeremy would be going to the town constable and asking about sightings of the dragon.

The quiet bard had finished his song, and some cried out, “Let us hear the tale of those who faced the dragon again!”

There was a round of resounding cheers, and the party noticed that most everyone in the common room was now paying attention to a table occupied by five young men. Four of them were unknown to the party, but Kazrack, Ratchis, Jana, Beorth and Jeremy knew one of them. It was Guisel.³⁸

“So, we were walking through the forest and the snow was nearly waist deep,” said one of Guisel’s companions to the captive audience of inn patrons.

“Was it this forest near the town, Kennedy?” someone in the crowd asked the tale-teller.

“Yes, but very deep in it, near its southwestern edge,” the one called Kennedy said. “And there we saw the dragon, among the trees.”

“What? The dragon was walking?” called one of the patrons.

“It had just settled down from the sky and kind of crawled under the trees to grab a young fawn that was nibbling on a piece of grass peeking through the snow,” Guisel answered, and surveyed the crowd. His broad smile turned into a

³⁸ Guisel was one of Crumb’s Boys.

frown as his eyes met those of the party looking over at him in wonder and with some amusement, and he sat down and did not speak while his companion finished the story.

“We crept up on it, and it lifted its head, shooting a long thin jet of flame at Brio here,” Kennedy rumbled the curly locks of chubby young man, who smiled, his cheeks growing red and hot with the attention, as the crowd gasped.

“But Brio ducked under and rolled towards it and stuck his sword under its head!”

There was a smattering of cheers.

“And then were all upon it,” Kennedy described. “Hitting it with a flurry of blows. It took off into the air and broke all the branches of the trees around it, and dropped snow on top of us. Guisel here shot a bolt from his crossbow right through the falling snow and right into the dragon’s belly and hot green blood splattered on him, that’s why he has the scar on his neck and shoulder.”

“So, the dragon got away?” someone asked.

Another of Guisel’s companions stood, “Yes, but it is now weak, and we came to re-supply. We find it and slay it!”

The party could now see more clearly that this was another of Crumb’s Boys. It was John, and Guisel was tugging on his shirt sleeve. He saw the party and blanched, waved weakly and sat back down.

The crowd cheered and clapped.

After hearing the tale, the party went upstairs to find their rooms and clean up and get their baths before going back to the Alderman’s house. Ratchis, however, walked over to Guisel’s table. The awkward lad was leaning over to Kennedy and saying something while cocking his head at the party.

“You’ve been busy since you left the castle, Guisel,” Ratchis said, with a big grin, his yellowed teeth pointing in different directions, his gums black. “How’d you meet up with this band of killers?”

“We’re not killers,” said Kennedy with a smile. “We’re just people doing our best to help other people.”

“I’m sure you are,” Ratchis said with a scowl. “So, you fought the dragon and lived to speak of it. Have you seen anything else out there? Anything dangerous that is?”

“There was some kind of living tree,” said Guisel shakily. “Yeah, uh... a living tree, that’s it.”

“So, the two of you,” Ratchis looked at John. “Must be getting to be pretty good fighters, huh?”

“Well, you know there’s a lot of talk about dragons, but it’s mostly just talk,” said John, finishing his ale and standing. “I think we’d better get some sleep fellows, if we plan to head out nice and early and track down the dragon.”

Ratchis watched them go upstairs to their own rooms.

While most everyone had wanted a bath (Ratchis just dunked his head into a basin of cold water, rubbed behind his neck and ears with a rag and called it a wash), the inn only had one copper tub that could be used at a time, and Jeremy got first chance.

However, he was still splashing around happily in the water when the others realized it was time to head to the Alderman’s and left without telling him.

Jeremy hummed a Neergardian song to himself as he got out of the water that had grown cold and towed himself off.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

“I’ll be ready in a minute!” he called.

The knocking came again, and more hurried than before. Jeremy slipped on his shirt and trousers and went to the door and opened it. At the door was a slight figure in a silvery gray cloak.

“I am sorry to disturb you,” said a girl’s voice from within the raised hood.

“Well, I was bathing,” Jeremy said, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, I shouldn’t have come here!” the voice cried with dismay.

“No, come in. Please stay,” said Jeremy, holding the door open for her. “How can I help you?”

The girl walked into the room and closed the door.

“Again, I am so sorry to bother you,” the girl pulled back her hood, and her wisps of blonde hair fell in a lovely cascade of gold. It was the girl they had seen at the alderman’s house. “I am Jasmine Silvestri, daughter of the alderman, and I have no one else to turn to.”

A tear slid down her cheek.

“It’s just that she’s been missing for days now, and father won’t send anyone to save her,” the girl said, dabbing at her eyes with a kerchief.

“Who?”

“Rahasia,” the girl said.

“Who’s Rahasia?” Jeremy asked, putting out his hand awkwardly to pat her shoulder and comfort her, but then pulling it back.

“She’s my handmaiden,” said the girl. She looked up at Jeremy with her big blue saucer-like eyes, moist with her tears. “She disappeared over a week ago and I don’t know where she is. No one knows.”

“No one has seen her?” Jeremy asked. “Maybe she went to visit family or something.”

“She was a half-elf and an orphan, she had no family,” said Jasmine. “And anyway, she would have told me if she went anywhere. Something bad must have happened to her, maybe she was kidnapped!”

“Who would kidnap her, and why?” asked Jeremy, he slipped on his socks.

“I don’t know.”

“What does your father say?”

“He thinks she ran off to be with one of those elves that live in that place in the woods south west of the house,” she explained. “He never liked her.”

“Why does he think that?” Jeremy asked. He tied his boots on.

“Well, um…” Jasmine paused. “Because someone claimed to have seen her there six days ago, but it wasn’t her, or it was a mistake. She did not run off with an elf man!”

“How do you know?”

“I just know,” Jasmine said, her tears now a steady stream down her face. “Will you help me please? You are supposed to help the people of Gothanius.”

Jeremy sighed. “Where was she last seen?”

“She went out to the garden to clear some snow and never returned,” Jasmine explained. “She took none of her stuff with her.”

Jeremy contemplated in silence the hangnail he had on his right index finger.

“I have to go, or my father will note my absence. Will you help me? Please? I don’t have a lot of money, but I can get you some” Jasmine pleaded.

“I will have to talk to my friends about it,” Jeremy assured her.

“I do have a tiara. It belonged to my mother. It’s got jewels on it. I’ll give it to you if you help me,” she said pulling up the hood of her cloak and making for the door.”

“We’ll be in contact,” Jeremy said, opening the door for her.

“Talk to Hassafein the Cook if you have to contact me, and he’ll tell me.” Jasmine said, poking her head out into the hall to make sure no one saw her, and turned back to Jeremy. “My father will be suspicious if he sees anyone talking to me, and he doesn’t want me looking for her.”

“Okay, the cook, right,” Jeremy began to close the door.

“Thank you,” Jasmine said, but the door was already shut, and she ran off home.

“I wonder what taking everyone so long,” Jeremy thought to himself. “They’d better hurry or we’ll miss our meeting with the alderman.”

Meanwhile, back at the Alderman’s Manor, the rest of the party was being served brandy in the parlor. The alderman noticed Jana for the first time, as she was cleaned up and the hood of her fur cloak was down.

“I wasn’t aware that the king was hiring young ladies,” he said and paused thoughtfully, and then smiled his big false smile. “But who am I to question the king?”

The party spoke with him for about forty minutes. He told them how the town was named because the bluff it sat upon was riddled with caves that once were the lairs to ogres, but the vast majority of the ogres had left for the Ogre Scar or had been slain during the war against the orcs.³⁹ He also explained that Aze Nuquerna was the name of the elven enclave about two hours south by southwest of the town, just beyond a narrow stream, and near a lake called “Green Eye.”

The party asked for a map of the area, but the alderman said it might take a few days to scare one up and it’d likely be expensive.

The alderman then politely implied that the time had come for the party to leave, and they took the cue and headed back to town, running into an impatient and annoyed Jeremy who was on his way to meet them.

“I don’t trust the alderman,” said Ratchis, as they all walked back to the inn.

³⁹ The Ogre Scar is a great tear in the earth just off center of the valley that makes up the majority of the Kingdom of Gothanius.

“Well, he certainly doesn’t seem trustworthy,” said Martin. “But then again, few politicians ever do.”

“Well, his daughter seemed nice enough,” commented Jeremy casually.

“His daughter?” asked Jana.

“Yeah, the girl we saw in his house this afternoon,” he replied.

“How could you tell?” Kazrack asked.

“Oh, she came by the inn and we talked,” Jeremy said. “She was really upset about her maid or something.”

Ratchis glared at Jeremy.

Jeremy explained what Jasmine had told him, and how she wanted their help in finding the half-elven woman.

“So, I figure we can add looking for her to the things we have to do,” Jeremy said.

“Do you know what a half-elf looks like?” Ratchis asked.

“Yes, but I’ve never seen a portly one,” the Neergaardian said.

“So, she’s portly?” Ratchis asked.

“No, but I’ve still never seen one that was portly.”

The half-orc had to restrain himself from strangling his companion.

“Well, if she is with the elves, we are going there anyway,” said Martin.

“I didn’t tell her that,” said Jeremy. “I thought it was a secret for some reason.”

“Thank you,” said Ratchis sarcastically.

“You’re welcome,” replied Jeremy.

“I am not looking forward to talking with the elves,” Kazrack said. “They are so flighty.”

“Flighty?” asked Ratchis.

“Yeah, they wouldn’t think twice about leaving things behind and they like transient things over solid and lasting things,” Kazrack said.

“Oh, I thought you meant flighty like the man that turned into a bat and flew off back at the castle,” said Martin.⁴⁰

“A man that turned into a bat?” Jana said, with a surprised tone. “I never heard anything about that!”

“We must have forgotten to mention it because we were too distracted by your betraying us,” Ratchis replied scathingly, and Jana was quiet.

They arrived at the inn and went up to one room to continue talking.

“You know that bat-man-thing could explain why Markle did not seem too concerned about being locked up,” said Ratchis. “They were probably working together.”

⁴⁰ See Session #12.

“I wonder what the real gnome chief wants from the elves?” Jeremy wondered aloud. “I mean, what can they do against a demon like Mozek?”

“I don’t know,” said Ratchis. “I don’t know anything about demonic powers.” The half-orc glared at Jana, his mood becoming fouler each passing moment.

There was a long awkward silence, and finally Kazrack brought up the need to decide what they were going to try to sell off to get money for supplies.

“What about this?” Beorth held out the bastard sword that had belonged to Malcolm and that Chance had been carrying.

“Give it to Kazrack,” said Jeremy.

“I don’t use swords,” Kazrack said.

“Yeah, but you can carry it. You carry a ton of other stuff,” said Jeremy.

“Weren’t we going to craft it into rings for the group?” the dwarf asked.

Jana got up and went to her room.

“Well, we don’t have time for that now,” said Ratchis, taking the sword and looking it over. “And I might want to use this.”

“Please do then, and then you can carry it,” Kazrack said.

“I’m going to carry it into battle,” Ratchis said with his first smile in days.

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The next morning, the party went their separate ways to fulfill their errands. Kazrack sought out a quiet place not far from an abandoned quarry to enchant his runestones. Ratchis and Martin headed to the pawn shop, and Jana awoke late to go to the general store.

Jeremy went to the constable’s office. From outside he heard a raspy voice say, “I don’t care, ya lousy pieces of crap! If I tell ya to patrol, ya patrol!”

There was another voice, much quieter than the first, and a hollered reply, “That’s what you get paid for! I have to protect this town from bandits and ogres and gnolls and such!”

Jeremy stepped into the square building of undressed stone, as two armored guard passed him sheepishly.

“And doing a fine job of it, I’m sure,” Jeremy said to the middle-aged man with a thin and scraggily gray beard that he assumed was the constable.

“What in hell do you want?” he yelled, spit flicking off his dry lips.

“Uh, well, my group and I, we are some of the uh, dragon-hunters and we were wondering, actually it was Jana’s idea, she thought I might come and ask you about any dragon sightings or…” Jeremy was unable to finish.

“She? Is a womun huntin’ dragons?” the constable said, his normal talking barely softer than his yelling.

“Uh, no she, uh... she’s our seamstress...” Jeremy said. “Actually, I think she was just repeating what the Watch-Mage had said.”

“A watch-mage? You got a watch-mage?” the constable started writing something down.

“That’s what he’s always said, and I’ve never doubted it,” replied Jeremy.

“Anyone else in your group?”

“We have a holy warrior of Anubis, and Kazrack, he’s a dwarf and Ratchis,” said Jeremy. “Anyway, we were wondering...”

He was interrupted again.

“That’s it? What about this Ratchis? You never said what he is.”

“Uh, he’s just uh, some guy traveling with us, no one important,” Jeremy said wiping his mouth.

“I want to talk to your friends tonight,” the constable said. “I like to keep tabs on all these here ‘dragon-hunter’ about.”

“If I can find them all. They might be out whoring or something,” Jeremy said quickly.

“Whoring?”

“Well, no, they wouldn’t do that. Jana wouldn’t do that,” Jeremy said, contradicting himself.

“What? Five of you share one woman?” the constable said with sneer.

“Uh, no!” Jeremy sighed. “All I want to know is who around here has seen the dragon?”

“Well, one of them dragon-hunting groups claims to have fought it, but I don’t believe them,” he replied. “And old man Carson, the shepherd.”

It took Jeremy another fifteen minutes to get directions to the shepherd’s place, and then headed there, feeling very tired for some reason.

The pawnshop proprietor was mute, and Ratchis and Martin haggled with him by writing amounts on pieces of paper. They cashed in some gems that the party had found among Chance’s stuff, including some of those small red rubies that had found on that collar back when they were seeking the source of the zombie infestation in Stonebridge.⁴¹

They headed over to the smithy, but as soon as the squat smith saw Ratchis he began to yell, “Get that smelly pig-fucker out of here! What are you crazy?”

Ratchis scowled, and stood by the door, as Martin approached and tried to talk to the man.

“I said, get him out of here!”

“Dear sir, I am Martin the Green, Watch-Mage of the Academy of Wizardry, and...”

⁴¹ See Session #8.

“So, you’re a wizard, huh? Well, I don’t care if you do have this thing ensorcelled and he is your pet or whatever, I don’t want savage baby-raping pig-fuckers in my shop. Now get him the hell out!”

Martin turned to Ratchis, who stepped outside. Martin then sold the chain shirt they had taken from one of the gnomes that had waylaid them, but he did not get a very good price.

End of Session #19

AQUERRA

Session #20

“That’s right, sir,” the grizzled old shepherd said. “It swooped down and snatched up some uh me sheep. One in each claw and one in the mouth—swallowed it with one gulp.”

Jeremy studied the man. He was haggard and leaned heavily on his shepherd’s crook. The man’s dogs had laid down at his feet, and a few sheep stood shivering moving amid the tiny pockets of visible grass beneath the more than a foot of snow.

“Did it have four legs?” Jeremy asked the man. “I mean the dragon, not the sheep.”

Old Man Carson squinted his eyes. “Yessir, it had four legs, and a long tail. It was black and it seemed to cast a big shadow. It was all blurry like.”

“Really? Is there anything else you can tell me about it?”

“It swooped over the woods to the west and disappeared,” the man said. “It was fast, and I reckon it has been taking my sheep fer a while now.”

“How many sheep are missing?”

“Bout Thirty-summin’,” the man said.

“How are you gonna eat?” Jeremy asked more curious than concerned.

“Prolly starve,” the man said and hung his head.

“Why not go somewhere else? Seems like the dragon is bad for your livelihood,” Jeremy suggested.

“Whut? And let that dam thing run us off?” the man spit and stood up straighter. “No damn ores and no dang ogres drove us off, no dragon is gonna. Ain’t that what all youse young men trampin’ across me fields day and night are here to do? Take care of that dragon so we can have our livelihood?”

“Do you have any family in town that can help you?” Jeremy asked.

“My son moved up aways to Summat. He’s too far away, prolly one of those fancy-schmancy goat-herders now! Sheeps ain’t good enough for a shepherd from Summat,” the man sounded disgusted. “Well, I ain’t too good to fight to keep me sheep. Fought off ogres I did when I was your age. You ever seen an ogre?”

“Uh, no,” said Jeremy.

“Well, be alert!” The man leaned in close and whispered. “They about nine feet tall, black, kind of blurry. . .”

Now that the man was closer, Jeremy could see that one of his eyes was basically sealed shut with swollen puss-filled flesh, and that the infection seemed to be creeping along the bridge of his other already squinty eye.

Jeremy sighed.

“Well, Mister Carson, if you remember anything else, I’ll be staying at the Golden Plough,” Jeremy said to the man. “Or I may stop by again on my way west.”

Meanwhile, Jana had made her way to the general store and was buying things on a long list of gear the party might need that Kazrack had put together. It was difficult picking things out with the shop-keeper’s dog, Noah, jumping all over her and licking her face whenever it could. Martin stopped by the store and offered to help Jana carry the large bundles of things she had purchased, but it would take more than one trip.

Ratchis found a friend in a form a stray scraggily little black and gray mutt that just began to follow him around. It came when he called but seemed unwilling to do anything else the half-orc ranger wanted it to do, Ratchis bought two long sausages from the innkeeper and fed one to the dog, and ate the other himself.

“That old stray is always hanging around here,” the Innkeeper said. “I feed him sometimes in the winter, but he can’t come in the inn.”

Ratchis thanked the man and ran off into the woods, with his new companion chasing after him, barking happily.

The Friar of Nephthys came to a stream that emptied into an old quarry, and as the dog watched him and occasionally yapped, the half-orc tried to catch fish in his hands. The cold water was refreshing to him, protected by a spell granted to him by Nephthys.

Martin was looking around the general store, before carrying the last bundle back to the inn, when he came across bins of nuts.

“Oh, nuts!” Martin cried, happily.

“They’re a pound for two copper,” said Margun, the shop-keeper.

“What are all the kinds of nuts you have?” Martin asked.

“Oh, walnuts, hazelnuts...”

“Thomas, are you getting that?” Martin thought to his bonded companion, who until a moment before had lay snuggled on a pillow in Martin’s inn room.

“I’m comin’! I’m comin’!” the little squirrel said breathily, dashing towards the general store.

A few moments later, there was a scratching at the door, and Martin walked over and opened it. Thomas the Squirrel scurried in and then froze. Noah the dog’s head jerked up and the big golden dog’s eyes locked with the bushy-tailed rodent’s. In a second the dog was charging after the squirrel who was running as fast as his little legs could take him back out the still open door.

“Thomas! Climb something!” Martin cried and thought.

“I’m climbing! I’m climbing!”

The dog was barking crazily and leaping against the inn’s outer wall, trying to reach Thomas who was looking down disdainfully from the drainpipe, out of harm’s way.

Margun, the shopkeeper, ran out of his shop and pulled off his dog.

Thomas leapt down onto Martin’s shoulder, who had come out as well. The squirrel licked his little paws.

“That squirrel is yours?” Margun asked.

“He’s a pet,” Martin explained.

“And when he dies, you can eat him,” Margun said with a smile.

Martin felt Thomas’ claws dig deeply into the flesh of his shoulder.

“Let’s not talk about that,” he said. The Watch-Mage went back into the store and bought his familiar lots of nuts

and some dried apple as well.

Later that afternoon, Ratchis, Jeremy, Martin and Jana were gathered in the common room of the Golden Plough to eat some dinner. The innkeeper had relented and allowed Ratchis to bring his new dog into the inn as long as he was responsible for it and cleaned up after it if it did its business. The dog lay down beneath the table, happily waiting for scraps from his new master.

Ratchis motioned down to the dog, "This is my new friend, Chance!"

The table was silent.

"That's a bad name, Ratchis," Jeremy said. "Trust me."

Martin just glared at Ratchis, while Jana stood and left the table, just as the food was being served.

"See what you did?" Jeremy said, pausing to shove food into his mouth. "Now she's gonna put a spell on you."

It was silent for a moment.

"Could someone go tell Jana to come down before her food gets cold," Ratchis said.

"Oh, I get it," Jeremy said, his eyes widening. "This way you can get have Jana's meal. That was devilishly clever of you."

Ratchis glared at the Neergaardian.

"Go ahead! Eat it! Eat it! Eat it!" Jeremy egged him on.

Ratchis just went back to his own meal. Eventually, Jana and Martin returned, just as Kazrack came into the inn and took a seat with his companions and motioned to the inn-keeper to bring him some food.

Ratchis' dog leapt up and started shoving his snout in the dwarf's crotch; Kazrack pushed him away playfully. The dog barked.

"Hey!" the inn-keeper yelled.

"Stop," Ratchis grunted. "The innkeeper is nice enough to let me bring him in. Let's not repay his kindness by being difficult."

"Nice dog," Kazrack asked, patting it on the head. "What's its name?"

Jana, Martin and Jeremy looked up from their plates.

Ratchis paused, "Kwa!" It was obviously an orcish word.⁴²

"Ugh," Kazrack frowned. "I'll call it 'dog'. Nice dog!"

Jeremy told the others what he had learned from Old Man Carson but added that the man's testimony might be suspect because of his vision. He also added that the amount of snow that had fallen since the sighting would make looking for tracks impossible.

"If it hadn't left tracks we would have had evidence that it was an illusion," said Martin.

⁴² *Kwa* translates roughly into common as "luck" or "chance".

“Well, we’ll never know now,” Kazrack said.

“Has anyone seen Beorth today?” Martin asked.

“Only when I first left on my errands this morning,” said Jeremy. “But when I returned this afternoon he wasn’t around.”

As Ratchis had finished his first course, he went up to the room he and the Ghost-hunter had been sharing and looked around. He found Beorth’s sword was still in its scabbard on the bed, but his quarterstaff was gone. The paladin’s pack was still there, but his fur cloak and jacket were gone, as was his armor. Looking through the bag, Ratchis also noted that Beorth had taken his soap, razor and prayer shawl.

The half-orc came downstairs to find Martin ending a chat with Wilson the Innkeeper. The two of them returned to the table.

Ratchis reported what he had found, and Martin added, “Wilson said that Beorth left sometime early this morning soon after we did.”

“Where did he go?” Jeremy asked.

“The innkeeper said he left with two figures, he guesses men, dressed as monks, and not for the weather, in thread-bare cloaks, and wearing sandals,” Martin explained.

“Why did he leave without saying anything?” Kazrack queried.

“Wilson said, Beorth seemed to leave with them of his own accord,” Martin replied.

Jeremy looked to Ratchis, “Was there a note in his room? You know, a piece of paper with writing on it?” The Neerguardian pantomimed writing.

“I know what a note is!” Ratchis shouted.

“Hey! How do I know what you know?”

They said he left of his own free will?” Kazrack mused. “What if he was ensorcelled?”

“Well, what are we going to do?” Martin asked. “Should we go looking for him?”

“The first thing we are going to do is keep this to ourselves,” Ratchis said. “With people like the Glaive running around we don’t want the locals thinking one of our companions has wandered off.”⁴³

Everyone nodded.

Ratchis continued, “I am going to finish eating and then I’m going to look to see if I can find his tracks, we’ll make a choice based on that.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Kazrack. “I’d like to see how you do that.”

“Do you think you can cast your spell and ask where he is?” Jeremy asked Kazrack. “You mentioned something like that once.”

“Well, in the morning I’ll throw the stones, if Beorth does not return,” Kazrack said. “We cannot abandon our friend.”

⁴³ The party discovered the Glaive was a bounty-hunter in Session #18.

“But we cannot abandon the gnomes either,” Ratchis said.

“But Beorth might be in more immediate danger,” Kazrack said.

“We don’t know how immediate the danger is for the gnomes,” Ratchis said. “And I think Beorth would not want to know that more gnomes were hurt or killed because of him.”

“Point taken,” said Kazrack. “But tomorrow the stones will tell me what I need to know to make my decision.”

After dinner, Ratchis and Kazrack went out back through the door the innkeeper had said Beorth and the two strangers had left the Golden Plough. The half-orc ranger found the track easily, and he and the dwarf (and the dog, Kwa) followed them along the southern edge of town and to the eastern side, that overlooked the bluff that was littered with cave entrances. Here the snow had melted all morning, making frozen trails down the bluff to the plain beyond.

“They went down this way,” said Ratchis. “I think. But is it no good, I am not going to find good tracks here.”

Meanwhile, Martin had dragged Jeremy outside to help him practice with his illusions.

“I am going to make some opponents appear, and I want you to fight them and critique my control of them, so I can get better at convincing people,” Martin explained.

Martin made a replica of Ratchis appear, and Jeremy half-hearted tried to engage it.

“It is hard to do when I know it isn’t real,” said Jeremy. “But I think Ratchis is not a good choice, because someone so big is going to have a broad and powerful swing. But the little thrusts you have him do so as to not actually make contact are not convincing.”

Martin dismissed the illusion. “I will try something else, perhaps Beorth.”

“Can you make something else?” Jeremy asked. “Can you make...women?”

Martin raised an eyebrow.

“Aside from the other issues, they are not tangible,” the Watch-Mage answered.

“I guess not, or else wizards would never leave their towers,” Jeremy replied, snickered and coughed. “But what I meant was could you make Maria? She could fight.”⁴⁴

Suddenly Jeremy’s mouth dropped open. “Wait a minute! How do I know Maria was ever real to begin with?”

“Huh?”

“How do I know the inn is real? Or you are real? Or anything? The world could be an illusion!” Jeremy reeled.

Martin sighed, “Don’t think about it too much.”

“Okay,” Jeremy replied and readied his sword. Martin waved a hand, tossed a bit of fleece into the air and spoke three arcane words and a translucent humanoid thing appeared before Jeremy.

“Hey! I said Maria!”

⁴⁴ The party met Maria at the Royal Banquet in Gothanium castle in Session #12.

Jeremy and Martin did this for a while longer until they were chased off the street by a town guard.

The party met back at the inn and bedded down for the night.

In the morning, Beorth had still not returned.⁴⁵

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Again, Kazrack marched out to a lonely place (out near the quarry) and found a large stone to sit upon and invoking the power of the dwarven gods he contemplated the fate of Beorth and what the party's best course of action might be, and then shook out the runestones from the bag.

He looked at them for a moment, and then took a deep breath, and began to move them into more regular patterns with his fingers as Beléar had taught him, seeking the underlying patterns, reading the runes on more than one level—for dwarven runes represent letters, important religious words that begin with those letters and also represent numbers. He allowed his instinct and wisdom to take over, and came up with this reading:

. . . To follow Beorth would be to accompany him on a leg of his journey towards Death, which would only hasten your own. . .

Kazrack made his way back into town, but decided to see the smith about getting his armor repaired, and perhaps purchasing a set of smithing tools. He entered the claustrophobic shack that was adjacent to the actual smithy, and the smith immediately roared, "Get out!"

"Have I come here at a bad time? When should I return?" Kazrack asked.

"Never!"

"I've never met you before, what have I done to offend you?" the dwarf asked, genuinely curious.

"Just get out! We don't serve your kind here!"

"My kind?"

"Grubbers! Get out!"

Kazrack let out a sigh and walked out, cursing the smith under his breath.

The dwarf met up with the others back at the inn.

"Did anyone notice anything unusual about the smith?" he asked.

"He seems a rather unpleasant fellow," Martin said. "One might even say a narrow-minded bastard."

Ratchis nodded.

"What did your rocks say?" Jeremy asked.

"Runestones!" Kazrack insisted, and then relayed what he had learned.

"I am not sure what to make of this message," the dwarf said. "I am unafraid of death. If I have to die to save

⁴⁵ **DM's Note:** Beorth's player was a professional dancer and between from around Thanksgiving to just after Christmas, his availability to play was limited as he performed in countless showings of the Nutcracker.

Beorth, or if retrieving him means I have to hasten my own death, then so be it.”

“Divination’s such an inexact science,” commented Martin.

“I question if we should go to our deaths at all,” said Ratchis.

“We have other responsibilities,” added Martin.

“As I said last night, would Beorth want us to risk the village of gnomes to save him?” Ratchis asked.

“I don’t think so,” said Jana.

“Sometimes it doesn’t matter what the person would want, but what is right,” Kazrack said.

“Is it not right to save these innocent gnomes?” Ratchis asked the dwarf.

The dwarf was silent for a moment, “You are right.”

So, it was agreed that the party would go *Aze Nuquerna*, after Martin went to the smith to try to purchase the smithing tools for Kazrack, as he was human. However, even after making sure that Martin’s “pig-thing” was nowhere around, he would not part with the tools for less than 22 pieces of silver, which was too rich for the party’s blood. Martin also arranged with Wilson the Innkeeper for Beorth’s things to be put in storage with a note for the paladin telling him where the party had gone should he return.

Ratchis, Jana, Martin, Kazrack and Jeremy (followed by Kwa the dog) began the two hour march southwest of the Alderman’s manor towards the elven enclave. Ratchis took the lead, trudging through the deep snowbanks that occasionally blocked the game trail they followed. He also tried to keep his new dog in line, as it kept leaping about him in circles, barking and running into the brush whenever he heard or smelled something.

“That dog is dumb,” Thomas said to Martin mentally.

“He’s just not as smart as you, Thomas,” Martin replied.

Thomas began to sing in Martin’s head like a child, “Dumb dog! Dumb dog! It’s a really dumb dog!”

Eventually, Ratchis got Kwa to walk beside him, but had to give a little angry shout when it looked like he might try to take off again.

“My father used to say you need to hit a dog to train him,” Martin called. “Or he’ll never learn.”

“That’s true of children as well,” commented Kazrack.

“My father said that as well,” Martin said.

“The next time I am teaching you two how to survive in the wilderness I will keep your suggested training methods in mind,” Ratchis said testily. “Now be quiet, we don’t know what we are getting into.”

They continued to march, and had just crossed a narrow stream, that seemed colder than anything they had ever encountered, when Kwa’s head jerked up and tilted to one side. He stopped moving, and when Ratchis noticed he stopped as well. The others continued to walk, but suddenly halted as they caught up.

“What is it, Kwa?” Ratchis asked gently.

The dog began to whimper and back up slowly.

“Be alert everyone,” Ratchis hissed, pulling the gnomish warhammer looking around. Kwa let out a yelp and took off past the party.

Martin tried to grab the dog as he passed but stumbled into a bush instead and there he was face to face with a large white wolf that sniffed and growled at him.

“Oh my!” the Watch-Mage stumbled backwards. “A wolf!”

“Don’t make any sudden moves,” Ratchis suggested, and Martin froze.

The wolf stepped towards the Watch-mage, coming out of the bush. Its white fur was darkened with mud, and suddenly it popped out of view and re-appeared beside Ratchis, sniffing and growling.

“Janx!” Jeremy cried.

“You know this animal?” Martin asked bewildered.

“Yeah, his master, or whatever, is an elf girl we helped when he was sick,” Jeremy explained. “If he is the same...blink dog, that’s what they’re called.”

“Janx?” Ratchis put his hand out slowly towards the big dog. “Are you okay? Do you remember us?”

The white wolf-dog sniffed again and let out a yelp and howl, and then did that half-leap/half-prance dogs do when excited.

Ratchis went to pat the dog on the head, and it reared back and growled again.

“Sorry,” Ratchis said to Janx. The half-orc turned to the party. “I think it is Janx.”

At that moment, the white dog popped out of view again and reappeared next to Jeremy.

“How does it move like that?” Martin asked.

“Magic, I guess,” said Kazrack. “I bet we are near the elven place and Tirhas is there.”

Ratchis stepped over to the dog, “Is Tirhas around?”

Janx tilted his head and let out a low mournful howl.

“I think Tirhas is in trouble,” Jana said, sarcastically.

“Take us to Tirhas, Janx,” Jeremy urged, and the blink dog took off through the brush to their right, and the party took off after him.

The blink dog led the party to a huge sunken clearing, in which there was a small lake of crystal blue water, perfectly bordered by nearly three feet of snow. Narrow trails in the deep snow seemed to have been shoveled out and led about the lake to and from a huge structure to the south end of the clearing.

It was a fortress of some kind, made of tall logs and set upon a tall stone foundation. The roof was taller than the embankment the party stood upon taking in the sight, but there was definitely a lookout post on each of the front corners, and two sets of steps perpendicular to a broader set that led to an alcove where the front doors stood closed. The rest of the structure was hidden in an area thick with trees and brambles, covered in deep snow, giving the impression it was half-buried in the earth. The steps and the area immediately around them was completely cleared of snow.

Janx comically slid down the embankment, and the party followed, trying hard to keep their balance.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Jeremy said, softly.

The party slowly approached, and as they got closer, Janx fell further behind in the rank, seeming to have trepidations about approaching the place.

They could now see an elf standing on the eastern lookout above them looking out over the field. The figure’s armor shone in the bright sunlight of mid-day, but he did not seem to move or note them.

“Hello!” Jeremy called, waving.

“We come in peace,” said Kazrack.

“We seek you council and aid,” called Martin.

The elf did not reply, but continued to stare straight ahead, as if they were not there.

“There’s definitely something wrong here,” Martin said.

“Yesssss, I think so,” commented Jeremy.

The party looked around. All was completely silent. Ratchis moved to the other side of the central steps and saw another elf up on that side’s look out—that guard did not seem to notice them either.

Ratchis returned to the others. “We should send an emissary to knock on the doors and speak for us,” Kazrack said.

“But we should not all go, as to not seem like we’re threatening,” Martin said. “I’ll go.”

“We’ll go with you, but a few steps behind, just in case,” Kazrack said, gesturing to Ratchis. “And then the others will come a few feet behind us.”

It was agreed.

Martin climbed the steps, with Ratchis and Kazrack behind him, and they noticed a large stone statue of a rough humanoid form, with a monstrous protruding face, a swollen lump on its forehead, and muscular arms and legs, crouched above the door. Above the statue in a silvery plaque were the elven letters: $\dot{\text{z}} \text{cd}\text{t}\text{y}\text{h}\text{b}^{46}$

“I never thought of elves as decorating with statues like that,” said Jeremy.

“Why not?” Kazrack replied looking back at the Neergardian. “Artwork is artwork.”

Martin paused about a quarter of the way up the main stairs, “I wish I’d studied elven. But no... I studied the goblinoid curriculum instead.”

“You can speak goblin?” Kazrack asked.

“No,” Martin replied and continued up the steps, or at least he tried. Before he knew what was happening the statue above the door was no longer there and a sudden shadow about him was getting bigger and bigger. He looked up just in time to see the statue, now an animate creature land atop him with clawed feet.

All went black for the Watch-Mage as he tumbled backward down a few the steps, blood pouring from his head. He was unconscious and bleeding to death.

⁴⁶ This reads Aze Nuquerna, which roughly translates to “*Over the Dark Pit*”.

The creature roared, and Ratchis and Kazrack drew their weapons.

Martin's body was still falling backward from the force of the gargoyle landing on him when it struck him twice with its stony clawed hands and slammed him once with the protrusion on its head.

It roared, and Jana stepped forward and spoke an arcane word and a ray of green light struck the beast. It bellowed again, and turned to Ratchis and Kazrack who came forward, standing over Martin's crumpled form.

Ratchis swung his mighty hammer at the living statue, but the thing was unusually quick and Ratchis over-extended himself, twisting his ankle. Kazrack on the other hand slammed his heavy flail head right onto the thing's face, a shot that would've crushed a man's skull. It had no effect at all.

The gargoyle grunted and clipped the dwarf across the top of the head with a stony hand. Jana spoke some words again and flicked her wrist at the thing and it reeled, putting its hands to its face.

"It's blind!" Jana called. "Finish it!"

The sound of Ratchis' and Kazrack's voices calling to their respective gods to grant their weapons a divine spark of magic could be heard, as Jeremy squeezed past them, coming in close and behind the gargoyle.

The thing sensed the dual-wielding Neergaardian and it swung around to bring all its attacks to bear on him, but Jeremy was too nimble for the gargoyle to strike through its blindness.

Again, Jana spoke a word while she cast her fingers open towards the gargoyle. It stumbled as if dazed, giving Ratchis a chance to slam it with all his might with his temporarily enchanted hammer. Kazrack smiled and took his opening at well, his flail shining as it chipped off a piece of the stone guardian.

The creature was now reeling and swinging wildly. Jeremy drove his long sword between the thing's legs and pushed with the hilt of his short sword, knocking it over. It struggled to get up, swinging at Kazrack and missing. Jana ran forward and pulled Martin from the fracas.

Ratchis lifted the warhammer in both hands over his head and brought it down on the gargoyle with a resounding crack. It wobbled and fell, and immediately tried to get back up again, even as cracks appeared near its joints and down its back.

"Natan-ahb has judged you and found you wanting!" The dwarf gave it the finishing blow and it crumbled into hundreds of little pieces.

Ratchis ran down to Martin's body on the lower stair where Jana was doing her best to stop his bleeding. The huge man knelt beside the Watch-Mage and laid a calloused hand on the fragile form.

"Nephthys hear my prayer and heal this brave man who fights in your name as surely as I do," Ratchis intoned, and in a second Martin the Green was coughing and coming back to consciousness.

He sat up slowly.

"Can you?" Ratchis asked.

"Huh?"

"Can you move on?" Ratchis offered him a hand.

"Oh...yes," Martin replied, being pulled up to his feet, shakily. "I just feel exhausted."

Jeremy and Kazrack were keeping watch with their crossbows drawn, but the elves on the lookouts still did not seem

to notice them.

Ratchis placed a hand on his belt of chain links and said aloud, "Nephthys grant me your strength!" and he felt his body surge with the might of a bull.

Ratchis and Kazrack examined the doubled doors, and pushing they found they were barred. They both began to push with all their might, and when a slight crack appeared between the doors, Ratchis slipped in his short sword in hopes of knocking out the bolt.

There was a bright flash, and a sizzling sound accompanied by the smell of singed hair and flesh, as both the dwarf and the half-orc cried out and flinched backward. Kazrack's beard was smoking.

"I think it was trapped," said Jeremy.

Ratchis roared and with a single mighty kick the doors flew open. He stopped, took a deep breath, laid a hand on Kazrack's shoulder and whispered, "Nephthys, please guard this dwarf so that he may see the glorious light of freedom always."

Kazrack felt the warmth of the divine healing energies enter him, and he and Ratchis stepped through the doors, with Jeremy right behind them.

They stepped through a narrow entry hall to a broader perpendicular hallway that seemed to run the full length of the fort's front wall. The floors and walls were lacquered wood. Torchlight and huge hearths in the southernmost wall of the rooms at the end were the only sources of illumination.

On either side of the long hall elves emerged from doors at the top of wooden steps that seemed like they likely went up to the lookouts.

"Go away," the elf on the left called. "You are not welcome here."

And even as the first elf spoke the second one joined him saying the exact same thing, but only slightly behind him. They spoke in flat even tones.

"We are taking no guests. No visitors are welcome," they nocked arrows in their short bows.

Ratchis called Martin forward and stepped toward the elf on the left.

"Take no step forward," an elf called to the half-orc, walking down the steps towards him.

"We do not want to hurt you," said the elf on the other side to Kazrack.

"What is going on?" Jeremy asked stepping through the entry hall. Jana took up the rear, and Janx decided to join them, appearing and disappearing among their ranks.

"Wait, we come in peace," Martin called back to the elf he faced, trying hard to sound reassuring.

"Do not come closer. Return the way you came," the elf said,

"We are looking for one of your kind, her name is Tirhas," Kazrack said to the elf on his side.

"I think they are ensorcelled," Ratchis said stepping forward.

"Ratchis! No!" Martin cried, and the elf in front of him let loose an arrow that cut a half inch of flesh from Ratchis' left side.

"Stop! We don't want to fight!" Martin cried, putting his hands up. "Ratchis, stop!"

Kazrack charged toward the elf he faced, "If possible, fight to subdue!" He sidestepped an arrow sent his way.

Ratchis charged as well, folding his arms in front of his face and chest, warhammer in hand. He was almost upon the elf when he heard it say "*sagitta magicus*". He felt the searing pain of something striking him, but he slammed his whole body into the elf, regardless the elf, flew backward falling on his rear end.

A third elf appeared at the top of the stairs and fired an arrow down at Martin who yelped and leaped backward out of harm's way.

Jana came around the corner to the right (past a metal ladder that seemed to go up into a crawl space above the entry hall) and flicked her wrist, blinding the elf Kazrack was approaching, and the dwarf slapped the elf's long sword out of his hand with his halberd.

The elves were tall and comely, with an even balance of soft and angled features, giving them a beautiful and haunting androgyny. However, they did not move with the speed and grace that the party has witnessed in Tirhas when they traveled with her briefly. These elves seemed distracted, or one might even say sleepy.

Jeremy came around the corner to back up Ratchis, while the blind elf backed away cautiously from Kazrack moving toward a dark hallway that led further into the fort.

As Kazrack wondered if he should stop him, he felt the bite of an arrow as still another elf appeared, dressed in muted blue and green, wielding a bow, at the top of the stairs.

The elf Ratchis had tackled stood up and moving with some modicum of grace reached for a pouch on his belt drawing out a handful of sand. He spoke a verbal component for a spell, while trying hard to not let Ratchis have an opening but it had the opposite effect. Ratchis dropped his hammer on the ground and slammed his two huge fists into the elf's face. Blood exploded from the delicate being's nose, and one eye was swollen shut as blood oozed out thickly from beneath it. The elf collapsed bleeding to the floor.⁴⁷

Jana prepared to cast her spell again, but the elf on the steps that had shot Kazrack dropped his bow and spoke the words "*sagitta magicus*." He pointed at the young witch and an arrow of light struck her dead on. She let out a cry, and her spell was interrupted.

Kazrack kicked at the blind elf's sword to make sure it was not picked up again.

Ratchis knelt at the side of the elf he had just struck and lay his hand on him.

"Nephthys, do not let this poor victim die from the treachery of a villainous sorcerer who charms them unwillingly."

The elf at the top of the stairs fired another arrow at the half-orc, but it went far too wide, and Ratchis did not even try to move.

End of Session #20

⁴⁷ **DM'S NOTE:** Somehow, Ratchis' player managed to roll TWO "Triple Total Damage" crits with his fists, meaning that all the extra damage became REAL damage, after subdual surpassed the elf's current hit points. Having *Bull's Strength* cast on himself didn't help either.

Session #21

Jana loaded her crossbow and brought it to bear on the elf at the top of the stairs, while Martin retreated further back into the entry hall.

Kazrack stepped up to his blind opponent who was slowly trying to get away, and with a low powerful blow, sent the elf flying off his feet. The elf scrambled on his hands and knees and felt around for his sword.

“Ratchis, I’ve got this guy. Cover my back,” Jeremy said as he made his way up the stairs, a sword in each hand. He came in with a sudden fury, but the elf nimbly avoided the blows, and riposted with a shallow cut to the Neergaardian’s wrist. Ratchis held his position, looking around, especially up the broad dark hallway that went to the right and further into the fort.

The elf at the top of the stairs on Kazrack’s side fired his bow at the dwarf and the shaft went clear through his calf, making the dwarf cry out loudly, but he was able to knock the sword out of the blind elf’s seeking hand.

Jeremy and his opponent continued to trade parries and feints, and seemed evenly matched, Ratchis turned from cautiously watching the hall to watch the fight for a moment, wondering how he could get up the narrow stair to the elf. Jeremy finally found an opening and shoved the hilt of his long sword into the elf’s gut.⁴⁸ Ratchis saw this and decided to check out the adjacent hall.

The blind elf crawled away and got to his feet, stepping towards the dark hall for a second time, with his hands out in front of him.

Kazrack made a run for the elf on the stairs, but the elf leapt down out of the way and the dwarf was forced to come back down and was able to catch the elf in the side of the head with the flat of his halberd’s axe head. The elf wobbled but continued to brandish his sword (having dropped his bow when he leapt). Jana, seeing an opening, fired her crossbow at the elf, but the bolt went wide.

“Those had better be blunt crossbow bolts you are using!” Kazrack threatened and heard movement behind him to the left. Another elf was emerging from the dark hall. He was taller than the others, and wore a cloak of bright green, and had bright blonde hair tied in thick braids.

“Reinforcements are arriving!” Kazrack cried.

Jeremy struck the elf again, as its reflexes slowed, but always he used the flat of the blade or struck with the pommel, not looking to kill these foes that were trying to kill him and his friends.

Ratchis suddenly turned, his face bright red with a sudden idea and he charged at the second staircase that must go up to a lookout and leapt up on the stairs and tried to bash the door. It held against his strength and weight.

Jana sensed this new elf coming towards Kazrack was not to be trifled with, and with an arcane word, a sickly green ray fired from her pointed finger and struck the new elf dead square in the chest. The elf shook it off and grunted.

Martin stepped back into the hall and loaded his crossbow.

Kazrack turned his halberd around and shoved the butt end into the gut of the elf he still struggled with, and then brought the flat of the halberd head onto the top of the elf’s head. It collapsed in a lump on the ground. The dwarf did not hesitate, making his way towards the newly arrived foe.

“Are you ensorcelled as well?” Kazrack asked him.

“Intruders are not allowed here,” the elf replied in a flat voice.

⁴⁸ **DM’s Note:** I usually describe fighting to subdue in this way, striking with the flat of the blade, the butt end of a weapon and in general trying not to hit as vital an area, but still strike hard.

“Okay, you are ensorcelled,” Kazrack said, grunting as an arrow from the new elf bit his shoulder.

There was an audible pop and Janx appeared beside the elf that Kazrack had just dropped, and the blink dog sniffed it.

Jana moved to Janx, while Martin ran into the room and took a position by the wall, training his crossbow on the elf fighting Kazrack. This new elf dropped his bow and pulled his sword, meeting Kazrack halfway. The dwarf tried his fancy disarming trick he had practiced so often, but this elf seemed too skilled a warrior to fall for it. Kazrack had to duck to avoid what would have been a skull-splitting blow in reply. Janx appeared behind the elf, snapping and biting to distract him from Kazrack a bit.

Meanwhile, Jeremy felt his own arms growing heavy as he and his elven opponent struggled on the stairs.

“What does it take to keep you down?” Jeremy cursed, as the door behind the elf burst open.

It was Ratchis! He had finally burst through the other door to the lookout and had run around and came up behind the elf Jeremy faced. The huge half-orc grappled the surprised elf and squeezed with all his might. The elf gasped and crumpled.

Jeremy and Ratchis came back down the stairs and could hear the combat from the other end of the hall echoing, but had not time to investigate, as yet another elf, in a cloak of silver and blue emerged from the shadows of the broad hall and fired an arrow that hung in Jeremy’s chain shirt for a moment before dropping down. The Neergaardian could feel the bruise swelling up in his ribcage.

Jana fired another ray of green light at the elf fighting Kazrack, but again the elf seemed to be made of stern stuff and shook off the effects of the enfeeblement.

Martin took the moment’s distraction to fire his crossbow at the elf, but the bolt went wide.

“Stop shooting at them!” Kazrack roared. “Tackle them! Throw stones at them! Do anything but shooting them with crossbows!”

“Sorry,” Martin said meekly, and slung his crossbow back on his back

“Our people should not be at war,” the elf in the green cloak said to Kazrack, as he parried blow after blow from the dwarf’s halberd.

“Uh, yeah... “ Kazrack replied, and then looked to Janx. “Janx! Grab him by the sleeve! Hold him!”

The dwarf tried to disarm the elf again, and this time the long sword went flying into the air and landed at the elf’s feet.

Jeremy scooped up the unconscious elf that Ratchis had beaten before and held his short sword to its throat.

“Shoot again and your friend gets it!” Jeremy said, throwing a wink at Ratchis. “Drop your bow!”

“Jeremy! Put the elf down!” Ratchis yelled and yanked the unconscious guard from Jeremy’s grip. He was gently laying him down, when the newly arrived elf did put way his bow and with a flick of sand and the word “*dormu*” a wave of drowsiness came over Ratchis and Jeremy.

Ratchis shook it off, but Jeremy swooned and fell to the floor.

Jana cast another spell, her face twisted into horrid visage as she clawed her hands forward and spoke an arcane word, but the magical fear dissipated even as it washed over the powerful elf, who moved deftly to grab his sword, but felt the heavy blow of Kazrack’s halberd blade, even if it were turned aside as to not cut him.

But the elf was back on his feet and slashed downward on Kazrack's foot even as he was still rolling up to a stable position. Blood began to pool beneath the dwarf.

Ratchis charged the spell-casting elf, and both his big hammy fist slammed into its face. The elf stumbled back, but did not fall, saying something in elvish and spitting blood.

"We're going to need a prisoner," Kazrack said, and Martin moved to tie up the unconscious elf in the middle of the floor. Jana stepped in front of him to cover him from the darkened hall as he tied up the elf.

Kazrack slapped the elf with halberd head again, using all his might, certain that the elf could take no more punishment, but he was wrong. The dwarf felt the bite of the elf's sword and all went black. He was bleeding pile of armored flesh on the ground.

"Damn," Martin cried as the dwarf dropped, but Jana just gritted her teeth and pulled out the club she had taken from one of the goblins that had fought what seemed long ago now.⁴⁹

Janx blinked over to stand over Kazrack's body as the elf moved towards Jana. The blink dog seemed unwilling to attack the elves but was doing everything it could to help the party.

Jana ran towards the elf swinging her club with both hands, but he leapt away deftly.

"Sorceress, why do you attack us?" the elf asked in his flat voice.

Martin looked up from where he was tying up the other elf, and spoke an arcane word, pointing at the elven warrior Jana faced, but no spell seemed to affect him.

Jana felt the bite of the elf's blade.

At the other end of the hall Ratchis grappled the elf before him and again squeezed with all his might until the elf went limp. He carried the elf over next to his kin and laid him down gently.

Ratchis could hear the yelling from the other end of the hall and threw a quick kick at Jeremy and then took off to help.

Jeremy sat up startled, unsure what had happened. He looked over at the second unconscious elf next to him and saw no one else around.

"Damn, I'm good," he said to himself, and got up to run down the hall to his companions. "Ratchis! Kazrack!" he yelled.

The elven warrior must have been tiring because Jana's club made contact and he grunted from the blow. Jana was not holding back at all.

Martin hurried over to Kazrack and began to desperately try to close the dwarf's wounds.

Jana's blow did not go unpaid, and again the sword cut her, making a deep gash in her right forearm. Ratchis ran up beside her, to draw the elf off. Jana took the opportunity to move out of the fight.

Martin seeing Jana was free to help with the dwarf, reached into his red leather bag and tossed from it a ball of fur that tumbled and grew into a gray wolf that bit at the elven warrior, but missed.

However, now outnumbered and seriously wounded, the elf turned and hustled away down the dark corridor. Janx finally took a snap at the elf to try to stop his escape but over-extended himself and plopped down on Kazrack's

⁴⁹ Jana took a club from the shaman of the Na-Sor Goblins way back in Session #3.

body.

Ratchis took off after the elf, and at Martin's command the wolf followed as well. They ran down a broad hall about ten feet wide, with ten-foot by ten-foot alcoves staggered on each side that held tall wooden statues. Ratchis ignored them and the wolf passed him within striking distance of the elf. However, the elven warrior spun around and drove his sword's edge deep into the wolf's shoulder. It yelped in pain, and Janx appeared on the other side of the elf, to block his escape.

Jeremy began to run down the hall as well, but Ratchis finished the fight, running in and ducking under the elf's attack and slamming two fists into the elf's face. It dropped.

Janx growled at the wolf.

Ratchis came back up the hall carrying the elven warrior, and the wolf followed at Martin's beckoning, but Janx disappeared and did not reappear.

Jana stabilized the elf, while Ratchis looked to Kazrack, stabilizing him with a *Cure Minor Wounds* spell. He then laid a hand on Jana and said, "Nephthys please lend your healing might to this young woman so we can flee this strange place."

"We need to get out of here," Martin said.

The others nodded.

"Ratchis, you grab Kazrack so I can grab one of these elves and bring them with us," Jeremy said.

"Grab the one that cast that spell on you," Kazrack suggested.

"What spell?" Jeremy asked.

"Don't you remember when you fell down?"

"No idea what you are talking about," and he scooped up the elf.

The party gathered their things and met by the entry hall.

"Wait," Ratchis said. "Why are we bringing an elf?"

"Kazrack said to grab a prisoner," replied Martin.

"And we can ask him what is going on at our leisure," added Jeremy.

"No, he'll just slow us down when he wakes up and could alert other elves to wherever it is we are going to hide out for the night because we are not going to make it back to town in this condition," Ratchis said.

"But maybe it this place that has him ensorcelled," said Jeremy.

"And maybe not," replied Martin.

"Just leave him," said Ratchis, and Jeremy put down the elf he was carrying.

Jana led the way out of the fort, but at that moment Jeremy cried out, "Wha-what is that?!?"

A translucent white eye about six inches in diameter was floating down the hall at them.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ This *arcane eye* was actually supposed to be invisible but the DM messed up, despite having read the spell description. Oops!

Ratchis put down Kazrack and stepped towards it swinging. The blow went right through it, and it never stopped moving passing through Ratchis himself. The eye stopped at Martin and wheeled back and forth and up and down examining closely.

“What is this thing?” Martin said aloud.

“You are not exactly inspiring confidence in us with your arcane knowledge, Martin,” Jeremy said, hustling after Jana. “Let’s get out of here!”

Martin moved to leave as well, and the eye followed him. Martin shooed at it, “Go away! What do you want from me? Leave me alone!”

The wolf stood there in entry hall confused.

“Wolf! Follow me, damn it!” Martin cried very annoyed, but the eye moved away and examined Jana who was waiting at the stop of the first stairway.

Ratchis ran past, the dwarf over one shoulder and the dwarf’s enormous pack over the other. He whispered a prayer of thanks to Nephthys for the great strength she gave him.

The party took off out of the clearing and into the woods. The eerie eye stopped at the bottom of the stairs and would not follow anymore.

They hurried as best they could through the deep snow back to the game trail.

“They got Janx!” Jeremy said, looking around. “Tirhas is going to be mad.”

“Does this group ever have an unquestionable victory?” Martin asked in an exhausted voice.

Ratchis scowled, “Let’s go as far as we can and then we’ll go a little further to as safe a place as I can find us to camp.”

Martin looked at the tawny wolf that followed at his side and opened his bag and called to it. The wolf leapt at Martin transforming into a perfectly tiny ball of fur that landed in the pouch.

“Disturbing...” Jeremy said in awe.

As it got dark, Ratchis took them off the game trail and into the deep woods. There was nothing he could do about tracks in the deep snow, but he hoped they might be overlooked in the dark.

He brought the party to a tall fir tree and he and Jeremy started shoveling and shoving the snow out from under it to make camp. In an hour they had a tent staked into the ground, and a small fire burning.

Jana tended Kazrack, and Jeremy cleared more snow, while Ratchis ran out and found for firewood. Returning with an armload a sudden rustle in the brush turned out to be Kwa. The dog chased him happily back to camp, barking and jumping.

Ratchis dropped the wood and grabbed the dog, holding its snout shut and very sternly saying, “No!”

The dog was quiet for the rest of the night.

The party discussed if they should go back to town in the morning or return to the enclave. A third option of resting a whole other day and night in this spot came up, but so did apprehension about the elves staging an assault on them.

“Did you see any signs that the elves patrol this area when you were hunting for firewood?” Jeremy asked Ratchis.

“No,” replied Ratchis. “But they’re elves, I wouldn’t expect to see any signs.”

“Well, if you were an elf, and you were on patrol...I know this is a stretch, but bear with me,” Jeremy gestured with his hands. “What would be the best way to approach this camp?”

“There is no best way. We’re in the middle of the forest. If they spot our camp, they’ll surround us and shoot us full of arrows,” Ratchis said, chewing on tough piece of jerky, and tossing a piece to Kwa.

“Well, I have some caltrops and I wanted to know the best place to lay them, but I guess any direction is as good as any other,” Jeremy said.

“Caltrops, huh?” Ratchis half smiled.

“I don’t really use them for this purpose. They’re more for, you know...” He nudged the half-orc with his elbow. “Angry husbands.”

“No, I don’t know,” Ratchis said, dryly and stood. “Go to sleep, I’ll take first watch, and you’ll have to take an extra-long watch after that.”

Anulem, 28th of Nuiet – 564 H.E.

In the morning, Ratchis prayed for Nephthys to grant him spells of healing, and soon enough Kazrack was stirring.

“Ugh, I hope Lehrathonar will teach me the secrets of where traps lie,” he said, as he struggled to get up.

“Just rest,” said Ratchis.

“Where are our prisoners?” the dwarf asked, craning his neck around.

“We don’t have any prisoners,” Ratchis replied.

Kazrack sighed, “I’m afraid we’re just going to have fight those elves again.”

Ratchis did not reply.

“Did we kill anyone by accident?” Kazrack inquired.

“Almost,” the half-orc replied.

“With your fists?” the dwarf asked.

“You’d better let someone else hold your hammer,” the dwarf said with a smile.

“Huh?”

“You do more damage with your fists,” and Kazrack let out a hard guffaw that immediately turned into a groan of pain as he held his side.

After a moment, he retrieved his prayer stone from his pack and laid his head upon it to pray and prepare spells.

Martin lay sleeping in the tent, unwilling to face the morning. But Thomas was hungry, and he scurried out of the tent and made his way over to where Ratchis was chewing on dried apple from a sack, and climbed up the behemoth

and on to the top of his rat's nest hair.

Kwa came bounding into camp from off doing whatever it is dogs do when they're alone and immediately noticed the squirrel, sitting on his master's head and chewing on a small piece of apple that the half-orc had given him. Kwa began to bark and bound atop of Ratchis to get at Thomas, who leapt with great fear, running back into the tent. The dog of course, followed.

"Help me! Help me!" Thomas cried to his bonded master.

"Whu...? AUGH!" Martin leapt up as his familiar crawled into his robes and Kwa suddenly leapt upon him shoving his drooling cold snout all over the Watch-mage.

"Stop! Kwa! Stop!" Ratchis leaned into the tent and dragged out the dog, who was barking like mad.

Martin crawled out of the tent and stood, "Well, I guess sleep is out of the question around here. What are we going to do?"

"I was thinking about that," said Jeremy dropping an armload of firewood. "You and Thomas are bonded right?"

"Why do you ask?" Martin said.

"Well, we could send the squirrel back to the elf place and have him look around and report back to you what he sees," Jeremy suggested.

"I'm not sending Thomas out to be killed, eaten or turned into squirrel shish-ka-bob. End of discussion," Martin said matter-of-factly, and sat down by the fire with his spellbook in his lap.

Kazrack joined the others around the fire, "I guess we are spending the day here."

"We'll re-gather our strength and replenish our spells and head back tomorrow," Ratchis said. "Maybe we can parley with them."

"Kind of too late for that," Jana said, scathingly.

"I don't think I'm cut out for this adventuring lifestyle," Martin said dejectedly.

"Well, when this is all over with you can settle down with you books," Kazrack said, trying to be comforting.

"I'm looking forward to it," Martin replied.

"Can I borrow Thomas for a little while?" Kazrack asked. "I want to train the dog to not go after him."

The dwarf held out a bit of dried fruit to the squirrel, which was sitting on Martin's shoulder.

"What does he want?" Thomas asked Martin.

"He wants to train the dog not to attack you," Martin explained.

"That dog is crazy! He wants to eat me! Kill it!"

"Here have some apricot," said Martin feeding him a piece.

"Mmmmm... Kill it! Kill it!." Thomas said, as he munched on his snack. "What does he need me for anyway?"

"I think Kazrack wants the dog to go for you so he can smack it around," Martin speculated.

“Oh! I want a ringside seat for that!” Thomas said, and leapt onto the dwarf’s head.

With Thomas sitting on his head and goading the dog with chirps and tail-flicks, Kazrack pushed the dog back and down repeatedly, saying “No!” very sternly. Ratchis, Jeremy, Jana and Martin discussed the situation with the elves.

“What do you think is the matter with them?” Jeremy asked.

“They are charmed,” said Ratchis.

“It would be very difficult to ensorcel so many elves for so long a period of time,” Martin commented.

“Well, I wouldn’t know,” Jeremy said.

“I want to go back to Thricia,” Martin grumbled miserably, trying to warm his hands by the fire, but the cold seemed to have nestled in his bones, unwilling to be moved.

Suddenly, Janx appeared in camp, and Kwa gave a yelp and disappeared into brush.

“I wonder why he’s scared of Janx,” Ratchis said aloud.

The albino blink dog stepped up to Ratchis and dropped a piece of sheer torn purple cloth on the ground.

“Janx, is that Tirhas?” Jeremy asked, walking up to the dog, who moved to keep a distance between himself and anyone else. He looked at Jeremy and cocked his head.

“Is Tirhas in there?” Jeremy asked the blink dog, and it growled and yelped in reply, bobbing his head up and down.

“Where did you find her?” Ratchis asked and began to trace a map of elven enclave in the snow with an ashen stick from the fire.

Janx cocked his head in the other direction, as Ratchis pointed to the sketch and asked, “This way? Or this way?”

The blink dog stepped back and barked.

“I don’t think he is smart enough to understand,” Kazrack whispered to the half-orc, and Janx growled at him.

“Well, he is obviously intelligent,” said Martin.

“Tirhas said he was intelligent and her friend,” Jeremy said. Janx looked at anyone who said the elf’s name.

“Well, that settles it,” Ratchis said. “We are going back tomorrow.”

“Maybe we should go back tonight and catch them unawares,” Kazrack suggested.

“We are in no shape to go back tonight,” Jana said.

“She’s right,” said Ratchis.

The day waned, and soon they were setting watches again.

Kazrack took the first watch. Jana and Jeremy took the second watch.

It was long and silent, and as it was winding down, Jana said, ‘I’ll wake Ratchis.’

“Uh, wait a second,” Jeremy said, touching the young witch’s shoulder. Jana had never heard such a tone in his voice and did not know how to interpret it. “Listen, I’d talked to Chance a lot, and I wanted to say... uh, I’m sorry

for your loss. I haven't had much of a chance... opportunity to tell you before now. I know you two had something special, and when it comes time to fight this thing that killed him, I want you to know that we're all right behind you."

There was a long awkward silence.

"Thank you," Jana said softly, and walked off to wake the half-orc.

Ralem, 1st of Dek – 564 H.E.

The next morning the party marched back towards Aze Nuquerna, accompanied once again by Janx, who popped in and out of view all around them anxiously.

"Where are we going?" Thomas asked Martin telepathically.

"Back to the elven place," Martin replied.

"Ooh, I don't want to go back there," said Thomas with a frightened voice.

"Neither do I," thought Martin sadly.

"Then why are we going? These people are crazy!"

Martin took the squirrel off his shoulder and gave him a cold stare.

"I'll shut up now," the familiar said and leapt back onto the Watch-mage's shoulder.

They came to the clearing again and marched steadfastly toward the front of the place. Again, they could see an elf standing on the lookout towers, staring straight ahead of him. They were sure another just like him stood in the opposite tower. The double doors at the top of the steps were now closed, not open as the party had left them a day and half before.

"Nephthys, grant this dwarf some shred of your endurance," prayed Ratchis laying a hand on his dwarven companion.

"Thank you," Kazrack replied.

"Look someone is coming to the crawlspace behind where the living statue used to be," Jeremy said.

"Come closer, so that we may speak with you," an elven voice called. It had an even tone.

"Are you and your kind still ensorcelled?" Kazrack yelled, taking a few steps forward, but not mounting the first step.

"You and your companions attacked us and did us harm nigh a day ago," the elf behind the opening only slightly wider than a murderhole said. The party could see the movement of his silhouette and a flash of bright yellow hair in the sunlight.

"We ourselves were attacked by your people," replied the dwarf.

"We were provoked and invaded," the elf said.

"Dwarves do not attack without provocation," said Kazrack.

"You must have read different history books than I have," said the elf, and despite the hint of humor in his words,

his tone displayed no emotion.

“We wish to speak to Tirhas,” Kazrack said. Ratchis stood to his left, and Jeremy and Jana were behind further to the right. Martin stood wiping sweat from his brow despite the cold wind of the winter’s day, behind all of them to the right, near the reflecting pool.

“She is our guest,” said the elf.

“We have reason to believe she may be hurt... If we could see her if even only for a moment,” Kazrack suggested.

“I’m afraid that would be impossible,” came a deeper voice from behind the curtain of wall. “She is deeply involved in an elven ritual of great importance and cannot be disturbed.”

“Who are you?” Ratchis called.

“I am a guest of these fine elves,” the obviously human voice said. “Why do you not come closer? Just up to the top of the first steps, so we can hear each other clearly.” The man had a soft, but masculine voice, reassuring, but haughty at once.

“I think we can hear each other just fine,” called Kazrack. “Unless you’d rather come out and talk to us. We promise not to attack. No tricks.”

The man laughed. “I guess to gain trust one must give it, but still just one of you and at the top of the first step. You have an Academy Alumnus with you. I will meet with him, but the rest of you must stand away. He can trust me.”

“How can we be so sure?” Jeremy called.

“Because, I am an Academy Alumnus, too. I am called Richard the Red.”

Martin’s jaw dropped to his chest.

“Wha- what are you doing here?” Martin stuttered.

“I am here on a mission for the Academy,” Richard the Red said. “Come up to the top step, and have your companions step away and I will come out and talk with you.”

“Do you not trust a fellow Alumnus?” Martin asked.

“You, I trust. Your companions I am not too sure about,” Richard’s smile shone.

The party discussed it and it was agreed. Martin climbed the lower steps, and the party stepped back about five feet. The double doors of the enclave opened with a groan, and a moment later, Richard the Red emerged. He was not overly tall, but had a stately posture when he walked, almost gliding down the stairs. His robes were varying shades of red, like the fire of a forge, and his hair was a dull red fire as well, liked heated brass. And it was long, shoulder-length, put back in a braided ponytail in the Thrician style.⁵¹ He had a thick beard, but trimmed close to his face, and bright blue eyes that shone like the ocean on a sunny day. Richard smiled broadly as he put out his hand to shake Martin’s. Martin the Green took his hand hesitantly. He did not smile.

“I heard the Watch-Mage of Gothanius died recently,” Richard said, his face becoming grave only for a second. “Did I hear wrong?”

“You must mean Tom the Silver,” Martin replied. “He did die. I am his replacement in the interim before the Academy chooses a more permanent replacement. Actually, I am quite surprised to find another Watch-Mage here. I

⁵¹ In Thracia it is common and fashionable for both men and women to wear their hair long, and have either one long braid, or a few smaller braids.

was certain I was the only one to be sent here.”⁵²

“Well, they do not always tell us what all our brethren are doing, especially not a less experienced more recent graduate. When did you graduate? Five Sixty -One?”

“Five Sixty-Three,” replied Martin.

“Then you probably knew my son, Gregori,” Richard said with a smile. “He graduated in Five-Sixty. They tell me he was given the color brown. Gregori the Brown.”⁵³ I have not seen my son in too long.”

“Yes, I remember him,” said Martin. “He was two or three years older than I was, so I did not know him well.”

“So, look,” Richard put his hand on his hip. “I’m going to assume that your mission is less important than mine. So why don’t you move along. I have everything under control.”

“Under control? Whatever do you mean?” Martin asked. “What is going on here?”

“I am not at liberty to tell you. I’m sorry,” said Richard. “All I’ll say is that it is a joint venture between the Academy of Wizardry and the elves of Tempesta.”⁵⁴

“Well, we came here to consult with the elves, and to find an old ally of my companions,” Martin explained. “I’m afraid we have to speak with the elves, especially since they seem to be acting strangely.”

Richard did not seem to be listening, he was looking past Martin’s shoulder at Ratchis and Kazrack, who were inching forward and were whispering to each other.

“Hey!” Richard yelled. “I thought we agreed you’d step away.”

“We did step away!” Kazrack yelled.

“Then keep it that way,” Richard said. “I want to trust you, but let’s not do anything stupid, okay?”

“Perhaps if you just tell me what you are doing in a more general sense, we could figure out some compromise. Perhaps I could even help you,” Martin suggested.

“I doubt you could do much to help me,” Richard said with easy arrogance.

“Or at least let us see the elf maiden,” Martin tried.

“I said that’s impossible,” Richard said. “She is involved in a delicate elven ritual. She cannot be disturbed.”

“Then let us come in. We’ll wait,” offered Martin.

“I am charged with making sure this thing gets done uninterrupted. I cannot just allow a pack of strangers into this sacred conclave and risk it,” Richard said. “Look, you’re not in the Academy anymore. You have to understand that not everything is so easy or cut and dry as they would have you think. The Academy prepares you for your true learning: the experience you gather out here in the real world.”

“But...”

⁵² *Tom the Silver* is the former Watch-Mage of Gothanuis. Among the things Martin the Green was supposed to discover while in the Kingdom of Gothanuis was more information about how he died.

⁵³ *Gregori the Brown* was actually a founding member of the adventuring band known as *the Oath*, but interestingly he was not a member at the same time as *Escher of Fallon*. (See Sessions #5 and #6).

⁵⁴ *Tempesta* is the island homeland of the elves of Aquerra, due east of the Black Islands Barony.

“As a Watch-Mage of experience and authority I am asking you to defer to me in this matter and take your companions and go,” Richard said, frowning.

At that moment, Ratchis and Kazrack were quietly counting to three. Ratchis had cast a *Detect Magic* and noticed the elf behind the murderhole and the one up on the left lookout had the aura of enchantment on them.

Ratchis charged at the Watch-mage. “Martin, get out of the way!” he yelled.

“You left on two!” Kazrack yelled, coming up behind the huge half-orc. However, his stumpy legs did not take him far enough.

Ratchis had already pushed past Martin and slammed two devastating punches on Richard the Red, who groaned in pain.

Richard the Red stepped back and suddenly in his hand there was a golden wire bent into a cup-shape on one end. He waved the other hand over it and chanted, “*Levessess!*”

The Watch-Mage began to ascend straight up into the air, coming to a stop twenty feet up.

“Ratchis! What are you doing?” Martin stepped back agape, a look of horror coming over his soft boyish face.

Jeremy moved up the stairs, passing Kazrack who was yelling, “The elves are ensorcelled.” Arrows came hailing down from the lookouts and from the central murderhole above the door. They bit at Jana and Jeremy, the latter of which had paused to load his crossbow. Jana ducked behind the stone steps, seeking cover.

“Argh!” Martin held his head in his hands. “You’re an idiot!” He then looked up at Richard the Red. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why they are doing this. Let’s talk more... Um...”

“Looks like the Academy isn’t so good at picking its charges anymore,” Richard said, sardonically.

Kazrack poured on the speed and taking steps two at a time ran up the upper central stair for the double doors which were still ajar, going straight for the elves that stood just within them.

“I was hoping it would not come to this,” Richard said, and he whispered an arcane word and gestured. Below him appeared a flat plane of white light and he quickly descended into it. He and the disk of light disappeared with a flash.

“Why are you doing this?” Martin whined.

“Prove these elves are not ensorcelled,” Ratchis yelled at Martin, scathingly.

Jeremy took off after Kazrack and came through the doors, crossbow in hand. The dwarf was already facing two elves, whose blows he deftly avoided despite the fact that he had left himself open to a flanking attack.

There was a popping sound as Janx appeared beside Jeremy who was coming to Kazrack’s aid.

“You cannot penetrate the sanctity of our compound,” both elves were saying in their flat voices that seemed to echo each other.

“Martin, look at those elves. Can you tell me they are not ensorcelled?” Ratchis cried.

“I can’t do this. I can’t,” Martin was gibbering incoherently, still trying to find the words to say that would make this nightmare end, but the flying arrows were enough to scare him into action. As he ran past Ratchis to go back down the stairs and take cover with Jana, the huge half-orc slapped the Watch-Mage hard in the side of the face.

“We have to help the elves!” Ratchis screamed. Martin whimpered and crouched beside Jana.

“These people are crazy,” commented Jana, peeking over the steps. But if she meant the elves or her companions was unclear.

Ratchis snorted in disgust and ran up the steps towards the doors, dodging missile fire the whole time.

“Remember these creatures are ensorcelled. Do not try to kill them,” said Kazrack, stepping past the two elves, spinning around, and sending one’s sword flying into the air. The dwarf was now past the entry hall, back into perpendicular hall the last battle had occurred in.

He felt something wash over him, but he shook off it, his dwarven resistance to magic serving him well. He turned and saw Richard the Red still levitating, but in the room with the stairs to the lookouts and the large hearths.

“Ha! Ha! Foul mage! Rivkanal protects me from foul magics such as yours!” the dwarf laughed aloud.

Jeremy slammed his crossbow into the face of the now unarmed elf. He heard the crunch of the elf’s nose as it stumbled back stunned.

Ratchis joined the fray, hammer in hand and immediately felt the bite of the other elf’s sword.

“You don’t know what you are getting into,” called Richard the Red.

“Wizard, these elves are charmed!” Ratchis insisted.

The unarmed elf stepped away from both Ratchis and Kazrack and tossing some rose petals in the air he said, “*Dormu*”. Kazrack shook off a wave of drowsiness.

Outside, Jana and Martin were pinned down by arrow fire, so Martin waved an open hand before him and spoke an arcane word. Now, an invisible shield hovered before him. Jana stood and pointed at the elf on the left lookout. The archer stumbled back disappearing from view. Martin took his chance and ran for the cover of the archway above the double doors.

Ratchis ran towards Richard the Red, yelling “These elves are charmed!” Kazrack was close behind.

“It is no concern of yours!” the Watch-Mage replied, sounding annoyed. “The agendas of the Academy are above the likes of you!”

“*Nubes de Foetor!*” cried Richard punching into the air with his right hand that crushed a rotten egg while pointing with his left. A billowing cloud of green gas unfolded from nothingness about forty feet ahead of him, filling most the room and the entire hallway.

Ratchis and Jeremy felt their stomach rumble as the noxious gas filled their lungs and in less than a second both of them were puking up trail rations and bile. One of the elves Jeremy had been fighting also began to lose his lunch, but Kazrack’s dwarven constitution allowed him to fight through the nausea.

Jeremy stumbled out of the gas down the hall to the left, still puking, while Ratchis left his own trail of vomit as he left the cloud as well, still trying to get to Richard the Red.

“As you can see, I am not trying to hurt you,” Richard the Red called. “Please just leave.”

Kazrack broke through to the other side of the cloud and seeing Richard floating there he dropped his halberd and pulled out a grappling hook to which he still had rope attached.

“Don’t make me kill you to free these charmed elves,” the dwarf said angrily.

“This is obviously an eventuality that calls for a different approach,” Richard the Red said cryptically, and lifting the

edge of his cloak, whipped it around himself and faded from view.

“Your invisibility tricks won’t work on me!” Kazrack cried, tossing the grappling hook with all his might to where the Watch-Mage had been floating. The hook just sailed through the spot and landed on the ground.

Kazrack cursed and then cried aloud in pain, as another elf appeared on the stairs to the lookout and fired an arrow at the dwarf, which sunk deep into his side, the cold metal arrowhead actually glancing off a rib, and bouncing away, taking a large chunk of flesh with it.

Jeremy had recovered but still struggled with the no longer unarmed elf (he had drawn a dagger). This elf had avoided the *stinking cloud*. Martin had made it to the relative safety of the doorway. Jana ran up the stairs after him and straight through the doorway, unknowingly passing beneath the trapdoor that led up to the lookout spot that the central murderhole was, and the elf above was waiting, firing an arrow straight down, that was deflected by her collarbone, but was painful and bloody nonetheless. She threw herself against the opposite wall, trapped in the entry hall by Richard’s spell, which still had not dissipated.

Kazrack now had his halberd back in hand and went for the elf on the stairs from the ground level. But the elf was too nimble and leapt away from the blow and off the stairs, striking the dwarf with his sword (having dropped his bow seconds before). By this time, Ratchis, who had been leaning against the hearth feeling his stomach and intestines spasming, recovered. He turned away from the hearth, which he noted had a mantle covered with a collection of mundane objects and ran for the elf fighting Kazrack. Gritting his teeth through a deep sword blow to his hip, he slammed two punches into the elf’s face.

“Oh, no. Not again...” the elf murmured as he collapsed into an unconscious lump on the ground.

The elf above Jana and Martin, who now eyed the trapdoor warily, dropped sand through the open hatch and called, “*dormu!*” Jana felt a wave of drowsiness come over her that she could not resist. In a second she had slid down the wall she had been leaning against, asleep.

Jeremy was smiling having seen the elf he battled wobble when the Neergaardian punched him in the face with the hilt of his sword, and blood had exploded in crimson streams from the elf’s delicate nose. But the elf was not giving up, and dagger flashed twice, making shallow cuts on Jeremy’s wrist and forearm.

Martin shook Jana awake.

End of Session #21

Session #22

“We have to find Tirhas,” Ratchis yelled, and began to run up one of the broad corridors that led further into the fort. Kazrack followed on stumpy legs.

Janx popped into existence beside the elf Jeremy was still struggling with, trying to distract it, but not actually biting or clawing at it.

“About time I get some help,” Jeremy quipped.

Martin examined the green cloud of noxious gas, trying to identify the spell that caused it, but failed.

Jeremy was able to knock his foe in the head with the pommel of his sword, staying clear of its proficient dagger-work, but still his opponent would not give up.

The cloud disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, and Jana risked passing by the trapdoor in the ceiling again and felt the bite of another arrow. She fell to the ground, blood pouring out of her at an alarming rate. Martin moved his magical *shield* to above his head with a thought and quickly pulled Jana out from under the trapdoor and into the perpendicular hall where Jeremy was cursing the elf he battled.

“Ratchis! Kazrack! Where are you?” Martin called desperately.

Ratchis noticed that the broad hallway had staggered alcoves, with tall wooden statues in them of elvish figures. He slowed his jog to look at one more closely. They seemed to be made of living wood, but still had clothing painted on them. It was strange to the half-orc, looking at the statue of an elven maid of pale blue skin. He shrugged and ran on, Kazrack not too far behind him.

“Gee, I hope these things don’t come to life that one at the door did,” Kazrack commented as he stole a glance at the statues as he ran past.

The broad hall connected with another hall that ran the width of the fort, and Kazrack took a left down this new hall, and saw two sets of earthen steps going downward towards each other, with a tall statue of an muscular elf dressed in green, wearing a crown, wielding a spear, standing beneath an arch of elven runes carved into the stone wall behind him.



55

The two companions moved towards where the other broad corridor met the rear hall they had found. It had to lead back to the front.

“We should try and get back and rejoin the others if we can. Hopefully this does lead around,” Kazrack said to Ratchis who was a good twenty feet ahead of him, but he suddenly heard a sound on the steps they had passed, and he looked back over his shoulder. An arrow whizzed past him and he flinched. Another elf had appeared on the top

⁵⁵ This reads: Cieladorn banar en sanial Geled-Tread.

of the stairs. He turned around and ran up to deal with the new opponent.

The elf leapt aside dropping his bow and drawing his sword, avoiding the blow of Kazrack's halberd. While Ratchis, hearing the sound of combat behind him snuck back down the corridor quietly. He came around the corner, but the elf and Kazrack were in clear view. There was no way the half-orc could sneak up on the new opponent, so he merely joined the melee. The elf was overwhelmed by the sudden appearance of a second combatant, and Kazrack took advantage of the moment's distract and sent the elf's weapon flying out of its hand, dropping on the top step. The elf stepped back and tossing a handful of sand at the dwarf called out "*dormu!*" The dwarf did not even feel drowsy.

Ratchis swung his powerful fists at the elf, but the elf was bobbing and weaving, avoiding the blows. Kazrack swung his pole-arm at the elf's feet, but overextended himself towards the steps, and in a frantic attempt to keep his balance, only managed to fall in place instead of tumbling down the stairs.

Again, the elf retreated, "*Dormu!*" This time the dwarf could not resist, and he fell asleep right where he lay, snoring loudly.

Ratchis took a step down the stairs and swung again with all his might, feeling the sharp chin of the elf against his knuckles twice. Head reeling, the elf ducked and grabbed his sword from the floor, but this allowed Ratchis an opening, slamming another blow against the back of his head.

The elf barely had time to look up when the second fist came down on his eye. He tumbled down a few steps, unconscious.

Ratchis kicked Kazrack awake. The dwarf awoke with a snort.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Magic," Ratchis replied.

The dwarf stood and went down and hefted the elf onto his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" Ratchis asked.

"I don't want to leave it right here. Someone might see. Let's go back to the group," the dwarf said, and dropped the elf at the top of the stairs.

"I think I hear someone calling our names," Ratchis said, turning to hurry back to the others.

Kazrack collected the elf's weapons, as Janx appeared from around the corner. The blink dog sniffed the unconscious elf and popped down the stairs.

The dwarf looked after the dog for a moment, and then took off after the half-orc.

"Drop! It's for your own good!" Jeremy cried, and slapped the elf he fought across the face with the flat of his blade, drawing some blood, but finally succeeding in defeating him.

Martin was frantically trying to bind Jana's bleeding wound, but the blood just seemed to seep into everything, and would not stop.⁵⁶

Jeremy walked over to the Watch-Mage, as Janx popped out of sight and reappeared near the hall Ratchis and

⁵⁶ **DM's Note:** In Aquerra, it takes 1d10+10 rounds to administer first aid and the skill check is made at the end of this time. Needless to say, characters do not die at -10 hit points.

Kazrack had gone down, and ran that way.

“Martin, what happened?” Jeremy asked with concern in his voice.

“She was hit by an arrow,” Martin pointed up at the trapdoor.

“Is she alright?” Jeremy asked.

“No!”

“Can you help her?”

“No!”

“Where is Ratchis when you need him?” Jeremy said.

“Ratchis!” Martin called, cupping his hands about his mouth. “Ratchis! Kazrack!”

The Watch-Mage sighed in resignation and tore more strips of cloth from Jana’s skirt to bind her wounds. The bleeding slowed.⁵⁷

“Okay, I’ve got her wounds staunched,” Martin said, with a long exhale of breath.

“Good,” Jeremy replied. “Can she move?”

“No!”

“I mean, can you move her?”

“No!”

“Well, we need to do something about the elf up there,” Jeremy whispered, pointing up. “Can you flush him out?”

“I can try,” Martin said, pulling a piece of wool from the pocket of his blood-stained emerald robes.

In a second, an illusory Ratchis stood beside the Watch-Mage, and then ran to the ladder and clambered up. The elf above who was holding an arrow in wait for someone to do just that, let loose the shaft. It flew through the hulking figure with no effect.

Jeremy leapt upon the ladder and climbed up after the illusion, which disappeared as soon as it left Martin’s view, but now the Neergaardian was in the tiny space and pulled his short sword.

The elf dropped his bow and drew his own sword, just barely getting out of the way of a thrust from Jeremy.

“Why’d you have to draw a weapon?” Jeremy said. “Make this easy for once.”

The ringing of blades resonated from the tiny room as Jeremy and the elf struggled to get the upper hand on each other. However, Jeremy was quicker in a small space, and despite the elf’s parry, he was able to force him back against the wall, pressing him into an awkward position, and then slam! The flat of his blade slapped the elf in the neck.

“You like shooting from holes, huh?” Jeremy mocked. “You don’t seem to be doing so well in a straight up fight.”

⁵⁷ **DM’s Note:** Actually, Jana stabilized on her own. Martin had no ranks in healing and would have likely failed the check when time came to make it.

As the elf made a futile attempt to counter strike, Jeremy struck again, shoving the hilt of his sword into the elf's gut. The elf groaned in pain, but spied Ratchis coming up the ladder and struck an awkward blow with his sword against the half-orc, but Jeremy took the opening and the elf dropped unconscious.

The party collected themselves in the entrance hall.

"We need to find Tirhas," said Ratchis.

"Jana is really hurt," Jeremy said.

Kazrack laid a hand upon Jana's shoulder, and another on his bag of runestones about his neck, "Rivkanal, please give you protecting hand to this young lady who is trying to learn to do good in this world."

Jana coughed and opened her eyes.

"Take a moment to rest," Kazrack said, and then cast a spell of healing upon himself as well.

"Kazrack?" Martin asked. "Did you see where the wizard went?"

"He disappeared," Kazrack replied.

"He's probably still here, somewhere," Martin mused.

"I got the impression he wasn't going far," Kazrack said. "We'd better get moving. Jana, can you accompany us if you stay near the rear ranks?"

"I'll slow you down, but yes," replied Jana.

"She and Martin can be in the middle," Ratchis suggested. "Jeremy, you take the rear."

The party gathered themselves and made their way down the broad hallway, pausing only a moment to look at the tall wooden statues of elven figure, with elven characters carved behind them on the alcove wall.

"They seem to be growing out of the floor," Martin noted of the statues.

"I thought maybe these statues might be of elves that reside here," Ratchis said. "If we could read elvish, we might be able to discern their titles and ranks. We do not know what Tirhas' position is here, if any," Ratchis said.

"She seemed like more a wandering person. She may not have any real ties to this place," said Jeremy.

"I think these are elven gods or heroes," commented Martin.

"Let's continue, and explore the lower level," Kazrack said, eager to have earth and stone above his head.

The party made it to the rear hall and as quietly as they could crept down one of the two earthen staircases.

"Do you see any sign of Janx?" Kazrack asked Ratchis, as the half-orc kneeled way down to look for signs of passage.

"No, let's move forward down that corridor," Ratchis said.

The walls here where horizontal slats of lacquered wood set against earthen walls. The smell of fresh dirt filled the place and Kazrack took a moment to breathe it in and enjoy—and then returned to his usual vigilance.

They moved in a close line, as they carried no light source. Instead, keeping within touching distance of each other they crept along the low-ceiling corridor; a cold draft circling about their wet feet.

Only a few feet down they came to a small alcove with a wooden door. Kazrack signaled the others to wait and he snuck forward and listened, hearing the faint sound of movement and breathing.

He signaled the others to come forward, and drew Jeremy nearby, whispering, “Be ready, someone is in there.”

“I’m ready,” Jeremy said, grim-faced.

Ratchis threw open the door and Kazrack leapt into the dark room. Jeremy looked both ways down the hall trying to see in the dim light of lamps on either end of corridor.

The room was small, like a monk’s cell. A small hearth burned low in the opposite wall, and the air smelled of herbs. The dwarf held up a hand to Ratchis as he noticed a figure lying on a sleeping mat on the floor. The figure moaned softly. Ratchis walked over and kneeled beside it. It was an elf. The one had critically injured with his fists two days before. The elf’s face was swollen and black, and his head lolled back and forth.

“Remember, I can provide light if we need it,” Jana whispered, leaning her head in the door.

“We don’t need it yet,” Ratchis said, taking a last sad look at the elf he had been forced to beat that no one could see in the dark. “But be ready, we may need it at a moment’s notice.”

The party moved further down the long corridor and came upon large oaken double doors reinforced with iron plates gilded like leaves.

Again, Kazrack listened, and Ratchis joined him.

They could hear a sound like water dripping and echoing and perhaps an intermittent rush of air.

“Get ready everyone,” Ratchis said. “This could be—”

The doors opened.

An elf had pulled the doors open and stood to one side, as if to make room for the party to walk in.

They stood at the entrance of an immense chamber. The ceiling was open, but the thickest tangle of thorns, vines and branches covered it over, but some light did pour down, as did the drippings of melted snow that tumbled down into the dark recesses of whatever was below them. This room was an open shaft crossed by wide platforms of stone, one of which led to a large rock pedestal upon which three tall stone columns of oblong shape and rough unworked exterior. Kazrack could identify it as volcanic rock. The way it was pocked-marked showed where bubbles of air had escaped the magma. They were nine feet high, and each had a gemstone embedded in it at about a seven-foot height. They were flanked by braziers with tall flames burning in them.

Another elf stood with bow drawn at the other end of the platform the party stood at. There another set of double doors led out of the chamber. On the broader section of the crossing platform stood another elf, his face bruised, his bow drawn. Upon the pedestal stood Richard the Red, smiling. And behind him on a low stone slab lay the form of a maiden, with slight features—but not quite elfin.

And between them all stood four growling wolves, with streaks of red in their ashen gray fur. Their saliva steamed as it slathered the stone before them, and the cool breeze from below wafted the smell of sulfur from the beasts.

Ratchis took a step forward, warhammer in hand. Kazrack stepped in beside him, as the others leaned forward to see what the first two could more clearly.

“Perhaps, we should take this time to talk,” Richard the Red said, with a smile that shone even in the dim light of the braziers.

The braziers crackled softly, as cold air wafted down through the thorn-covered opening in the ceiling.

Ratchis laid a hand on Jeremy's shoulder and called to his goddess, "Nephthys, we may soon be in danger. Please heal this wild one so that we may be prepared for battle."

Kazrack walked past Ratchis and the elf that had opened the door and into the large damp chamber.

"I don't know what it is we have to talk about, unless you can explain why the elves upstairs were charmed," Kazrack said to Richard the Red, his smile broadened.

"Not so hasty," Richard said. "Why don't you come into the room where we can talk more clearly and in a civilized manner?"

"Why should we trust you?" Ratchis asked, stepping in. Martin stepped in as well.

"Why shouldn't you?" Richard asked. "If anything, I should not trust you. We had an agreement to talk before and you suddenly attacked me. Perhaps it is I who am foolish to trust you and give you another chance, but I have to admit I am biased by the presence of an alumnus in your ranks."

"So, what say you?" Martin said. "What do we have to discuss?"

"Like I said, not so hasty," Richard eyed Jeremy, who aimed his crossbow at the Watch-Mage from the doorway. Jana walked up beside the Neergaardian.

"Information does not come free," Richard the Red said. "I prefer a fair and equal exchange. Question for question. You ask and then I ask. One question at a time."

The party contemplated his offer in silence.

"Why should we?" Kazrack asked.

"You want information. I want information. We can fight and learn nothing, or we exchange information and try to deal with this diplomatically. Personally, I'd prefer to not fight," Richard replied. "Look, I will even dismiss the wolves as a sign of good faith."

With a wave of his hand the wolves disappeared in a puff of sulfuric smoke.

"Martin, were those illusions?" Kazrack whispered.

"I don't think so," Martin replied.

Martin, Kazrack and Ratchis conferred for a moment, and then agreed to the exchange.

"Okay, so we'll each get a turn to ask a question and answer it as completely and honestly as possible. Of course, you we can reserve the right to not answer a question, but that means the asker gets to ask a different question. I hope it does not come to that, however. You can start," Richard's smile never faded.

"Ok," said Ratchis. "What are you doing here with these elves?"

"I'm here to prevent these elves from doing something that they've been doing for a long time, that disrupts the power balance not only here, but across what is known of Aquerra," Richard replied.

"That is not a very clear answer," Ratchis said, gruffly.

Richard the Red sighed, "Looks like I am going to have to give away some of your secrets, guys." He looked to the elves that stood, bows drawn, with blank faces. "You don't mind, do you? I didn't think you would."

Richard let out a small laugh. “They are so agreeable! Anyway, have any of you ever heard of the *Novilustani*? You might know them as drow, or dark elves.”⁵⁸

“Dwarves tell such stories,” Kazrack replied.

“I thought they were a myth,” said Ratchis.

“Oh, they are not a myth. Trust me,” said Richard. “Anyway, this place was established to guard over an entrance to the Plutonic Realms and warn if the drow should seek to return to the surface, and to guard over a power that the elves feel that the dark elves should not get their hands on. I plan to allow the dark elves to re-gain this power.”⁵⁹

“What?!” Martin cried.

“Is that a question?” Richard said, calmly. “I’m sorry, but I do believe it is my turn.”

“Fine,” Kazrack said, grumpily.

“So, why have you come here? Was it only to find this elven maiden, or was there more to it?” Richard asked.

The companions looked at each other, and Ratchis spoke up, “We came seeking aid from the elves to help some gnomes to the north who need it against a common enemy.”

“I see,” Richard said, scratching his chin. “Is that it? All this trouble for such a simple thing.”

“Different people have different priorities,” Kazrack said. “Some people want to release evil in the world, others want to help innocent gnomes.”

Richard the Red laughed. “Your turn.”

“Let me first state that I am a priest of Nephthys,” Ratchis said.

“I guessed,” Richard said with a slightly mocking tone.

“How do you think it’s possible to convince us not to stop you when these elves are here to warn the against the coming of a great evil?” Ratchis asked.

“Because I can see a bigger picture than you can,” Richard said smarmily. “I learned in my adventures that the drow are gearing up for another attack on the surface. The elves have grown complacent, and they have lost their imagination when it comes to dealing with these kinds of crisis situations. The time of the elves is passing, and all they will leave us is the legacy of this evil. If they can’t or won’t do anything about it, I will.”

He paused, and looked at each of the companions in turn, trying to search their face for some kind of understanding.

“There is something about the society of the Novilustani you need to know,” Richard said in a patronizing tone. “They respect nothing but power and deceit. It is their small numbers and their constant in-fighting that keeps them in check. However, certain powerful families have accumulated power, and unless something is introduced to lead to another power struggle, we can expect an attack soon, perhaps as soon as 10 years from now. My plan is to allow them to have this great power and struggle over it. The dark elves will destroy their own power base and their assault could be delayed for hundreds of years, if not longer.”

Again, there was silence as the party contemplated the answer they received.

⁵⁸ Novilustani is the elven name of what are commonly called “drow” or “dark elves”. It means, “Children of the New Moon”

⁵⁹ The Plutonic Realms is the great underground world beneath the surface of Aquerra.

“So, here is a question for you,” Richard said. “What is the nature of the danger to these gnomes you mentioned?”

The three companions who were concerning themselves with the questioning conferred. Finally, Martin replied, “It is an internal struggle.”

“Is that all you are going to say?” Richard asked. “I do not doubt it is technically the truth, but how can I help you if you withhold important information from me. It would be unfortunate if your friends suffered for your obstinacy,” Richard the Red commented.

“That is all we can say on the matter,” Ratchis stated.

“Have it your way,” Richard said, sounding slightly annoyed.

“Our turn,” Ratchis said. “Please give us a moment to confer.”

“Of course,” Richard smiled.

Martin, Kazrack and Ratchis spoke in hushed tones for a few moments.

Martin spoke, “What evidence do you have that the elves will be unable to defeat the drow and that we should allow your plan to proceed in hopes the drow destroy themselves?”

Richard did not hesitate, “You have my word. I am sorry I have nothing else to offer you, but I am a wizard of the Academy, do you think I’d risk the release of such an evil unless I had reason to believe there’d be a greater good involved? Since men were running around in furs like orcs... no offense...”

“None taken,” Ratchis said.

“This place has stood since that time to watch for the coming of the Novilustani, but they are not prepared. Does not the ease with which I stand here prove that?” Richard said.

“Is that a question?” Kazrack asked.

“It was a rhetorical one,” Richard replied.

“What is all this really about?” Jeremy suddenly piped in, walking into the room while keeping his crossbow trained on Richard.

“I thought it was my turn to ask,” Richard said.

“It is. Ignore him,” said Ratchis.

“We usually do,” added Kazrack.

“Hey!” Jeremy exclaimed.

“Yes, I know,” Richard replied. “But do you see what happens if are too literal with this arrangement? We waste time with semantics instead of exchanging information. Regardless, my turn to ask: If I could offer you help with this gnomish internal struggle, as you call it, will you leave me to this mission? All you need do is wait here, and make sure no one else disturbs the delicate procedures by which I will accomplish my task, and then I will accompany you and aid in your mission.”

“I don’t think we know enough about what you are trying to do to agree with such a plan,” Martin said.

“And from the little we do know, I would say it is unlikely,” Ratchis added.

Richard the Red sighed, "that is truly unfortunate."

"Our turn," Kazrack said.

"Wait," Richard lifted a hand, his smile having faded to an emotionless visage. "I think I am done with this. I have nothing more to ask you if you are going to only give me vague or partial answers."

"You cannot expect us to simply leave these elves to your whim," Ratchis asserted. "At least the gnomes are free to defend themselves."

"Well, if you think it will help us come to a more peaceful situation, I will answer more questions, but do not expect me to be as forth-coming if you are not offering information in return."

"Who is that girl?" Jana asked, speaking up for the first time and pointing to the figure still lying on the stone pedestal.

"Oh her," Richard said. "She is a local girl who is helping me contain and control the power. It is a difficult prospect, but she will succeed with my help."

"And those wolves?" Jana asked. "I got the impression they were of a fiendish origin."

"The tools of the enemy can be used against them," Richard said, simply.

"Don't you think this has a chance of corrupting you?" Ratchis asked.

"No, they are under my control. They do what I say," Richard replied.

Again, there was tense silence. One of the elves let the tension down on his readied bow and shook his hand as if it had grown sore, but then returned to his readied position.

"Maybe I can send someone to fetch some food," Richard suggested.

"No thank you," replied Ratchis.

"Not hungry," said Martin.

"And why will this power lead to the dark elves' defeat?" asked Kazrack.

"I said because they'll fight over it," Richard replied in an exasperated tone.

"Did they once have this power?" the dwarf asked.

"In the Second Age," Richard said.

"Did it hasten their fall then?"

"Yes, and it will do so again. They will war among themselves for a long time."

"What will happen in the meantime? I mean, what effect with this war have on Derome-Delem?" Kazrack asked.

"Well, there will be some upheaval. This cannot be avoided, but some loss of life is necessary to staunch the death, destruction and suffering that is sure to follow if this menace is left unchecked."

"Where are all the female elves?" Ratchis asked. "All the elves we have seen here thus far have been male."

"There are only males here," Richard replied.

“And what is the matter with them?” the half-orc asked.

“Oh, they are fine,” Richard’s smile returned. “It is quite a simple thing. Yes, a simple thing.” The Watch-Mage paused, and his sense of pride was palpable in the air. “You see, they are in reverie.⁶⁰ They are dreaming, or at least they think they are dreaming and thus open to suggestion.”

“So, you are controlling these elves?” Ratchis asked, the anger growing in his voice.

“Controlling? No.” said Richard, his voice returning to his polite tone. “Actually, it is really ingenious. Let me take a minute to brag about it if you’ll indulge me. You see, in dreams, even the most irrational things make sense. For me to know what is best for them, for them to follow my suggestions would make no sense in waking life, but in dreams it makes perfect sense. It is really a simple thing. Simple, but pure genius if I do say so myself. It is that kind of thinking that leads one to graduating first in his class at the Academy, which I did.”

“I am finding this all very hard to tolerate,” Ratchis said. “Let us speak to Tirhas. If see she is not ensorcelled and she gives us a reasonable explanation, perhaps we can let this go.”

“She cannot be disturbed,” Richard replied.

“Convenient,” Martin murmured.

“Oh, you know Martin, not sure if you have heard the news about the Archmage Nemmerle,” Richard said. “You did hear he was ill, right?”⁶¹

“Yes,” Martin replied.

“Well, he passed on very recently. I thought you might like to know,” Richard said. “Poor old man. It would break his kindly heart to know that two alumni were at odds like this. I can still remember bits of his traditional speech at commencement, just before we took the oath.”

“What does the Academy oath say about letting magic into the wrong hands?” Martin asked, his voice gaining the slightest bit of confidence.

“Oh, the oath,” Richard laughed. “Come now. It is ridiculous that some oath made when we were wet behind the ears and didn’t know our elbow from our arse is supposed to bind us throughout the rest of our lives. Real life outside of the Academy, and what we learn while we are there are two very different things.”

“You broke your oath!” Martin’s voice grew louder. “The oath is the profession of our duty and the guideline by which we act.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Richard scoffed.

“Unfortunate that you broke your oath?”

“No, unfortunate that it is written so poorly, so narrowly, that it cannot foresee the necessities of the world beyond the walls of the Academy.”

“Get ready to take out that elf on the left,” Ratchis said to Kazrack in not quite a low enough voice.

“Jeremy, get ready!” Kazrack said.

⁶⁰ Reverie is elven dreaming. It is really reliving of events and times of the elf’s past, and sometimes even his future, or part of the life of a departed ancestor. Elves sleep with their eyes open.

⁶¹ The Archmage Nemmerle has been the headmaster of the Academy of Wizardry since 371 H.E. He recently allowed himself to pass on. A replacement has not yet been named.

“Oh, this is so stupid!” Richard roared. “You idiots! You are going to force my hand, aren’t you?”

And with that the fiendish wolves reappeared, except this time there were on three of them.

The elves did not hesitate, as the elf who had opened the door fired an arrow at Ratchis, striking him deep in the calf. Ratchis felt the muscle spasm in pain, as blood soaked his pant leg and the fur of his boots. The pain would slow him down.⁶²

However, Jeremy had not let down his guard either and he fired his crossbow at Richard.

Even as the bolt went flying toward Richard, in his mind’s eye Jeremy felt that he was flying directly behind it. Even as it left the crossbow, he knew this was kind of shot that an archer has once in a great while, where nothing could go wrong. It felt as easy reaching out and placing the arrow into the target with your hand. No, this was better than that. This was one of those once in a lifetime shots. This was going to be the shot that killed Richard the Red, the mightiest wizard Jeremy had ever seen. The bolt raced towards Richard’s neck, aimed right for the *Osiris’ Apple*⁶³ that Jeremy had watched bob up and down as the Watch-Mage talked and talked.

The bolt struck.⁶⁴

And then bounced off to no effect, landing with a clatter drowned out by the yelling of the others as they entered combat with the wolves.

Ratchis brought his hammer down upon one of the two creatures that leapt at him, its mouth steaming with sulfurous saliva. The half-orc winced as he felt another elf’s arrow nip him. He also cried out in pain as wolves slammed heavily into him, trying to bite him.

Kazrack struggled with a wolf as well, calling to the closest elf, “Drolenie! Don’t hurt us! The others don’t know you’ve been ensorcelled.”⁶⁵

“*Fascinere omun*,” called Richard the Red aloud, looking to Jeremy.

“Why are you attacking us, Rich?!?” Jeremy cried out in horror.

“There has been a great misunderstanding, Jeremy, you must stop your friends before someone is hurt,” Richard pleaded.

Martin pulled the wool from his pocket and spoke his arcane words, a second Richard the Red appeared, on one side of the great pedestal.

“Elves! Guardians! He has deceived you,” the false Richard pointed to the true Richard. “He is *nova lustana*! You must stop him.”⁶⁶

One elf paused, looking back and forth between the real Richard and the illusory one, but the other fired his bow at Martin, who barely ducked. His concentration was broken, and now the false Richard would merely yammer for a few seconds before disappearing.

However, he would have lost control regardless as Jeremy ran over to him and shook him, saying, “What are you

⁶² **DM’s Note:** Ratchis received a crit with the following effect: “Foot Wound, +1d3 to damage, speed reduced to ¾.”

⁶³ There is no “Adam” in Aquerra.

⁶⁴ **DM’s Note:** Jeremy’s player rolled a natural 20, and a crit result of the following: “Larynx punctured, double die damage, After CON rounds make CON check at DC 15 each round (at +1 to the DC each round) or die the following round.” Unfortunately, Richard was protected by a protection from missiles spell.

⁶⁵ Kazrack was trying to use what he thought might be “a common elf name.”

⁶⁶ Martin the Green was having the illusory Richard the Red say the word for dark elves in elvish incorrectly.

doing? Stop!”

“Get off of me!” Martin commanded, as Jana cast her spell of blindness upon Richard, but he shook off the effects.

Richard began to sing an elvish song in a lovely tenor that echoed in the large tenor, the beauty of the song only slightly marred by his accented elvish.

Ratchis slammed his hammer into a wolf for a second time and it disappeared in a puff of acrid smoke, but the other moved into its place, allowing the third to set up a charge at Kazrack. The wolf bull-rushed the dwarf, slamming him with his head to try to knock him off the stone ramp they struggled on. Kazrack sidestepped the blow, and the wolf pulled to a halt biting and dodging the dwarf’s return blow.

Jeremy, satisfied that the illusory Richard one elf was still staring dumbly at posed no harm, leapt over to Ratchis’ side and with a thrust of each of his swords, yet another wolf had disappeared.

Again, Jana cast her spell upon Richard, and this time he yelled out, “Damn!” Stopping his song; the watch-mage’s head darting around wildly without seeing a thing.

The other two elves were not fooled however, and another arrow clipped Martin in the shoulder and cried out in pain, pinioning his arms to keep his balance.

“Droleniel! You look vaguely orcish under this enchantment. How do I look to you?” Kazrack was inexplicably calling one of the elves.⁶⁷ Ratchis took up a place across from the dwarf flanking the wolf and with another mighty blow it was gone. He did not have a moment to rest, knocking away an incoming arrow, and looking up to where Richard crept forward towards the edge of the stone platform.

“Jeremy!” Richard called. “It is Jana! She’s causing it! Stop her!” And with that he suddenly picked up his pace and leapt into the open space and disappeared soundlessly into the darkness below.

“Richard!” Jeremy cried with an agony that could not have been surpassed if Jeremy’s own brother had leapt into that gap.⁶⁸ “Jana! He’d better not be hurt!”

Martin cursed and slurred his words into an arcane incantation running forward and casting a handful of colored sand at two of the elves. In a second they were both unconscious on the cold stone.

Jana tossed off another blindness spell, and the remaining elf, the one Kazrack had been babbling at, was blind as well. The elf began to back away cautiously but was moving to the edge behind him.

Ratchis rushed forward and grabbed the elf in his huge arms. The elf had swung his blade reflexively when he sensed the half-orc close, but the blow was easily avoided.

The elf barely struggled, and then said weakly, “I surrender. Kill me if you must, but please bury me in elven soil.”

“No one is going to kill you,” Kazrack said, trying to be comforting. “You are in a foul dream. You were near a precipice and almost fell. We are trying to save you from yourself.”

“I would never have expected a dwarf of your kind working with the drow. Drow, orcs and dwarves, working together, this *must* be a foul dream.”

As Martin moved to bind the two unconscious elves, and Jana rushed up to the maiden lying on the stone platform, Jeremy grabbed a torch off the wall and began to descend a narrow stone staircase he discovered disappearing deep

⁶⁷ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack was trying to confuse the elves into thinking that he was an elf as well and that some spell had made them all appear different to one another. The rest of us had no idea what he was trying to do until after the session when Kazrack’s player explained.

⁶⁸ Jeremy Northrop does not have a brother.

into the darkness below.

“This is all your fault!” he cried to the others over his shoulder as he descended at a quick pace, but still cautious of the crumbly steps.

“Someone needs to talk to Jeremy,” Ratchis said, holding the elf off his feet awkwardly, as Kazrack tried to reason with him.

“Kazrack, I am putting him down. Watch him,” Ratchis said, seeing that no one was acting to follow the ensorcelled Neergaardian.

The huge half-orc dropped the elf and hurried down the platform toward the narrow stair Jeremy had taken. The elf sat up, and began to edge away again, and was heading towards the edge.

“Where are you going?” Kazrack asked. “Be careful. You could fall over the side.”

“I must go on the ship to reach the other side,” the elf said mysteriously, trying to stand.

Kazrack ran up to him and pulled him away from the edge, and then shook him violently.

“What? What’s happening? Who are you?” the elf asked, his voice only slightly changing from the usual emotionless tone to one with the slightest bit of fear.

“I am Kazrack Delver. There was a mage. You’ve been ensorcelled,” the dwarf explained.

The elf shuddered, “Are we in the Chamber of the Three?”

“I don’t know. There are three rough statues in here, with gems in them,” Kazrack replied.

“Are there any elven women in here?” the elf asked, his tone becoming a bit more worried.

Kazrack looked up at Jana who was conversing with the half-elven girl laying on the pedestal.

“You must be Rahasia, aren’t you?” Jana asked the groggy girl, who blinked her eyes with difficulty.

“Yes. Yes, that is who I am,” the girl’s voice was raspy. “Who are you?”

“Don’t worry, we’re here to help you,” Jana replied. “Are you hurt?”

“No, I just feel very fatigued,” the girl replied.

“Get down here!” Ratchis’ voice echoed from below.

Jana hustled over to the edge of the stone platform and looked over the edge and could see nothing.

Kazrack was still trying to make sense of what the elf was saying, as it seemed to go back and forth between wakefulness and its ensorcelled state of reverie.

“Kazrack! Get down there!” Martin commanded the dwarf. He stood from binding the two elves who were already stirring. “I’ll take care of the elves.”

Kazrack left the elf where he sat and walked over to the edge of the central platform and looked down. Even his darkvision could not reach the bottom, though he squinted and tried to see what was happening.

“Oh Isis!” Martin exclaimed and hustled past Kazrack towards the stairs Jeremy and Ratchis had taken. “Stupid dwarf!”

Kazrack then hustled past Martin, picking up speed with his strong legs. “Hold your tongue mage!”

The torch crackled and spat, as Jeremy made his way down the stairs. He cringed as the smell of rotting garbage wafted up to him. The circulating cold air above kept the upper chamber fresh, but down here the air was close and foul.

“Richard!” Jeremy called into the darkness beyond his torchlight. The floor of the huge chamber below was a pile of rotting garbage of various depths. The walls were stained white marble, and Jeremy could see tall arched passageways leading out of the garbage chamber around the perimeter of the room, and a huge central column holding up the stone platforms above.

“Richard?” Jeremy called again, frantically running atop the mucky garbage that threatened to suck his boots off. He looked around trying to get a view of the Watch-Mage.

Ratchis was halfway down the stairs, when he spotted Jeremy’s torchlight bobbing up and down in his black and white field of vision. The half-orc did not pause, “Jeremy! Get over here!”

Jeremy turned, “Ratchis? Is that you? You have to help me find Richard; he might be hurt!”

“Nephthys, protect us!” the ranger/priest murmured seeing a form rise from the muck behind Jeremy. “Behind you!”

The Neergaardian turned and perhaps the most horrific thing he had ever seen.

It was ten feet in diameter, but its body seemed to be made of the very garbage in the chamber. It stood upon three legs that were as thick and mottled as rotting tree trunks and it had three tentacles. Two were flayed open on the end and covered in thick spines three inches long, but the third stood straight up, off-center of the body, with a leaf-shaped appendage that held two yellow and green eyes, that absorbed Jeremy’s visage with alien hunger. It had a huge maw riddled with teeth of random sizes. It made a sound like a constant heavy breath as it whipped one appendage forward and lifted Jeremy in the air, the painful spines piercing the Neergaardian’s chain-shirt.

It began to squeeze the life out of him.

Jeremy screamed in horror, “Help! Richard! Somebody! Help!” He managed to get one arm free and sliced awkwardly into the creature’s tentacle with his short sword. A bit of green malodorous ichor spurted from it, but the creature would not let go. Instead, he squeezed even harder and pulling Jeremy closer to him as if he were only a rag doll, the monster shoved one leg into his mouth and bit down.

Jeremy screamed again.

Ratchis was a blur of motion. “Kazrack! Get down here!” he yelled, as he leapt over an incoming tentacle and slammed his warhammer into the creature’s side, sending a wave of nasty ichor over him like vomit spurting through pores.

Jeremy worked his other arm free, but the creature only squeezed even tighter. He drew more of what passed for the monster’s blood with his short sword, but he could hardly feel his other arm, and the blow was too weak to do any damage.

Jeremy coughed, and even above the creature’s incessant breath, Ratchis could hear ribs begin to snap, and see awareness flee from the young man’s eyes. Giving no thought to himself, he slammed the hammer down on the creature again, wincing as ichor splashed into his roaring mouth.

The creature raised Jeremy way up above its body, and still squeezing brought the Neergaardian down to smash Ratchis with his own companion. Ratchis ducked, but the other tentacle raked him and wrapped around his thighs.

The half-orc was lifted into the air and brought closer to the monster's mouth.

By this time Martin was passing Kazrack on the stairs and Jana had made it to the top of the stair, following down behind.

Ratchis raised his hammer above his head in both hands, feeling the life being squeezed from his own body, knowing that his time was running out.

"Nephthys!" he cried, filled with the ecstasy of coming death. "Let my last blow be in your name!"

Ratchis' hammer slammed into the garbage monster with all of the Friar of Nephthys' might. The mucky consistency of its body gave way beneath the blow, and even as Ratchis felt his hands sink into the beast up to his wrists, it began to melt away back into the garbage it had emerged from. Ratchis fell heavily into the rotting trash, and beside him lay Jeremy, motionless.

The half-orc crawled over to his Neergaardian companion and lifted his face to his own ear.

Jeremy was not breathing.

Martin hurried over, Kazrack right behind him.

"How is he?" Martin asked, and then noticed how Jeremy's body seemed twisted and broken, bile still sliding down from the corner of his mouth. "Never mind."

Ratchis put down Jeremy's body gently and stood, and just stared at Martin with a simmering anger, ignoring the throbbing pain around his torso where the creature had squeezed him.

Kazrack walked over and lifted Jeremy's body onto his shoulder and began to walk back to the stairs.

"We need to go," was all the dwarf said.

Martin turned to follow, but Ratchis did not move. Martin turned back around, "Ratchis, we have to go."

"Martin," Ratchis said softly, and then suddenly, grunting through the pain, he sprang into action, grabbing Martin by the shoulders and lifting him into the air. "That mage is dead!" And with that, he tossed the Watch-Mage as hard as he could. Martin slid along the muck painfully.

Martin looked up, slime dripping down his face and coughed out swallowed muck. Ratchis just continued to stare.

"Ratchis, we should leave this place," Kazrack said, looking back from the bottom of the stairs.

"How can we leave?" Ratchis asked.

"What would you rather do?" Kazrack said, wisely. "We do not know where Richard is, how many more ensorcelled elves there and what is doing it, and Jeremy is dead. We have to leave and approach this a different way."

He began to walk up the stairs. Jana saw him coming up with Jeremy in his arms, and her head hung down. She turned and began to climb the steps herself.

Upstairs, the elf Kazrack had left sitting alone had crawled over to the other two and was blindly trying to help them untie their bonds. Kazrack put down Jeremy's body and kicked him away.

"You are freeing the wrong people," Kazrack said. "I am your friend, and they will hurt us."

"The girl!" Jana cried, looking up at the pedestal of stone where the three rough columns stood. "She is gone!"

Martin and Ratchis came upstairs, and the Dwarf was talking to the same elf he been speaking to before.

“What is your name?” Kazrack asked.

“I am Ethiel,” the elf replied in his faraway voice.

“Do you know of an elf maiden Tirhas?” Kazrack asked. “Earlier you asked if there was an elven woman here. She is an elven woman. Is she here?”

“Yes,” Ethiel replied.

“We should get out of here,” Jana said.

“I am going to try to get this elf to lead us to Tirhas and show us the way out,” Kazrack said.

“Well, hurry, if you think you can,” Ratchis said.

Martin remained silent.

“Can you lead us to Tirhas? We must get her out of here,” Kazrack said.

“Yes, that makes sense,” Ethiel said nodding. “An elven woman should not be here, it is too dangerous. But I am blind...”

“No, you are not,” said Jana, and the elf could see.

Ethiel led them back out the door the party came through, and down the hall to the right. Ratchis carried Jeremy’s body, while the others were alert for attack or trap. The elf brought them to a room which was more like a long rectangle of hallway connecting a variety of cells and housing a stone room within itself.

One cell they passed had a small, but stout figure lying on the floor. The party peered in. It was a gnome, dressed in armor torn to shreds and clothing soaked with blood.

“Who’s in that cell?” Martin the Green asked the elf.

“Oh, he is a guest who is unwell,” the elf said.

“Well, we need to make him well,” Ratchis said.

“I think he has gone across,” said the elf. “This is actually a memory of long ago. There is no gnome in the cell.”

“Uh-huh,” said Ratchis. “He needs a proper burial.”

“We will deal with him later,” said Kazrack. “Let us deal with the living first.”

They continued around the corner.

Ethiel brought them to a cell where a lithe elven figure lay on a mat on the hard earth. She wore tight burgundy hose, with a lavender shirt of sheer material over white cotton blouse beneath. She turned, pushing her golden hair from her face.

It was Tirhas Tesfay.

“What are you doing here?” Tirhas said, sitting up, her voice was as soft and clear as a distant churchbell.

“Are you ensorcelled?” Kazrack asked.

“No,” Tirhas replied, in her normal condescending tone. “But Ethiel is.”

She pointed to elf that had led them, “Can you get me out of here?”

“We may have to tie you up?” Kazrack whispered.

“Whatever it takes,” replied Tirhas.

“Who has the key?” Kazrack asked Ethiel.

“I do,” the elf replied, holding up a ring of keys.

Kazrack snatched it from his hand.

“I have to go in there and tie her up so we can take her out of here,” said Kazrack.

“That sounds like a good idea,” said Ratchis playing along.

“No, wait,” the elf said, shaking his head. “Something isn’t right here. She can’t go.”

The party turned to Ethiel, who stood bolt right, “Orc! Foul mimic of our people! I will not let you set her free!”

“We are here to help,” said Kazrack.

The elf swung at Ratchis, who dropped Jeremy’s body and grabbed the elf in a bear hug again.

“He’s not going to believe you. We need to get out of here,” Tirhas said.

Ratchis squeezed the elf until he slumped over and then tossed him in an empty cell.

Kazrack let Tirhas free.

“How did you get here?” How did you even find this place?” she asked.

“A very long story, that,” said Kazrack. “We were sent here.”

“By whom?” Tirhas asked. She looked at the body of Jeremy. “Your friend died? That is a shame. He was foolish, but foolishness can be envied. It is a trait elves are not allowed.”

“Let’s get out of here, and then we’ll explain it all to you,” said Ratchis.

“Grab Ethiel. We need a prisoner, and he seemed to break out of the enchantment briefly. Maybe by taking him out of here we can break it permanently,” said Kazrack.

“No, leave him in his cell,” said Tirhas. “We do not need to be tied down by a prisoner.”

“I am taking him,” said Kazrack, doing just that.

Ratchis scooped up Jeremy’s body, and Jana approached Tirhas. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“I will be okay,” the elf replied, calmly. “I am merely fatigued, but I have to ask you: Have you seen a half-elf girl?”

“Yes,” replied Ratchis.

“She is a drow,” said Tirhas, very solemnly, and Kazrack could feel something turn in his stomach.

They hurried outside and hustled back to the woods, making camp much closer to the enclave this time. They prayed they would not be followed.

“What did you mean that girl was a drow?” Kazrack asked Tirhas when the party had settled in, and Jana and Ratchis wrapped Jeremy’s body carefully.

“This place is called *Aze-Nuquerna*. It stands as guardian over a tunnel to the Plutonic Realms and over the spirits of three powerful witches, dark elf witches—for there are no other kind—from the Second Age, whom are trapped in the columns in the Chamber of the Three.”

“Yes, we saw the columns,” said Kazrack.

“The spirits can only be freed by providing them with a female elven body to inhabit; to possess. It is for that reason that only male elves are stationed at Aze Nuquerna. Females are not allowed to remain for more than three days to lessen the danger of possession. However, the possession can only happen at certain times under certain conditions, or else I might not be sitting here speaking with you,” Tirhas spoke evenly, but betrayed a growing anger with a brightening of her eyes. “That human... that Watch-Mage, freed one of the spirits into the body of the half-elven girl. Now her spirit is trapped in the stone, and the drow witch is free to practice her evil. This a foul thing this man did.”

She turned to Martin, the corners of her of her mouth folding downward toward her chin.

“He claimed that releasing the power would cause chaos among the drow and cause them more harm in the long run than good,” Kazrack said.

Tirhas did not pull her eyes from Martin, “That is insane. Thousands would die. It would not be worth the sacrifice. It is too much of a risk. And anyway, it meant essentially killing that girl.”

“Rahasia,” said Jana. “Her name is Rahasia.”

“She is trapped in that stone forever. Knowing, but not knowing. Bodiless, but immobile,” Tirhas said, looking down.

“Is there no way to reverse it?” Martin asked.

“None that I know of,” said Tirhas. “But Ethiel may know, he knows of more lore about these witches than I. Now, how did you find me?”

“Janx led us to the fort, but we were already seeking it out,” said Kazrack.

“Janx! Is he still around?” Tirhas asked, excitedly.

“We do not know what happened to him. The last time we saw him was in the fortress,” said Ratchis.

“I had hoped that he would have gotten away and not endanger himself for me,” said Tirhas.

“You did as much for him when we first met you,” said Jana.

“I know,” Tirhas looked up again. “And why were you looking for this place?”

Ratchis and Kazrack looked at each other and then at the others. Kazrack nodded his head, and Ratchis told her everything. He began with the night at the inn and told her the party’s entire tale until they had found her in the cell.

“That Watch-Mage is mad,” said Tirhas. “He would come to my cell and brag to me about how he had all my kind ensorcelled. He said it was an object. He kept referring to it as ‘a simple thing.’ The sooner we can break the spell,

the sooner we can find the drow and then perhaps these elves can look to helping your gnomish friends.”

“Well, we cannot go back today,” said Martin.

“No, we should go back now,” said Ratchis.

“I agree,” said Tirhas. “You should go back as soon as possible.”

“Why?” asked Kazrack.

“They will not expect us to go back, and Richard must be close to being out of spells. Tomorrow, we’d have to fight him at full strength again.” Ratchis explained as Tirhas nodded.

“We are not at full strength either,” said Martin. “And I do not have a full complement of spells.”

“The longer a time in that body, the more comfortable she becomes and the more powerful she will be,” said Tirhas. “We need to find her soon if we hope to defeat her.”

“But we don’t know how to break the spell,” said Kazrack.

“True, but if what she says is true, Richard the Red implied it was an item,” said Martin. “If we find such an item we can perhaps destroy it or remove it from the area to end the enchantment.”

The party prepared to return. Even Jana decided to go back, despite her exhaustion, but they waited for her to catch her wind enough to not slow them down too much.

Ratchis walked over to where Jeremy’s body lay.

“It’s my fault,” he said, softly.

“What is?” asked Kazrack, coming up behind the half-orc.

“I was too slow,” said Ratchis.

“How do you mean?” asked the dwarf.

“In slaying the creature that killed Jeremy,” said Ratchis.

“Then we’re all guilty,” said Kazrack. “Let’s go.”

Tirhas remained behind with the elven captive to avoid being ensorcelled or re-captured.

“If we do not return, please give our friend a burial,” said Kazrack to the elf.

“It will be least I can do for all you have risked and done for my kind,” said Tirhas.

It was a bright day. The sun, which was reaching its apex, glittered off the snow. They could hear water running down the sides of the elven fortress, sliding along rivulets of ice that occasionally broke, leaving imprints of themselves in the diminishing snow below.

Jana, Ratchis, Kazrack and Martin returned to Aze-Nuquerna. About three hours had passed since they left. The door was still open. The party slipped through with Ratchis in front, followed by Jana and Martin, with Kazrack taking up the rear. They tried to be quiet and walked softly to the left into one of the chambers with the stairways to the lookout, the hearth and the broad corridor going deeper into the fortress. They turned up the broad corridor, but

Kazrack looked and saw the collection of strange items on the mantle above the hearth.

“A top hat!” he said aloud. “What is this stuff? We should examine it.”

“I remember seeing a motley collection of things on the other mantle on the other side when Richard cast that cloud of stinking gases,” Ratchis said. “We got so distracted; I had forgotten about it until now.”

The party collected the objects from both mantles. They were a weird collection of things to have on display, having no obvious relation and some being in shabby shape. There was: a small round painted stone statuette of a goblin, a corked blue wine bottle only $\frac{3}{4}$ full, a moth-eaten top hat, a pipe, a fist-sized ruby, a silver flask, a cracked teacup, a necklace of sea shells, and a lantern.

“Do you think one of these things could be what we are looking for?” Kazrack asked Martin.

“Well, it is clever to hide it in plain sight, but I cannot know for sure unless I use my *Detect Magic* spell, but I only have one prepared. Perhaps we should see if we can find anything else that might be a possibility and I can cast my spell and examine it all at once, that is, unless Jana can cast the spell,” Martin said.

“I do not know that spell,” said Jana, sounding almost embarrassed.

“Then we will continue, and search some more,” said Ratchis continuing down the broad corridor lined with the statue-filled niches. The other three followed, but elves with bows appeared at the end of the hall. They had arrows nocked, and called out to the party, “You may come no further. You are invaders who seek to disrupt the sanctity of our home.”

“We mean you no harm,” called Kazrack.

“Then why have you caused us pain and hurt us many times?” the elf called, his tone was still that flat tone of a sleeper.

“You have shot us with arrows and caused us pain as well,” said Kazrack. “Perhaps we should talk to your leader.”

“Our leader is a statue,” replied the elf.

“The statue is testing you by making us look other than we are,” Kazrack said cryptically.

One elf cocked his head in confusion, but the other kept his arrow trained on Ratchis, without wavering.

“Is your leader supposed to be a statue?” Martin asked.

“No,” the elf replied. “You must leave. You are not welcome here.”

The party stood their ground for a moment, but finally relented, realizing they were in no shape for yet another confrontation with the elves. They backed out of the corridor and hurried from the fortress, carrying what they found on the mantle.

Ratchis, Martin, Jana and Kazrack returned to camp. And scattered the items on a blanket and Martin cast his spell. The only thing that radiated magic (and powerfully so) was the silver flask. It was covered in elvish runes.

“Do you think if we destroy it, it will break the enchantment?” Kazrack asked.

“We have no way of knowing that this has anything to do with the enchantment,” said Martin. “It could be a coincidence.”

“Well, it is our only lead. If this doesn’t work, I’m afraid we are going to have to spend another day recuperating and then try again,” said Ratchis, his voice even more raspy than usual.

The Friar of Nephthys picked up the flask and turned it around in his hand. It was an example of excellent work, each letter perfectly carved into the smooth and soft polished silver. The cap was rounded and screwed on and off.

“Well, here goes nothing,” Ratchis said, and he unscrewed the cap. There was a sudden hissing sound, but then nothing happened for a moment. Ratchis looked to Martin and then Jana, who shrugged their shoulders.

And then a blue mist rose slowly from the flask and was dissipated by the cold wind. It was silent as the party waited to see if anything would happen, but then Ethiel was awake.

“What? Where am I? Who are you people? Why are the tokens we guard out here? Why am I tied up? Tirhas?” The tone in the elf’s voice, actually had a hint of worry. It still had the calmness of elves, but not the laconic attitude of before.

Tirhas moved to him and placed a hand on his shoulder, “Ethiel, it okay. You are safe. Let me untie you and I will explain everything.”

And she proceeded to.

As she explained as best, she could to Ethiel, Kazrack asked Martin, “Is that flask still magical?”

“I’ll have to wait for tomorrow to find out,” the Watch-Mage replied.

Finally, Tirhas finished her tale and Ethiel turned to the party, “I guess I should thank you for your relentless attempt to help us. Who knows what greater evil would have happened if you had not come when you did? When the mage came, we took him in as a guest; he was an Academy wizard, we had no reason not to trust him.”

“Well, you do now,” said Ratchis.

Ethiel stared at the half-orc for a long time.

“I hope you can forgive me for my rough and abusive treatment,” the half-orc finally said, growing uncomfortable under the elf’s gaze.

“You did what you had to do,” Ethiel said simply. “But one must wonder why the Watch-Mage did what he did.”

“He is a rogue, a renegade. He thinks he knows better than the Academy masters,” Martin said, betraying his anger and disappointment.

Ethiel looked down at the items the party had removed from the hearth mantles in Aze-Nuquerna.

“These need to be returned and replaced right away,” Ethiel said. “These tokens are powerful items of witchcraft that we also guard over, some of which once belonged to drow witches.”

Jana’s jaw dropped as she made the connection, realizing that the key to great power was spread out in front her and she would likely never get to examine even one of those tokens. ⁶⁹

“Was this one of them?” Ratchis asked, showing him the silver flask “It is what had you enchanted.”

“No, I do not remember that. It must have been brought by the Watch-Mage,” replied Ethiel. “But we should take it and examine it and keep it safe if my kind are so susceptible to it.”

There was an awkward pause.

⁶⁹ Witchcraft tokens do not detect as magical.

“Let us return to the compound,” said Ethiel. “If the enchantment is broken, and Naerdonel was turned to stone, then I am the ranking officer. The others will be looking for me.”

Ethiel led the way back to Aze-Nuquerna, and after a moment’s tense confusion, they were allowed in and the party was given rooms to stay in. Jeremy’s body was placed in cold storage underground.

The other elves explained that as soon as the enchantment was broken, they searched for Richard the Red and for Rahasia (who was now possessed by the drow witch) and could find no sign of them. Ethiel speculated that perhaps they had penetrated the portal to the Plutonic Realms, and even now were on their way to contact other drow deep in those dark caverns.

“Tomorrow you shall be invited to a council and we will discuss possible ways of handling this situation, and to officially thank you for your unsought help,” Ethiel said. He took the flask from them and after a light meal they collapsed on elven sleeping mats.

End of Session #22

AQUERRA

Session #23

Isilem, 2nd of Dek – 564 H.E.

“We hope your sleep and breakfast was to your satisfaction,” asked Ethiel the next morning. The party awoke refreshed by the soft mats of the elven guest cells, and the morning meal had been slices of small green apples in steaming oatmeal, with flower petals of some kind.

“It was as pleasant as could be expected,” Kazrack replied, not liking the light fair, but being sincerely appreciative of the efforts.

Jana, Kazrack, Martin, and Ratchis stood before a large circular white table. In its center was perfect sphere of glass nearly a foot in diameter. Across from them sat three elves, Ethiel was at the center. He had golden hair like Tirhas, and soft hazel eyes. He was very pale. On his left was Finarfin, taller and broader, with auburn hair in many long braids and eyes like mahogany. On his right was Findulias, very slight, with grey eyes and skin akin to the color of caramel. Tirhas Tesfay sat at the right end of the table.

The chamber was underground. It had an arched ceiling, and a long table was covered in several sheets on one side. The entire room has tall wrought iron candelabras designed to look like climbing ivy. The party had been led here after they were done eating; following a secret passage behind the stairs they had had no idea was there.

“We want to thank you again for your unsought after help,” said Ethiel, in the nearly emotionless tone all the elves seemed to have even when not ensorcelled, but he ended his statement with a broad smile that brightened not only the room, but the hearts of the battle-weary companions. “Richard the Red’s actions were very grave and will have desire consequences no matter what happens now, but we must still seek out ways of minimizing these negative consequences.”

Ethiel paused. The elves on his left and right nodded their heads in solemn agreement.

“However,” Ethiel continued. “There will be time enough for that, for as my people say ‘*e hrivel nare-malta urime sara laire tercano-lasselanta e hrivel-oto*’, that is ‘even from winter comes spring where tools are forged to harvest the summer wheat before autumn comes to herald winter once more.’ Now, it is time for us to show you our gratitude with gifts, as you have shown yourselves sons and daughters of Osiris and Isis, son of Natan-Ahb, and even the abandoned son of Ashronk’s foul breed, have proven themselves friends of the elves, and on this we turn that goodwill.”^{70 71}

Ethiel stood.

“Each one of you shall be called aside and given your gift. You will be told about it and you may ask questions about it, and it is up to you if you choose to share the nature of this gift with your companions. Jana, you are first.”

Finarfin stood and motioned for Jana to join him over at the long table, and he uncovered a folded up deep blue shawl of fine wool. “This is the *Mantle of Presence*,” he said in his voice like the cry of a distant eagle above canyon. “It is to be your gift.”⁷²

Next, Ratchis was called over, as Jana took her place among her companions once again. Finarfin, uncovered a pair of white fur-lined boots. The elf called them “*The Boots of Uller*.”

The boots were of polar bear fur and leather were long enough to nearly reach the tall half-orc’s knee. The boots

⁷⁰ Isis and Osiris are said to have been most involved in the creation of mankind, enlisting the aid of Ra, Tefnut, Shu and Geb.

⁷¹ Ashronk s the god of the orcs.

⁷² **DM’s Note:** This item of great magic strengthens the presence of a person, making them more persuasive, more intimidating, or more likeable. However, the wearer also becomes more self-involved and unobservant. When worn, the wearer gains a +2 enhancement bonus on all Charisma-based skill checks and a +1 on all DCs for all witch or bard spells cast. However, they also become more self-involved, suffering a –4 penalty to all spot, listen and search checks.

would make him tread lighter than a rabbit upon the snow and ice and protect him from the cold.⁷³

Ratchis smiled happily as he took the boots from the elf and returned to his friends. Kazrack was next. Finarfin revealed a squat heavy stein made of cobalt blue metal and marked with large dwarven runes. Kazrack had heard legends of such a thing before. It was a *Dwarven Rune Stein*. He was told of this particular stein's history and its properties.⁷⁴

Lastly, Martin the Green was called over, and for him, Finarfin opened small box holding a gold ring with a finely cut rectangular stone of green. The ring was called *Lacan's Demise*. The ring immediately increased the wearer's endurance and after a week of being worn removes all need to eat or drink, and any more sleep than two hours a night.⁷⁵ He was told that it was found in the treasure hoard of Gomash the Troll Chieftain (father of the notorious Great Troll Frojack) by the half-elven troll-slaying hero, Arofel. It is known that the ring is one of several originally forged by Wayfarers of Ptah for Monks of Anubis, who refused the gift. It is known that one of the rings came into the possession of Lacan Pepper, one of the former despots of Thracia, who killed himself after having gone mad from wearing it too long. It is rumored that the ring is also the reason that he died without an heir, leading to his younger brother, Iane becoming the Margrave. It is from this event that these rings get their name. How one of the rings came into the possession of the troll chieftain is unknown.

The companions all stood together again, looking at their gifts, wishing Jeremy and Beorth were with them to enjoy the fruits of their efforts.

Again, Ethiel stood. "We have one more gift for you as a group. It is *The Urn of Osiris*

The clay urn was covered with depictions of Isis collecting the pieces of Osiris and slowly putting him back together. It had a handle on either side.

The urn could return the dead to life. The blood of the deceased had to be poured into the urn and four people who know the person to be raised must touch the urn and recite the prayer to Osiris inscribed on the bottom of the urn. "*That which has been broken shall be remade, that which has begun the final journey shall turn back, in return for this I will fulfill what need Osiris has of me...*"

Ethiel explained that the four people to raise the person are bound to fulfill their promise to Osiris (which is an unspecified debt which is not made clear until after the inscription is intoned) and that it did not work to raise those of elven blood.

Jana, Ratchis, Martin and Kazrack felt a wave of disbelief wash over them. They could bring life back to the dead!

⁷³ **DM's Notes:** They came to Derome-Delem from the Northern Reaches on the feet of Tuure—a hero and explorer from that frozen land who arrived during the latter part of the Third Age. Killed by storm giants in a tragic misunderstanding, the boots were later presented to a traveler who brought them to Aze Nuquerna for safe keeping. These boots allow the wearer to move at his normal movement rate atop snow without leaving any tracks, and to gain a +10 competence bonus to balance checks when traveling across ice at half speed. In addition, the character is considered to be under the effects of an endure elements (cold) spell while the boots are on.

⁷⁴ **DM's Notes:** If the rune is intoned while a liquid is poured into the cup, drinking the entire liquid provides the benefit provided by the rune and then the rune disappears. The liquid remains magical for one minute. The runes represent the following words: *Sonn* (Endurance) - 1d4+1 points of Con for 8 hours, *Thord* (Fortitude) - +1 morale bonus to attack rolls and fear saves, + 1d8 temporary hit points for 8 minutes., *Alagh* (Heroism) - +2 competence bonus to attack rolls, saves and skill checks for 1 hour, *Findar* (Luck) - +1 luck bonus to all saves for 1 hour, plus during that hour may reroll any one roll, but must take the second result even if worse., *Ur-Tindel* (Sturdiness) - +10 competence bonus to all balance checks, Reflex checks against knockdown and to all Strength checks to resist bull rush attacks, *Barak* (Mettle) - +4 natural armor bonus to AC for one hour, *Samryn* (Truth) - Zone of Truth centered on drinker for 8 minutes.

If a potion is poured into the stein this way, there is a level check against caster + spell level—the losing spell is made inert and either way the rune disappears. All durations are halved for non-dwarves. Once all the runes have faded the stein must be given as a selfless gift to another for them to reappear.

⁷⁵ **DM's Note:** This ring's immediate benefit is a +4 enhancement bonus to a wearer's Constitution score. Once worn for one full week the ring continually removes the need and desire for any nourishment. The wearer need not drink or eat, ever and only requires 2 hours of sleep each night (it being equal to 8 full hours). If removed any hit points gained are lost and, it must be worn again for another week for the sustaining enchantment to come into effect again.

They could return Jeremy to the living!

“And if you should choose to use this upon your recently fallen companion, we have a gift for him as well,” said Ethiel. “However, while you might be eager to use this, just remember that bringing the dead back to life is a serious affair. And if you do it, I advise doing it outside, this would please Osiris.”

Kazrack’s shoulders sagged. “As much as I would like to help bring Jeremy back, I do not think I can make a promise to a human god. What if what he asks of me goes against the ways of my own gods?”

“Kazrack, Osiris is a good god. He is the god of nature and makes sure the season cycle turns. He provides us with fruits and vegetables and animals for the slaughter. He would not require anything of you that you are bound not to do,” Martin the Green said.

“Osiris is the father of Nephthys,” Ratchis said. “I have no fear that the task will go against my beliefs and nor should you, Kazrack.”

“Can we discuss this later?” Jana interrupted. “I do not think Ethiel and his brethren care to hear our private discussion, and I do believe the matter of Richard the Red and Rahasia still stand before us.”

“Yes, but she is no longer Rahasia, she is Karellena a drow witch of the Second Age, who can call fiends to work for her. We have been scrying to find out more about her or Richard the Red, but it has been difficult. We shall tell you what we can,” Ethiel said, and the council really started.

Ethiel motioned for the party to sit at the table, and clearing his throat softly he began, “At first we thought she might try to make her way directly to the *Plutonic Realms*, but our scrying has found that she has not penetrated the seal of our doorway there. Actually, it makes sense. The Plutonic Realms would be a treacherous place even for her, without the proper provisions or guide.”

Ethiel paused.

“We have found that she has gone into the *Honeycombe* instead. I’m sure you know what this is,” Ethiel said.

The companions looked at each other quizzically. “Um, no. No, we do not,” said Martin the Green.

“The Honeycombe is the name of the many caves beneath the town of Ogre’s Bluff. The bluff itself is pocked-marked with cave entrances that create a huge labyrinth that is miles deep,” Ethiel explained. “One of the portals below leads to the Honeycombe, and she most definitely went that way. Richard the Red may have gone that way as well, but for some reason we find scrying on him to be impossible. The drow witch in this half-elven girl’s body is most likely trying to get out the other side of the tunnels and supply herself for her journey. Of course, she may have to deal with some of the ogres still left in those caves.”

“Why didn’t she flee overland?” Kazrack asked.

“She probably did not want to risk us stopping her,” said Jana, answering the question for Ethiel. “She probably thought going through the caves would slow down pursuit.”

“So, if you are willing to go after her, we can show you the way to the Honeycombe from our own chambers, as that is the way we recommend you go, but perhaps you might prefer trying to beat her to town overland and catching her on the other end,” Ethiel said.

“But aren’t there a lot of caves on the other end?” Ratchis asked.

“Yes,” replied Ethiel.

“Then it seems we have no choice but to follow through the ogres’ caves, if we have no way of knowing at which of these caves she will emerge,” Kazrack said, and he turned to Ratchis. “Do you think you can track her once we get

down there?”

“I can try,” replied Ratchis.

“We have already found a track down the stairway to the Honeycombe, we can point it out to you to help you on your way,” Ethiel said. “Normally, our leader would send a detachment of our warriors down, but we are small in number, the high priest, as you would call him, and many of the others left for King Ienegred Magnolius’ wedding in Tempestat.⁷⁶ It seems the Watch-Mage knew this and caught us with our guard down.”

“I am concerned for the gnomes,” said Kazrack, suddenly. “I am just afraid that that our delay here will further endanger them.”

“Yes,” agreed Martin.

“Well, from what you have told us about the creature Mozek, he is passing as a gnome and seems more than happy to simply rule the gnomes for now, and not destroy them. We may be biased in this matter, though we wish to see no harm come to the Garvan gnomes, I think this matter is a more immediate danger,” said Ethiel.

“I have some questions regarding the drow witch,” Jana asked. “What do you want us to do with her? Bring her back, or... deal with the problem?”

Ethiel paused and sighed.

“Understand that the girl, Rahasia, is all but dead. Her spirit is trapped in that stone, and it is beyond our knowledge to reverse the process,” he explained. “Unless of course, we can get Karellena to willingly return her own spirit into the stone and free the girl.”

“There is no ceremony or spell that can reverse it?” Kazrack asked, incredulously. “If there is a way to do it there has to be a way to undo it.”

“Perhaps,” said Ethiel, softly. “We do not want to get our hopes up, however, but I will have one of our scholars look into the possibilities of reversing the girl’s misfortune...”

“However,” said Tirhas tersely, interrupting. “Understand, that my first priority is stopping this drow witch, and if that means I have to kill her—if no means of capturing her and returning her here rendered harmless are available or effective—I will.”

The companions looked to the elven maid; her face betrayed a raw hatred that the party had never seen there before.

“When you call her a drow witch,” Jana asked. “What exactly do you mean?”

“She and her sisters violate the pact made by the elves long ago. She uses forbidden magics,” Ethiel explained.

Martin the Green shot a look at Jana, who sneered at him.

“What magics are those?” Kazrack asked, as the same moment Jana asked, “Is it likely she will be at her full power?”

“We really cannot be too sure,” replied Ethiel. “Oh, yes, I almost forgot. In connection to Karellena and the tokens we guard, one of them is missing. According to the catalogues it is in the form of a hatchet and bound to it is a handmaiden of the goddess *Teneraél Undol*.”

“Um, who is *Teneraél Undol*?” Martin asked.

⁷⁶ This wedding set to occur sometime in the next elven Stellar Cycle (a period of time lasting about 1307 days) and will hopefully heal a schism between a high elf and wood elf noble house.

“She is the spider goddess of the dark elves,” Ethiel said.

“I think it is clear that we cannot let her get too far or get back to her people,” said Ratchis.

“There is one last thing we must tell you,” said Ethiel gravely. “This is something we have discussed among ourselves and have decided that we must tell you, despite the fact that it is a great secret shame of the elven people and are loath to share it with mort..., I mean, non-elves.”

He paused and looked to the elves on either side of him.

“I know you have heard of the dark elves, what we call in our tongue, the *Novilustani*, but know you this, any elf can be what you call a drow, and that we have no name for that we share with non-elves. Yes, the Novilustani were the original children of *Teneraél Undol*, but not all were evil but most of those that did not turn to dark ways as their goddess did were slaughtered. But there were also among the elves of the other lines, who gave their will and promise to the spider queen. They too fled to the dark places in the world. They too have the power of a drow.⁷⁷ The elven people have kept this secret from the other races for thousands of years, though there have been a few who have found out. The drow have been gone for so long that we allowed the stories of the coal-skinned elves being evil to grow, as it is not far from the truth. So many of that line who would not betray the Ara-Cemnari were killed, that any you would find today are likely just that, evil.⁷⁸ Be wary of who and what you meet below. Though we have no reason to believe our fallen kin are in the Honeycombe, it is best to cautious.”

He was quiet for a long moment to let that sink in.

“Well, if there are any more questions let us know,” Ethiel said. “I leave you to your preparations. I assume you will be using the urn this afternoon?”

“Yes,” said Ratchis, with confidence.

“I don’t know,” said Kazrack.

“Let us go discuss it,” said Martin.

The companions rose to return to their rooms, and Ratchis turned to Ethiel, “If you have patrols in the woods please look out for a dog, he was scared off by Janx. I don’t think it can fend for itself.”

“We look after all of nature’s creatures,” replied Finarfin. “If we see it, we will see about bringing the dog to you.”

The party took their newly granted gifts with them, and Ratchis took up the urn, and they gathered upstairs in the room he was sharing with Kazrack. There they discussed the implications of using the *Urn of Osiris* to return Jeremy to life.

“I think you need to have faith that a human god would not ask a dwarf to make a pledge that would violate his faith,” Ratchis said to Kazrack,

“I have no way of knowing that,” Kazrack said, shaking his head.

“That is why it is called *faith*,” said Ratchis. “Obviously, we were meant to be on this path together.”

“I wish Beorth were here,” said Kazrack.

“Anubis is the son of Osiris, as is Nephthys...”

⁷⁷ **DM’s Note:** In Aquerra, “drow” is a template applied to any elf who goes evil and pledges himself to the dark elven goddess, Teneraél Undol,

⁷⁸ Ara-Cemnari is the elven name for the generation of ancestors they revere as gods. The name means “those who were sown”.

“I actually I was wishing Beorth were here for the wisdom that is his own, not his god’s,” the dwarf, clarified.

“Well, time is of the essence,” said Ratchis, looking to the others “What will it be?”

“I will do it,” said Martin, gravely.

“As will I,” said Jana, her face betraying no emotion.

Kazrack paused, “I too will do it, for do not our dwarven fathers teach us that loyalty and faithfulness to our friends and comrades in arms are one of the highest virtues?”

Ratchis let out a long breath, worried that the dwarf’s stubbornness would keep Jeremy from his chance to breathe the air of this world again.

Jana, Ratchis, Martin and Kazrack gathered outside just out of view of the elven enclave, in a circle of small trees that they cleared of snow. The lay Jeremy’s wrapped body in the circle, even though it did not need be present for the urn to work according to what the elves had said.

“I think Ratchis should perform as much of the ceremony as possible,” suggested Martin. “Nephthys is the daughter of Osiris.”

“So is Set, from what I understand, so I do not put too much stock in those relationships,” said the dwarf, revealing that he knew something of human theology.

“Anyway, the elves said what there is to do we must all do,” Ratchis said. “Kazrack, place the urn in the center and we’ll all sit around it.”

The dwarf moved the urn over to the middle of the circle, and inside he saw what looked like some earth and some broken twigs and collected moss. He turned it over and started to dump out what was within.

“Wait!” Martin ran over and lifted the urn. “Osiris is a god of the earth, perhaps we should keep that in there.”

“If he comes back with twigs coming out of his head, don’t blame me,” Kazrack said, rolling his eyes.

Ratchis walked over and took the urn and emptied it, “The directions said nothing about anything in the urn except Jeremy’s blood. Jana, would you mind helping me collect some?”

Jana and Ratchis drained bowl full of blood and poured it into the urn, and then the four companions sat around the urn and held hands.

“Now all we need do is speak the words and wait and see what happens,” said Ratchis.

The four looked at each other, and then opened their mouths, speaking the following in unison, *“That which has been broken shall be remade, that which has begun the final journey shall turn back, in return for this I will fulfill what need Osiris has of me..”*

A silence fell over them.

Even the wind stopped, as did the sound of birds, and the dripping of melting snow tumbling from the leaves and needles of the trees around them.

Kazrack opened his mouth to speak, and Ratchis turned his head to shoot him a glare, but neither was able to complete his action. All four of them felt an incredible tension building in their bodies, as if transformed into painful

fists trembling but motionless. They could feel this bodily presence move up their bodies, up their legs, in their bowels, down their arms, and finally up their necks, until they held their mouths open in silent cries of fear. They could feel the hairs on the backs of their necks rise, and suddenly the wind had returned, blowing with an increased ferocity. A growing sound that matched the growing tension of their bodies. The wind seemed to be crying aloud for them, and the sun seemed shadowed over for a moment.

And then it happened, the four of them began to speak in a voice that was not their own. They each said a different thing, but all at once, so all they could only understand was what the alien voice said through their own person. And they knew that these were the tasks that they must do in return for Jeremy's life. The description of their assigned tasks was of different lengths, so first Ratchis stopped, and then Martin and then Jana and finally, Kazrack. And it sounded as if all four promises ended with the same option, that resonated as the voice issuing from Kazrack spoke alone at the end, after it had been spoken three times, "...or forfeit my life."

The four tasks were as follows:

Ratchis: *"I will seek out the Circle of the Thorn and do one complete task for them or forfeit my life."*

Martin: *"I shall retrieve the Book of Black Circles from the Brotherhood of the Lost, cast one spell from it and then destroy it, or forfeit my life."*

Jana: *"I will seek out a temple of Isis and learn of magic through her pure sources and will take no other token and learn no other spell until I do, or forfeit my life."*

Kazrack: *"I shall craft a sickle of great quality, hammering and sharpening its blade in the Glade of Henaire, under the light of the full moon, and then present it to the Circle of the Thorn, or forfeit my life."*

And then the presence was gone. The four companions gasped and Martin and Ratchis slumped forward, Kazrack and Jana caught themselves before they did as well. The wind and sounds returned to normal, and they all had the taste of earth in their mouths. Kazrack leapt up awkwardly and hurried over to Jeremy.

The dwarf uncovered the young Neergaardian's face. Jeremy's chest heaved and he coughed; his eyes fluttered. The body had no marks on it, and even the cut on his wrist where they had taken the blood was gone.

"I'm sorry that mine is the first visage you look upon, but I'm sure you're glad to be back," the dwarf said to the newly re-born warrior.

"Am I finally there?" Jeremy croaked, and tried to sit up, but swooned. He felt as if his body had long been asleep, with pins and needles in his limbs, and a dry mouth.

"You haven't gone anywhere, except outside the elvish temple we were in," the dwarf said.

Jeremy coughed again, "I was on a road, where..."

Kazrack placed a soothing palm on Jeremy's forehead, "You have been called from that road, you are not to travel it yet."

"I was on my way to a city," Jeremy said, confusedly. "Where are we?"

"We are in Derome-Delem," replied Kazrack.

"I was walking to a city, and there were other people on the road, but I could not turn my head to see them. I could only see them ahead of me as they passed me or I passed them," Jeremy said. "Malcolm!"

"Malcolm was there?" Kazrack asked.

“No, uh... yes, he was at the city waiting for me, somehow I just knew that,” Jeremy said. “Oh, I am so tired.”

Martin walked over, “We should probably get him inside.”

Kazrack nodded, and he and Ratchis helped carry him back into *Aze Nuquerna*.

“I can walk,” Jeremy croaked.

“Just lie still,” said Jana.

Martin walked over to the urn and picked it up. The pictograms and runes on its surface were gone. It was perfectly smoothed and unmarked.

“I don’t think we’ll be using this again,” Martin noted, pointing to the urn.

“We’ll ask the elves when we get Jeremy to bed,” Kazrack said.

“How do you feel?” Kazrack asked Jeremy, as he laid him on a mat in one of the rooms they had been assigned. “I mean, aside from tired.”

“Warmer,” Jeremy said in a dreamy voice. “Things smell funny, different here.”

“You should rest. We’ll be back,” said the dwarf.

“No! I can’t sleep!” Jeremy tried to sit up again. “Is this a dream?”

Kazrack punched Jeremy in the shoulder, knocking him back on to the mat. “Does this feel like a dream?” And if this were a dream would the first face you saw be mine?”

Jeremy rubbed his shoulder, “Okay, I’ll sleep.”

Back in Jana’s room Ratchis asked, “So, what was everyone tasked with?”

He looked to Jana, but Martin answered. “I have to destroy something called the Book of Black Circles, but before that I have to cast a spell from it.”

“Do you know anything about it?” Kazrack asked.

“I have heard some rumor in my time at the Academy,” Martin replied. “It is a dark book with a dark history.”⁷⁹

“Well, destroying the book I can understand, but casting a spell from it?” Kazrack mused.

“I can only trust that it is for a good cause,” Martin said. “How about the rest of you?”

“I have to forge a sickle at a particular time in a particular place for something or someone called the Circle of the Thorn,” said Kazrack.

⁷⁹ Martin the Green knew from his studies that the Book of Black Circles was penned by five of the greatest and most evil necromancers in Aquerra’s history, each one learning from the last and then penning more in the evil book. The last person known to have had it was Marchosias the Corruptor, traitorous master of the Academy, slayer of the Archmage Karella, and Master of the Void Sphere.

“I have to do a task for the Circle of the Thorn as well, but mine is undefined,” said Ratchis.

Everyone looked to Jana, she sighed and spoke, hesitantly, as usual. “I am to make a commitment to... purify my ways, and that is all I will say about that.”

Ratchis harrumphed.

“Well, does anyone feel any different?” Ratchis asked.

“Yes,” replied Kazrack. “I feel what can only be described as an urge to accomplish this task soon. It is not an overwhelming feeling, but it is there and undeniable.”

“Yes, me too,” said Ratchis.

“Well, I don’t feel any different,” said Martin.

“Neither do I,” added Jana.

“Well, I’m sure Osiris must see some urgency in your transformation, or purification or whatever,” said Ratchis.

“Not Osiris, but Isis,” said Jana softly.

“Well, good,” said Martin with a grin. “Isis will be a good influence on you.”

“I knew you would say that,” said Jana with a frown.

“What remains to be seen is if we will feel obligated to do these tasks before we take care of the problem with the gnomes. We may be delayed even further,” said Ratchis.

“I think we should send a message to the gnomes that their chieftain is dead and that they need to accept their interim chief or pick a new one,” said Kazrack.

“We don’t even know that the gnome we saw in the dungeons here was the chief,” said Martin.

“And we can never be sure that message arrived properly or if it might put the gnomes in even more danger or let Mozek think he can put whatever nefarious plans he might have into action,” said Ratchis. “We should take care of the tasks before we help the gnomes so that we may do so unfettered, and in hopes of gaining some means of defeating Mozek in the meantime.”

“I say we take care of the gnomes first, and then take care of the tasks,” said Kazrack.

“I get the feeling that if we do not take care of these oaths, we will die,” said Martin, nervously.

“And?” said Kazrack, casually. “I was willing to give up my life to help the gnomes before, and that hasn’t changed. If it is the power of Osiris or the hands of Mozek that does it makes little difference.”

“And if we deliver ourselves into the hands of Mozek and his brothers there is no hope for the gnomes at all,” said Ratchis, growing annoyed.

“We’ll decide what order to do these things when we have taken care of the drow witch, which is our most immediate obligation,” said Jana, failing to hide her disgust for her companions.

In the darkness of his room Jeremy awoke with a start. There was someone standing over him.

“It is only I, Tirhas. Do not be alarmed,” the elven maiden said.

“It’s...you,” Jeremy managed. The weight of his limbs was lessened, but he still felt a fatigue draped on him like a funeral shroud.

“It’s good to see you...back,” said Tirhas softly. She kept her hands behind her back and rocked slightly on the balls of her feet.

“Am I really back, then?” Jeremy asked, sitting up achingly.

“You comrades have given a great deal for you to return from the other side,” Tirhas said.

“Given?”

“They used something called ‘the Urn of Osiris’ to call you back from Anubis’ Realm. In return each one of them had to promise to accomplish some task for Osiris, or give their own life trying,” said Tirhas.

“How... how they’d get this thing?” Jeremy rubbed his temples.

“Ethiel granted it to your companions as a gift,” the elf explained.

“Where’s Janx?” Jeremy asked, suddenly.

“Huh? Oh, I am not sure, but if he were in danger I’d know,” Tirhas said. “I am sure he will return soon.”

“How long was I gone?” Jeremy asked.

“Not even a day,” Tirhas said, and pulled her hands from behind her back. She bore an unsheathed short sword and held it out to Jeremy with two hands. “Your companions are not the only ones who received gifts. This is called *The Right Blade of Arofel*.”⁸⁰

Jeremy took the sword. It was made of some material that shined like silver, but was harder than steel, and immediately above the hilt were carved the elven letters: *manus tenebrae*

“Thank you,” said Jeremy. “It’s beautiful. What does this say?”

“It translates into ‘the Dark Hand’,” Tirhas said.

“The Dark Hand? Why was it called that because it was used by someone not that respectable?”

“No, he was a great hero, a folk hero of our people. He was a great wizard and a mighty warrior,” Tirhas said.

“And what happened to Richard the Red?” Jeremy asked, looking from the sparkling sword blade, to the shining blues eyes of delicate beauty set in the cold face of the elven maid. “The last thing I remember is hurrying to see if he was okay for some reason.”

“You were ensorcelled,” replied Tirhas.

“Yeah, I remember that now,” Jeremy said, laying back down and passing the sword back to Tirhas. “It was all foggy but talking to you makes me see things the way they truly are.”

He closed his eyes.

⁸⁰ **DM’s Note:** The Right Blade of Arofel, +1 short sword, grants the "Defense of the Dancing Blades" feat when used in pair with "the Left Blade of Arofel". It is made of true-silver, called Mithral by elves.

“Sleep now,” Tirhas said, and stroked Jeremy’s hair gently for a second before leaving the room.

Many hours later the Jana, Ratchis, Martin and Kazrack sat in one of their cells eating the food the elves had brought to them, steamed mushrooms stuffed with some kind of preserved cucumber and covered in a sauce that was sweet, yet sour.

Kazrack hated it.

The door opened and in came Jeremy with a huge smile on his face, “You are all here!”

“How are you feeling?” asked Ratchis.

“Hungry! Really hungry!” Jeremy replied and sat down and began to stuff himself with bread and cheese and mushrooms.

“Tirhas told me what you all did,” Jeremy said, looking up, his mouth full. “I don’t know what to say…”

“Say thank you,” Martin said.

“Yeah, I was gonna start there,” Jeremy said, taken aback by Martin’s comment.

“You’re welcome,” said Martin, going back to eating.

“Well, you can’t understand what this means to me,” Jeremy said, smiling again. “Everything seems different. Brighter, fresher, more real… It is just wonderful to be alive. Everything is so beautiful!”

Kazrack sighed and smiled, “I suppose we can’t expect you to come back changed. You still babble.”

“But I am changed! Everything is changed! You are all so beautiful!”

“You are making me feel uncomfortable, Jeremy,” said Kazrack.

“I don’t care!” cried Jeremy and grabbing the dwarf by the ears planted a kiss on the dwarf’s forehead. He then ran around the table kissing each of his companions in turn.

“Um, thank you,” said Ratchis.

“So, what happens now?” Jeremy asked.

The others explained about the drow witch, and how they would be descending into the Honeycombe to seek her (and possibly Richard the Red) out.

“Is that your task? You know, for the urn thing?” Jeremy asked.

“No, it is simply our duty,” said Kazrack.

Osilem, 3rd of Dek – 564 H.E.

The next morning, after breakfast the party gathered in the Chamber of the Three ⁸¹ From there, Ethiel, accompanied

⁸¹ *The Chamber of the Three* is the name of the chamber in Aze Nuquerna where the three stone obelisks which held the spirits of the drow witches reside.

by two other elves and Tirhas Tesfay, led them down to the lower garbage room.

The fetid smell made Martin wince, and Jeremy looked at the spot where his life had ended and shuddered.

“Are you sure that monster is gone?” he asked.

“The creature was raised by us. It would not attack elves, or those with elves, but we are fairly certain it was slain, though it has disappeared for days at a time before,” Ethiel explained. “It grieved us that Richard’s treachery led our own beast into complicity.”

They went down one of the marble corridors leading away from the stinking garbage, and to a large stone door carved with elven sigils. Above the archway were the elvish runes:

Ethiel stepped up raised a hand before the door and spoke a hushed word. There was the gentle yawn as the air pressure changed when the door jerked ajar of its own accord.

“Beyond is *Culadin e sila Avelsoliel*,” he said turning to the party. “It means ‘stairway to the honeycomb’. You will follow it down to a huge chamber. With two obvious exits to your left, take the one more directly across from the base of the stairs. It will lead into the Honeycombe, from there you are on your own. There are probably no more than a score ogres left down there, but that is enough.”

One of the other elves handed the party packages of food to pass among themselves, and the other gave them two coils of elven rope and a lantern.⁸²

“Good luck,” said Ethiel. “Once you pass through the door, we must seal it against intrusion, so you will have to make your way to the other side below the human town. And while you seek your quarry, we shall search our tomes and papers in our library for references to this ‘Circle of the Thorn’ and the ‘Brotherhood of the Lost’ as you asked.”

“Um, Ethiel,” Jana suddenly said. “You never said what Karella’s powers are like.”

“Well, it is hard to know for certain. She can call on any number of fiendish beasts, and beguile,” Ethiel said. “Also, we do not know if she will be able to use the powers exhibited by all drow in her current body, but it is possible.”

“Drow powers?” Martin asked.

“Yes, the standard abilities of the *Novilustani*. The ability to levitate, cast globes of darkness, that kind of thing.”

“Oh, nice to know,” said Martin.

The elf that had handed them the ropes showed Ratchis the sign of the witch’s passage at the threshold.

“That is the mark you must look for when you come to the chamber below,” he said to the half-orc.

Ratchis nodded. The rest of party crossed the threshold to join the woodsman, and Tirhas came with them.

“I shall accompany you,” she said. “Though if catching the drow means having to let Richard go, I will do it.”

Martin raised the lantern as the door closed behind them and they began the long walk down the narrow corridor, which was made of seemingly endless steps that were of uneven length and height. It was a wearying and oppressive journey in the dark, ever downward. Ratchis took point, making his way down as quietly as he could sixty feet in front of the party, while the others tarried to give him room.

The descent was tedious. For an inordinate amount of time the chaotic staircase crawled down spiraling in long loops in one direction and then in another. At times it was as broad as forty feet and at others barely three feet wide.

⁸² This is the equivalent of silk rope, a rare commodity in Aquerra.

And just when they felt that they could take it no longer (except Kazrack who wondered at the fact that each stone had been purposefully made asymmetrical with the rest with a bizarrely masterful craftsmanship), the steps descended into a much larger chamber. The ceiling fell away into the darkness, as did the floors and walls around them, until the humans could not even see the floor forty feet below them.

Twenty feet below them, on a particularly long step something glittered, and there was the shadow of a lump or something partially blocking the way.

Kazrack's eyes opened broadly.

"Treasure!" Ratchis whispered. "Hold on!"

He crept forward and peered around, looking above and below to each side and finally up to the large stone that had been placed on the step. Ratchis motioned and the other crept forward.

Upon the step was a large stone about three feet across and two feet high. It was rough and unpolished. Heaped upon it were more coins than any of them had ever seen gathered in one place before. There were stacks of silver coins and dwarven obleks, and the bright glint of gold in several places, all on a bed of bright copper holding many gems littered about the surface.⁸³

However, the pile was also marred with the stumps of many burned out candles upon a collection of bones and skulls and rags and ripped up canvas bags. Most of the skulls were of humans, but two were abnormally large and oblong with a ridge in the brow.

"Ogres," Tirhas said, quietly.

"Treasure!" Jeremy said, less quietly, stepping forward.

"Stop!" Kazrack cried, his dwarven reflexes kicking in. "It could be trapped!"

"Or cursed," said Jana.

Jeremy looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Are you saying we are just going to let this treasure sit here and keep going?" Jeremy's voice echoed with exasperation.

"Keep it down! Voices carry," said Ratchis.

"No, I plan to check it," said Kazrack. He removed his pouch of runestones from around his neck and retrieved one. It came ready to his hand, even though it was a particular stone that he was looking for, as if it knew to be on top. He placed it on his palm, and chanted softly under his breath, his head down. He then looked at the stone and the treasure.

"It is not magical," he said with confidence.

"Good!" Jeremy leapt forward, but Ratchis put a thick arm before the Neergardian.

"It could still be trapped," he growled.

"And it may not detect as magical and still be cursed," added Martin, the emerald of his new ring shining in the lantern light as he rubbed his arms across his body to stay warm in the damp cavern. "I can't wait for the day I can take a bath. A hot bath."

⁸³ "Obleks" are common dwarven money that come in copper, silver and gold denominations. They are round pellets partially flattened on one side and stamped with a dwarven rune.

“So, we *are* leaving it,” Jeremy said. He looked at the others and sighed, and then suddenly fell to all fours and crawled right up to the side of the stone. He peered at it closely but kept his hands and body away.

“What are you doing?” Kazrack asked.

“Looking for traps,” said Jeremy. “I don’t see any.”

He stood.

“That doesn’t mean there isn’t one,” said Ratchis.

“Oh, it most assuredly means there *is!*” said Jeremy with confidence. “Let’s go.”

They continued down the stairs. Ratchis took the lead, followed by Kazrack, and then Jana and Martin, followed by Jeremy and Tirhas.

Finally, they were on the floor of the huge cavern. The floor below them was moist and soft dirt, littered with sharp stones. The ceiling of stalactites was shrouded in darkness even to the dwarf and the half-orc. Ratchis kept an eye peeled for the exits Ethiel had told them about.

Ahead of them to the right was a shimmering column of stone made of a huge stalactite and stalagmite meeting about twenty feet off the ground. Moisture beaded on its surface, glimmering in the lantern light.

“This is amazingly beautiful,” Kazrack said softly. “I have not seen caverns like these since my early childhood.”

“The exits from this cavern should be that way,” said Ratchis, pointing to the left. “I can feel colder air from that direction.”

The near-silence of their walk across the huge chamber was shattered by a scream from Tirhas behind them.

Jeremy was the quickest to react. He spun around. “Mother of Filth!” he cried, as he saw Tirhas struggling to free herself from a huge spider, nearly five feet in diameter, hanging above her by a thick shining web. The spider’s venom rolled thickly down her shoulder and arm.

Kazrack was at her side quickly, but not quicker than Ratchis. The half-orc turned and fired his crossbow (already loaded) into the spider’s flank. There was a nasty popping sound as ichor burst from the wound. Kazrack’s halberd drew more ichor and a screech from the spider, as Martin attempted his new spell *sleep* (learned the day before from one of the elves), but the vermin resisted.

It plopped down on the soft ground, its front feelers wide open, looming taller than Kazrack’s head, and it came down on the dwarf and he felt its hot venom coursing through his veins. He almost immediately felt his muscles weaken and he groaned, the spider’s teeth pulling big chunks of flesh free from his shoulder.

Jeremy’s new sword was in his left hand and stabbed the spider right above the head and it screeched again, letting go of Kazrack and began to turn.

“Foul servant of Tenaerél Undol!” Tirhas cried and shoved her blade right into the spider’s face, all the way to the hilt. The creature shuddered and popped, and then its legs wobbled, and it collapsed.

Kazrack rubbed his poisoned wound and winced from the pain.

“Quick, Ratchis try to clean out his wound while I help Tirhas,” said Jana, pulling out her oft-used healer’s kit.

The venom moved through their bodies, moving to their hearts. Kazrack felt a tightening in his chest and a shortness of breath, as the strength was drained from his body. Ratchis had not been fast enough, but Tirhas was able to

further resist the poison thanks to Jana's help.

"Ugh, I feel awful," Kazrack moaned. "I don't know if I can take up the front ranks anymore. I'd be more of a liability than an asset."

"Well, we have no choice but to move on," Ratchis said. "I will carry your pack. You'll do the best you can, and we'll just hope it is enough."

"Well, even though I am weakened, I want the two of you remaining behind me so you can be safer in case of attack," Kazrack said to Martin and Jana.

"We may need line of sight to cast our spells," noted Jana.

"Don't worry, I think we can see over him," Martin commented dryly.

Kazrack frowned. Jeremy laughed.

The party kept moving, Kazrack having noticed a bunch of webs up near the ceiling between the glimmering pillar and the ceiling and what was probably the rear wall, which was obscured by darkness. Ratchis took a few minutes searching the two passages out he had been told about, and found signs that the small boot print, still bearing some rotting trash from the garbage room went down the natural corridor that supposedly was the more direct way to the Honeycombe.

The passageway was long and narrow, going down for a long time with a very mild slope. Ratchis stopped occasionally to make sure the track he had found continued this way, but there was nowhere else for it go. There were no other branches, only occasional alcoves in the stone walls that were not level with the slope, creating perfect little ambush spots for one or two medium-sized creatures. But no ambushes came.

Eventually, they came to a fork in the path. The passageway opened up into a small oval area that branched in three directions. Immediately before them the path continued at the same level. On the right went downward, but on the left it went up sharply.

Ratchis motioned for the others to stand back and spent fifteen minutes looking around.

"There are two kinds of tracks here," he finally said. "I almost missed the witch's because there are a bunch of prints like a two-legged animal with a padded and clawed foot. The witch's track goes down the center passageway and then back to the right. The creatures' footprints are everywhere, but it looks like the most recent set went to the right as well, but after the witch did."

"Perhaps she turned into the creature," Kazrack mused.

"There are several of them, so unless she can turn herself into a pack of creatures..." Ratchis let his voice trail off.

"I guess we go right then," said Tirhas.

The passage to the right curved to the left again after only about twenty feet, and then opened into a tall oblong room. It was about forty-five to fifty feet long, and its floor was sunken about three feet below the floor the passageway the party followed. There was another shimmering column near the other end of the room, to the right, and a darkened alcove four feet above the floor to the left.

"Wait here, I'll check it out," Ratchis whispered to the others and snuck forward. Kazrack dropped down to the cavern floor, covering him with the heavy crossbow the half-orc had handed to him before he left.

Ratchis kept to the right, but came around the column from the left, looking to peer into the darkness of the passage that led out the other side of the cavern, and suddenly there was a heavy weight upon him and intense pain.

Kazrack was the only one who could see clearly as the lantern light did not reach that far, but a creature leapt down from behind the column, where it had been clinging. It slammed Ratchis in the head with a misshapen club, knocking the half-orc off his feet.

There was a roar and another of the creatures appeared in the dark alcove.

They had shaggy gray and brown fur in uneven splotches all over their bodies. The smell of dung emanated from them. They had bear-like faces, and broad shoulders, and long canines that dripped saliva. They hooted wildly.

The first creature tried to slam Ratchis again while he was on the ground, but the half-orc rolled out of the way deftly avoiding the blow and letting his pack slide off his shoulders.

Jana came forward and with a word and a flick of her wrist the now familiar ray of sickly green emerged from her finger and struck the creature standing over Ratchis, but to no avail.

Kazrack fired a bolt at the second creature, knocking it down and back into the darkness of the alcove.

Tirhas leapt down into the cavern, and facing the alcove waited, while Martin waited for a clear sign of what to do.

Jeremy hurried to Ratchis side and drew rank blood and bile from a deep blow in the creature's flank. Covered by Jeremy's aid, Ratchis leapt to his feet and slammed his war hammer into the creature's ribs. It bellowed in pain and dropped unconscious and bleeding to the ground.

The creature in the alcove stood and came back into view, only to be met by a ray of silver frost that struck him from Tirhas' finger. It roared and threw its club at Ratchis, who was closest, and the half-orc grunted. Blood now poured from his temple.

By this time, Jana had loaded her crossbow and fired at the second creature. The bolt seemed to strike more fur than flesh. Kazrack was busy re-loading the heavy crossbow, while Jeremy waited by Tirhas, ready to strike if the second creature came down out of the nook in the stone wall.

Ratchis, however, despite being gravely wounded cried out in anger and charged at the creature leaping up to the platform, but it side-stepped and easily avoided the telegraphed blow.

"What the hell does Ratchis think he is doing?" Jeremy said aloud, as he readied to leap after Ratchis, but suddenly, from the darkness of the passage beyond the cavern came the hooting another of the creatures charging at him from his right.

However, Jeremy was prepared and slammed his sword against the creature's chest. The flat of the blade struck and it drew little blood, but it was enough to knock the creature down. However, it deftly arched its back and flicked its body back to a standing position.

Martin moved up behind Jeremy and cast his *daze* spell on the newly arrived creature, but to no avail.

Tirhas drew her sword and drew more blood from the smelly hairy thing. She wore a look of determination and hatred on her face.

The hooting of the creature facing Ratchis became an incessant babbling as more drool poured from its mouth and it puffed up, its muscles swelling with increased strength. No longer having a club, it revealed that these things were much more dangerous while weaponless. He grabbed at Ratchis with two powerful claws, drawing more of the fading half-orc's blood, but failing to strike with his bite.

Ratchis staggered, barely conscious.

Jana fired at the enraged creature but missed. Kazrack, however, found his mark and his crossbow bolt lodged itself in the thing's thigh. This gave Ratchis the chance to step away from it and call to Nephthys for her healing energies.

Jeremy drove his enchanted blade deep into the creature that attacked him before it could swing its weapon again. It shuddered and fell back down, dying.

Martin attempted to *daze* the creature in the alcove as it turned away from Ratchis and looked to Jeremy and Tirhas but again, his spell failed to affect it. The creature leapt at Tirhas and met her waiting blade. It fell dead.

Now that they were lying still, they could see that these creatures had white fur that they darkened with dirt and dung.

Kazrack moved to Ratchis and called down the power of the dwarven gods to heal his companion some, while Tirhas went from creature to creature sinking her sword into their necks and finishing their lives.

“Quaggoths,” she said, with disgust.

“Quaggoths?” asked Ratchis.

“These are quaggoths,” Tirhas said. “They are the willing slaves of drow.”

“What are they doing here?” Kazrack asked. “I thought this place was supposed to be inhabited by ogres.”

“I do not know,” replied Tirhas.

From beyond the cavern they were now in, they all heard a strange cry interrupted by a snarl. Martin shivered.

“Perhaps Rahasia summoned them,” Kazrack mused.

“From what I know of summoning magics she would have to be close by to have done that,” Martin the Green said.

“And these are the same creatures that made those tracks we found,” Ratchis said. “Could she summon them permanently?”

“I meant that she called for them,” Kazrack clarified.

“They dwell in the Plutonic Realms. It would be a long way for them to come in so short a time,” said Tirhas. “And Ethiel did not mention a passage to the Plutonic Realms from the Honeycombe.”

“That doesn’t mean there isn’t one,” said Ratchis. “Come on, let’s check out that sound in the next cavern.”

Again, Ratchis crept forward, while the others hung back. The next cavern was also sunken, its floor several feet below the last cavern, but it was also much bigger. The hulking ranger leapt down into the cavern and saw that to his left, the chamber was a series of plateaus that lead to a dark passageway in that direction. To his right, a dry channel was cut into the floor about eight to ten feet deep and running parallel with the room. It disappeared into a dark hole in the direction he had come from. There was also another way out across from where they came from, but Ratchis’ darkvision did not have the range to penetrate the darkness over there. The floor and ceiling were an obstacle course of stalactites and stalagmites.

On the floor about forty feet away, Ratchis saw the body of a large humanoid, which would have been over nine feet tall, if it still had a head, but it didn’t.

Ratchis relayed what he saw to the others and they came into the chamber. “We could easily be ambushed in here, so stay alert,” said Ratchis.

“What is that thing?” Jeremy asked pointing to the body.

“It’s an ogre, or it was anyway,” replied Ratchis. “Anyone else hear that?”

It was the sound of deep labored breathing coming from passageway to the left. The breath rattled every few seconds.

“I don’t hear anything,” said Jeremy.

“I bet it is a wounded ogre,” said Kazrack. “I think those quaggoth things and the ogres are at war or something.”

“Perhaps the quaggoths are clearing this place to claim it for the drow,” Martin suggested.

Tirhas nodded her head.

Ratchis placed a hand on Kazrack’s shoulder, “Nephthys, grant this dwarf with some portion of your divine strength so that he may do his part to the word free of the evil influence of the drow and their slaves.”

Kazrack felt the new strength course through him, but still weakened by the spider venom, he was still not as strong as he normally was.

“I am going to check out that breathing,” Ratchis said.

“We’ll come with you,” said Kazrack.

“No, just be ready for if I need your help,” said Ratchis.

“Fine, we’ll just get closer to the passage, and you can go parley with the beast,” Kazrack turned to Jeremy and Tirhas. “Can you two give me a hand up to that plateau if there is trouble? I’m not so good at climbing.”

Jeremy nodded, but Tirhas did not reply.

Ratchis hoisted himself up to the level where the passageway was, and quietly moved down it. It immediately curved to the left and narrowed a great deal. Soon, Ratchis was in the dark by himself, out of sight of the rest of the party.

The breathing was louder, closer, but its source was still out of view. He moved slowly forward, and still the passageway curved, and just as it turned back at a sharp angle, he heard the deep resonating voice, still breathy emerge from beyond.

“I heard you talking,” it said. The voice was slow and steady, each syllable like the blow of a hammer of in a windy room. “I can smell you, orc-blood.”

“Can we parley?” Ratchis called in a hushed voice.

“What?” the voice said.

“Can we parley?” Ratchis asked again, as he crept forward some more. Sitting in an alcove where the corridor turned, was a huge figure. Over twelve feet tall, he was hunched over, and a huge battle axe was across his knees. He wore the fur of a gray bear over his huge chain shirt. He had pallid, almost frosted blue skin, and long white hair. The giant’s shoulders were twice as broad as Ratchis’, but where his eyes should have been, where just bloody holes, circled by crusty rust-colored discharge.

“What do you mean?” the giant asked.

“Can we just talk?” Ratchis asked.

“Yes... Don’t think that just because I cannot see does not mean I cannot kill you. You know I will,” the giant said, his head cocking trying to pin-point the half-orc’s position. “What are orcs doing in the tunnels? Are you working

for the shaggy-ones?”

“No,” Ratchis replied. “I am the only half-orc here that I know of. I am here with several humans and a dwarf searching for an elven woman. We were surprised to find these shaggy things here. We thought there were ogres down here.”

“There *were* ogres down here. I was their chieftain until my own people turned against me,” the giant said.

“You were attacked by an ogre?” Ratchis asked.

“Yes, my own people turned against me,” the hulking form said through a ragged cough. “I decreed that we would leave the Honeycombe when shaggy-ones began to arrive and endanger us. I thought we should flee to the Scar ⁸⁴, but the young among my tribe wanted to stay and fight. They punished me for what they saw as cowardice, but I saw it as being pragmatic. They poked out my eyes and left me wander the caves until the shaggy ones killed me. They wanted to war with the beasts and now my people are slaughtered. The central chamber, which housed my tribe has already been taken over. It is crawling with those things.”

There was a long pause, where the only sound was the labored breathing of the giant.

“I love the sound of a crunching skull as much as the next ogre,” the giant continued. “But the survival of our tribe was more important, but I don’t think they could ever see that. So now all that there is left for me to do is find my way to the central chamber and die killing as many of those things as I can before I go. I hope that I should be blessed enough by the gods to kill their leader before I die.”

“Who is their leader?” Ratchis asked.

“I do not know,” answered the giant. “But they have got to have a leader they are too organized to not have one.”

“What is your name?” Ratchis asked. “I am called Ratchis.”

“My name is Silverback. ⁸⁵ At least, that’s what it would be in this tongue. Have you met many of these creatures I speak of?”

“Three,” replied Ratchis.

“Only three? I’ve never encountered them in groups of less than eight, or maybe six,” Silverback said.

“I have to go and tell my companions that I am safe and that you pose us no danger,” said Ratchis. “Perhaps you can lead us to this central chamber?”

“If you wish to accompany me to death in battle, by all means, it will make my hear swell that that many more of these beasts were killed by my doing,” Silverback said. He almost smiled.

Ratchis went back and told the others about the old giant.

“Will he bring us to the central chamber?” Kazrack asked. “The drow is most likely making her way there if she is not there already.”

“Yes, he will bring us, but he makes it sound like there are too many there for us to hope to deal with,” explained Ratchis. “Perhaps if we could sneak in and find her and grab her and get out... somehow...”

“I don’t know how you expect us to survive an assault on a place teeming with those quaggoth things when they have a drow witch on their side,” Martin said flustered.

⁸⁴ *The Ogre Scar* is a great rent in the earth in the middle of Gothanius, known for the presence of ogres.

⁸⁵ **DM’s Note:** *Silverback* is a half-ogre/frost giant. Special Thanks to the Rat Bastard DM’s Club for their help in detailing him.

“Can we trust the creature?” Tirhas asked, her face scrunched up in a look of disgust.

“I think we can,” replied Ratchis.

They decided to all climb up to the plateau and come speak with Silverback. They found him moved from his place, to the narrow corridor that ran perpendicular to the one they followed.

“I am going,” he said, his heavy breath kept a dirge-like rhythm for his words to rest against.

“Will you lead us to the central chamber?” Ratchis asked.

“Yes, I know a secret way. I know this place better than all my people. Only I among them know this place was once a fortress for the dark race of elves, and I have found some of their tunnels,” Silverback said.

“Yes, we are looking for an elf, an elven maiden. I mentioned her before,” Ratchis asked. “Have you seen her?”

“I have seen no elf,” Silverback replied. “Then again, I have not seen much of anything for these past many days. I’ve only heard the cries of my people as they are torn apart by the beasts. My only comfort is in that their last thoughts they must think of how they should have listened to me. And the young upstarts that did this to me are dead!” His voice rose up like deep operatic horn, his tense muscles spasming with anger.

The party looked at the giant ogre nervously.

“I am going now,” Silverback continued. Follow if you will, the way is long and winding, but I can bring you to a place where you may be able to observe the central chamber before you enter it and perhaps take them by surprise ere morning—when I will kill as many as I can before I am killed.”

Silverback, crouched and pointing one shoulder before the other, led the party down the narrow winding passage that slowly climbed up and up and up. For such a big creature in a small place, and for being blind, Silverback moved with great speed and confidence. His feet did not falter once. Of course, in many places where the giant must squeeze through the companions were able to pass through quite easily.

After traveling nearly an hour like this, they felt cold air rush through the narrow tunnel. Martin stopped and refilled the lantern with oil, and then they emerged at the edge of huge cliff, which was just one side of an immense underground canyon. The drop off to their left as they emerged sank into what seemed like endless and impenetrable darkness. Above them the ceiling stretched away by scores of feet, but thankfully the cliff side opened up a bit right ahead, where there was a wide opening from which a bouncing light emerged.

Light?

“Listen,” Silverback said, stepping to one side to let the other out of the narrow corridor. “Do you hear that?”

From the opening ahead and to the light from whence the light emerged, there was the sound of battle and human voices mixed together with the snarls, barks, and roaring hoots of quaggoths.

“Ugh! Agh! Ugh! Get back!” cried one voice, each syllable punctuating the clang of a sword blade, or the squeal in pain of one of those creatures. “Look out! There is another hairy humper over there!”

“Damn! There’s two on me,” called another whiny voice.

And behind it all was a voice singing very loudly and rhythmically. *“Though she was such a mess, She pulled off her dress and threw her in bed and kept her well-fed with sausages, breadcrumbs and grapes! With sausages, breadcrumbs and grapes!”* It was a catchy bawdy tune that seemed to flow well with the drumbeat of battle.

The party ran forward, but Silverback hung back not wanting to reveal himself. Ratchis reached the opening first

followed by Jeremy. Martin and Jana ran past the opening, the latter taking some cover from the wall on the opposite side. Tirhas, bow in hand went to the center of the opening, while Kazrack took up the rear.

There was a group of five human men out-numbered by quaggoths. The men seemed experienced warriors, as they had spread out in a semi-circle from which they could get to each other, but they had their backs to the walls as to avoid being surrounded.

Closest to Ratchis was the singing man, he was of slight build, and had wavy light brown hair and a soft handsomeness that was emphasized by his palpable dislike of being underground and dirty, but he fought well with a long sword, slapping the two quaggoths back deftly and avoiding their blows. He wore a brown waistcoat and breeches—no armor. This was Frederick the Amazing.

Across the cavern from him, facing two quaggoths himself, was a tall and lanky man in leather armor fighting with a long sword as well, but he seemed to be struggling more, and he displayed several deep wounds in his right side and shoulder. He had dark brown curly hair, and bad skin. He had a slack-jawed look to him, and he whined the whole time he was fighting, “I need some healing over here!” He was called Rondar.

Beside the lanky man, was broad man of good height, dressed in splint mail and bearing a heavy mace and a shield. From the shield shone the light that illuminated the cavern, and it also bore the insignia of a scepter held in a black hand and bathed in flame. He wore a full helm with a tassel of black sticking up from the top. He fought silently against two quaggoths, slamming his mace into their ribs again and again. He was splattered with much blood. He was Aldovar.

At the far end of the cavern fought the remaining two against five quaggoths. The one on the left was very short and stocky. He wore armor of cured hide dyed gray. He wielded a great sword, which he used with great efficiency. The man was almost as broad as he was tall, with black hair cut short in the front and long and stringy in the back. He had olive-skin, and a permanent grimace. Over his armor he wore a cloak of wolf fur, the head of the former animal serving as an intimidating hood. He was Debo of the barbarian wolf-people of the northern Outlands.

The last man was notable for the endless stream of profanity that spewed from his mouth in a cadence that went with the music, filling up the spaces between notes, syncopating the rhythm. It was a foul and degrading string of words and insults that would make a sailor squirm. He had wavy blonde hair and a thick mustache. He wore a chain shirt, and black leather breeches and tall boots. He fought with a long sword in one hand and a short sword in the other and whirled them around with a proficiency that made Jeremy feel envious. He was Gunthar.

The Neergaardian threw a dagger at one of the quaggoths attacking the bard, but the blade went wide.

The quaggoths noticed their additional adversaries and one ran at Jeremy, who ducked the club as he drew his short sword. Another ripped into the bard, whose song never stopped. The squat barbarian with the great sword roared in pain, as one of the quaggoths cracked his head with a heavy blow that made him spit blood and teeth at his opponents.

The bard hit a high note as he hit the quaggoths still on him (as the other had gone after Jeremy), while Ratchis smashed the skull one by the tall lanky man of the other with his war hammer.

“Where’d you come from?” the man asked the half-orc, bewildered.

“Nephthys sent me!” Ratchis replied, setting his sights on the other quaggoths trying to relieve the tall man of his pancreas.

“Nephthys? I thought we were supposed to go to *you* to hide!” the man said, cryptically.

Martin the Green pulled a bit of loose wool from his cloak and with a gesture and a word, a creature of black shadow appeared before him and charged through the melee. One of the quaggoths, followed it with its eyes, but none seemed willing to leave their prey to pursue the phantasm.

The barbarian's great sword emerged from the back of one of the quaggoths and it fell to the stone floor shuddering, while the heavily armored man cracked the skull of another that kept on fighting.

"I like your song," Jeremy called to the bard, drawing blood from the creature before him. "It is good music to fight by!"

Kazrack moved to Jeremy's side to help flank the creature the bard still struggled with.

Gunthar was a blur of action, striking again, with his long sword, feinting with his short sword and striking a second time with his long sword. One of the quaggoths before him collapsed in a pile of blood-soaked fur.

Rondar ran from the quaggoths Ratchis was trying to help him with, dodging the opportunistic blows of quaggoths, as he took a safe spot beside the barbarian, and pulled out his bow.

Meanwhile, Tirhas was firing arrows at the backs of quaggoths, being careful not to strike her temporary companions, or the five men, but her efforts were for naught.

A quaggoth struck the bard again, and this time the young man did stop singing, crying out in pain instead. It was a cry that was echoed by the barbarian, and by Jeremy who took a particularly bad blow to his neck. He could feel his blood pouring under his chain shirt and soaking his clothing.

Jana cast her *daze* spell on a quaggoth fighting the heavily armored Aldovar, while Ratchis stepped over and crushed the ribs of the one the Rondar left behind. It fell. The heavily armored man slammed the dazed quaggoth with his mace, but it still would not go down.

Kazrack continued to aid the bard.

By now the companions realized that these five men were the same they had met at the Sun's Summit Inn in the alder-village of Summit, months before.⁸⁶

End of Session #23

⁸⁶ See Session #14

Session #24

Between the eleven of them, mopping up the remaining quaggoths was not difficult. The loudmouth blonde proved to be as efficient as he was showy with his blades, and the stocky dark-haired one in wolf's fur displayed a strength and fury that appeared to even scare his companions.

In moments both groups were standing at either end of the cavern (Jana, Ratchis and the others with their backs to the cliff) facing each other nervously.

"Debo get scalps," said the stocky man, and proceeded to use a hatchet to cleave off the tops of the dead quaggoth's heads.

"Yes, Debo, you cut them hairy floggers up real good," said the blonde with the curly hair, he leaned on his long sword and smiled at party, his gaze stopping at Jana and going up and down, and then looking past her at Tirhas who was standing in the rear. "Where'd ya pick up the lima bean?"

Ratchis furrowed his brow, and Jeremy sneered. Martin and Kazrack simply were trying to figure out what he meant.

"Ya don't see many lima beans around here," the man continued. "Especially ones that look as delicious as she does; a little weird, a little boyish, but that's alright by me." His gaze went back to Jana. "Not that you are anything bad to look at, sweetness."

He winked, and then addressed the whole group.

"My name's Gunthar. I remember you guys, the pig-fucker and the tall bald guy, where's he? Anyway, what are you doing down here? Friggin' dragon's not the flarn down here—we know."

"You came down here looking for the dragon?" Martin asked.

"No, ya friggin' idiot. Where in the hell in the puckered arse of Set would a dragon fit down here? We're just huntin' ogres, padding our pockets with some of their ill-gotten booty, but these hairy muthahumpin' father-stabbers ambushed us. Twice! We grabbed what treasure we could find and a few pelts that might be worth a lousy queen's sweaty armpit bit of copper to some sick kid-humper, but not many ogres about. Most musta been killed by the hairy things."

Gunthar's words came out like a hail of arrows from a thousand men, ceaselessly and they seemed to darken the light of the lantern and even that of shield borne by the tall man in black with a shield.

Ratchis wracked his mind to identify the shield's insignia, but he could not place it.

Gunthar's companions did not talk much, however Aldovar placed a hand on the bard's shoulder and said softly, "Oh my dark lord, if you see fit please heal this man so that the strong might prevail over the weak as you would have it."

The bard's wound closed.

Kazrack cursed under his breath.

"Well, we should go," said Kazrack aloud and turned to leave, but his companions made no move to follow him.

"Kazrack, these men might have information we need," Ratchis said softly.

"These men are loud, obnoxious and crude. We should not waste our time with them," the dwarf insisted.

"Little grubber's got a problem? Not tall enough to get a woman?" Gunthar asked with a snicker. Rondar let out a

donkey's bray of laughter.

Kazrack walked back towards the passage they had emerged from to see if Silverback was still there, but the giant ogre was gone.

"Hey!" Jeremy said. "There is no need to insult my companions or speak of anyone in a crude way especially the ladies!"

"Oh, ho!" Gunthar said. "What do we have here? Mister Fancy Two Swords! Why shou..."

Gunthar cut himself short and cocked his head, and when he did it, his mannerisms in combination with his blonde hair, build and persistent smile made a bell go off in both Martin and Jana's heads.

"What's your name?" Gunthar asked Jeremy,

"Jeremy, why?" the Neergaardian replied.

"Where you from?" Gunthar asked, his eyes squinted, and he took a step forward, his hand coming off his long sword.

"Why?" Jeremy responded getting nervous.

"You from Neergaard?"

"Um, no..." replied Jeremy. Martin looked at him suspiciously. "I'm from all over."

"But not Neergaard?"

"No."

"Everyone is from some filthy muthahumpin' place originally," Gunthar insisted.

"Well, if I had to pick one place, I'd say Herman Land," Jeremy replied.

"Kind of light-skinned and fair-haired for a Herman-Lander," Gunthar said, stepping back, and an edge coming into his voice.

Martin leaned over to Jana and whispered, "Is it just me or do the two of them..."

"Yes, they certainly do. It's weird," the young witch replied.

"Oh well, my grand-father immigrated to Herman Land from Neergaard, but we haven't been back for two generations," Jeremy said. "You from Neergaard?"

"Uh, yeah...yeah," Gunthar suddenly re-gained his swagger.

"Sorry to question ya like your puke-sack old lady when you been out piercing bloated whores with your man-javelin, ya know what I mean?" He smiled a disgusting smile. "It's that for a second... What's your family name?"

"Uh, Brighthelm," Jeremy replied.

This time the entire party looked at him funny, including Kazrack who coming back and seeing his party still talking to Gunthar, decided to go back down the passage himself and find Silverback.

"Yeah, I thought maybe you could be my little brother," Gunthar said. "But that would be impossible, he died before I ever met him."

“Yeah, well I don’t have any brothers,” Jeremy said.

“Yeah, well, wishful friggin’ thinkin’,” Gunthar said. “Ever since I found out that I had a younger brother I dreamed of taking him under my wing and teaching him the ways of the world, and when I finally got my chance it was because he had died, and our dad took me as his legitimate heir.”

There was a long pause.

“So, what are you doing down here? Oh, wait, I know same as us,” Gunthar continued to talk. “Well, there is not much left, them hairy bastards running around covered in their own friggin’ shite took it all to a central chamber, crawling with the hairy things, like chiggers on my nutsack. Ya wanna stay the hell away from there. We were going to go down there, but even though Debo can’t die, the rest of us can.” He pointed to the barbarian who repeated, “Debo can’t die.”

“So, you are leaving here?” Ratchis asked.

“Yep,” Gunthar replied. “We have to get back to hunting the dragon. We have a plan.”

“Oh yeah? What is it?” Jeremy asked, curious.

“Wouldn’t you like to know,” Gunthar said slyly. He turned to his companions, “We’re getting out of here.”

The other party gathered their things and made their way to a passage in rear left corner of the cavern. As they disappeared into the darkness, Gunthar turned and looked back, “Oh, and watch out, there is some huge white-haired ogre running around. We shot at it before. It would’ve been a great kill, but it got away. I think it is injured though, so keep an eye out.”

The permanent gritted smile seemed to be the last thing to fade in the shadows of the passageway.

The party re-grouped, and Ratchis was able to catch up with Kazrack who had found Silverback hiding a hundred yards or so back into the narrow passage they had traveled through.

The old giant commented that the five men the party had run into had attacked him from afar, but that he led them into a quaggoth ambush to avoid them.

Silverback led them along the narrowing cliff edge and then up another passageway, that broadened into a place of many steps going in three different directions. Here he paused and asked for them to describe each to him, before deciding which way they should go. What followed was two hours of going up broad stairs, down narrow twisting ones and then a slow gentle ascent until finally, all other routes and passageways seemed far behind them, and there seemed to be only this one narrow stairway.

Finally, Silverback stopped. As he turned his body, the air changed in the passage, a cold metallic taste caressed them from beyond the giant.

“Ahead is an old watch post. It looks above the central chamber and there is a stair that will lead down to a dry riverbed that is adjacent to the place—which will allow us to take them by surprise, or so we should hope,” his voice was raspy and slower with every word. “There are openings that allow one to look out into the huge chamber, though at this height and with the darkness there will be little to see, but we will most definitely be seen if you make light, so do not.”

Silverback entered the room, and crouched down, nearly crawling to a far corner where he sat down.

“We rest now,” he said. “Tomorrow we go to die.”

Ratchis and Kazrack went into the room and looked around. It was not more than thirty feet wide and about forty-five feet wide. They immediately could see the openings that looked out and down of the central chamber area, but from where they stood all they could see was darkness. Just off center of the room was a stone bench, about eight feet long, three feet wide and three feet high, decorated with the carvings of countless spiders.

“The cold air feels good,” said Ratchis. “The air was getting oppressive down there.”

“Ratchis! Kazrack!” came a sharp whisper from behind them. It was Martin the Green. “We can’t see. Once we turned off the lantern all but you two were in the dark!”

“Let’s turn on the lantern very low,” suggested Jeremy.

“No!” Ratchis said harshly, but in a whisper. “Here is my hand, we’ll direct you in.”

“I think we can get away with a little bit of light,” said Kazrack.

“No light,” said Silverback

“What do we do now?” Jeremy asked.

“We wait and rest, and tomorrow try to sneak into this central chamber and see if Rahasia or Richard are there,” said Ratchis.

“Right,” agreed Kazrack. “But we should look around here some and see what we can find out about this chamber and about our options for escape and/or retreat.”

“Might be a good idea,” said Ratchis, he walked over to the openings. He had to squat down because they were obviously built for much shorter people, but Kazrack could see nothing because it was obviously built for people a head taller than him or more.

“You know there is a door over here, looks like it goes outside,” said Kazrack walking over to the left-hand wall. “It was kind of half-hidden, but I can make out the mechanism perfectly now.”

And so, the plan was made. Ratchis would cast *Silence* on the door in case it made a lot of noise while being opened. It was made of stone but braced with rusted metal. Once this was done Kazrack and Ratchis would go out and see what there was to be seen.

Beyond the door was a narrow stone ledge, which overlooked a very long drop off. The watch post was actually built within the corner of an immense piece of stone that made up two sides of the huge chamber. They could not see the walls on the opposite side and directly below them they could make out the vague outline of ridge of soil and stone that might be the edge of the riverbed.

There was no way they see of getting down there from here. On one side, the ledge was blocked by an outcropping of rock, and on the other a past rockslide must have smashed the path away.

They crept back into the room and closed the door before the silence spell was over. One of the others had lit the lantern, and had it burning very low.

“We said no light,” Ratchis said angrily.

“Come on, we need to see,” said Jeremy.

“What if something had happened to you while you were gone and we could not see where it was you went,” reasoned Martin.

“You didn’t even notice it until you came back in because it is so low. There is no way anyone else could see it,” said Jeremy.

“I think it’ll be okay,” said Kazrack.

“Silverback,” Kazrack said. “Do you know another way out of here?”

“There is the stair right here which leads down to the riverbed, that can be followed to the right all way to a cave exit below the town,” the old giant said. “Or back the way we came, not far there is a series of steps that will take you right down to the stream that still runs, this will lead directly into the front of the central chamber.”

The others sat and tried to rest, and turned off the lantern, as the dwarf and the half-orc scrambled around trying to learn more about their surroundings.

“I don’t like it down here,” Thomas said, burying himself deeper into the folds of Martin’s robes.

“It’ll be okay, Thomas,” Martin reassured his familiar.

“I think I am going to go down to the dry riverbed now and just scout around and learn what I can,” Ratchis whispered to Kazrack, as they stood by the archway led to the stairway Silverback had mentioned.

“That would be dangerous,” Kazrack. “But we should learn what we can about this place before rushing in. The ogre chief may be willing to die, but the rest of us are not quite so eager.”

“I won’t take any unnecessary chances,” Ratchis said. “I am going to leave my armor with you, so I will be even more quiet.”

Ratchis and Kazrack began to make their way down the uncharacteristic narrow steps that descended very sharply. Kazrack was to go part of the way down with him, but not forty feet down the stairs, the stone steps themselves stopped, what was left was a slick limestone ramp that the steps had been carved from.

“I had a feeling this place was half-finished,” commented Kazrack. “The stonework here is alien to me, but still skilled, but unfinished, probably tired themselves out with all their extra spider-frills and the baroque ornamentation.”

“Uh, Kazrack, can we discuss that another time, and tie this rope around your waist,” Ratchis replied. “I am going down there, stairs or no stairs.”

“Wait,” Kazrack said, pulling his dwarven rune stein from his pack. “Drink this first. It will fill you with the spirit of *Alagh*, heroism.”

The dwarf filled the stein with two mouthfuls of wine and passed it to the half-orc, who gave his awkward snarling smile of friendship and drank it down quickly.

Ratchis holding the other end of the rope, began to lower himself down the slick stone. There were only occasional little rough spots of rock that could pass for hand-holds, but most of the descent Kazrack held up the hulking half-orc by brute strength. However, even nearly fifty feet of rope was not enough for Ratchis to reach the bottom of the shaft.

He sighed.

Ratchis scooted over to the very corner of the shaft, trying to wedge himself between the wall and the floor to give himself more stability.

He let go of the rope, moved and immediately tumbled headfirst down the shaft. He threw out a hand and a foot and halted his fall painfully, but precariously.

“Ratchis! Ratchis!” Kazrack hissed down the shaft.

“Lower the rope more,” Ratchis hissed back. “I can’t make it down. I need to come back up.”

Kazrack came to the very edge of the end of the stairs and lowered the rope as far as he could. The frayed end of it was only seven inches short of Ratchis.

Ratchis sighed again. “Lower!”

“As low as it goes,” Kazrack replied.

The half-orc leapt from his awkward position up towards the rope, but his leg came off the wall at a weird angle, and he tossed himself more outward than upward, and less than a second later he was tumbling all the way down into the darkness, trying hard to keep his yelps and groans of pain as quiet as possible. At the end was a final drop of fifteen feet straight down. He lay on a hard stone floor covered in a light drizzle of sand. He sighed again.

Ratchis was in a tiny chamber no more than ten feet at its widest point, but there was a narrow crack, through which he could spy a plateau that led right down into the dry riverbed.

He got up aching and felt a dozen scratches and scrapes burning at once. “Nephthys, close these minor wounds so that they may not be my undoing when I suffer greater ones,” he said, clutching the scored and broken chain about his waist.

Back at the top of the shaft, Kazrack waited for a moment listening to the echoes of Ratchis’ painful descent fade away. He then went back to the watch-post where the others rested.

He told them what happened.

“What the hell were you doing playing around in the first place?” Jeremy asked.

“We were not playing around,” Kazrack said angrily.

“Ya could have fooled me,” Jeremy said, grabbing his gear and walking past the dwarf carrying the lantern, which he had re-lit, but had on very low.

Jana, Martin, Jeremy and Kazrack got to the edge of the stairway, with Tirhas observing from a few feet back. Jeremy turned up the lantern some more, since there was less chance of anyone seeing the light here.

Kazrack tied the rope around his waist, “Jeremy, you’ll have to lower me down as far as the rope can go.”

“Where is the other rope?” Jeremy asked. “Didn’t Ethiel give us two ropes.”

“Yes, there were two ropes,” Tirhas concurred.

“Ratchis has the other one,” Kazrack said resignedly.

“Well, that’s real smart,” said Jeremy.

“There’s no point in arguing about it now,” said Kazrack.

“Right, there’s no point to any of this at all,” Martin the Green said, tersely. “We don’t even know what we are getting into or where we are going or for what.”

“We’re going after the drow witch, Martin,” Jeremy said, sounding confused.

Martin sighed, "I know. Forget it!"

Jeremy lowered Kazrack slowly, with some help from Jana and Martin, until they ran out of slack. Kazrack then slid his shield beneath himself and untied the rope. The dwarf rocketed down the shaft, turning 180 degrees and then tipping over onto his side as he slammed into the opposite wall of the shaft and down the final fifteen feet with a loud groan.

Ratchis looked down at him.

"What the hell are you doing down here?" Ratchis hissed.

"I came to help you and make sure you were all right," Kazrack replied.

Ratchis shook his head. "There is no way back up there. The way is too steep and slippery. We're in trouble, because if we get attacked here, we have nowhere to go."

A few moments later they heard the wild hooting of quaggoths passing by outside the crack. Ratchis ducked down, and crept to the opposite side of the opening, but beyond in the gray darkness he could see nothing but dim shadows of movement.

Suddenly he heard another voice passing as well, but it did not sound like a quaggoth, it sounded like a soft-voiced woman, making a very clear representation of the melodic hooting. They were calling back and forth. She was giving orders!

The quaggoths passed just as Kazrack heard the yelp and the thumping of Jana tumbling down the shaft. He caught her and stepped backward and landed on his rear, and her hip bone struck him heavily on the forehead.

"Nephthys have mercy!" Ratchis hissed. "Is everyone going to come down here and risk their lives? Kazrack you should have told them to stay up there!"

"And split up the group and leave you to die?" said Kazrack. "We needed to come down here anyway."

Jana nodded, and said, "Get ready, Martin should be next. Ratchis, I brought your chain shirt with me."

Martin hung from the rope in the utter pitch dark (the lantern had been sent down with Jana, as Jeremy held a dagger with the light spell on it).

"I just gotta let go. I just gotta let go. I just gotta let go. I just gotta let go," he said over and over again, but simply hung there.

"Martin! You have to let go!" Jeremy called down.

The Watch-Mage gulped and whispered, "Hold on Thomas!" He let go of rope and slid down the shaft. Amazingly, he was able to keep from flipping and slipping, holding his robes open beneath him, and trying to steer by yanking on one side or another.

Below Kazrack heard Martin's approaching shriek, he braced himself to catch the mage. The impact was loud, as both cried out and Kazrack went flying back against the opposite wall. Ratchis, who had moved over to the other side of the crack to keep an eye open for foes, turned to look at the dwarf, and in that moment, a quaggoth leapt into the cavern, hooting loudly and swinging its club at the half-orc.

Stunned, Martin moaned, "We're all going to die."

Tirhas took the rope from Jeremy, "You go next. I have another way to get down."

The young Neergaardian paused for a moment, and then made his way down as far he could.

“We have to hold them to the crack, so only one can attack us at a time,” Ratchis said, returning a club-blow with an even stronger one from his hammer. The quaggoth fell in place, blocking the crack.

Jeremy did not pause, when he got to the end of the rope he simply let go hoping for the best.

Jana pulled the lantern from her pack, but it had cracked in the rough descent. Martin crawled back to the edge of the stone slide to get away from the melee behind him. Kazrack brandished his halberd and moved to hold Ratchis’ flank. He could now see two more quaggoths behind the fallen one, waiting for an opportunity to get into the tiny cavern.

The quaggoth leapt to its feet and stumbled with his club at Ratchis. The half-orc side-stepped the blow and brought his hammer down on the hairy beast again.

Jeremy landed on Jana, and they both lay there scraped and with the wind knocked out of them. However, desperate to see what was happening, Jana was able to cast her *light* spell on her dagger, breathing through the pain and keeping her concentration focused on the arcane gestures. Tall shadows moved against the wall. The hooting of the quaggoths echoed up and down the shaft.

Cowering in the corner, Martin cast *shield* on himself.

“We have to get out of here or we’ll be overwhelmed,” Kazrack said, as he buried his halberd blade into the quaggoth, and gave it a hard twist to the right. It collapsed in a pile of blood and fur, but another leapt over it and slammed his stone club into Ratchis, who almost fell from the blow.

Ratchis slammed his hammer into the creature’s face in order to give himself more breathing room. The quaggoth’s nose crunched loudly, and it spit out a tooth as its hoot went up three octaves, and it began to puff up. Kazrack thrust forward again, but the quaggoth twisted its body to avoid the blow and slammed his club into Ratchis again. The half-orc cursed loudly.

Jeremy stood and took the lit dagger from Jana.

Ratchis buried his war hammer into the quaggoth’s shoulder, and there was a large crunch and rip, and it collapsed. Ratchis stepped back from the crack to allow Jeremy to take his place, but just as he did, the last quaggoth bull-rushed the Neergardian. Jeremy was slammed against the opposite wall, clearing the crack of an opening, he shoved his short sword (which he had managed to draw) into the thing. Kazrack was slow in reacting and his blow went wide.

Jana adopted her silent and grim fighting face and swung her own club at the creature that was now assaulting Jeremy but missed. Martin stepped forward with dagger in hand as if he were going to join the melee, but then stepped back into the corner.

The quaggoth had his club in the air to bring it down on Jeremy, but Kazrack thrust his halberd into its lower arm and it dropped the club.

At that moment, beside Martin, Tirhas landed, floating down like a feather on the wind.

Ratchis crushed the quaggoth’s skull, but even as it fell it still kept trying to rip at Jeremy, so the Neergardian thrust his blade into it, and it finally stopped moving.

Kazrack moved to the crack to see if more quaggoths were coming and what the landscape out there was like.

Ratchis turned to Jeremy and placed a hand on him, “Nephthys, please allow me to heal this young brave warrior so he may live to see the sun again.”

Jeremy felt the healing warmth fill his body. “Thank Nephthys,” he muttered.

Ratchis did not pause and slipped his chain shirt on.

“We have to get out of here,” Tirhas said in her typical detached-sounding voice. “This is a terrible place to get stuck.”

Kazrack walked back in. “The riverbed is just out here, if we follow it out to the right we will get out of here, or so Silverback said.”

He poured some wine into his dwarven rune stein and spoke the rune “*sonn*”⁸⁷ and drank the contents.

Jana, Jeremy, Martin and Tirhas poured out of the crack. It opened onto a narrow ledge about five feet above the riverbed. They jumped down one by one, followed by Kazrack and Ratchis.

“We have to go that way,” Kazrack said pointing to the right. “Run!”

Jana, Jeremy and Tirhas began to run, but Martin paused and looked back to Ratchis and Kazrack. And then ran, falling out of the range of the light Jeremy carried. He tried to pour on the speed.

“Let’s go,” said Ratchis to Kazrack.

“I’ll only slow you guys down,” the dwarf said. “I’ll hold them off. Go!”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Ratchis. “Run. If we have to fight them, let’s make as much room between us and them first. We might find a place to hide or the exit might even be close. They may not come outside.”

They were now facing the opposite direction from where the others were running, and before them the echo of hooting echoed. It sounded as if it were getting closer.

“Go! I run too slowly. I will only endanger the others,” Kazrack said.

“There is no reason for you to do this,” Ratchis insisted. “I am not going to leave you here.”

Kazrack made some half-hearted progress down the riverbed, with Ratchis only about fifteen feet ahead.

“Look!” Tirhas cried out to the others. “There is a narrow crack. Maybe if we go this way, we can hold them off, or lose them and find a place to hide.”

“I don’t see anything,” said Jeremy.

“I can see further with less light,” said Tirhas. Jana stopped running, as did Martin, both looking back to see where the others were.

But it was too dark, and they could not see five quaggoths charging at Ratchis and Kazrack, even if it was not that far away from them. All they could hear was the maddening hooting, and then the sound of combat.

Martin scrambled to light the remaining lantern, while Jeremy passed the dagger to Jana and pulling both his swords ran to the edge of the light, getting ready to attack any quaggoth that emerged from the darkness. Tirhas leapt up to the ledge before the crack she had discovered.

In the darkness, a quaggoth ran with all its might at Kazrack and swung his club, but the dwarf ducked deftly, and sliced the beast right across the crotch. Blood splattered the moist ground, as its inner bits and pieces started to tumble out of its body. It tried for him even as it collapsed, and in that moment a spear appeared in the air, but it was translucent and mildly luminescent. It thrust itself deep into the quaggoth’s exposed neck and the creature stopped

⁸⁷ The dwarven rune pronounced “*sonn*” can be translated as “*endurance*”.

moving.

Jeremy and Jana moved back a bit more followed by Martin, throwing their light onto the scene of the battle. Tirhas pulled her bow and leapt back down from the ledge.

“Finish these things quick and make for the crack!” she called.

“Run! Everyone run!” Kazrack said, shaving a bit chunk of hair and flesh from the side of the beasts. “Save yourselves. I will hold them back.”

“Have you gone crazy?” Jeremy asked. He readied himself for the three quaggoths following that first one. One came right for him, and he thrust his long sword into it, but he still felt the weight of the club on his shoulder. He shuddered, as his chain shirt did not protect well against blunt weapons.

Another of the quaggoths was a blur of movement as it charged Ratchis. There was a moment of limbs and groans, and the thing stood above Ratchis’ unconscious form, hooting and swinging his club above his head.

The last quaggoth joined its brother attacking the dwarf and brought his club down with all his might. Kazrack moved his halberd to parry the blow with the shaft, but he was too slow and swung too high. The stone club slammed into his shoulder and there was sickening crack and the sound of tearing flesh, as a shard of bone now poked through the side of his now useless right arm. Kazrack’s halberd and defenses were now down.

The dwarf only grunted, though he was in agony.

Jana spoke her arcane words to *blind* one of the quaggoths attacking Kazrack, but it shook off the spell’s effect.

Martin moved to one side and cast a spray of colors at two of the quaggoths, the one over Ratchis fell unconscious, but the other acted as if nothing had happened.

Tirhas carefully fired an arrow into the fray, but it went over the head of the quaggoth she aimed for and disappeared into the darkness.

Kazrack struggled with his two quaggoth opponents, barely staying out of harm’s way, while failing to connect using his light flail in his off-hand. Finally, the quaggoth that had broken his arm struck again, in the shoulder of the same arm. Again, the dwarf cried out, blood pouring down his twisted arm in torrents.

Jeremy struck a deep blow with his elven short sword, but the angered quaggoth returned the favor and the Neergaardian fell.

Jana fired her ray of sickly green light at one of the quaggoths attacking the dwarf, but being careful to not strike the dwarf, the ray went wide missing completely.

Martin took his crossbow off his back and began to frantically load it.

In the distance there was more echoed hooting.

Tirhas dropped her bow and casting forward a handful of sand spoke the word, “*dormu*”. The quaggoth over Jeremy and one of the ones one Kazrack fought fell into a sudden slumber.

Tired of her failing spells, Jana pulled out her club and rushed the remaining quaggoths, shoving the end into its ribs. She grunted with satisfaction. Martin stepped over to one side and taking careful aim sent a crossbow bolt to skim it and get tangled in its bloody fur.

Tirhas tried another gesture and another word, but the quaggoth did not react, continuing to struggle with Kazrack as if all else were a minor annoyance in comparison to the dwarf.

Jana swung again but held back her blow as the quaggoth and dwarf spun about each other suddenly and she would have struck her companion.

Martin hurriedly loaded and calmly fired again. This time the quaggoth shrieked, as the bolt went deep into its calf.

Tirhas drew her sword and slit the throat of one of the sleeping quaggoths.

Kazrack took the moment's distraction and slammed the head of his flail against the thing's chest and knocked it backward and down on the ground. The dwarf hurriedly backed away from the thing, and Jana followed suit dropping her club and fumbling for her crossbow. The quaggoth leapt up and looked at Kazrack. It made ready to leap at the dwarf, but it stood bolt upright as a crossbow quarrel pierced its neck. Its hands clawing at the shaft as it collapsed in order to bleed to death.

Everyone let out a sigh of relief, and then the quaggoth that had been *color sprayed* leapt up at Kazrack.

Everyone was startled but the dwarf channeled his sudden rush of adrenalin into a fierce swing of his flail, slamming the thing in the face.

"Check on the fallen," Tirhas said, joining Kazrack, sword aloft.

Jana hurried over to Jeremy to check and make sure he was still alive, while Martin ran over to Ratchis.

The quaggoth was hooting and leaping and swinging its club wildly. Jana looked up from binding Jeremy's wounds to see Tirhas take a nearly crushing blow. The elf cried out and sliced the thing's thigh with her short sword.

The quaggoth leapt high up and began to shake, tossing its club away. Its chest and arms and shoulders began to puff up with incredible swollen strength.

"Hey ugly," Kazrack said, swinging wildly at it. It grabbed him on either side of the head with its long dirty claws and lifted him up, pulling bloody pieces of scalp off. The dwarf slid to the ground, bleeding to death.

Tirhas was breathing hard, trying to find an opening to the wild thing's vitals, but its brute strength and seeming ability to ignore painful wounds made it difficult. She could barely keep up with it, and as she dodged each blow, she knew she was tiring.

"I could use some aid," she called to Martin and Jana, and she thrust her sword forward, but the thing twisted away with a hoot, and brought its claw backhand across her chest and neck.

Jana and Martin went back to their dropped crossbows.

Tirhas cried out again, as she took a bite to the same shoulder the spider had gotten her in. She cut into it, but barely enough to make a patch of hair fall off of it.

She pulled away from the beast, and quarrels from the two spell-casters dropped the thing.

"Jeremy is stabilized," Jana said calmly. The hooting seemed more distant, but still around them. "Their sounds seem to probably echo in the tunnel. They might not know where we are yet."

"What are we going to do?" Martin asked nervously, looking down at the bloody bodies of their warriors breathing shallowly laid out on the riverbed.

Jana looked up from where she was binding Kazrack. "On Ratchis you will find a ceramic vial," she said. "Pinch his nose and pour it down his throat, while Tirhas and I move Jeremy and Kazrack up to the crack."

"A potion? Where'd you get it?" Martin asked, searching the half-ore's pack for the ceramic vial.

“Well, I am hoping it is a potion of healing,” Jana said. “We found it on a Menovian captain who we saw drink a potion and become healed.”

“So, for all we know this thing I am about to give him might turn him into a rabbit or something?” Martin asked, holding the vial in his hand.

“At least a rabbit is easier to carry than he is,” Tirhas said, grabbing Jeremy under the shoulders as Jana grabbed his feet.

They hefted him up to the ledge, as Martin poured the contents of the vial (a clear blue liquid) into the half-orc’s throat. Ratchis coughed and spasmed for a moment, and then opened his eyes.

“Where am I?” he said groggily.

“It worked,” Martin said, amazed. He looked up at Jana and called, “It worked!”

Ratchis sat up. Martin explained to him what had happened.

“I am severely weakened, but I think I can drag Jeremy along if the three of you carry Kazrack.

The hooting got louder.

“We’d better hurry,” said Tirhas.

“They are coming this way. They are not far. I can hear them,” Ratchis said groggily.

“What are we going to do?” asked Jana. “They will see us in the passageway.”

“No,” said Martin the Green with sudden confidence. “I have an idea Everyone up into the passageway!”

They scrambled up the ledge and down the narrow crack in the stone wall in the tunnel created by a long dry underground river. Martin took up the rear, as the other laid Jeremy and Kazrack on the cold stone floor of the narrow way.

“Now everyone keep quiet,” Martin hissed and then with an arcane word and pulling a fluff of wool from his cloak he cast a spell. A wall of stone now covered the opening of the passageway between them and the riverbed.

“This will only last as long as I concentrate,” he whispered. “So, let’s be patient.”

A moment later they heard the sound of many quaggoths passing the opening on the other side along the dried river. They hooted and hollered, and the party could hear their padded feet sloshing in the mud,

Jana, Martin, Tirhas and Ratchis sat there in the dark, trying to not even breathe. Everything ached.

When they had heard no other sound for over twenty minutes, Ratchis finally spoke, “ We need to find a place to hide. I’ll scramble ahead and see what I can see.”

“Isn’t that what got us in this mess to begin with?” said Tirhas caustically.

“I’ll be right back,” was Ratchis’ only reply.

He shuffled off in the dark and was back ten minutes later. To those sitting in the dark waiting for him it seemed an eternity.

“There is a huge chamber up ahead with plateaus of various heights that kind of recess into the walls,” Ratchis said. “I think we may be able to hide up on top of one of the lower ones without too much trouble, but we’re going to

have to be very quiet.”

“I can use that scroll the gnomes gave us,” Martin whispered. “It will create an opaque shelter. I’ll make it gray-colored to blend with the background as best as possible.”

Ratchis hefted Jeremy over his shoulder and led the others down the narrow passage. Martin let his illusion spell drop. Jana and Tirhas struggled to carry Kazrack between them.

Ratchis and Tirhas climbed up to a plateau on the right side of the chamber first and then dropped a rope to pull up the two unconscious companions.

Martin and Jana followed.

Martin read the spell from the scroll and a black hemisphere appeared around them; opaque from the outside, but transparent to those on the inside.

“I need to rest,” said Ratchis.

“We all do,” replied Tirhas.

“I’m afraid Kazrack will not survive the night,” Ratchis said.

“He looks stable to me,” said Jana.

The party was gathered beneath the gray hemisphere of the sheltering spell.⁸⁸

“I cast a spell on him earlier that increased his endurance, and later he drank something from his dwarven cup that increased it even more,” Ratchis explained. “I think if it weren’t for those, he’d be dead, and when they run out his wounds will overwhelm him. Unfortunately, I am out of healing spells.”

“Then there is nothing we can do,” said Jana. “Except…”

“Except what?” asked Ratchis, barely keeping his eyes open.

“Well, we saved you with that potion the Menovian captain had,” Jana explained. “And we have another vial of some black stuff that belonged to one of those evil gnomes that attacked us that time. We can take the risk and try that on him.”

“I think we pushed our luck enough once for today,” Ratchis said.

“But if he is going to die anyway,” said Jana.

“I don’t know for sure,” said Ratchis.

“Well, I have a potion prepared for me by my brethren of Aze-Nuquerna,” said Tirhas cautiously. “But I am severely wounded and planning to use it on myself.”

“But you are alive, and he may die,” said Ratchis. “Don’t you think you should use it on him?”

“And what good would that do me if we end up getting attacked up here and I die?” Tirhas said coldly. “Even with my potion he will still be unconscious, and I will be injured. However, if I use it on myself, I will benefit from it greatly, and therefore so will you if we have to fight or flee again.”

⁸⁸ This spell (*Leomund’s Tiny Hut*) has many different names. It is often referred to as *Instant Hut*, but it is thought it has its origins as a priestly spell provided by the halfling goddess Rhianwen and called “*Rhainwen’s Lodge*”.

“On the other hand, Kazrack is too strong a warrior to let die,” Ratchis said, calmly. “If he dies the chances of any of us getting out of here alive is greatly diminished, let alone accomplishing what we came down here to do.”

“And if we both die, what do you think of our chances then?” Tirhas asked.

Martin just looked at the elf in amazement, unable to believe that she might allow their companion to die when she had the means to possibly save him.

“It is up to you,” Ratchis replied. “I cannot force you to do anything you don’t want to do, but I hope you will do what you think is right.”

Tirhas Tesfay was silent for a time.

Finally, she spoke again, “Here administer it to him. All I ask is that if I die that you do not leave my body here to rot if you can at all help it. Bury me above in elven soil.”

“No one is going to die,” said Ratchis. “Not yet anyway.”

The night was long. Or was it night? They lay huddled in the dim light supplied by the magical dwelling, feeling comfortably warm and dry, but they had no idea how much time was passing. In the next few hours Jana, Martin and Tirhas then took turns staying up, and Jeremy and Kazrack moaned and stirred, while Ratchis slept deeply, re-energizing himself so that he might pray for and prepare the divine gifts granted to him by Nephthys.

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In time, Ratchis awoke and after spending an hour communing with his goddess, he lay his hands on the others and healed them with her power.

Finally, Kazrack stirred and slowly sat up, feeling as if there were a weight on his chest, and wincing as he tried to move his arm (which Jana had set).

“I am not dead?” Kazrack asked.

“No, you are not,” Martin replied. “But from the way you were acting I am as surprised as you are.”

Kazrack frowned. “You should have run,” the dwarf said. “I was trying to give you all a chance to get away.”

“You forgot two things, Kazrack,” replied Ratchis. “Firstly, that Martin barely moves any faster than you do, and secondly we wouldn’t leave a friend behind to die.”

“I am not afraid to die, especially to help my companions,” said Kazrack.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get plenty of chances of try again,” said Jana scathingly.

They continued to rest in the dark, beneath the cover of spell’s shelter. Martin had told the others it would last close to 18 hours.

In time Kazrack was able to regain his own spells, and he lay his hands on Jeremy and called on Rivkanal, the dwarven goddess of motherhood and the hearth to heal his wounds.

Jeremy stirred.

“Oh, everything hurts,” was the first thing Jeremy said.

“Keep it down,” whispered Ratchis. “This spell of Martin’s might not last much longer.”

“What happened to Silverback? He never came down with us?” Jeremy asked.

“No, I am not sure how he would have made it down that ramp anyway,” replied Ratchis. “He is likely dead by now if he went through with his plan.”

“Speaking of plans,” Tirhas interjected. “What is ours?”

There was no reply for a time.

“I’m not sure if we can survive an assault on the central chamber,” said Kazrack.

“I am fairly confident that we most definitely cannot,” said Martin the Green.

“So, we are leaving here?” Jeremy asked.

“After we rest some more,” Kazrack said.

“If we are going to leave, I recommend we do it right away,” Tirhas suggested. “The longer we sit up here, the more likely we are to be spotted or heard. I do not like sitting in one place for so long.”

“I heard Rahasia’s voice,” said Ratchis, suddenly. “Or what I thought was her voice, speaking in the language of those things, the quaggoths. It sounded as if she was giving them orders.”

“Do you think they knew she was coming? Or that she called them?” asked Kazrack.

“I doubt they would have had time to arrive here from the Plutonic Realms so quickly if she had called them somehow,” said Tirhas.

“Perhaps Richard the Red is in contact with other drow, perhaps he arranged for the creatures to be here to help her return to her people,” speculated Jana.

“If that is the case, she is likely beyond our reach by now,” Tirhas said.

“So, that means we leave?” Jeremy said again, groggily.

“We’ll wait until the spell ends and then we’ll make our way back to the dry riverbed and follow it out,” said Ratchis.

“I just hope we can get out there with no trouble,” Tirhas said. “I heard quaggoths pass through this chamber a few times while you slept. They are patrolling. Looking.”

A few hours later they clambered down from the plateau, Kazrack requiring lots of help because his right arm was in a sling and made their way as quietly as they could back to the riverbed. Jeremy had barely shrugged off the fatigue of his injuries when they set off.

They walked arranged in a straight line, with Ratchis in front with a rope about his waist, and Kazrack in the rear, with all those who could not see holding on to the rope to guide them in the darkness.

The going was very slow.

They crept along the riverbed, stumbling over each other, and occasionally hissing at each other angrily.

“We need light,” Jana insisted, after they had walked for over an hour, but had not made much progress.

“Yes, I think we do,” Ratchis said, surveying the area before them.

Jana spoke an arcane word, and in a moment, light emanated from her dagger.

Before them the riverbed broadened and sunk down into a wide depression filled with drying muck which was at the foot of a black stone cliff forty feet high that must have once been a waterfall. The cliff was flanked on either side by tall groupings of volcanic rock that created natural pylons that could be climbed.

They moved single file along the muddy bank to the left of the cliff. Ratchis, taking the rope, went up first. The climbing was not too bad, though in places the stones leaned way over making getting over on top of them difficult, but they gave stable footing once up there.

Ratchis was about three-fourths of the way up when the others spotted movement above him. A quaggoth hooted in the shadows above as he dropped a heavy stone on the half-orc’s head. Blood poured from his scalp, as he struggled to maintain his footing and pulling a dagger from his foot tossed it straight up. The quaggoths tried to knock it away, but the blade pierced his hand and he hooted again, more loudly and more angrily.

Tirhas had her bow out and an arrow nocked even as the stone was still falling. However, the arrow arced low and struck Ratchis in the small of the back.

Ratchis roared in anger.

Jana passed the dagger with the *light* spell to Kazrack, who despite needing to use his offhand tossed it up to the cliff to light up the shadowed foe. It was now illuminated, and so they were able to clearly see him this time as he lifted another rock and dropped it on Ratchis’ head again.

The half-orc raised his hands above his big head to block the stone, but its weight and speed struck him hard and Ratchis tumbled backward, landing on the hard bank below and then rolled down into the muck.

Jeremy fired his crossbow, striking the hairy thing in the shoulder and this time it cupped its hands around its mouth and gave a long series of loud hoots. Martin scrambled to load his crossbow, snapped into action by seeing Jeremy fire. Tirhas continued firing arrows, but they continued to miss their mark.

Kazrack also struggled to load his crossbow, but the pain of his broken arm worked against him.

Jana spoke an arcane word, and the quaggoth’s hands went to his eyes.

The creature stumbled backward out of sight, as Kazrack ran down to Ratchis.

“He is bleeding to death!” the dwarf cried, as Jana cast *light* again, this time on her club. She then went down and bound Ratchis’ head wound.

“What do we do now?” Kazrack asked. “Between Ratchis’ unconscious form and my broken arm, getting us all up there and out of here is going to be much harder.”

“We have no choice,” Jeremy said, with unusual decisiveness. The Neergaardian grabbed the rope and placed a dagger in his teeth and began to climb up, as Tirhas nocked an arrow and kept it aimed at the top. In the distance, behind them they heard the echoed hooting of quaggoths seeming to answer the call of the one that had just fled.

“We have to hurry,” said Tirhas.

Kazrack, Martin and Jana pulled Ratchis out of the muck and back up the bank.

Jeremy pulled himself over and up on to the top of the dried waterfall and stood just in time to see the quaggoth who had fled bull rushing him to send him back over the side. On instinct alone, Jeremy pulled the dagger from his teeth

and thrust forward with all his might, bracing himself for the impact, but it never came. He opened his eyes to find the thing impaled on the dagger and gasping for breath as it collapsed. It would soon bleed out and die.

Jeremy sighed and thanked Osiris under his breath and turned around.

"I'm okay," he called down. "I am going to see how close the exit is. I'll be right back."

The Neerguardian jogged down the cavern with his crossbow out. He had gone a few hundred feet when he saw that the corridor began a slow ascent. The ground was wet, and he could see some snow up ahead and dim light streaming down. He ran back.

"The exit isn't far," he called down. "I'll cover you." He watched as Tirhas Tesfey made her way up deftly.

The distant hooting did not sound so distant all of a sudden.

"Martin, you next," Kazrack said.

The watch-mage did not argue and tied the rope Jeremy lowered about his waist and climbed a bit, but mostly Jeremy pulled him up as Tirhas kept an arrow readied, keeping an eye open for the end of the radius of light for any approaching quaggoths.

They lowered the rope again, and Jana and Kazrack fastened it about and beneath Ratchis' shoulders, and Jeremy and Tirhas carefully pulled up the unconscious form. They checked him over when they got him up to make sure his wounds had not opened again, and then sent the rope down.

"You next," Kazrack said to Jana.

"No, you are injured," Jana said. "I can climb on my own if I have to, but you need help. You go first."

"No, I insist," Kazrack said, stubbornly.

"Don't be a fool, Kazrack," Jana said.

The hooting of quaggoths was very close behind them now.

"Hurry!" Jeremy called, holding the rope as Tirhas readied her bow again and stood beside Martin.

"Just go!" Kazrack said and stepped away from the rope.

Jana sighed, grabbed the rope and wrapped it around Kazrack's waist. "I told you to go!"

Now it was Kazrack's turn to sigh. He stepped up to the stones and scrambled up a bit, but soon Jeremy was simply pulling him up slowly, hand over hand.

The dwarf was barely one quarter of the way up when two quaggoths came charging out of the darkness. Jeremy redoubled his efforts to pull Kazrack up, as Tirhas fired an arrow, but it disappeared into the darkness behind the thing.

Jana, panicked, ran for the stone pilings and began to climb.

The quaggoth in the lead let out a high-pitched hooting shriek and threw its club with all its might at the young witch. It missed, but one of Tirhas' arrows caught the creature in the foot. Martin pulled the trigger on the crossbow, but nervous he had not finished properly aiming. The quarrel went into his own foot.

"Damn it!" the Watch-Mage cried out and dropped the bow on the ground.

Jeremy had to take a breath, leaving Kazrack dangling about halfway up.

The second quaggoth passed its companion and hiked its club over its shoulder and hocked at Jana. She cried out and her fingers slipped off the slick stone and fell backward onto the bank knocking the wind out of her, and she slid down the bank into the muck.

The first quaggoth hooted with glee and charged down into the muck, and as Jana looked up, she received a vicious claw to the neck and chin. Blood began to gush from her wound, as she collapsed unconscious.

The quaggoth still on the bank happily picked up the club he had just thrown and threw it a second time, and again he found his target. Kazrack was sent flying away from the stone wall and swung there for a moment as Jeremy tried desperately to keep the dwarf's ascent as steady as possible.

"Let me back down," Kazrack called. "I have to help Jana!"

Jeremy did not obey.

Tirhas fired an arrow at the quaggoth getting ready to rip out Jana's throat for good but missed. However, Martin thought this was the perfect opportunity to try one of the spells the elves of Aze-Nuquerna had taught him. He pulled a live cricket from a pouch and spoke the word "*dormu!*"

The quaggoth near Jana tumbled into a sudden slumber, but the other charged up the side of the stones after Kazrack (having lost his club with the second toss). Tirhas leaned over the side and plunked an arrow right into its face. It fell off the stones and slid down into the muck beside Jana's bleeding form.

Jeremy finished pulling Kazrack up.

He left the dwarf to watch over Ratchis and he and Tirhas hurriedly climbed back down. Jeremy went straight to Jana and tried to bind her wounds, but Tirhas took a moment to slit the throat of the sleeping quaggoth and then joined him.

They stabilized her and then Jeremy climbed again and slowly hoisted the young witch up. Tirhas followed.

Jeremy and Tirhas carried Jana's unconscious form to the cave mouth. The cold air blew down on them sharply, but they felt elated when they saw the last bit of the bit of light disappearing in the open sky above them, and the snow-covered plain before them.

Jeremy ran back and sent Martin to the cave mouth, who then sent Tirhas back to help the Neergardian drag Ratchis' hulking form to the exit, accompanied by a sullen Kazrack, cursing his broken arm under his breath.

The party took some time to catch their breath, but soon they were shivering. At the base of the bluff, which was littered with cave entrances, they saw three cloaked figures. One seemed to be shaking the hands of the other two, and a moment later one was climbing up the side of the bluff by means of a narrow path, while the other two headed back southward.

"Should we call for help?" Jeremy asked.

"No," said Tirhas. "We do not know who those people are."

"We need to do something," said Kazrack. "Let me go back to town and see what help I can get us."

"No, let me go," said Martin. "I will likely be more successful than you at that. No offense, but dwarves don't seem all that well liked around here."

"True," Kazrack acquiesced.

“I’ll try to hurry,” Martin said.

The watch-mage made his way up the craggy path to the top of the bluff, which brought him right to the edge of town.

He hurried through the streets of Ogre’s Bluff to the inn, and as he opened the door and the smell of ale and burning fat struck him in the face, he saw Beorth coming out.

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

End of Session #24

...continued in “Out of the Frying Pan” – Book Two: Catching the Spark (part two)...

AQUERRA