

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

Part Two: The Fearless Manticore Killers & the Pit of Bones!!!

Session #54

The fleeing gnome reached what would have been a short plateau for anyone else, but he struggled to grab the edge of stone lip, which was five feet above his head.

A second gnome appeared to the human’s left, atop another small plateau from which a tiny cave egressed. He held up a crossbow and fired on the human, but the bolt bounced off the man’s chain shirt with little or no pain, and not distracting him in the least from his prey.

“There’s a human attacking a gnome,” Ratchis cried to companions.

Ratchis stood tall and putting an arrow to his great bow, fired at the pursuing figure with such abandon that the bow snapped out of his hand, forcing him clutch it to his chest to keep it from flying over the cliff edge.¹ The arrow went wide.

Derek came around pulling his bow out and stringing it, as Jeremy squeezed past them both and examined the slope leading down to scene below them.

“We have to save the gnome!” Beorth commanded.

“I’m on my way,” Jeremy replied, and looked at Ratchis and Derek. “But please don’t shoot me.”

Martin climbed the last step and hurried out onto the plateau to see what was happening, leaving Kazrack complaining behind him. The short and stocky dwarf was having as much trouble getting up the last lip as the gnome was having below.

Ratchis rained more arrows down, but they fell short of the mark as they could hear the gnome crying out in pain from the savage blows the human was now bringing down on him with his bastard sword. The gnome pathetically tried to parry and return the blows with his axe but failed. The man’s steel was a blur of silver.

Jeremy leapt down onto the sloping natural ramp and swayed and slipped. He made it down to one of the outcroppings of jagged stone and grabbed on to steady himself before continuing. He warned the others that the near frozen water on the slope made it even more treacherous than such an incline would normally be.

One of Derek’s arrows lodged in the human’s lower back, between chinks in his armor, but he did not seem to care or notice. He cut down the gnome, even as it begged for mercy and then dropped the point of his sword into it again making sure it was dead.

The man turned his head slowly and calmly as another crossbow bolt flew past him from the second gnome.

Beorth awkwardly tried to make his way down the slope, while Kazrack forgotten, was still kicking his legs wildly trying to get purchase. “This is so demeaning,” he muttered.

Ratchis’s rain of missing arrows continued, “I hope those aren’t demon-gnomes and we’re making a big mistake.”

Derek flipped off the cliff edge, sliding twenty feet down the slope and fired an arrow, but it went wide as he lost his footing. He nearly began a potentially deadly descent but reached out and grabbed the edge of one of the sharp rocks, grimacing.

“You’ll have to show me how to do that one of these days,” Jeremy quipped, as he made his way carefully down to the same outcropping of stone; to move any faster would have likely meant tumbling the rest of the way down out of

¹ **DM’s Note:** Ratchis’ Player rolled a fumble requiring him to take a move-equivalent action to fix his grip or drop his weapon.

control.²

A third gnome came charging out of the small cave with a battle axe held above his head, heading towards the human, while the gnome with the crossbow, put it away and drew a warhammer. The bastard sword and the battle axe met with a clang.

Martin hurried back to Kazrack, realizing the dwarf was still not with them and reached down to grab the dwarf's hand and pull him up. Even with help the dwarf scrambled in place.

"Igneous spheros!" a high-pitched voice cried, as a little dumpling of a gnome woman stepped out of the shadows near the bottom edge of the ramp. A ball of fire a few feet in diameter began to roll towards the human, bouncing as it went. With amazing dexterity, the man leapt and twisted, as the ball of fire bounced beneath him.

He did not speak a word.

Ratchis dropped his bow and grabbing his rope secured it to a nearby outcropping of rock and tossed it over the side of the incline.

The clang of weapons echoed from below. The man turned as if dancing, blocking, and returning blows with ease. The gnome with the warhammer moved to flank, but the tall warrior blocked his blow readily. The man's skill with his weapon was apparent.

"Wish me luck, D," Jeremy said to his friend as he moved to continue down the slope. "This guy looks serious."

Derek fired another arrow at the man, carefully keeping his balance, hoping to flush him away from the remaining gnome. But not even a rolling ball of fire could do that. It turned and rolled back towards him, and he leapt again, but this time the edge of his gray cloak caught fire.

Seeing the man drop the gnome with the axe, Derek grabbed for Ratchis' rope after putting his bow away. The silent warrior turned his attention to the other gnome, and it fled.

Ratchis shoved Martin out of his way and reached down to pull up Kazrack. The watch-mage hurried back to the scene and calling upon one of his illusions, a bristling wolverine of large size appeared between the man and the gnome.

"It's Tanweil!" Martin cried, seeing the man in profile for the first time.³

Jeremy made it to the bottom, and the female gnome turned her short bow on the Neergardian.

"We're here to help you," Derek said, getting to the bottom of the rope.

The female gnome had a cute chubby face, gray and silvery ringlets that fell out from beneath a colorful knit cap. She wore no armor and looked dirty as if she had been on the road for a long time. Her large hazel eyes were swollen as if she had been crying long and often, and there was fear and sadness in them.

"Do you speak common?" Jeremy asked.

"Who the hell are you?" she asked harshly.

Her attention turned away from her ball of flame, it fizzled out as Tanweil leapt over it one last time. He eyed the wolverine cautiously.

Beorth grabbed the rope and pulled himself over the edge, but before he climbed down he looked down to where the female gnome was and covered his eyes, "Anubis, please grant me your divine vision so that I may know we are

² **DM's Note:** Moving any faster than half speed required a balance check (DC 20) to keep your feet and a subsequent reflex check (if failed; DC 12 to 20; depending on how far the PC was from an outcropping) to keep from tumbling down.

³ Tanweil was one of the would-be dragon-hunters with which Martin arrived from Herman Land.

entering this fight on the right side.”

He detected no ill will or darkness in her heart.

Ratchis pulled out his bow again and made ready to shoot as the man moved away from the wolverine towards the small plateau the first gnome had tried to climb upon.

Derek let an arrow fly as the man leapt up easily, landing atop the plateau lip which was a little less than six high. Without looking back the man’s sword swung in an arc behind him, sending the arrow flying off before it could strike him. In one smooth motion he sheathed his blade on his back, turned, and drew his own bow.

“Whoa!” Jeremy said, his jaw dropping.

“He is a very dangerous man!” Martin called out to his companions. “He killed twenty or more orcs on his own, on the road to Gothanius.”

The other gnome began to hurry over, putting away his warhammer and drawing his own crossbow and keeping it aimed at Jeremy.

He was an older gnome, and though he wore a metal cap, they could tell he was bald. He had craggy wrinkles around his long and broad nose, and bags beneath his umber eyes.

“You’d better stay the hell away from her,” he threatened. The female gnome moved away, putting a thick, rocky outcropping between her and the Neergaardian.

Martin had his illusory wolverine move to guard the fallen gnome, as everyone heard Beorth cry out. He lost his grip on the rope and came tumbling down—landing hard forty-five feet below. He lay there stunned and holding his head, his armor dented and scuffed.

Hollering with frustration, Ratchis dropped his bow, as his arrows fell short of their target again and again.

“You little guys should stay behind cover,” Derek told the gnomes. He let another arrow go, and this one found its mark. Tanweil winced from the blow but did not hesitate. An arrow came flying back, grazing the ranger’s thigh.

Jeremy loaded his crossbow, not anxious to test his own swordsmanship against someone whose prowess seemed to come from legend. He fired a bolt, and it grazed the man’s ear, and he took a five-foot step back.

“Whose side are you on?” the older gnome asked. “You can’t stop us like he’s trying to.”

“I hate not knowing what’s going on,” Jeremy muttered.

Ratchis decided the bow was his best option to stop the man, and lifted his bow again and kept up the rain of ineffective arrows.

Worried that he might be in the line of arrow fire, Martin stepped to his left to get behind a rock, but at that same moment Kazrack had pulled the rope up and was leaping down using it to swing about halfway down onto the incline. Unfortunately, doing this brought the taut rope with the dwarf’s weight on it across Martin’s ankles, whipping the watch-mage off the edge and onto the ramp, and he began to slide down painfully. Thomas leapt from his master’s shoulder and onto the safety of the plateau.

Kazrack was able to reach out and grab the mage, but the latter was stunned and the illusory wolverine popped out of existence.

“My apologies,” Kazrack said, as Martin drooled and moaned.

Derek hurried forward to get a better shot, but missing he felt the bite of two more of the steel-headed arrows, and now blood was flowing readily from his wounds. This realization made Derek note something about Tanweil.

“You’ve got to drive him away! Drive him away!” the older gnome cried out from behind the rock.

“Derek! For the love of the gods, get back here,” Jeremy called to his friend, shooting another bolt that grazed the man.

Beorth crawled over to the gnomes and stood. “We are here to help you. Who is that man?”

“You’d better stay back!” the female gnome warned Beorth, pointing her bow and arrow at the paladin with suspicion.

“That guy does not seem to bleed,” Derek said to Jeremy. “He seems to have some kind of protection. I just noticed.” He backed away, ducking to avoid more of the man’s arrows.

“I am Beorth, a servant of Anubis. I mean you no harm,” Beorth said to the gnomes.

Jeremy dropped to the ground to make a smaller target and called out, “Beorth, you need to back us up. I think it’ll take the three of us to drop that guy!”

Tanweil winced again but did not bleed as another of Derek’s arrows caught him in the shoulder. He leapt down and grabbed the fallen gnome.

“He’s got Kasha!” the older gnome cried.

“Drop the gnome!” Jeremy commanded, standing as he loaded his crossbow again. “And drop the bow!”

The man held the bow in his right hand and held the gnome beneath the left, taking in the scene silently.

“What does he want with the body?” Beorth asked, pausing.

“I don’t think he’s dead,” the female gnome said, tears sliding down either side of her potato-like nose. “I hope he’s not dead.”

Martin shook his head to clear it and glared at Kazrack angrily. He reached into the folds of his watch-mage robes and found his magic ring, slipping it on.⁴

“Are you well? Can I leave you?” the dwarf asked the mage.

Martin nodded, and Kazrack foolishly decided to try a controlled slide the rest of the way down. Instead, he managed to slam into the wall below spinning as he came down.

Ratchis cast *light* upon one of his arrows.

Derek moved forward again, firing as Tanweil leapt up on the ledge, still holding the gnome. The arrow went wide, as did Jeremy’s bolt, as they were afraid to strike the gnome-shield.

“He’s stealing Kasha!” the older gnome cried.

“I will stop this desecration!” Beorth said firmly, and drawing his sword, began to run toward Tanweil.

Bolstered by Beorth’s bravery, the female gnome came around the stone and speaking two arcane words, two arrows of light burst from her pointed finger, and struck Tanweil unerringly.

Martin made the rest of his way down using the rope, and called to his familiar telepathically.

“I’m coming down with Ratchis,” the squirrel replied.

⁴ **DM’s Note:** Remember, in addition to the “sustenance” abilities that kick in after a week’s time, the ring also provides the wearer with a +4 enhancement bonus to Constitution.

Ratchis fired one last arrow, and then moved to use the rope for his own descent.

Tanweil flung the gnome, Kasha, onto a taller ledge atop the first one and then leapt up beside him.

Jeremy dropped his own crossbow and drawing his sword, made a running leap up onto the first lip.

“Come back here!” he cried.

Beorth was having a much more difficult time getting up on the ledge.

The female gnome moved over to her companion as Martin finally got to the bottom, and heard her say, “we have to get out of here.”

“Are you from Garvan? Why are you here?” the watch-mage asked them, as they looked back at him with wide-eyed surprise.

“I will tend to your friend,” Kazrack told them, as he stood and hurried to where the battle had moved.

Martin did not wait for an answer and hurried after him.

Meanwhile, Tanweil had scooped the gnome back up and Jeremy was up on the upper plateau approaching him with caution. Derek began making his way up there as well, but Beorth still struggled.

Kazrack paused on his way to the first fallen gnome, and crouched down to give Beorth a boost.

Anxious to get down the slope, Ratchis moved too quickly and fell prone, holding the rope to keep from going down the rest of the way.

Derek made it to the upper ledge as well, and fired nearly point-blank at Tanweil, but the warrior ducked into a crouch, letting the arrow go over his head

“Now I know who the dragon’s allies are,” Tanweil said, his voice an emotionless hiss. They could see his face clearly now, his white hair belying his long youthful face. Suddenly he sprang off the ledge to his left, where the floor of the open area gave way to a great drop of over fifty feet.

It was as if time slowed, as jaws dropped, certain that the warrior they were struggling against had just decided to kill himself rather than face the party.

But they were wrong.

Instead of plummeting down, Tanweil *glided* down, his feet hanging akimbo, one arm up and still holding his bow, and the other let the gnome fall.

“Gods!” Jeremy cried, leaping down to a different lower ledge in that same direction. “Did ya see that?”

Beorth got up onto the first ledge just in time to see the warrior glide past. Martin turned back to the gnomes, seeing that the man had fled, by whatever bizarre means. They were hurrying along back to the small passageway the older gnome had first emerged from.

“What’s going on?” Martin asked them. “Why are you fighting? Talk to us, please!”

Tanweil landed far below with a jerking step, almost stumbling, and then hustled down beneath a huge broken horizontal slab that rested on two others.

Jeremy called for Kazrack to follow him as he jumped and climbed down towards the dropped gnome.

“Well, I don’t think we need to rush down to help *that* gnome,” Kazrack commented in his common brusque tone.

“Jeremy!” Beorth called. “You are the only one fast enough to catch him!”

Jeremy looked back at the paladin like he was mad. He had no intention of chasing down Tanweil, and was only concerned with the gnome.

“We can’t protect you if you hurry away,” Ratchis said to the gnomes, coming up beside Martin.

The two gnomes clambered up on to the small lip and retreated into the passageway.

“If you let him get the sword our chieftain will die,” the older gnome pleaded, and then disappeared into the darkness.

“We’re cousins of Garvan. We just came from there. We know your chieftain is missing. We’re here to help!” Martin called after him, climbing up himself.

Chaos reigned for a few moments as the party was trying to accomplish two different things at once. Martin and Ratchis wanted to chase after the gnomes, Jeremy and Kazrack were heading down to see to the gnome Tanweil had dropped and regroup for pursuit of the silent warrior.

Beorth and Derek stood with indecision, not sure which was the proper course.

So in the end the group decided to wait it out and camp there, as the day was growing long. On the morrow they’d use Martin’s spell of *levitation* to get a vantage point from which to spot the actual Pit of Bones.

Beorth and Ratchis went about recovering the corpses of the two gnomes and burying them beneath cairns of stones, while Derek and Jeremy made their way back up the treacherous slope to get the party’s packs and other dropped gear.

On their way back, Jeremy and Derek discovered a patch of brown mold on the large stone the gnomes had hidden behind earlier. Its very presence made them both feel cold and feverish.

Jeremy wanted to burn it, but Ratchis figured it the warmth might feed it and make it bigger, and they decided to leave it alone altogether.

They unrolled their bed rolls but decided against even a small fire since it would be too easy to spot from all the nearby perches. They just suffered through the cold and damp.

“I don’t know what that creature was, but it moved so fast and the way it glided with its little wings,” Kazrack said, as they brought their gear to the upper plateau from whence Tanweil fled.

“What creature?” asked Ratchis.

“The warrior who attacked the gnomes was no man,” Kazrack replied.

“Yes, it was an illusion or something; a disguise,” added Derek. “When he was flying or whatever I could see it for moment, like it didn’t make sense that he could do that and suddenly I could see him for what he truly was...”

”And when he landed, he looked like a human again,” Jeremy said, agreeing.

“What are you saying?” Martin asked. “I know that man from my journey to Gothanius. His name is Tanweil, and he is fierce warrior, but as far as I could tell human, though he never spoke to me, or anyone else that I ever heard the entire time we traveled.”

“He looked familiar to me, too,” said Ratchis.

“Probably from the castle,” Martin speculated. “But what did he look like to you?”

“Like some kind of man-lizard,” Kazrack said.

“Or a dragon-man,” Derek said. “He had little wings on his back, and he really wore a chain shirt, but he also had a tail, with a ridge up his back.”

“He was certainly scaly, and the muscles of his wings and shoulders were broad,” Jeremy added. “He looked strong.”

“I think it is connected to the dragon,” Derek said. “Glamorganna.”⁵

“You know the dragon’s name?” Beorth was astounded.

“Yeah...”

“How come you never told me?” Martin asked.

“You never asked,” Derek replied, laughingly.

“Hmmm, well... the dragon could be the ‘*she*’ Moishie mentioned,” Martin mused. “When he said, ‘*she would be watching*’”

“The gnomes may be working for her,” Derek suggested.

“This is growing increasingly odd,” Martin said.

“We cannot allow this to distract us,” Ratchis said. “The only thing that matters is finding the map that shows us where Hurgun’s Maze is.”

The others agreed, though some more grudgingly than others.

“I still think we should go after the gnomes,” Kazrack said.

“The gnomes don’t know where the map is,” Ratchis said. “They said they are here for some sword, and anyway, they can travel through passages too small for us. It is best we make our own way. I’ll take first watch with Martin. They rest of you get some sleep.”

“Good idea,” said Kazrack, bedding down.

“And what if that dragon-creature comes back?” Jeremy asked, trying to fluff his pack into some kind of pillow.

“Then I’ll wake you when we reach Anubis’ Realm,” Ratchis replied.

“Wake up! Wake up!” Martin shook Jeremy and Derek at once, while Kazrack sat up looking around in the dark.

“What’s going on?”

The earth was shaking, and the great broken slabs of stone groaned as they tried to give way to each other. Dust rose in great cloud choking their lungs, and a rain of pebbles came down around them.

“We need to move camp!” Ratchis said, his arms full of everyone’s packs as he kicked Beorth awake. “We need to get out from underneath this overhang in case it collapses.”

The Fearless Manticore Killers moved out from under the overhang and down to the great plateau that was out under the dark cloud-covered night sky.

⁵ Derek was sent to warn Martin the Green about the dragon, and to help him in any way possible to stop it.

The shaking only lasted a few moments, but the echoing cracks, and the settling groans of the great slabs made them nervous. It took some time for them to settle back in their bedrolls.

Derek and Jeremy took over the watch.

It was not long before Jeremy was spooked, not by the quiet, but how the long patches of silence were broken up by a singular echoing drop of water, or a breeze blowing through the narrow cracks hundreds of feet above them.

“Something could come and we wouldn’t know,” Jeremy said.

“Calm down,” Derek replied, his smile was invisible in the darkness. “I can tell a moth’s wing from a dove’s fart.”

Jeremy’s laughter echoed out across the chasm and then he quickly hushed himself.

Derek stood up. “Did you hear that?”

“Stop messing with me,” Jeremy replied, laughter still in his voice.

“Footsteps in the water below,” Derek put hand to his ear.

“I am so gonna beat your ass if you’re messing with me,” Jeremy replied, but then he thought he could hear the arrhythmic splashing as well, and the sound of something clawing the stone wall far below.

“I heard it that time,” Jeremy said, even as the things began to whisper words in an indecipherable language.

They woke Kazrack, who when he heard the whispering, leapt to his feet.

“That is dwarven!” he hissed. “Wake the others.” The dwarf grabbed his halberd.

Derek began to light a torch, while Jeremy kicked Beorth and Martin awake. Ratchis, having heard the commotion was already on his feet and casting Nephthys’ blessing upon his long sword.

Martin spoke an arcane word and his own torch lit up.

“You make yourself a target with that,” Ratchis croaked.

Kazrack moved to the edge of the cliff and looked down, at the end of his darkvision he could see a dwarven form slowly coming up the face, digging its white claws into the stone, and looking up eagerly. Its beard and skin were shockingly white in the reverse world of dwarven sight, but its eyes were a disturbing black. The beard was wet and knotted, clinging to the creature’s hide, and dripping water to echo below it.

“What are they saying?” Martin asked, he moved up behind Ratchis who stood beside the dwarf.

“Nothing that matters,” Kazrack replied, waiting above the climbing creature with his polearm poised to strike. “Things to try to unnerve us.”

But the hissed words of the undead dwarves did not dishearten the stalwart dwarf, inwardly he knew the words were ones any dwarf might fear. He knew that these were the undead called “the grapplers” in dwarven legends, the cursed dead who died submerged in water, whether it be deep in caves or out at sea, and they wanted nothing more than to drag their former kin to a watery grave as well, to increase their accursed and shameful ranks.

“Come back with us,” they hissed. “We will bring you down to your fathers’ fathers’. You will feel the sweet ecstasy of your lungs filling.”

“Let me turn them,” Ratchis suggested.

The first of the dead dwarfs made it to the top.

“Let them come! They must be destroyed!” Kazrack roared, bringing the blade of his halberd down on the head of the ghoulish dwarf, cleaving it open. The creature screeched and tumbled off the cliff to land on the plateau twenty-five feet below.

Derek spotted another of the things coming over the cliff twenty feet further to Kazrack’s right. He ran towards it and Martin and Beorth hurried after him. The dead dwarf hissed through its black teeth. Derek could see the thing’s black knotted hair and deep blue-black skin, but blind white eyes. He buried the axe in its head as it came up and then yanked it back out. The dwarf laughed and black water poured out of its mouth. Martin swung his torch at it ineffectually. Beorth struck it with his longsword, and it shook as if it were about to lose its grip, so Kazrack ran over and gave it another hard blow. The grappler roared as it tumbled back off the cliff face.

“Now your family is forever safe,” Kazrack swore.

“Are there more?” Martin asked, and as if in answer two more began to pull themselves over the edge. Derek and Beorth went to chopping at one, while Kazrack and Ratchis went for the other.

Beorth cleaved the head from the one he dealt with, but the other leapt off the cliff deftly.

“You will join us, son of Rak-kazum,” the dwarf said to Kazrack, as he leapt.

Kazrack’s eyes went wide, and without hesitating he leaped after it.

“Kazrack!” Ratchis cried, and he leapt as well.

“What are you? Crazy?” Jeremy called after them, but he leapt as well.

Kazrack landed with a grunt, his left leg nearly collapsing beneath him as pain ran up it and into his chest, but he did not stop. He thrust his halberd at the fleeing undead dwarf, and black blood spurted from it. Ratchis ran at it, and it screamed and leapt at him, arm’s forward in a wrestler’s stance. The half-orc shoved his sword through its gut, and the bones of fish and the rotten corpse of a snake fell out of it, along with the stretching coils of guts. It reached for him, but then stopped moving.

Ratchis whipped his blade to get the corpse off of it.

“When our quest is over, we must make an oath to return here and destroy every last one of these horrible things,” Kazrack said, and spit. “We must burn these corpses.”

When they had done just that, they climbed back up to the camp.

Kazrack took Beorth aside, “Beorth, do the dead have some knowledge of the dead from where they lie?”

“What do you mean, Kazrack?” the paladin asked.

“The undead dead thing he called me ‘son of Rak-Kazum,’ that is my father’s name. How could have known that?” Kazrack asked solemnly, sadness creeping into his deep voice. He tugged on his beard nervously.

“All undead draw their power from one source,” Beorth intoned. “So, it stands to reason that they might share knowledge through that source but that does not mean your father is dead.”

“I hope not,” Kazrack replied.

“What does your heart tell you?” Beorth asked.

“It is shrouded with doubt,” Kazrack replied, and walking away, he paused. “Thank you.”

The party discussed if they should return to sleep or try to press on immediately.

“We will need to rest all through tomorrow, I think,” Kazrack suggested. “With our sleep interrupted we will be too tired to channel the power of our gods and prepare for our miracles in the morning.”

Ratchis said, “We are close to the Pit of Bones; a place where hundreds if not thousands of dwarves and men died grizzly deaths, swallowed by the earth. It will get worse before it gets better, we need to make sure we have all our available resources or we will not make it.”

“We may not all make it regardless,” said Beorth.

“We may want to travel during the night and rest during the day when the undead are less active,” Martin said, ignoring the paladin’s pessimism, though there was both resignation and fear in his voice.

It was decided that Beorth and Jeremy would watch the rest of the night. As dawn approached, the young Neergaardian warrior collapsed in exhaustion, and Beorth woke Ratchis and Kazrack. Derek and Martin remained asleep.

Beorth yawned and stood watch while the dwarf and half-orc prayed to their respective gods for guidance and their daily allotment of divine miracles.

Ratchis sat with his knees up, and his head leaning on them, and his arms flat on the ground. He had his belt of scored chain links draped over the back of his neck, muttering words to his benevolent goddess.

Kazrack kneeled with his forehead pressed to his twenty-pound prayer stone. His calloused hands held it in place and felt the many dwarven runes carved upon it that told the tale of the significant events of his life, every birthday, every honor, and one day the name of his wife and his children.

Splat!

Something splattered on the hard stone before Kazrack. He did not rise from where he was, but Derek walked over and looked. It was a small bird with spotted brown feathers. A whippoorwill.

“What was...?”

Splat! Splat Splat!

Three more birds plummeted from the air, dying immediately as blood and feathers were smashed against the surface of the plateau they were camped on.

Ratchis looked up.

And then came down a rain of dead birds, until the floor was awash with tiny, fractured bones, feathers, and blood. There were scores and scores of them.

Martin, Jeremy and Beorth awoke, and again the party was forced to flee back beneath the overhang, and then a moment later, the birds stopped falling.

“Whippoorwills,” Martin said, solemnly. “An omen of death.”

End of Session #54

Session #55

Ralem, the 8th of Sek – 565 H.E.

The Fearless Manticore Killers spent their morning reviewing spells to prepare, healing, and talking over the things that had recently learned. Martin's eyes kept trailing over the splattered birds nervously the entire time.

"I have been trying to place that Tanweil," Ratchis said. "He seemed familiar to me, and it came to me while I prayed. I met him in the woods west of Ogre's Bluff, when I was on my own for a day or two after escaping from custody."⁶

"You were in custody and escaped?" Beorth asked, looking at the half-orc suspiciously, while inwardly cursing his lost memory. Derek looked at Ratchis with narrowed eyes, echoing the paladin's reaction.

"I guess Jana never told you that part of the tale," Kazrack said, putting a hand on Beorth's shoulder. "It was a misunderstanding, and it was all cleared up."

"Well... almost..." Everyone looked at Martin when he spoke. "We still have to retrieve that journal or whatever it is from Rindalith's possession in payment for the favor Daniel the castle steward did by talking to the king on our behalf."

"As far as I am concerned that is low on the list of priorities, somewhere below hunting this dragon," Ratchis said.

"Speaking of the dragon, Tanweil accused us of working for the dragon, if you recall," Martin said,

"It was because we were helping the gnomes. There is some connection between the gnomes and the dragon, but those gnomes do not seem evil, but they are working for her anyway," Ratchis said. "I think..."

"Well, we heard the gnomes had been making the illusion of a dragon to scare humans away from Greenreed Valley, maybe they were doing it on behalf of the dragon, or..." Martin began, scratching his head.

"Or, the illusionary dragon and the dragon sightings drew the attention of a real dragon," Derek concluded.

"The more questions we have the less we know," Ratchis sighed.

"Well, what are our plans if we run into that man-lizard thing again?" Jeremy asked, trying to get back to the immediate problems.

"Not getting killed would be a start," Martin said.

"Since we have more questions than answers, and he seems to have *some* answers, I propose we ask questions while we fight," Kazrack suggested.

"So, we should try to capture him if possible?" Jeremy asked incredulously, his eyes growing large.

"He seems very dangerous, and I think he could kill us all even if we were fighting to kill and not capture," Derek said, he got up and threw the last of the kindling he had brought with him into the barren broken land into the small fire.

"So? There's nothing to stop us from trying to question him while we defend ourselves," Kazrack replied.

"Except for the sound of us gurgling in our own blood," Ratchis said. The half-orc's huge ham-hands tightened into angry fists. It was clear he did not like having to contemplate a foe that could best not only him, but the whole group single-handedly.

"I don't think it will come to that," Kazrack said.

"It will come to that for each of us in time," Beorth said. "If not from this Tanweil, then from something else at some

⁶ The town guard of Ogre's Bluff arrested most of the party in session #27.

other time. Those in our professions have little hope of dying peacefully in our beds someday.”

“Can we stop talking about death?” Jeremy asked uncomfortably. “What are we going to do right now?”

As if in answer, the ground shook again. It began softly and then seemed to pass beneath them to the southeast, growing stronger and then weaker again.

“We can’t stay here,” Ratchis said, looking up at the cracked and fallen rock.

It was decided that Martin would use his spell of *levitation* on Ratchis and raise him way up to look around and see if he could spot the Pit of Bones and a good route to get there. Since Martin had to stay close and it was hundreds of feet up, the watch-mage wrapped his arms about the strong half-orc’s neck and went up with him.⁷

Ratchis and Martin were happy to feel the warmth of the sun on their faces, as they left the dampness of the broken slabs below them. Looking around, scores of feet above even the tallest stones Ratchis could see that the great slab of stone that created a wall behind their camp led to a wide natural stairway that was open to the sky, similar to the one they had climbed up in the dark. The steps widened as they went down, with tall walls of stone on either side of them, but the ‘giant’ steps were even taller going down. While some were only a five- or eight-foot drop, even from this distance Ratchis could see most were forty feet tall or more. There would be a lot of climbing down, but they would have to go that way, for beyond it was a plain of dust littered with broken black shiny stones within a bowl in the earth, and just beyond that was a great canyon wall that seemed to obscure a great pit behind it. That had to be what they were looking for.

He could see the silhouettes of carrion birds circling that area.

“Carrion birds, huh?” Jeremy said, when Ratchis mentioned them back on the ground as he showed them the route the best he could on their undetailed map. “What are they carryin’?”

“...was that a joke?” Martin asked, looking at Jeremy agog. Derek burst out laughing.

“Yes,” Jeremy replied. “Someone needed to lighten the moment.”

The Fearless Manticore Killers gathered their things and began the march up the shallow climb to the broad stairs. The earth rumbled again.

“I think this whole place is still settling,” Kazrack said.

It took nearly an hour for the party make their way up to the top of the broad steps. It was a wedge cut in several slabs of stone. Kazrack examined the area and decided there used to be narrower steps going down alongside and sometimes winding across the greater steps, but they had long ago worn away and/or collapsed. He thought this was dwarven work, but their present condition suggested to him that they had fallen out of use long before the citadel had been swallowed by the earth.

Ratchis cast *bull’s strength* on himself, to help with climbing and lowering people and gear.

It was slow going.

It took several hours to get the party about halfway down. While they could simply sit on the edge of certain steps and slide off to jump safely, at other places Beorth and Kazrack were lowered with a rope first, to keep watch while the rest climbed down. Martin usually came down third, and Ratchis always came down last, wrapping the rope about his arm to

⁷ **DM’s Note:** This is actually *not* the way it happened. Unfortunately, I made a bad ruling on the use of *levitation* and did not realize that Ratchis would have to be within range of the spell for Martin to control his ascent and descent. So, in writing this, I had Martin come along with him, while in game he stayed on ground level and controlled it from there, while Derek used his great senses to describe Ratchis’ gestures of whether he wanted to rise or descend to the watch-mage.

bring it.

At the next ledge, which was sixty feet high, Kazrack was lowered about halfway down the wall, while Beorth, already below, stood thirty feet back keeping watch, when stone around them began to rumble and shake again.

Kazrack gripped the rope for his life, and Beorth's face grew confused. The rumbling grew louder and seemed to be emanating from the wall before him.

Suddenly the wall burst open. There was a shower of rock and dirt, and Kazrack let go of the rope to come tumbling down the last few feet onto his backside.

When the dust cleared into the bright shining sunlight, a huge creature came lumbering out of the sudden passageway it had created with its claws.

It was just over eight feet tall and its drooping shoulders nearly five feet wide. It had long muscular arms that ended in clawed hands that nearly dragged on the ground, and short stubby legs that were bent backward at the knee and ended in broad round feet. It was covered in an umber-colored chitinous shell, and had a beetle-like head, with great sharp pincers that looked as if they could easily rip the head from a man. Its great beetle-like multi-faceted eyes shone in many colors in the sunlight, and a set of smaller green-blue eyes were set between them, right above the comparatively small mouth that had another set of smaller pincers around it.

It made no sound in and of itself, but its feet crunched the shards of stone beneath it, and its pincers clacked arrhythmically.

The great creature slammed into Beorth with its body sending the paladin flying back near the edge of the plateau-step. He landed prone.

Beorth dragged himself to his feet, to keep from rolling over the edge. Drawing his sword, thrust it at the creature. The sharp point of the long sword made the smallest scratch on the thing's shell, and it knocked the blade out of alignment, before the paladin could crack it.

Kazrack leapt to his feet and running at it, slashed with his halberd. The creature whipped around with unexpected speed and swung down with its great clawed hands at the dwarf, before he could even get it within the reach of his polearm. The dwarf ducked the blow, but his halberd fell short of hitting.

Jeremy scrambled down the cliff towards them, while Martin levitated down. Derek dropped his pack and began to send arrows at the creature, which only bounced off its thick shell.

Ratchis dropped the rope as the lumbering hulk brought a claw across Beorth's thighs, drawing a gout of blood. The paladin was jerked off his feet and seemed suspended in the air for a second as the pincer closed in on his shoulder and jerked him around before dropping him near the edge of the ledge again.

Kazrack tried to draw it away from Beorth, but his blows kept skidding across the thing's shell with no visible effect.

It even shook off Martin's *slow* spell. Ratchis began to climb down.

The creature reared up and slammed into Beorth again. The paladin put his sword up to skewer the thing, but the blade just bounced between the two of them. Kazrack desperately shoved his halberd blade between the thing's feet to trip it and keep it from shoving the paladin, but it was too strong. Beorth teetered on the brink for moment, and then disappeared over the edge, landing forty feet below with a clang and an 'oof,' his head reeling as he saw double.

Kazrack made to swing again as the creature turned to face him. The dwarven warrior-priest looked up at it, to thrust the halberd in its face, but something about how the light of the sun hit the polished metal blade, made him pause and he drew it back to look at it more closely; a puzzled look on his face.

"Kazrack, are you alright?" Ratchis called, as he leapt off the wall. Jeremy already had his swords in hand and went charging at the creature.

“Yaaaaaah!” he cried, and he held his sword up, but before he could reach it, it reached him, bringing a claw down on his shoulder. Blood oozed down Jeremy’s tunic, and he stepped to one side to get by, causing his blow to miss.

“You are not supposed to go so fast!” Martin chided the creature, wagging a finger at it. His voice was a bit slurred, and he just hung in the air, doing nothing, but looking deep into the tiny blue-green eyes set in the center of the creature’s face.

The lumbering creature turned to Jeremy and caught the Neergaardian’s head and neck in his pincers for less than a moment. Jeremy cried out, as he pulled away, tearing flesh from his ear, and feeling the crunch of his gorget being pressed into his neck. He held his sword up to keep the overwhelming creature at bay, but he felt his left arm jerk painfully. There was a sickening tearing sound.

From where he was, firing arrows from the level above, Derek had a moment of confusion. He saw something go flying high into the air, as the monster’s swing came up and away from Jeremy. It was something limp and pinkish and just about two feet long, and it trailed line of thick red liquid behind it and then flipped end over end down to where Beorth had fallen.

He saw Jeremy’s blade hit the ground, and a moment later Jeremy’s body was next to it. A pool of blood spreading out too quickly on Jeremy’s left side, spurting strongly from where his arm had once been, but now there was only raw jagged flesh and bone.⁸ Jeremy’s eyes rolled back into his head and his body began to shake violently.

“Look at my halberd,” Kazrack called to Ratchis with a sing-song voice, oblivious to what was going on around him. “If you look at it right you can see the reflection of your tusks.”

The sound of his companions crying out seemed to echo in his ears from down a long dark hallway. The paladin opened his eyes and the light stung. There was something warm dripping on his face, and he reflexively brushed at it. It tumbled down onto his chest, and he felt something smear across his cheek, chin, and hand.

Beorth sat up quickly, shaking his head again to come to his senses, and Jeremy’s bloody arm fell into his lap.

“I’m coming!” he called up, and frantically tried to climb the sheer rock wall, but he could not find good purchase, as the weight and restrictive nature of his splint mail dragged him back down.

Derek’s arrows continued to bounce off the lumbering hulk to no effect, but it did not seem to like it, nonetheless. It reared over Jeremy’s crumpled form and clacked its mandibles angrily. Ratchis leapt off the wall, whipping his warhammer from his back and charging at the thing. It caught the half-orc’s mighty blow in a claw and pushed it back, bringing the other claw around cutting a deep gash in Ratchis’ arm. The ranger’s eyes opened wide, and then he stepped within the creature’s reach, to at least be able to trade blows with the monster.

But thankfully, Martin came to his senses for a moment and his second *slow* spell did the trick. The hulk really did seem to lumber now, and teeter slowly towards Ratchis, while Kazrack continued to turn his halberd back and forth in the light, awestruck.

Ratchis felt one claw smash him on the top of head, and a piece of his scalp was scraped off painfully as it ripped off a kinky knot of hair.

Ratchis roared and threw his weight into his shoulder and tried to bullrush the giant bug off the cliff edge, but the thing simply thrust out a claw gripping at the friar’s groin and stomach. Ratchis roared again and fell back, moving his hammer to defend himself, while Kazrack coming to himself stepped to try to flank and distract the hulk.

Out of the corner of his eyes, the dwarf could see a figure fall painfully from the step above. Derek had tried to leap down, but misjudged, falling flat on his back, knocking the wind from his lungs.

⁸ **DM’s Note:** Jeremy suffered a critical hit from the umber hulk. Apply Crit Multiplier +1 to Total Damage – Fort Save (DC 10 + ½ damage) or Arm Removed at Shoulder (+5 to save if shield), 3d4 bleeder crit.

Ratchis could feel his own blood pouring from him to mingle in the increasingly black pool of Jeremy's. The half-orc struggled to keep his footing.

Below Beorth decided to start removing his armor hastily to aid in his climb, as he had made no progress.

"*Colarus Spectrus!*" cried Martin, casting a handful of multi-colored sand in the direction of the hulk. A shower of multi-colored light washed over the thing, and it stood dazed for a moment. Ratchis took the opportunity to rush into it with a shoulder again in an attempt to knock it off the cliff; but its legs were squat and wide, and it would not go over.

The confusion settled on Martin again, and he was unsure of what to do, even as the creature shook off the stunning effect and took a *slowed* swing at Ratchis. The half-orc ducked.

"Run! We will all die if we do not flee this monster!" Ratchis cried to his companions. Kazrack alternated between thrusting his halberd at the creature, failing to penetrate its shell, and drawing back looking around as if he did not know where he was. Finally, he just wandered lazily towards the cliff face, beneath where Martin floated by means of his spell.

Ratchis slammed his hammer against the creature again and again, but only every other blow seemed to make the smallest of cracks in the hulk's shell. However, he could see yellow ichor dripping heavily down its leg.

Derek tumbled over towards Ratchis to aid him, avoiding a blow from the thing, but unfortunately the young woodsman, stopped and looked right up into its eyes, and instead of driving his axe into its knee, he hesitated and tried to remember again, what it was he was supposed to do.

Martin suddenly realized what he was doing and sent another flash of color at the monster, and again it was stunned. Ratchis slammed it yet again with his hammer, and this time a long crack appeared from the center of its chest and across its abdomen, spurting more the brown and yellow ichor. The half-orc kept his eyes on the thing's chest, stealing glances to see where the blows might come from and relying on his faith to keep his mind clear.⁹

The hulk lifted one of its stubby legs to avoid the swing of Derek's axe, while Kazrack stumbled away confused.

"Traitor!" Martin cried still apparently confused, pointing at the dwarf. He drew a dagger to hurl at his companion. It made sense to his addled mind.

Ratchis turned to move away from the thing, but it caught him with a claw and threw him down, a trail of blood arcing through the air, as the half-orc fell on his side and rolled over on his back, unconscious and bleeding out.

Kazrack turned his confused eyes away from his fallen companion to the glint of a grappling hook grabbing the edge of the stone shelf. Beorth began to pull himself up the rope, bracing his feet against stone wall, but even with the aid, his armor made the climb very difficult. But he refused to give up, thinking of Jeremy bleeding out above him and needing his help, and he pulled himself up as if by force of will alone.¹⁰

The paladin pulled his head up over the ledge, in time to see Derek duck to make what might have been a decapitating blow from the monster, merely a deep gash across the young man's head.

Derek fell, bleeding from the face and neck.

Martin was staring at the blade of his dagger as if it held the secrets of the universe, and Kazrack, who had been wandering around aimlessly, suddenly charged at the beast, ducking a blow from it, and thrusting his halberd blade between its legs. A gush of ichor poured from it, and it teetered, but did not fall.

"Beorth, Hurry! Jeremy's life blood is pouring out even now!" the dwarf cried.

⁹ **DM's Note:** Friars of Nephthys gain a +2 sacred bonus to all saves against mind-affecting spells and are immune to spells with the *charm* descriptor.

¹⁰ **DM's Note:** Beorth's player used a *hero point* to ensure he succeeded at this climb. A hero point can be traded in for a natural '20' for any d20 roll.

“*Imago Majorca!*” Martin incanted, getting a hold of his senses again, and a great gold ram appeared at the edge of the cliff and began to march resolutely towards the hulk. The creature fled, trailing ichor from its many wounds, diving back into the tunnel it had created when emerging.

Beorth pulled himself over the edge and crawled next to Derek who was not far away and lay a hand on his head to keep him from bleeding out. He stole a glance at Jeremy, and his head hung low.

Kazrack walked over to Ratchis, and saw that the half-orc had stabilized on his own, and then he forced himself to walk through the thick pool of Jeremy’s blood to look at the dead Neergaardian.

Jeremy’s skin was a pale pale white, and his eyes were open wide in pain and horror, his tongue hanging out of his mouth and split where he had bitten it while convulsing.

“First Chance, then Jana, now Jeremy...again...” Martin said, his voice choking as he walked over beside Kazrack.

“Is Jeremy dead?” was the first thing Ratchis asked when Beorth’s healing awoke him. The half-orc could feel the pain and weight of his wounds dragging his limbs down. He slowly sat up with a grunt and buried his disfigured face in his big calloused hand.

The Fearless Manticore Killers decided to climb the rest of the way down the gigantic steps to the stony plain below, in hopes of finding enough wood to build a pyre for Jeremy, as burial seemed too risky with the amount of undead about.

They marched a few exhausting miles away from the great steps, and found a place where many low crags of stone created cover from the barren canyon walls to the west where they felt the Pit of Bones must be. Along the way they cut down the few small scrubby trees they found and laid Jeremy’s body upon a pyre made from them, wrapped in his oil-soaked wool blanket.

Jeremy’s gear and personal items were spread out on another blanket, to see what would be taken from it to be used and what would burn with him to go to Anubis’ Realm.

“When I die,” Ratchis said, looking over the things. “I want you to burn me and spread my ashes in the places I liked, and take my things and use them ‘til they break, or until you find someone else who can use them well.”

As if in reply there was a rumbling from back in the broken land they had emerged from.

“I hate this place,” said Martin.

Derek had not spoken a word since awakening, but now Kazrack offered him Jeremy’s elven sword, *The Right Blade of Arofel*.

“Shouldn’t one of you take it?” Derek said, his voice wet with repressed tears. “You knew him longer than I did.”

“I think you two shared a similar spirit,” Ratchis said. “It would do honor to your friendship if you took it and used it in his stead.”

Kazrack nodded.

“I shall do my best then,” Derek said, a tear coming loose from beneath his eyes, and leaving a smudged line of dirt on his face.

Beorth, Kazrack, Martin and Ratchis each stood on one side of the pyre with a lighted torch.

“He may not have lived long, but he experienced much of this cruel world, and despite that he still knew what side to fight on,” Beorth said.

“He was loyal to his friends, and would have given his life for any of them,” Ratchis said.

“Jeremy, when my heart was heavy you lightened it. For this, I owe you a debt,” Kazrack said.

“We’ll see you soon in the Duat,” Martin said, tears streaming down his face. “Wait for us, okay? Good luck on your journey.”

Derek said nothing but held *the Right Blade of Arofel* in his hands and cried.

They each stepped forward and putting their torches to the pyre at once, watched it light up. They then tossed their torches atop it.

“What about the bowl-thing? Use that!” Thomas chattered in Martin’s mind; sadness tainting his little squirrelly voice.

“You mean the urn?” Martin replied. “We cannot. We do not have it with us, and anyway, it will never work again.”¹¹

“That’s not fair!”

“Life’s not fair, Thomas,” Martin replied, sadly.

“He did not smell as good as Ratchis, but I still liked him,” Thomas said.

“Yeah, me too.”

As the flames of the pyre rose high into the air, the party noticed scores of whippoorwills alighting upon the stone crags near them, and watching, cooing their dread calls quietly, barely audible over the crackle of the flames.

The birds did not wander far, but at dawn after Ratchis and Kazrack were done praying for spells, they fled.

The party decided to spend the day encamped here, to regain their strength and move on the next day.

End of Session #55

¹¹ Remember, the *Urn of Osiris* would only work again if all the tasks the party had agreed to undertake were completed, and since Jana died without doing so, it would never function again.

Session #56

Isilem, the 9th of Sek – 565 H.E.

“Anubis! Please send these foul undead guardians of this nefarious place out of our sight, so we can continue our sacred mission!” Beorth cried, clutching his golden jackal’s head pedant.

The armored skeletal beings did not even hesitate but held their swords aloft and their inhuman voices screeched from their tongueless mouths, red pinpoints of malevolent light glowing in the dark pits of their skulls beneath their battered helms.

The Fearless Manticore Killers had spent the day resting on the east side of the black rocky outcropping. Derek had explored the rocks themselves, finding narrow paths among them, and places sheltered from the wind and rain, where the stone edges were still very sharp, as if they had once been cut from molten slag.

However, as the sun fell once again, the whippoorwills returned, their spotted feathers ruffling in the occasional breeze from the south. They were scattered over the rocks, just watching the party, their heads jerking up and down and from side to side in that unnerving way birds often do. Kazrack had wanted to shoo them off, but Beorth did not let him, saying it was bad luck to do so with birds of ill-omen. Now the paladin was wondering if he had been wrong.

For not soon after, three armored skeletal figures had clawed their way out of the rocky ground and surrounded the camp, and the birds had taken to the air, creating a great swirl of feathers, and chirping above the battle, moving with chilling unity.

“In the name of Nephthys, send these foul creatures back to the grave so that their souls may be set free!” Ratchis cried, swinging his chain belt over his head, and holding his warhammer in the other hand. Again, the skeletons did not waver.

Martin, who had been studying one of his many books, slammed it shut and put it away, while Derek scrambled to grab his bow and axe. Kazrack followed suit.

The three undead warriors leaned back as one and lifting their left hands pointed at Ratchis. Black bolts of energy flew from their fingers, striking the half-orc. Ratchis cried out in pain, as he felt the cold blows penetrate his back and chest.

Beorth charged one of the undead minions, “Ahhhhhh-nubis, guide my blow!” Bringing his long sword down on one, cracking its collarbone, and its sword arm drooped weakly.

Ratchis looked to charge another, but at that moment his jaw dropped in disbelief and horror. The whippoorwills had flown into a formation that resembled a tall female form, with a whirling hem of a dress. They moved fluidly, as if she danced and dress rode up. She was nearly ten feet tall, as scores and scores of birds moved to keep up the synchronized illusion.

The half-orc had had enough of these ill-omened birds and rushing past them headed for another of the skeletal warriors, but the hem of the bird-dress whipped past him and he felt the many tiny little pecks on his face and shoulder. Even as his hammer blows drove the undead thing back on the defensive, he noticed that while the birds’ wounds were very small, they seemed to have caused an unusually large amount of blood to go slipping down beneath his chain shirt.

“Someone get the bird-thing!” he cried out, even as he side-stepped the sword blow of his opponent, and it stepped oddly upon a stone and its ankle snapped like twig, falling awkwardly.

As it struggled to stand, it came up right into another blow from the friar’s hammer. Its helmet sung out with a tuneful clang, as it fell again, but it rolled deftly away from a follow-up attack, moving unusually fluidly for a thing made of bones.

Beorth shouted with satisfaction, as he cut the head off of his own opponent and it crumbled into a pile of rusted armor, but Kazrack was holding off, cautiously remaining out of the reach of the dancing, and flying bird-form looking for a way to harm it. Derek sent arrows through the formation to no effect.

Kazrack continued to remain clear of the birds, while Ratchis smashed his foe into pieces, only to feel the pecking of birds again. Martin cried out, as he stepped forward to cast a *color spray* on the birds, only to have it have no effect, and feel another swirl of birds strike him. Blood spurt from both the half-orc and the watch-mage as if their skin where the birds had pecked them had become a sieve.¹²

“Natan-Ahb, protect me from those who you have found wanting!” Kazrack prayed, casting *protection from evil* on himself, before heading in to deal with the bird threat.

The whirling ‘dress’ had a broad reach, and the dwarf grimaced as he felt the thing peck at him painfully, but he swung his halberd wide and felt like he hit the thing several times. He stepped back to safety, his polearm a blur around him to fend off the birds and saw several of the tiny creatures dead on the rocky ground.

Derek dropped his bow and brandishing his battle axe charged at the remaining armored skeleton. It sidestepped the young warrior’s attack and two bolts of black energy crackled as they struck him.

Beorth thought the bird-thing was distracted by Kazrack, and charged in with his sword swinging, but he was wrong and though he was able to cut down a few of the birds, he felt his face burn as he was pecked like sleet whipped in the wind.¹³ The paladin was amazed at how the monster was able to behave as if it had one brain, despite its many little bodies, coordinating its attacks with such speed and surety.

It whipped out again, and again Kazrack and Beorth swung their weapons wildly in a futile attempt to ward off the tiny birds, that found their way easily through the defense.

Ratchis joined the fray against the formation of birds, and a dozen birds fell, but he collected more tiny bloody wounds to go along with those he already had.

“*Lentus!*” Martin chanted, but spells did not seem to want to affect the thing.¹⁴

The birds suddenly dispersed flying in all directions. Martin allowed himself a sigh of relief, thinking they were fleeing, but then cut it short. The birds merely reformed nearly instantaneously forty feet away to badger Derek, as he struggled with the remaining of the undead warriors.

Ratchis charged after it, hoping to avoid the birds and finish the armored skeleton so that the party could concentrate on the bird-monster, but he was wrong. The woman made of birds danced in his direction and he felt a plethora of pecks that drove him to the ground bleeding.

Unsure of what else to do, Martin grabbed a brand from the campfire, and moved cautiously towards the birds.

Kazrack and Beorth hurried to catch up with the birds. Kazrack pressed his attack, and more of the whippoorwills fell broken and bloody to the ground. Seeing their small crushed forms littering the site of the battlefield, it was hard to believe that moments before they had been attacking viciously.

Beorth knelt beside Ratchis’ bleeding form and laid a hand upon his forehead, “Anubis, please bring life to this follower of Nephthys so that he may free the souls of these fallen creatures.

The half-orc stirred.

Derek tumbled away from the birds, and around behind his foe, leaping to his feet and bringing his axe down to cleave its helmet, and the skull beneath, in half. It crumbled; the armor suddenly rusting as if it were hundreds of years old, and the bones becoming nothing but dust.

Again the birds dispersed, and this time reformed in their dancing form to assault Martin. He waved the torch before

¹² **DM’s Note:** The bird creature, which was a variant on the cifal from the AD&D *Fiend Folio*, had a *wounding* ability, that caused hits to bleed at the rate of an extra hit point per round each.

¹³ **DM’s Note:** The cifal had the combat reflexes feat, so was able to take more than one attack of opportunity a round. The party found out the hard way.

¹⁴ **DM’s Note:** Having a hivemind, it was immune to mind-affecting spells.

him pathetically, and then put his arms before his face, the sound of wings fluttering about him. When the flurry of birds moved away to dive at Beorth once again, the watch-mage was on the ground bleeding.

Beorth impaled several of the birds on his sword, even as Kazrack sent a dozen more to flop about on the ground, as if dying broke whatever spell was upon them. Derek brought some down as well.

As suddenly as they had arrived the few birds left flying off confused.

“Wow, those were some bad birds,” Thomas chittered in Martin’s mind, when the watch-mage was awakened by the healing miracles of Kazrack’s gods. “Are you okay? I can feel it when that happens to you.”

“So can I,” Martin thought back to his familiar, wryly.

“This place is too dangerous to rest at and too dangerous to continue on,” Ratchis said, after he had closed some more of his wounds.

“Well, we are all too injured to risk moving, so we’ll just have to trust to providence,” Kazrack said.

“But what about tomorrow?” Ratchis asked, looking around, worried the birds might return.

“Tomorrow we move on, ready or not,” Kazrack replied

“We are too weak,” Ratchis said.

“We have little choice,” Beorth said, grimly.

“And we cannot go back to those broken lands, what if we encounter another one of those creatures that killed Jeremy?” Kazrack commented.

It was agreed that they would spend the night there and then decide what to do in the morning. Kazrack took the first watch, and after a few hours, he woke Derek.

The night was dark, and while they had a very small fire going, it gave off little light and the looming black rocks cast shadows towards the canyon wall, making the desolate area seem all the gloomier.

The fire crackled, and the sticks’ falling was the only sound to be heard, but Derek’s keen ears perked up. For a moment he thought he heard a footfall that echoed the fire’s cracking. He cocked his head to listen. Nothing. He stepped over to the north side of the camp, where he thought he heard the sound and crept about the rock. There was but the slightest sliver of moonlight, and he thought he spied a mark in the dirt, but he could not be sure. He crept towards it.

Long moments passed as he moved forward, and he thought he heard it again, as if someone was using the arrhythmic punctuation of the fire to cover their steps through the craggy rock. There was a sound over by the shadowy corner where Martin slept on the other side of the camp. Derek hefted his battleaxe and hurried over there, and then he heard it clearly. Someone was hurrying away from the rocks towards the canyon wall. Derek leapt atop a rock to get a better view and could see a robed figure disappear into the darkness.

Derek awoke Ratchis, who immediately took to waking everyone.

“Someone has been in our camp!” the half-orc cried, scowling at Derek, who scowled back. “Everyone look through your stuff and see if anything is missing.”

The half-orc moved about the camp, moving away from the fire to use his darkvision to get a better view of whatever footprints there might be around.

“My spellbooks are gone!” Martin cried out with horror.

"Thieves!" Kazrack spat.

Ratchis reported a pair of sandaled tracks that had come through the rocks and the around the south side of the camp.

"Monks!" Kazrack spat.

"Are all your books gone?" Beorth asked the mage.

"Only two, but they were my two most important and commonly used ones," Martin said, his voice becoming thin and reedy with grief. "There were some of those books we recovered from the Necropolis in that bag as well."¹⁵

"Whoever it was, it was a big man, or at least they had very large feet," Ratchis said, shrugging his shoulders.

"My best spells are gone!" Martin moaned, plopping down on the ground. Thomas crawled out from the mage's bedroll and climbed up to nuzzle his master's neck to comfort him.

"Don't you have them memorized yet? You read them everyday!" Ratchis said, annoyed with Martin's attitude.

"That's not how it works," Martin sulked.

"I guess that settles the question of whether to move on in the morning," Kazrack said. "The longer we wait the further away the thief will get."

Ratchis nodded.

"What's the point? I'm useless now," Martin whined.

"You know what Jeremy would have said?" Derek said, cracking a smile. "He'd say, 'Come on Martin, we all know you were useless all along!'"

No one laughed.

Osilem, the 10th of Sek – 565 H.E.

The morning found the Fearless Manticore Killers following Ratchis from a safe distance as he sniffed out the sandal tracks south from the outcroppings to where the canyon wall was dotted with tall stone spires. The half-orc wore no armor in case he had to sneak up on someone, or climb, instead Martin had cast *mage armor* on him, one of the few spells found in another of his smaller traveling spellbooks.

The watch-mage was sullen and did not respond readily to what anyone said to him. Derek's guilt over having failed at his watch, was balanced out by his contempt for Martin's reaction to having lost some material goods, when they had so recently lost a bosom companion.

Whoever had snuck into the camp the night before was strong and agile. Ratchis followed the sandaled track as it easily vaulted over stone and disappeared at a tall cliff. He climbed up to follow and found the track again above, calling the others to follow him with a gesture. These cliffs and spires were of various heights though they all towered over the base of the canyon wall. Beyond they could see the open area where the Pit of Bones must be.

The thief had leapt from spire to plateau to spire with great deftness. Ratchis was not as confident of his own ability, and tying a rope around his waist, he handed the other end to the rest of the party to hold. He vaulted into the air but came down short slamming into the rock face with a grunt and then fell only to have the descent arrested by the rope. He jerked painfully for a moment, and then the others pulled him up.

¹⁵ See Session #44

He tried again, and this time his fingers grazed the edge, but he still fell.

Trying a different tack, he flung a grappling hook out to the spire. The metal hook scraped against the spire edge but fell off.

Deciding it was futile, the party back tracked to see if the trail could be found further ahead on ground level. It did not seem too much of a leap of logic to assume that whoever it was that had stolen the books had headed to the Pit of Bones.

As they climbed down, Derek spotted a figure crouched on a distant spire looking down into the Pit. Whoever that was would have a much better view of what was within. It was hard to make the details, but it seemed to be a tall lanky humanoid shape.

“Tanweil?” Beorth asked.

“Isis,” Martin swore. “I hope not.”

An hour later the party marched along a narrow crevasse in the canyon walls towards the Pit of Bones. Ratchis looked and found several sets of tracks had passed through here, sandals, and boots of both gnomish and human size. They seemed to go in both directions.

The party also spied several more crevasses that seemed to descend back into the broken land they had emerged from two days before. Obviously, there was more than one route to and from the Pit.

As they drew closer to the Pit, they could see it was immense. It was narrower and deeper at the end closer to them. It was over two hundred feet long, and at the broader and shallower end it was over sixty feet across. The pit looked like it had been excavated from some collapsed area that was even larger. The perimeter was littered with great slabs of cut stone, and other rough-hewn natural rock walls. The air was dry, and the ground a fine powdery dust that was white in many places, as if bonemeal had been ground down and mixed in with the earth itself. Pieces of bone, and fragments of armor and other artifacts of what had once been a great citadel could be seen half-buried in the tiered pit wall, but the bottom could not be seen.

It was decided that Martin would cast *invisibility* on Ratchis, and the ranger would scout ahead to see what could be seen. He cast it grudgingly, as it was the only one he had prepared a few days before, and now the spellbook that allowed him to prepare it was gone.

As Ratchis hurried off before the spell would run out, Derek called to his companions.

“Hey, there’s a ram out there,” Derek said, point to a plateau above the Pit of Bones, but on the other side. “It is huge and golden.”

The others squinted to see it, but it was more of a big golden blur to their untrained eyes.¹⁶

“Is it that same ram I was told of? The one we fought the monks to free?” Beorth asked, his voice not hiding his puzzlement and curiosity.

“It must be,” Martin replied, letting his wonder at the coincidence cut through his woe for the first time that day. “There cannot be two rams like that. It must have come to help you Beorth, because this place would be dangerous for it if those monks are about.”¹⁷

“It could be here to fight evil on its own,” Beorth suggested.

“It had some kind of bond with you,” Martin explained. “There were times that you could see it, but others could not.”

¹⁶ **DM’s Note:** Derek’s spot score is twice that of the next highest in the party.

¹⁷ The monks the party encountered in Session #31 said the ram was all that remained of an ancient divine aspect that sought to regain its godhood, and that once been an ally of Set. Beorth believed the ram was to be his holy mount and was not evil at all.

“I do not remember,” the stoic paladin said, and Martin wondered how the ghost-hunter kept from giving into despair.

The party’s shadows had hardly moved when they heard Ratchis hiss to them as he returned.

“There are three men, dressed as monks down in the pit,” he said, his voice coming from thin air. “We were right, the pit is deeper on one end, but there are plateaus dug out to create levels. They must have been digging at this thing for years. They have a camp down there, and a fire, and there is rope ladder from the far side of the pit down to near where they are. There is an entrance or something they’ve uncovered, like a trapdoor to a chamber below. It is sealed off by some wooden planks with a rock atop it. Oh, and there are piles of bones and other things dug up and laid on tarps, like they’ve been exhuming bodies.”

“Does Anubis allow that kind thing?” Derek looked to Beorth, but the paladin could only shrug.

“I think there is special dispensation for monks of Anubis to move bodies in certain cases,” Martin speculated. “I mean there must be, right?”

“I will go and talk with them,” Beorth said.

“I say we take them out first and talk later,” Ratchis said. “I don’t trust these monks and they may try to stop us from doing what we came here to do, even if they think are doing this for the right reasons. We have to enter that place and find the map.”

“And we will, one way or another,” Beorth said. “But let us try my way first. If my words do not succeed, then my staff shall have to be the means to show them the error of their ways.”

The others were swayed by the charismatic holy warrior’s words, but Ratchis would remain invisible to be an ace in the hole if things went awry.

“Morning, Brothers! It is I, Beorth!” Beorth came openly around the pit, with Martin, Kazrack and Derek walking together about ten feet behind him.

The monks did not seem surprised to see them there.

“Yes, Beorth!” said a short stocky monk, with large calloused hands. He stood with those hands as fists against his thighs. Beorth had met him before outside of the Circle of Thorns, but of course, he did not remember, but Martin immediately recognized him. He was called Lomax. He wore the black robes and brown tunic of a Monk of Anubis and bore no weapon.

The other two monks looked younger, one had a weaselly and pimpled look to him, and a swollen osiris’ apple. His head was shaved like the others but was misshapen. He was called Thosir. The other was small and wiry looking, his robes were disheveled, and wore a permanent frown. He was called Allas, and like Lomax had the olive-coloration of a Herman-Lander.

“May I come down?” Beorth asked, gesturing to the rope ladder that was bound to a stone shaped like an immense gray dewdrop.

“I see you are still with your companions,” Lomax’s tone seemed to say that he disapproved, but Beorth ignored it. He grabbed the rope ladder and quickly climbed down.

The camp was in an area several feet deeper than the majority of the bottom of this part of the pit. Thosir stood down there, by where the wooden planks were.

“Yes, we have traveled here because we need to find something hidden here,” Beorth said.

“Of course you do,” Lomax nodded, an easy smile coming to his full lips.

“Perhaps we are looking for the same thing?” Beorth offered.

“Perhaps, but we have only come here to disinter the dead and bring them to where they can be buried in a sacred place, and to ensure any relics are kept safe from the wrong hands,” Lomax said. “What is it *you* seek?”

“Simple knowledge,” Beorth replied. “And to see that the dead here are laid to rest.”

“I thought you might be off somewhere trying to correct your mistake,” Lomax said.

“My mistake?”

“Because of you, a malignant creature still roams,” the monk said.

“It is not malignant. I know its true nature,” Beorth said,

“So you say,” Lomax said. “But I fear Master Hamfast knows more of these matters than you do.”¹⁸

There was a long silence, and Kazrack paused at the top of the ladder, wondering if he should come down, as he did not want to provoke the monks unduly and ruin his companion’s attempt at parley.

“Even if it is a good creature,” Lomax continued. “Would you allow it to live if you knew its continued existence would allow an even greater evil creature into this world?”

“What knowledge do you possess of an evil creature coming into this world?” Beorth thought he might be on to something.

“So has my master, Hamfast, told me,” Lomax replied. “His word is enough.”

Beorth inquired about the remains, and Lomax explained that they planned to bury them all in mass grave once more had been uncovered.

“I would study those remains,” Kazrack called down. “May I approach?”

Lomax looked at his two underlings, as if he could talk to them with his eyes alone, and then gestured for the dwarf to come down.

“Psst! Follow me down,” Kazrack whispered to Ratchis, hoping he was nearby. He hoped that if they climbed down at the same time the monks would not notice the rope jerking.

“Where is Master Hamfast now?” Beorth asked.

“He is below with more of the brothers,” Lomax pointed to the wooden boards. “Seeking out more bodies and whatever relics are to be saved.”

“Do you know when they shall return?”

“When they succeed.”

“Perhaps we might descend and aid them,” Beorth suggested.

“It is too dangerous,” Lomax replied, his face remained impassive, no matter what he said.

“We have faced danger before. I am not afraid.”

¹⁸ Beorth met Master Hamfast in the Interlude at the start of Book II: Catching the Spark (part II); just before Session #25.

“You should be,” There was a hint of a suppressed smile.

Kazrack was half-way down, when the rope jerked violently, as Ratchis lost his footing above him and after dangling for a second, fell hard on the stone below.

He quickly got up and hurried over to where rough-hewn step lead to the plateau below where the bones were piled.

“What was that?” Lomax cried, and the other two monks slipped into fighting stances, cautious. They squinted at the bottom of the rope and looked around.

“Ratchis! Where are you? Make your presence known!” Beorth called out.

The half-orc groaned with disapproval.

“I was wondering where the half-breed might be,” Lomax commented.

“I’m on the steps!” Ratchis called back.

“I did not see him go by,” Lomax arched an eyebrow. “I hope you are not attempting some deception to get past us and below. We are being civil and allowing you into our camp even though our agendas might be at odds. I hope this will not come to blows...unless violence is all you know, Beorth?”

Kazrack made it to the bottom, and Martin followed suit, but when Derek was not even a fourth of the way down the it suddenly jerked violently and fraying at the top, and he came tumbling down the nearly one hundred foot ladder.

He landed with a cloud of dust and the wind was knocked out of him.

Kazrack looked up and saw a figure duck behind the stone above, where the rope had been fastened.

“There is someone above by the stone!” he cried out. Pointing up, and then he jumped down to where the camp was.

“Master dwarf! What are you doing!” Lomax demanded.

“Whoever’s there has a bow!” Ratchis called out from his still invisible form, he had seen the robed figure as well.

Martin followed Kazrack down and put his back to the wall.

“Why is the half-orc invisible? Is this some kind of trick?” Lomax’s words betrayed anger.

“Beorth was forthright with it, and it is a spell that is not easily dismissed,” Ratchis said, and then looked up to where the hidden figure was. “And who are you, stranger?”

Martin poked his head over the edge to look to see if any of the monks’ feet were unusually large, but slapping himself on the forehead, turned to see a pile of packs by the bedrolls, only fifteen feet away.

“We asked Ratchis to approach in secret because we were not sure what enemy we faced,” Beorth tried to explain.

Kazrack called up to the mysterious figure as well, “You! Behind the pillar! Why do you attack us? Come out from behind that stone, lest our we send our invisible companion to force you out!”

Derek took that as an indication as to how the parley was going to go, and drew his bow, putting an arrow to it.

Allas began to wave his arms back in forth before him, over where he heard Ratchis climb back up on to the upper plateau of the pit bottom.

“Yes, come out and show yourself,” Lomax called to the hidden figure.

The figure made a run for it. There was a flash of orange skin behind a silver and blue cloak. Derek stepped away from the wall and let an arrow fly.

There was a flash of blood as the arrow grazed the figure, before it rushed out of view with incredible speed.

“Come back! We would speak to you! We will hold our attack!” Kazrack called up, frowning at Derek.

Allas gave up looking for Ratchis and began to walk over with purpose towards Derek.

“Yes, this must be some other force seeking entrance here,” Beorth attempted. The monk named Allas merely shrugged but continued towards Derek to try to keep him from firing more arrows.

“I think our thief found us again,” Kazrack said of the figure that had fled.

“Thief? Whatever do you mean?” Lomax asked.

“Some of our goods were stolen in the night,” Martin replied for the group, stopping himself from searching through the monks’ packs. The chance for peaceful resolution seemed to increase again.

“Well, be that as it may now that this *thief* has been spotted do you think he will go away, or that that he will return?” Lomax asked.

“He probably seeks the same knowledge we all do,” Beorth said. “He will return.”

“Shall we go track him down?” Kazrack asked.

“We cannot leave our posts, but you may do as you please,” Lomax said, his body was tense and ready to spring. “We cannot risk your invisible friend slipping below while we are made to think he has left with you.”

“D’nar, come closer,” Kazrack called to Ratchis.¹⁹

“I am fine where I am,” the half-orc called from his spot between the ledge down to the lower level, and the pit the camp was made in.

Allas turned back from Derek, and made a grab in Ratchis’ direction, but totally missed.

Before anyone could react to this, Derek cried out as an arrow clipped his shoulder from eastern side of the pit, where the tall ravine walls were. Everyone looked up and saw that the figure that had cut the rope before had moved to the other side of the pit. It was a tall humanoid of some kind, with the prominent snout of goblinoid features, with thin lips, large eyes and large canines, and a swarthy orange pallor. Outfitted in black, they could see this monk used a recurved longbow, she was nearly six-feet tall and as broad as Ratchis. Her hood fell away, they could see she had one tail of braided blue-white hair tucked behind one pointed ear.²⁰

Allas shrugged again, and continued to swing his arms before him, looking for Ratchis. Derek spun around and fired an arrow back at the bizarre monk-monster-woman, but she ducked behind a protruding rock, only to emerge from the other side and send two more arrows at Derek, who leapt backward, and cursed, feeling the bite of both. This monk was an excellent archer.

Martin popped back up to the upper level away from the camp, craning his neck to see who was firing the arrows.

“You are vulnerable up here,” Lomax warned the watch-mage. “Get back down.”

¹⁹ D’nar, which means ‘uncut gemstone,’ is Kazrack’s name for Ratchis in dwarven.

²⁰ This monk is a hobgoblin. Hobgoblins were long ago made extinct in Derome-Delem and the islands of Herman Land. They can still be found in great numbers in western Thracia and El Reino Unido de Las Familias Superiores, and in smaller groups in the Black Islands and Neergaard to the east.

Martin hopped back down. “Who is it? What is it?” he asked.

Thosir came running at Derek and tried to shove him forcefully off the ledge to the next one ten feet below, but the young woodsman side-stepped. This left Beorth as the only open shot for the archer above, and he winced as he felt the bite of the broad steel-headed arrows.

Undaunted by the arrows, Kazrack scrambled up to the main plateau just in time to see Thosir try to push Derek. “We are betrayed!” he cried and took a hard chop at Allas. The monk sucked air in through his teeth, as blood cascaded down his leg. He whipped around and took a defensive position.

“Why did you attack me?” His eyes growing wide, as he watched for another attack from the dwarf.

Lomax leapt down to Martin, putting space between himself and the attacking dwarf. “You must stop your dwarven friend,” the monk said in a convincing voice. ²¹ “He is making a mistake.”

“Kazrack! Stop! What are you doing?” Martin popped up over the edge of the depression and looked to his dwarven companion. “You are making a mistake.”

Allas backed away from Kazrack cautiously, and the dwarf hesitated for a moment, but Beorth did not.

“Why do you attack my friend?” Beorth asked Thosir, with anger in his voice. He drew his sword, swung with all his might. The monk reached up and knocked the blade out of alignment with an open palm, side-stepping the blow, but his hand still caught the edge and blood flowed freely down his forearm and splattered from his elbow.

“I was only trying to push him out of the way of the arrows,” Thosir replied calmly, but the veins beneath his dimpled and misshapen scalp twitched. “But now I am forced to defend myself.”

The monk feigned a punch, but then kicked out low, driving his heel into Beorth’s knee with great strength. The paladin hobbled back, and the monk drew away as well. Beorth got the impression that he had purposefully struck him in a painful, but not vital, spot.²²

Beorth struggled to not let his knee give way and felt the bite of two more arrows. Blood flowed over his tunic and shone on his armor in the glare of the afternoon sun disappearing behind the canyon.

Kazrack went charging at Thosir, and the monk whirled around and grunted, as he was cut deeply.

Martin leapt up and over to Kazrack and speaking an arcane word tossed some colored sand Kazrack’s way, and a spray of rainbow lights washed over his companion.

“Martin, stop it!” the dwarf cursed, but assumed it was a mistake. “I am still in the way!”

Ratchis, who had been climbing out of the great pit altogether to get at the archer, decided he was needed below, and dropped on Allas who seemed ready to join the fray again. The monk collapsed under the great weight of the half-orc driving him into the packed earth. Ratchis landed painfully on his own shoulder but rolled away.

Allas lay there bleeding from his head and nose, unconscious. Ratchis was now visible.

Happy for Ratchis’ distraction, Beorth was able to lay a hand upon his chest and call out to Anubis to close some of his wounds. However, he made himself a stationary target and felt the bite of another arrow. Reflexively, he ducked, and a second arrow struck Derek in the chest, and the young ranger fell down bleeding to death.

Thosir took the moment of distraction to duck his head down and turn to rush at Beorth, but Kazrack swung his halberd around and cleaved into the monk’s calf. Thosir fell bleeding out.

²¹ **DM’s Note:** This was a *suggestion*.

²² **DM’s Note:** He dealt subdual damage.

“Martin, Come! Levitate me up to the archer so I might cut her down from her perch,” Kazrack called to the watch-mage. Martin hurried over, but instead of casting a spell, he tried to rip the halberd from Kazrack’s grasp.

“This is a mistake!” Martin said. Kazrack pulled it back out of the mage’s weak grip easily.

Ratchis made it to his feet and looked up only to see Lomax coming down on him with a great flying kick. The hard heel of the monk’s foot slammed Ratchis’ chin and cut open his lip. The half-orc’s mouth immediately swelled and ran with blood. He felt a tooth crack and break apart upon his tongue, and the bruise grow, as all the capillaries burst beneath his left eye.

“If you must be foes, then worthy foes you be,” Lomax said. “I am unafraid to go to Anubis’ Realm. Are you?”

Ratchis staggered back and called to Nephthys to close his wound, as he dodged wildly to avoid Lomax’s flurry of blows.

“Kazrack, over here!” he called to his friend for aid, seeing the dwarf had dispatched another of the monks.

Kazrack moved to help Ratchis, but Martin leapt to grapple him and hold him back. The dwarf simply spun around and struck the watch-mage across the face with the shaft of his pole arm.

“Cut it out!” the dwarf yelled at the mage, and then turned around marching towards Ratchis and Lomax. “I think Martin is ensorcelled.”

The dwarf swung his halberd at the monk’s legs, and Lomax attempted to jump over it, but Kazrack clipped his foot. There was a gush of blood and the monk landed on his side. The monk kicked his legs out in front of him and rolled up to a sitting position, and then continued to spin his body, until he was suddenly turned upright, keeping blows from both his foes at bay. He slammed his foot into Kazrack’s lower abdomen. The dwarf grunted in pain, and then felt Martin futilely grabbing at him from behind.

The watch-mage’s lip was split as well.

Lomax’s spinning did not deter Ratchis, and spitting on his hands, he gripped his warhammer and brought it down on the monk twice. Lomax staggered and then felt the bite of Kazrack’s halberd. The monk fell, and this time did not get back up.

Beorth lay a hand on Derek and whispered to Anubis. Stabilized, Beorth was now able to heft his companion over his shoulder and move toward the camp.

Ratchis immediately dropped his hammer and began returning arrows at the strange hobgoblin monk, as she appeared just long enough to send two arrows towards him. They fell just short of him.

“Martin, levitate me up there, and then bind your *friends*, the monks,” Kazrack said, pushing the mage away from him a bit.

“You can’t move in any direction but up and down with levitate,” Ratchis said. “It won’t work.”

“I think the only safety lies in the pit,” Beorth said, hustling past them with Derek, and moving around the camp towards the boarded-up trapdoor. He laid Derek gently down and then leapt down to that lower level.

Kazrack grunted and laid a finger on Lomax’s forehead. “Rivkanal, please stop our foe’s bleeding.”

Suddenly, Martin slapped his own forehead in dismay, “...Oh, no, not again!”

“Martin! I need help getting the body down,” Beorth called from over by the boards, where he was pushing the heavy rock off.

“We can’t go down there in the state we’re in,” Ratchis said. “We don’t know what is down there. We’ll search the bags and see if Martin’s things are here.”

Kazrack walked over and stabilized Thosir as well, but he was distracted craning his head to get a view of the archer. The arrows had stopped coming down, and no sign had been seen of the bizarre monk from behind the large stone she had fired from.

“I’m afraid we will fall to this archer,” Beorth said, gently putting his hands beneath Derek’s shoulders, while Martin grabbed the boy’s feet. The brought him down to the camp level of the pit.

Ratchis came down into the camp, and started kicking at the monk’s bags, taking a cursory look at what might be there, while pointing a heavy crossbow up to where he had last seen the archer.

Martin crawled over to look at the packs more carefully, and once they were convinced the archer had left Ratchis and Kazrack collected the monks and laid them out on their bedrolls.

“We have no other choice but to go down there now,” Beorth said, pulling up the planks. “We are too exposed here. There is no other way.”

End of Session #56

Session #57

“Beorth, stop!” Ratchis yelled to the paladin, and Kazrack echoed him. “Beorth, we cannot just go down there.”

“Why not?” There was only one more board to be removed. The paladin looked up, blood on his face and hands.

“We cannot drag Derek down there in his state,” Ratchis reasoned. “There could be something worse down there.”

The three of them began to debate the matter in earnest. Kazrack wanted to go after the archer-monk. Beorth wanted to immediately go below. Ratchis felt they should gather their strength and then retreat to some place of relative safety to rest. Martin expressed no opinion, arguing against all reasoning for whichever position, while frantically going through the monks’ camp for his spell books.

Finally, Kazrack sighed, “Whichever way we go we will be beset with danger, so we might as well go down.”

Ratchis grunted his disapproval. “We’ll leave the monks where they are. If that other monk is in league with them, she’ll come and take them or whatever. We’ll leave them food but take their weapons.”

“Agreed,” said Beorth.

“I found them!” Martin cried, hugging a book to his chest.

“Hoorah!” said Thomas mentally.

There was a spiral staircase made of great stones held up by a metal frame going down into the darkness. The metal was warped, and the stones cracked. The climb down looked precarious. Kazrack volunteered to go down first and check it out. They tied a rope about his waist, and down he went, while Beorth and Ratchis held the other end. Martin stood watch. He still held his books in his arms.

The stairs groaned in protest as the dwarf made his careful descent. He was jolted to one side and braced himself to fall, as one of the steps beneath him cracked, and sent up a plume of dust. But he did not fall. He could see that at one time the stairs had been of excellent craftsmanship, but years of moisture and pressure from above had twisted the metal and cracked the stone.

The open steps led down to a great round room, that was bi-leveled by a series of stone platforms that starred out from the center to open spaces in the wall, where brown rubble had tumbled through. The stone of the ramps and the walls were all blackened and, in some places, even melted. Scorched. The real floor was another twelve feet below. Looking around, Kazrack could see that the rubble partially obscured rotten ballistae, their metal rivets corroded. The dwarf’s eyes widened with sudden understanding.

The room he was standing in was an enclosed parapet. The rubble had come through the great windows where the ballistae had been stationed. This was the top-most level of the citadel and the place itself had fallen nearly whole into a crevasse that had then filled in with broken rock from the surrounding area. The earth itself had swallowed the building whole.

Kazrack came around the steps and could see a gap in a ramp to his left that might have been another spiral staircase down to the lower level. He tugged for more slack from the rope.

“You okay down there?” Ratchis called down. His gruff voice echoed in the great round chamber. A large portion of the area below was in total darkness, as it seemed larger than this ramped section of the chamber.

Suddenly the darkness was pierced by an orange glow. A nearly transparent sheet of flame burst into being and circled the circumference of the room, and then split into several more, spinning around, each growing, as if to make a ring of flame.

“What is that? What’s going on?” Ratchis called down, seeing the fiery light come up through the trapdoor.

Kazrack began to back away towards the steps. "I'm coming back up!"

Beorth and Ratchis began to pull on the rope with all their might, jerking Kazrack off his feet. The dwarf scrambled to get back up as they dragged him along bodily. He managed to regain his footing, but before he could come around the steps, he heard a soft pop.

Above Beorth and Ratchis fell back as the rope gave way, burned through in the explosion. Soot came flying up out of the hole.

"Kazrack! Do you hear me?" Beorth called down. He began to clang noisily down the steps. "Sit tight! We'll come and get you!"

He swayed in place for a moment.

Kazrack sat up singed and dazed. He had fallen again, and rolled into a ball, and was not sure if he had blacked out or not. The world was a dull hum, and he could hear Beorth calling indecipherably from a great distance. He patted out flame by his elbow, and quickly examined his beard to make sure the tangled thing was still there.

The dwarf jumped to his feet and waved Beorth back. "Get back up the stairs! Get out of here!"

Martin ran over to the hole with a jug of water he grabbed from among the monk's things. Below Beorth looked around at the wavering red and orange light that was coming off the walls. The corroded metal of tracks the ballistae rested on gleamed.

Kazrack allowed his mind to wander a moment when he recognized how the great weapon was bolted to a frame, and chains and weights must have been used, including dwarves at several stations to target it more precisely. He could see the siege weapons were scorched as well. There must have been a great fire here once that burned hot and fast and then was put out just as quickly, he thought.

A clatter of bones against stones brought him out of his reverie. He reached the stairs, but Beorth had not ascended.

"My god's energy will save us!" the paladin cried. Confused, Kazrack looked up and could see that the sheets of flame trailed after bones that flew through the air at great speed. Sometimes colliding with the ramp and running across them to create the clatter, making the blackened stone glow red.

Suddenly, the bones came flying together with great speed, and the sheets of fire surrounded the humanoid form. The mantle of fire, peeled back from the skull, and as it did sinew, flesh and skin seemed to spontaneously grow, as if the thing were burning backward. Before them was a naked man, with runes burned deeply into his flesh. His face melted off and his skull exploded into flame again.

His left arm shriveled up in flame, and then flicked forwards sending a bolt of fire at Beorth.

The paladin cried out to his god and holding his sword above his head charged at the grotesque thing.

"Go down!" Martin yelled at Ratchis. "I'll watch Derek. Go!"

"I'll be back," Ratchis said, and grabbing the jug of water he came hurrying down the steps. It was a bad idea. He slipped and had to throw his shoulder into the central pole of the steps to keep from falling, and more than half of a lower step came loose. He grunted and continued down with more caution.

The burning man avoided the blow of Beorth's sword, by having his upper torso explode into a blaze of flaming bones that struck Beorth across the chest and face, searing him.

"You will not bend me to your will servant of Anubis!"

Beorth tried to parry the next blow, but the thing punched forward. Beorth's cloak caught flame, and there was a nasty burn on his neck and face. He fell back unconscious.

“Beorth!” Kazrack cried, turning away from the steps, and readying his halberd.

“Good! More dwarves to kill!” the thing hissed, its tongue curling up into a deep red flame. Kazrack charged and brought his poleaxe down, but the undead thing leapt back, and smacked him with flaming bony fists. He could feel the heat of the blow beneath his armor, as it became very hot in the less than a moment’s contact. He swung wildly to keep the thing at bay.

By this time, Ratchis had come down and crawled up to Beorth, as to not attract too much attention to himself as he dragged the jug of water.

He whispered to his goddess, and in less than a moment, Beorth sat up, sputtering, and holding his face. However, he did not tarry long. He grabbed his sword and came at the creature.

Kazrack was able to strike the skull a good blow with his halberd.

Ratchis chucked the clay jar at the thing, and it exploded and hissed, reforming with rather less potent, now blue-tinged, flames. The thing screeched, and Beorth took the opportunity to call to his god to smite the thing once and for all. His blade smashed through the blazing bones, sending them flying out into a flaming ring of dust.

The thing was destroyed.

The three companions patted each other out.

“What happened?” Martin called down into the darkness. With the creature gone, Beorth suddenly found himself in the dark as well.

There was a whispering in dwarven below. Only Kazrack could understand it, and he hastened the others to go back up.

“Tender morsels,” the voice had said.

Above, Ratchis healed Beorth, and again the party fell to arguing about what to do next.

“Do you hear that down below? That is something mumbling in the tongue of my fathers!” Kazrack was beside himself. “I think we should go down there and destroy them right now, and then that place will be safe, and Natan-Ahb’s just will be satisfied as well.”

“Both places seem just as dangerous,” Beorth said. “But perhaps Ratchis was right about the dangers below. We should stay up here where we can tend to the monks while we tend our own wounds.”

“I am not tending anyone not in this group,” Ratchis barked. “I will leave them food within reach, but if they live or die is not my concern here. My concern is finding this map and learning where we can find Hurgun’s Maze.”

“When we leave them to go below, we will leave them to their fates,” Beorth replied. “But while we are here, *I* will care them.”

“I’ll help,” Martin added, weakly.

“But those abominations cannot be tolerated to exist any longer,” Kazrack insisted. “You cannot understand them, but I can, and I say we destroy them. They were destroyed easily enough before.”

“Except that now we are sorely wounded, Derek is unconscious, Jeremy is dead, and we have a monk archer of some race or another...” Ratchis began.

“Hobgoblin,” Martin added, again weakly. “I saw her very quickly, but it looked like a hobgoblin to me, though I’ve always learned the females of their culture are subservient to the men, certainly not monks.”

“...Waiting for a chance to kill us all,” Ratchis continued, deciding that Martin was adding nothing helpful. “And, last of all we don’t know how many there are down there, or what else there may be.”

Kazrack sighed, “We can camp on the upper part of the room; that way we will have cover from anyone coming from above, and whatever is down there won’t be able to reach us, and if they can climb up, we’ll see them way before they get to us, and we’ll have the advantage.”

“Yes, well, we mustn’t miss an opportunity for such an advantage,” Ratchis replied.

“This sarcasm you’ve developed during your time in civilization doesn’t suit you, D’nar,” Kazrack said back, coldly.

Ratchis did not flinch, “I do not trust you to spend a night down there, whenever you hear them whisper, you are as loud as an oliphaunt.”

Kazrack grunted.

“I think Kazrack’s plan has merit,” Beorth offered, but Martin shook his head in disagreement.

“How about I go down and check it out and see if I think there is good place for us to camp, and if so we will do as you and Beorth want,” Ratchis offered.

“Okay, but I will be the one to go,” Kazrack replied.

Now it was Ratchis’s turn to grunt and roll his eyes.

“You cannot understand their whispers,” Kazrack said. “I can tell if anything they say might be helpful to us.”

“That is why you should not go,” Ratchis countered. “Nothing they can say to me can move me to be rash. They have nothing good to say. All that is left in their black bitter hearts is to destroy the living and make them as miserable as possible.”

Beorth nodded, “He is right, Kazrack.”

The dwarf shrugged, and then nodded.

Down went Ratchis, but he was not gone long.

“There are too many places where something could climb up from below,” Ratchis reported. “And the stairs are too unstable. They may collapse if we have to retreat back up in too much of a hurry. In fact, I am not sure they will last a few more gentle climbs up and down.”

Camp was made, and Martin crawled into the tent to get some sleep, feeling exhausted. Derek’s unconscious form was laid within beside him.

The sun was naught more than a dim golden glow at the top lip of the pit when Beorth, Ratchis and Kazrack were about to divvy up the watches were startled by the sudden appearance of the armored skeletons like those they had fought before. As the last light died, there they were, hissing unintelligible curses at them.

Kazrack did not hesitate, but grabbing his pouch of runestones, he called out to his gods, and one of the skeletons turned and fled.

Ratchis followed suit, but his entreaty to his goddess must have been tainted with the anger and frustration he was feeling.

Beorth cried out, as two black bolts of energy struck him. He fell and did not get back up.

The undead things had appeared surrounding the camp, and Martin startled awake having heard the commotion. He

crawled out of the tent on his belly, and began to see to Beorth's wounds, as blood seemed to be gushing from his nose.

Kazrack felt the cold touch of one of the bolts but gritted his teeth and shook off the pain. Ratchis charged at the one that brought down Beorth striking at it with his hammer. The sound of metal on metal rang out, as the undead thing moved deftly to parry the blow with its long sword. Ratchis winced, as the counterblow grazed his knuckles as he brought his hammer down at the blade.

Again, Kazrack called out to his gods, and two more fled, following the first one as all three dematerialized into the pit wall, as if suddenly ghostly.

Roaring, Ratchis closed with the remaining skeletal warrior. The thing ducked and fired a black bolt of energy at point blank range, but the half-orc did not seem to notice the cold blow. He brought his hammer down on the thing's head, causing a huge dent in its helmet. He could hear the sound of the crunched skull but did not take a moment to enjoy it. Ratchis swung his hammer across its chest and sent it flying backward, bone fragments flew in all directions. The armor suddenly aged and crumbled away.

"I told you we should go below," Kazrack admonished as soon as the battle was done. "Those things will only return."

"Fine. We'll go down," Ratchis said, going over to Beorth's unconscious form, as Martin worked over him. "But we are going from one danger to another. And I have no more access to my goddess' healing graces this day." His gaze lingered on Beorth.

"I have none as well," Kazrack said. "All the more reason to find ourselves a secure position below."

Ratchis sighed, and they packed their things.

Martin moved the boards, and below he heard some kind of echoed smack and then shuffle and a snap of something. He shuddered.

Kazrack went down first to keep watch as the others descended. Martin followed. He cast *levitate* on Beorth and awkwardly brought the paladin down, weightlessly. It took a good long time, and he began to sweat as the metal frame of the stairs began to groan and shake. He cursed whenever Beorth became jammed in the stairway, and he had to jerk him free. He stopped to examine the paladin's wounds to insure they had not re-opened and then continued. The stairs seemed to sigh in relief as he stepped off, dragging Beorth behind him.

Finally, down came Ratchis. He had Derek over his shoulder. The metal frame began to buckle, and then it lurched forward suddenly, as Ratchis came around, and he instinctively drove his foot down to steady his footing, but the stone beneath gave way and he flew forward. The steps began to collapse; stone falling on stone.

Ratchis fell fifteen feet below, but Derek was thrown from his shoulder and landed with a sickening crunch on his head and shoulder, crumbling unnaturally before falling over. The young huntsman was spread out on the hard cold stone, his head twisted at an odd angle.

Ratchis looked up and then scrambled over to Derek. He was dead.

"Noooooooo!" Ratchis' voiced echoed through the great chamber, making pebbles tumble down the piles of rubble. The last piece of stone on what had been the steps came loose and fell as well.

"Ratchis! You said to be quiet," Kazrack hissed. "D'nar! Stop! He is gone."

Kazrack walked over and put his hand on Ratchis' shoulder and looked down at Derek's dirty face.

Ratchis stood quickly and threw his fists into the air in frustration and anger, "This is all my fault!" He brought his fists down on his chest with all his might, a fleck of spit bubbling out from the corner of pruned purple lips. And then the great half-orc collapsed on the ground, crying. "All my fault...All my fault... You arrogant bastard!" Ratchis sat up and slammed his fist into his leg again, and then collapsed sobbing.

“Ratchis! Ratchis, get up! This isn’t helping,” Kazrack tried, but the ranger would not respond. Martin the Green merely stood there, by Beorth, mouth open a bit. Whether his face expressed disbelief or numbness, Kazrack could not tell.

The dwarf steadied himself and snarled, looking over at Beorth breathing shallowly. With a ‘harumph’ he marched over to Martin.

“We’re going to have to make camp right here,” he said to the watch-mage. “Since you don’t need much sleep, you will have to watch all night and then wake me for the final two hours.”

“I can’t do that,” Martin’s voice was raspy whisper. He snapped his fingers and lit a torch, growing tired of the dark, that Ratchis and Kazrack could see through so easily.

“Why not? Just put your ring on,” Kazrack’s patience was wearing thin, but Martin’s was suddenly gone.

“Sure, just give me week,”²³ he replied with venom, slipping the ring on. “I will stay up and watch the best I can, regardless.”

“And if you fall asleep?”

“Then we die,” Marin snapped. “Deal with it.”

Kazrack harrumphed again and then looked back at Ratchis who had not moved. He got out of his armor and unrolled his bedroll and fell into an uneasy sleep.

Martin wandered over to a rotting ballista and began picking up bits of wood, and the broken shafts of spears once meant to be projected by the half-buried machine. He started a small fire, tossing his torch into it, and sitting to take watch.

The watch-mage thought Ratchis had fallen asleep where he was, but then he noticed the half-orc cleaning off Derek’s face, and trying to dress him for burial or a pyre.

Martin walked over. “Go to sleep,” he said.

“Not until he’s clean,” Ratchis replied, his voice as dead as Derek was.

“How long will that take?”

“Until he’s clean,” Ratchis responded, he never looked at Martin.

With a sigh, Martin snapped his finger and then touched to Derek’s forehead. The boy warrior was clean.²⁴

“Go to sleep,” he said again.

Ratchis frowned and complied, silently.

Hours passed. Martin spent them staring into the small fire and looking for strays bits of anything flammable to throw into it. Sometimes he petted Thomas on the head, as his familiar slept on his shoulder.

A few times he heard shuffling below, and the hisses of the faintest whispers in a language he did not understand. He paid them no mind. He also spent a lot of time looking at Derek’s corpse only fifteen feet away, in a shadowy reddish light.

²³ Martin’s ring, *Lacan’s Demise* must be worn for one week without interruption for its eating, drinking, and sleeping properties to kick in.

²⁴ Martin used *prestidigitation* to clean Derek’s body.

“I’m sorry, Derek,” Martin whispered. “Beorth’s unconscious, so we couldn’t give you final rites yet, but when he awakens, we’ll make sure it’s done. I’m afraid. More afraid than I was when we were in the Necropolis. It could have been any one of us. Any of us could die...”

“But you’re still glad it wasn’t you, right?” Derek’s voice croaked out of his dry lips as he sat up. His face had taken a green pallor, and his eyes were opened wide, black, and rheumy. His neck was still twisted in an unnatural position. “Are you scared or are you relieved, Martin?”

Derek stood up slowly, and Martin snapped out of his terror, and snatched a brand out of the fire. Martin’s former companion grinned, malevolently, and took a step forward.

Martin met his advance, bringing the burning brand down in a wide arc that Derek easily avoided. He hissed and raised a rigid hand, its nails now black and sharpened, to strike the mage, but then cocked his head as if he heard something.

Martin pulled back and made to swing his brand again, but Derek leapt away to the edge of the platform. “Yes... Yes... I’m coming,” he hissed into the darkness. He looked back. “See you later, Martin,” and swung off the side, disappearing into the darkness.

Martin stood there flabbergasted for a moment, and then chucked the brand back into the fire and sat beside it, staring away into the small smoky flame for the rest of the night.

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“Where’s Derek!?” Ratchis’ voice snapped Martin awake. He was still kneeling, and the fire had died before him. Light streamed in from the trapdoor above.

Martin fell over, his legs tingling with pin and needles.

“He’s gone. He rose in the night and fled,” Martin said, with no emotion in his voice. He stood, slowly. He made a shooping gesture with his left hand. “Go pray. We need your healing.”

“I’m sorry, Martin,” Ratchis said, inexplicably, and then rose up, his face becoming a mask of rage. He grabbed the watch-mage by the front of his robes and lifted him into the air. “WHY DIDN’T YOU ALERT US?!!!?”

“What good would it have done us?” Martin replied, his voice still passionless. “We needed rest for Beorth.”

Ratchis growled.

“You can put me down now,” Martin added, calmly.

Ratchis put him down. “What kind of man can be so calm when one of his friends becomes one of the living dead?” he asked, with disgust.

“We will join him soon enough, but we might as well do what we can while we can,” Martin replied.

After praying, Kazrack and Ratchis used the blessings of their gods to tend to the wounds of the party. Though gravely wounded, when Kazrack went to lay his hands on Ratchis, the half-orc balked.

“Don’t waste that on me!” he snarled.

“Oh? You want to die too now?” Kazrack asked. “You’d rather die down here than to live a coward.”

“Say that again?” Ratchis dared.

“You’d rather die down here than to live a coward.” Kazrack spat.

Ratchis' big meaty fist slammed into Kazrack's face with incredible might. The dwarf's head was driven back, but he immediately crouched into a fighting stance, raising his own fists.

"Are you done?" he asked his friend.

"Are you *both* done?" Martin asked, disgust in his voice.

Ratchis slumped down to the cold stone. Crying, he cast another healing spell upon Beorth bringing him back from the edge of Anubis' Realm. The paladin coughed awake.

"You brought me back," he sputtered.

"One life for another," Ratchis replied.

Suddenly, a shadow crossed over the trapdoor. "Hello!" A fair voice called down.

End of Session #57

Session #58

“Hello?” the voice called down again. It was a fair voice, with a high lilt, as if it might break into a melancholy song at each syllable.

Kazrack walked over to the where the rubble of the stairway now lay, craning his neck to get a view of who might be up there.

“Kazrack! Be careful!” Beorth hissed.

“Hello?” the dwarf called back up. He held a loaded crossbow in his hand.

“Are you Kazrack?” the soft voice called down. The dwarf squinted, trying to get a better view of who was up there, but the figure was backlit. All he could tell is that the person has a very slight build, and long hair that hung down over her shoulders. He decided it was a she, for he could not imagine a man having a voice like that, unless it was an elf.

“Who are you?” Kazrack called up, suspicious.

“Are you traveling with Martin the Green, Jeremy Northrop, Beorth Sahkemet, Ratchis of Nephthys and a boy called Derek?” She rattled off the names of the Fearless Manticore Killers as if she had spent time memorizing them phonetically.

“Yes, but again I ask, who are you?”

“I am Anárie Mathaliel,” the figure said, and then she stuck her head down through the hole and Kazrack could see, his guess had been correct. It was an elven woman. “I come from Aze Nuquerna. I was sent by Ethiel to aid you in your quest.”

Kazrack looked back at Beorth and Ratchis and shrugged. “I don’t see any reason to doubt her, except that we are in a region surrounded by enemies...”

“...and liars,” Beorth added.

“Do you have a rope?” Kazrack called up. “We do not have a means to get you down. Unless you simply come to convey a message, if so, you can tell us from up there and then flee this dangerous place.”

“You asked Aze Nuquerna for help, did you not?” Anárie called down. There was a hint of haughtiness in her lilting voice.

“We have to get a rope up to you,” Beorth called up weakly.

“There is no need for that,” Anárie said. “You might not be able to get your rope back.” And with those words she disappeared from the hole for a moment and then stepped into it, but her descent was arrested. All of a sudden, she began to float down gingerly, swaying slightly back and forth. She kicked off the top of the pile of rubble and flipped in mid-air, landing with a graceful tumble in front of the party and then up to her feet.

She wore a bluish-purple velvet cloak embroidered with bright red along the seam, and bluish-black traveling leather pants that matched her leather armor. She had very slight, almost spindly, arms, and delicate fingers. There was a long sword at her side, and an unstrung bow stuck into the pack on her back. Anárie had very light brown willowy hair, almost the color of straw, pale skin, delicate features, with the slightest upturn of her tiny nose, and large sparking green eyes. Her ears looked even pointier than those of other elves the party had met, and her face was nearly expressionless, except for the slightest hint of a smirk.

“From your hair and eyes, you could be Ethiel’s twin,” Kazrack said to her.

Anárie’s eyes narrowed, “No, I don’t think so. If you are testing me, it is a good try, but I look nothing like him.”

“Well, you are welcome,” Kazrack replied, frowning. He did not feel as satisfied with how his ‘test’ worked out.

A little red animal face peeked out from the top of the elf maid’s pack. It took a sniff around and then ducked its head back in.

“That’s a big squirrel!” Kazrack commented.

“Yes, indeed, it would be if he were a squirrel,” Anárie said, with a puzzled look.

“Then what is he?”

“He is a fox.”

“Do all mages have animals?” Kazrack asked, but Anárie did not have a chance to answer.

“If you and your animal want to live, you should leave now,” Ratchis said, aggressively. He walked right up to Anárie and towered over her. He stood head and shoulders taller than her.

“Sometimes one doesn’t always do what it is smart when they are doing what is right,” Kazrack said.

“I know,” Ratchis replied.

“I did not come all this way to back down now,” Anárie said, her impassive face making it difficult to tell if she were insulted or intimidated. “Are those monks tied up above those who would not listen to your warning?”

Ratchis grunted. Beorth introduced himself and did his best to explain about the monks.

“I’m surprised you were able to reach us alone,” Kazrack said, still suspicious. “You must be a great warrior in addition to one who can, uh...use magic.”

“Magic can be useful for many things, and one person alone can get through some places unnoticed easier than a group can,” Anárie said, by way of explanation.

“Heh. You may prefer to travel alone then if it is so much safer,” Ratchis grunted, angrily. He sat down. “In any case, don’t listen to anything I say, it may lead to your death.”

“Given the dangers of this place I can understand your grim attitude, but is it really warranted?” Anárie asked.

“We have lost two members of our group to Anubis’s Realm, already, and we have barely breached this place,” Beorth said. “And I was almost lost as well.”

They sat down to talk more, as Martin the Green continued to sleep.

“Forgive me if my next question makes me seem less than grateful, but I was curious why you agreed to come here,” Kazrack asked.

“Ethiel asked me to because you asked him,” Anárie said.

“So, it was out of obligation to Ethiel?”

“...And curiosity. It is not often that one gets the opportunity to walk through a dwarven citadel, even a fallen one.”

Hours passed. Some in silence, some in more conversation with the elven woman—though Ratchis did not say a word. Beorth and Kazrack decided to use some rubble to cover the hole down to the lower half of the area. There had been a stairway there once as well, but it seemed to have collapsed long before the upper one.

Not too long after that the party noticed movement above.

“Do you think that the other monk has returned?” Beorth asked.

“Most likely,” Kazrack replied in a whisper. “I just hope that he does not cover our retreat through that way.”

As if he had been heard, Kazrack swore as he saw the wooden planks cover the hole back up, and they all heard the sound of stones being laid atop them.

“Well, at least they did not come down after us,” Kazrack said, shrugging. “I am more concerned about going below and destroying those incessant mumblers down there.”

Martin had just woken up to the sound of Thomas chattering in his head, when the others heard the sound of creaking and shuffling approaching in the darkness from the other side of the great chamber.

“Something is coming!” Anárie announced.

“Beorth, get ready to make a light!” Kazrack ordered.

Ratchis could see two shambling dwarven forms coming at them in the darkness. Their bodies were bloated, and rotting, and they still wore scraps of chain armor. One of the had its entire lowered portion of its face ripped down to the barest raw flesh atop bone, and black bile oozed out, shining bright white in the half-orc’s darkvision.

Ratchis hefted his hammer and walked cautiously towards them, eager for their attack.

Martin squinted, as Anárie now held a lit torch, casting wild shadows, and making them feel as if there was movement all around them.

“Lady of the Raised Shield, protect me from my foes, that I may defend my companions,” Kazrack called, holding his bag runestones with his right hand, and casting *protection from evil*. He hurried to support Ratchis, halberd in hand.²⁵

The two forms hastened their approach toward Ratchis, but they still had an uneven, almost ape-like gait.

Anárie spoke a word softly in her mellifluous tongue, and the torch in her hand began to sail of its own accord over to illuminate the undead.²⁶

The first one leapt forward at Ratchis. Its eyes bulged and its skull cracked as Ratchis brought his hammer down on its head with both hands, but it did not even slow, and while it clawed blindly, its jagged teeth ripped into his forearm.

“Don’t let them touch you!” Martin called out, recognizing ghouls from his *Introduction to Undead* class at the Academy. “They can paralyze with a touch! *Lentus!*”

The ghoul clawing at Ratchis suddenly slowed down in a bizarre parody of itself.

The other one came at Kazrack, and the dwarf tried ripping it from its feet, but it leapt easily avoiding the pole-axe’s hooked blade and grabbed at him. Kazrack pushed at it with the shaft his weapon, and suddenly Ratchis was on its left flank, bringing his hammer down on its back. It screeched and hissed and moved away from Kazrack to keep both foes in its line of sight, Kazrack could see that the first ghoul was now a lifeless pulpy mass on the stone platform. Ratchis had smashed the head from its body with a hammer blow.

The second ghoul was still reeling from the blow, when Beorth stepped up and brought his sword down, nearly cleaving

²⁵ “*The Lady of the Raised Shield*” is a common title for the dwarven goddess, Rivkanal.

²⁶ *Mage Hand*

head and shoulder from the thing, “Anubis! Your blessings guide my weapon!”

The Fearless Manticore Killers began to debate moving their camp over to an area of the platforms where access would be more limited from below.

“And you are?” Martin asked Anárie.

“Anárie Mathaliel.”

As they were in the process of moving, more ghouls came climbing up from below, splitting part of the group from that which had already set themselves up in the smaller area. Kazrack had created a barricade with rubble.

One climbed over and made its way to Beorth, who did not hesitate. In a second, he was bringing his sword down on it, cutting a huge gash in its chest. Kazrack leapt over the barricade, halberd in hand to aid Beorth, and Anárie moved to flank. Ratchis and Martin who were furthest away, were cut off, as another ghoul leapt from another platform, knocking Ratchis down.

“Kazrack! Ratchis needs help! Augh!” Martin barely finished his warning when his stomach cramped. He felt his bile rise. He could hear something clawing its way up one of the solid stone supports and it smelled of a rancid moldering corpse.

Beorth cut deep into the dead flesh of the ghoul before him, but it would not fall, clawing and biting the paladin, who felt his muscles harden and quit responding to his commands. He was paralyzed. The ghoul licked Beorth’s face hungrily, but then cried out as Anárie spoke some arcane words and two arrows of light flew from her outstretched hand, striking it.

Like the original ghouls, these were the twisted forms of dwarves as well.

“Come with us, Kazrack.” one hissed. “Join your fathers.”

The dwarf charged at the one between Martin and Beorth, but it ducked, and the dwarf swung around to interpose himself.

There was a loud clank as whatever was climbing from below threw over a hand holding a two-handed hammer and began to pull itself up.

Ratchis got to his feet and slammed the ghoul full on in the chest with his hammer. The thing’s chest caved in and a huge piece of it fell away as if it were a false panel, revealing fresh bleeding flesh and a protrusion of bone below.

“*Lentus!*” Martin tried his slow spell again, but this time the ghouls were unaffected.

Anárie’s sword was suddenly in her hand, and as if frolicking in the woods, she skipped forward at the one hoping to devour Beorth. With a flick of her wrist, the top half of the ghoul’s head was clipped off and flying into the darkness. Its body collapsed.

“Devious elves,” the rotten thing said, as it came up onto the platform and went for Kazrack.

Ratchis finished his foe and moved past Martin to help Kazrack. The watch-mage pulled a knife and hurried over to cover the paralyzed Beorth, to allow Anárie to join the fray. The elfin warrior tumbled to flank the remaining undead.

Kazrack cried out, as the rotten ghoul’s filthy claws ripped at his face, drawing blood. The thing wore a rotten tunic, and hefted a great hammer, grasping it with two hands again to strike down on Kazrack. However, the rune-thrower, stepped back and thrust with his halberd, cutting deeply into it.

Ratchis choked back bile as the foul stench filled his nostril. He swung weakly and nearly lost his footing.

“D’nar! Watch out!” Kazrack warned, but he should have taken his own advice as the ghastly thing’s hammer struck

him across the top of his head painfully. Luckily, his helmet absorbed most of the blow or he might have been brained. However, he could still feel the wound begin to swell and bleed beneath.

Anárie coughed softly. She felt nauseated as well and was barely able to scratch the thing with her sword as her limbs felt weak and heavy. The ghast snarled and knocked her blade out of sync.

Ratchis tried to get through the thing's defenses with brute strength, but all the while partially digested bit of rations bubbled out of the corner of his mouth. He was less than useless.

Cautiously, Martin left his post to join the fight.

The thing dropped the maul, and ripped Kazrack with both hands. "You will taste the flesh of your friends," it said, as Kazrack's movement was arrested and he stood perfectly still, unable to move, but aware of what was going on around him.

The ghast spun around to handle Ratchis and Anárie, but the half-orc got lucky and was able to drop his hammer atop its head. It floundered to the right, and Anárie caught it under the arm with her blade, nearly cutting its arm off. It fell lifeless to the floor.

In a couple of minutes, both Kazrack and Beorth shook off the paralyzation. The party used the last of their available healing just to keep themselves from hovering too closely to death's door.

The Fearless Manticore Killers and their new companion finished moving their camp over to one of the smaller and less easily accessible stone platforms, and Ratchis draped his hyenadon hide over an exposed portion of an arbalest to provide some shelter from the dampness.

Thomas sniffed curiously at Anárie, as Beorth spoke some words over the ghoul corpses and he and Kazrack buried them under cairns made of rubble.

"I smell something funny... Ah!" Thomas ducked into Martin's shirt shivering as Anárie's own familiar poked his head out with curiosity. "He's gonna eat me!"

"Don't worry, we won't allow that," Martin comforted his familiar, and turned to Anárie. "And who is your friend?"

"Tuko."

"The squirrel is Thomas," Martin replied with a smile. "You have to understand, he is uncomfortable with foxes."

"If you two are done playing with your animals we have work to do that would go faster with some help," Ratchis scowled, lifting a heavy stone to lay upon one of the ghouls.

Martin sighed, and he and Anárie helped what little they could.

Soon, everyone settled down to rest and catch some sleep, except Ratchis and Anárie, who agreed to watch. In the morning, the party would make their way down to the lower level, perhaps to never see the sun again.

As Kazrack stood watch by himself hours later, he heard the sound of the stones being moved off the boards that covered the trapdoor above. The Fearless Manticore Killers were camped further away from the trapdoor now, and the dwarf figured they could afford to wait and see what might come down.

He turned to Anárie, who sat with eyes wide open, with her back against one of the hastily constructed rubble barricades.

"Do you see that?" he asked, but she did not answer or even blink. "Anárie. Get your bow ready."

She did not move.

Grumbling curses in dwarven, he shook Ratchis awake. “The elf refused to take action,” he whispered with disgust after explaining that someone seemed to be coming down.

At that moment a hooded lantern attached to the rope began to be lowered down the hole.

“I think she’s sleeping,” Ratchis whispered back, rubbing sleep from his eyes with one hand and his bow with his other.

“Her eyes are open!” Kazrack hissed.

“That how they do it,” Ratchis explained with a shrug.

“Elves just always have to be different, don’t they?” Kazrack complained, keeping his eyes peeled at the situation unfolding above them.

The light from the swinging lantern threw wild shadows as they could see a gnome begin to shimmy down the rope. He held one hand as if shielding his eyes from the bright sun above to get a better look.

“He should see us,” Ratchis said, as they made no effort to hide.

“There is something wrong with that rope or the gnome,” Anárie said, behind them. Kazrack jumped, as he was startled.

“Let’s wait for them to come to us,” said Ratchis.

“We are not assassins to be crouched in the dark waiting for them,” Kazrack said. “They may think ill of our intentions if we skulk here. We can ill afford to not befriend these gnomes. Is not the whole point of our being here to help their kin?”

Kazrack stood and began to walk over towards the area where the gnome hung, still about fifteen feet above the stone platform where the remains of the staircase lay covering the corpses of the ghouls the party had destroyed.

“Friend gnome!’ Kazrack called up.

“Oh, ho! I know you mean me harm!” said the gnome looking past Kazrack to a dark corner where a ballista was covered in earth and rock.

Kazrack looked around confused.

“Don’t make a move dwarf!” Kazrack heard a voice coming from the trapdoor above. It was the same voice as that which had issued from the gnome on the rope. He looked up and saw the same gnome pointing a crossbow down at him.

The first gnome now stopped moving and speaking and then in a moment disappeared.

“If I meant to attack, I would have attacked the gnome on the rope,” Kazrack said.

“Not if you knew it was an illusion,” the gnome reasoned. The gnome had metal cap on, and long and thin white beard that stuck down the hole. He had a dusky skin tone, and large green eyes. Kazrack recognized him as one of the two gnomes that had fled after the battle with Tanweil.²⁷

“We mean you no harm,” Kazrack said.

“Uh-huh, that’s why you are running around with a half-orc,” the gnome said. “We’ve had too many of our companions die to not be cautious about whom we trust.”

²⁷ See Session #54.

“I wish you had chosen to listen earlier. If we had joined forces perhaps our companions would not have died,” Kazrack replied. “We have already lost two of our number.”

“Don’t put that on us...” the gnome snapped.

“I only blame...”

“Ha!” The gnome pointed at him accusingly.

“...the forces of evil.”

The gnome frowned.

“But we have met evil gnomes before, how can *we* trust *you*?” Kazrack asked.

“Heh. How do you suggest we test each other’s intentions?” the gnome continued to carry on his side of the conversation from his position, hanging through the trapdoor; perhaps someone held him by the legs, above.

Ratchis began to walk over to Kazrack.

“A companion of mine approaches,” the dwarf warned the gnome.

“No funny moves!”

“My companion has no sense of humor to speak of,” Kazrack replied dryly.

“Hee! Hee! But *you* do! Are you sure you’re a dwarf?” the gnome tittered.

Kazrack did not like this question, so he ignored it.

“For our part we are friends of Garvan, and have been there twice, once spending months with your people,” said Ratchis looking up.

“Oh yeah? What’s the name of our interim chief?”

“Mozek,” Kazrack said quickly.

“No, Socher...” Martin said, having woken up he was listening in. “Mozek, his son, took over for him when he died.”

The gnome squinted at them suspiciously, “Are you friends of Mozek?”

“That cannot be said,” Kazrack replied.

“Why not?”

“Why not, what?” Kazrack asked back.

“Why can’t it be said?”

“Because it is not true.”

“What’s not true?”

“That we are his friends.”

“Then why didn’t you say that to begin with,” the gnome giggled and rolled his eyes.

Kazrack scratched his head for a moment, trying to think of a question of his own, “What were the names of the two junior illusionists?”

“They were brothers,” Martin added.

“Socher and Briendel. You are trying to be tricky,” the gnome said, but there seemed to be respect in his voice.

And so the questioning went on back and forth, the gnome occasionally seeming to argue with whomever he was with up there. Most of the questions had to do with the Garvan gnomes.

Suddenly, the gnome disappeared from the trapdoor, as they all heard a shriek from above. Half a moment later there was a different gnome, it was the plump little female spell-caster they had seen before, she wore a travel-stained lavender cloak, and a deep blue travel outfit. She had a short bow tied to her pack and a short sword at her side. The rope jerked as she climbed down as quickly as she could. Kazrack winced a few times thinking she would fall.

And suddenly, there was something falling. A screech and a roar were heard from above, and then dust and stones showered through the trapdoor, followed by a small tumbling figure. It was the gnome they had been talking to before. He reached out for the rope to slow his descent, but it did not do much good. He landed painfully on the stone platform, and the female gnome did a controlled drop for the last ten feet, drawing her sword as he she looked wildly back and forth from the party to the trapdoor.

Suddenly, at the door, a huge claw tried to reach through, cracking and scoring the stone around it, but it could not fit. Its black talons were set into a magenta and purple mottled claw, which looked vaguely reptilian. The smell of burning copper filled the huge chamber, and the thing roared and screeched again.

“Stay back!” the female gnome warned Kazrack and Ratchis.

“We mean you no harm,” said Kazrack.

“What was that?” Martin asked.

“Creedadal called it a kind of wyvern,” said the first gnome, breathing heavily and clutching his stomach and chest and he sat up. ‘Except he said it was *fiendish*.’”

“Wonderful,” Martin sighed.

“Creedadal? Why is that name familiar to me?” Kazrack asked.

“He is the Master Illusionist of Garvan,” Martin explained. “He left with the real Chieftain to seek the aid of the elves, and as we all know, they never returned.”

“Oh, when was the last time you spoke to Creedadal?” Kazrack asked the gnomes.

“Before he died,” the male gnome replied, and his companion let out a small sob, covering her mouth with her free hand; her sword lowered a bit.

“What were you doing here? What was he doing here?” Martin asked.

The gnome looked down. “We cannot tell you.”

“Then how can we trust you?” Kazrack asked.

“I guess, you must trust to friendship,” the gnome looked at Ratchis pointedly, and then glanced at his belt of scored chains. He looked Kazrack in the eye. “But if you want us to trust you then you need to swear to your dwarven god that you will help and not harm or delay us. Our kin will suffer if we do not accomplish what we are here to do.”

“I will swear on all of them,” Kazrack replied. He was kneeling beside the gnome.

“Okay, swear...”

“I swear I will only attack you if provoked,” the dwarf said.

The gnome scrunched up his face. “What kind of provocation?”

“If you attack me or do some obviously evil deed.”

“Name one.”

“If you attack one of my companions...”

“No! Not what would provoke you! Name one of the dwarven gods, you dope!”

“Well, I was only following the most likely interpretation of what you were saying, and...”

“Kazrack!” Martin admonished. “Just swear.”

Kazrack swore in dwarven for the gnome, listing out the names of all of his gods.

Names were then exchanged. The male gnome was called Schlomo, and his companion was Kismet.

The two gnomes joined their camp.

“I have to ask you something about the man that was chasing you and your companions before,” Kazrack asked. “He said that we were aiding the dragon by protecting you...”

“Well, what could he have meant by that?” Schlomo rolled his eyes in an exaggerated manner and then they darted back and forth nervously, as if he feared he was being watched.

They all agreed to rest some more before moving on. Kismet fell into a weepy sleep, while Schlomo and Beorth watched.

Balem, the 12th of Sek – 565 H.E.

In the morning, the gnomes set up counter-balancing ropes, that allowed people to descend to the lower level two at a time, on either side of the central stone walkway, which was only ten feet wide.

The chamber below was much darker, and it reached off to the northwest, larger than the level above it. However, that area seemed as if it was mostly caved in. Huge stone supports held up the platforms above, and on the floor was powdered stone and bone, with the occasional large, but still unidentifiable piece that showed sign of gnawing.

With a word, Kismet made a tiny glowing orb appear to bob along beside her. It shed enough light to illuminate twenty feet easily.

“Is that the spell called *radiant spark*?” Martin asked the gnome.²⁸

“You can call it that,” Kismet smirked. “We call it *lightning bug*.”

Martin nodded and made a mental note. He wanted that spell.

The walls of this area were lined with scores of murder-holes, through which dirt and tiny stones had poured through

²⁸ **DM’s Note:** *Radiant Spark* is a spell unique to Aquerra.

and in some places had cracked the walls. When this place had been on the surface, it must have once given a view in all directions through which the dwarves could have rained missiles down upon besieging foes.

There was a broad marble stairway, that went down much deeper underground. It was scorched, cracked, and scored. Avoiding those stairs and the caved in area, for now, they moved carefully around one of the supports, and found a larger pile of fresher bones, and some torn ragged robes that appear to be monastic in origin.

Kazrack looked up and saw a bunch of dwarven runes carved into the support. They appeared to have been hastily and primitively etched by someone, but they grew less and less legible as they made their way down the side.

It appeared to be some kind of crude record of someone being trapped down here, for there were dates.

DAY FOUR

I THINK – ONLY HOAD CATHOR AND MYSELF BLODKUIR LEFT – CATHOR NEAR DEATH AND HUMAN CONTINUES TO WHIMPER

DAY SIX

WATER GONE – HUMAN BREATHE BUT ONLY SCREAM RARELY NOW – THE HUNGER HAS ALREADY GNAWING ON US WITHIN – SOON WE WILL BE EATING ROCKS ONE WAY OR ANOTHER

SEVEN

WATER DRIPPING WHERE WALL COLLAPSED – HOAD REPORTS HUMAN IS DEAD – WE DISCUSSED ENDING IT BUT NATAN-AHB FORFEND - LET US NOT SINK TO SUCH SHAME

NINE

HOAD FOUND FOOD DIGGIN IN RUBBLE – IT IS CHEWY AND RAW BUT FILLING - HE FOUND SACK OF RATIONS THEY HAD BEEN BRINGING US DURING SEIGE WHERE HE HAD BEEN DIGGING A WAY OUT – FEELING STRONGER – MAYBE LEHRETHONAR SERVANTS WILL FIND AND FREE US

TEN

STRANGE – MORE FOOD

THIRTEEN

HOAD ACTING STRANGE – NOT SPOKEN IN TWO DAYS – CATHOR IS DEAD WEAK

FIFTEEN

WHERE IS FOOD FROM – HOAD WHAT HAVE YOU DONE

SIXTEEN

NATAN-AHB FORGIVE ME HOAD IS DEAD – I KILLED HIM

SMELL HIS BLOOD

GOOD

BLOOD GOO

The group was silent. No one made a sound as Kazrack translated the runes aloud. The only sound was dripping water behind them, where the chamber was collapsed.

“I swear one day I shall restore this place,” Kazrack intoned. “But such dreams must be put aside for now. D’nar, can you determine if that water is drinkable? We should refill our skins, as we do not know how deep we will have to go and what other sources of water there may be.”

Schlomo noticed that behind the tall stone wall that encased the stairway down was a rusted weapons rack. They found

a good number of light and heavy bolts for crossbows, but most were rotted through, as were the crossbows and the hafts of other weapons.

Ratchis began to creep over to the wall of rubble that reached up to the ceiling at an acute angle. Among the rubble there leaked streams of water, and among them were large purple mushrooms, covered in puckered lesions. They were as tall as a man, and their stems as broad as one.

“Those look unpleasant,” commented Martin the Green.

“Poisonous?” Ratchis asked.

“No idea,” Martin replied. “I’ve never seen anything like them before. But I certainly wouldn’t eat one.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Ratchis said, dryly.

As Ratchis crept towards the water to taste it, he came ever closer to the fungi, and suddenly one just off to his left opened its suckered lesions and began to emit an ear-piercing shriek.

“Everyone get back! I’ll take care of it,” Ratchis cried above the shrieking mushroom, drawing his sword and charging up the rubble at it, but as he did another of the mushrooms, he was passing suddenly whipped out barbed tentacles.

Startled, Ratchis retreated a step and it whipped him again. This time he could feel the barbs leave behind burning stinging splinters on his arm. It began to throb.

Beorth did the exact opposite of what Ratchis said and rushed forward, feeling the sting of the spines well, Kazrack hurried forward and buried his halberd into the one attacking Beorth.

And still the shrieking continued.

Anárie spoke an arcane word, but whether it was her armor or the incessant nerve-wracking sound, the spell fizzled and did not come off.

Sighing, Ratchis hurried by, and hacked at the shrieking one to stop it. A cloud of spores spurt into the air, and he coughed, but the thing did not stop.

Kazrack cried out as he felt the sting of two tentacles. They could now see more than half-the large mushrooms in the rubble swaying their tentacles in their direction blindly and eagerly.

Beorth felt the sting again but cut the thing apart and finally the tentacles topped moving. Kazrack was able to hurry over finish the shrieker, and the party simply got out of range of the violent violet fungi.

Moments later when the Fearless Manticore Killers gathered at the top of the stairs, Kazrack let out a low moan. Whatever poison had been in those stingers drained his stamina.²⁹

With a word to his goddess, Ratchis was able to *restore* it.

There was nowhere left to go except down the stairs, and Ratchis and Kazrack led the way, followed by Schlomo and Beorth. Martin and Kismet walked side by side and Anárie took up the rear.

Yes, Ratchissssss, that’s it,” a familiar voice hissed from below, as they descended into darkness. “Come closer. Let me repay you my debt.”

End of Session #58

²⁹ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack took 2 points of Constitution damage.

Session #59³⁰

The broad steps led down into a large central chamber with a vaulted twenty-foot ceiling and a marble tiled floor was stained with dust and blood, and covered in loose stones, cracked tiles and bits of bone. Two huge statues of armored dwarves, now lay in large pieces, bisecting the room diagonally. Across the room a similar stairway led down into another level and further darkness, and a fifteen-foot-wide hall led out of the chamber in the left lower corner. The opposite corner from where the stairs turned left into the room, a stone statue still stood. It was a dwarven warrior in chainmail, holding a warhammer before his face. The workmanship and detail were incredible and Kazrack gasped. There was a setting for a gemstone, as if it had been woven into the beard, but it had been wedged out.

Beorth held a torch aloft, as Ratchis led the way towards the hall.

“...*watch your back*...” Whispers floated on the stale air like leaves on a pond. They all frantically looked around, craning their necks to determine where they came from. “...coming to kill me again, are you Ratchissss...?” It was Derek’s voice.

“I’m coming to put you to rest,” Ratchis whispered back. He saw the hall was actually in two sections, one going up and to the right, the other parallel to the chamber and kind of going off to the left on the other side of a thick stone wall that seemed to help support the tons of stone above. There was a set of thick oaken double door reinforced with bands of iron directly ahead in the upper portion of the hall, Ratchis moved ahead to check the leftward way. This broad hall’s walls were decorated with the carving of huge dwarven faces side by side. The faces were nearly five feet across and carved with incredible detail, though places seemed to have been rubbed down by the centuries.

“Do you recognize any of these figures or faces?” Beorth asked Kazrack.

The dwarf walked slowly forward, going right up to one of the faces, and feeling the curve of stone with his bare hand. He laid his face against the stone to check for seams.

Ratchis crept past, looking cursorily into two barren alcoves on the left-hand wall.

“Why not let us eat the mage?” a voice hissed from seemingly behind them, from the other hall. “I hear he is useless, anyway.” This voice was not Derek’s. It was deeper and more sinister.

“Kazrack!” Ratchis warned, as he heard sudden footsteps from the other hall. There emerged a dwarf in chainmail and holding a battered metal shield. He swung a bright golden flail in the other hand and wore no helmet. A large portion of his scalp was torn away revealing his cracked skull beneath. His eyes were red and glowed with cold light.

Ratchis turned and grabbed his left shoulder crying out. An arrow had come flying out of the wall where the dwarven face was. The arrow slits that were so cleverly disguised they still could not be seen even though an arrow can come flying from one.

Martin acted quickly, firing his crossbow at the thing, but the bolt merely lodged in its shield, and its eyes brightened with more intense hatred.

“Beorth, I’ll take the torch so you can fight,” the mage dropped his crossbow to the floor.

Beorth nearly dropped the torch as he passed it back without looking at his companion. Sword in hand he rushed at the dwarf. “Feel the wrath of my god!” he cried and running past everyone brought the sword down on the undead thing. The long sword sparked against the shield and then slid down catching on the dead dwarf’s skull, prying a piece off. Black blood and brain matter bubbled out from the wound, but the thing did not pause. It whipped the flail around, catching the paladin in the ribs. Beorth was able to parry the follow-up blow but rubbed his side.

“Don’t go to it! Wait for it to come to you,” Schlomo called to Beorth, adding a curse in gnomish.

Anárie moved to get a shot with her bow, while Ratchis and Kazrack marched forward to help Beorth.

³⁰ Session #59 was played Saturday, May 17, 2003.

“Martin, Kismet, move back into the chamber so you don’t get hit by arrows from behind,” Kazrack suggested.

As if in answer, Martin cried out as an arrow bit into him. Kismet immediately obeyed, but Schlomo hefted his hammer and stood his ground, waiting for something to get within swinging range.

As Ratchis hurried up the hall he was startled as out of the corner of his eye, he suddenly saw a figure standing there. It had been hidden in one of the alcoves. It was a man, a dead man with milky white eyes, and skin peeling from his face and a bald head. His left ear and neck were horribly burned and had long ago festered and fallen away in chunks. Over his chainmail he wore black priest’s robes embroidered with silver serpents. He wore a fierce golden jackal’s head about his neck.

The new foe’s hand crackled with black energy as he reached out for the half-orc, but Ratchis leapt aside, warning the others. “There is another one back here! Very powerful!”

As Beorth and the undead dwarven warrior were locked in combat, Anárie spoke an arcane word and then leapt, tumbling past the dwarf to get behind him. Unfortunately, at that moment, Beorth was driven back, allowing the dwarf to whip out with his flail catching Anárie on the backside, as she spun past. She gave no indication of pain, even though she could feel the bruise already forming.

Beorth felt the flail’s head smash into his face as the dwarf brought it back up deftly. The paladin sucked in air through his teeth and moved his blade up and down to keep a repeat blow from doing the same again.

“Martin, fall behind D’nar,” Kazrack shouted orders. “Beorth fall back to line up with me. Back-to-back!”

“Everyone fall back!” Ratchis echoed, and then ducked. He had noted movement behind the stone dwarven face on the wall with the help of Martin’s torch. He could see where one of the murder holes were and ducked just in time avoid another arrow. He turned to the robed figure, but it gave him a rictus grin and then crouching as if he were about to spring into a run, blurred out of view.

He was gone.

Martin took this opportunity to cast *shield* and hurry behind Ratchis.

The undead dwarf, confident that Beorth could not get through his shield, turned to swing at Anárie. She leapt back deftly, and he was forced to turn back to face Kazrack who coming forward, slashing at his back with his halberd. The living dwarf sliced through the armor of the dead one.

“Why fight?” the dwarf croaked in dwarvish. “Join me brother. Eat their flesh and gain our strength.”

“The strength of the gods flows through our veins, we have no need of your flesh,” Kazrack replies.

With a pop, as air was displaced, the black-robed ghastr appeared with a stumble as if moments before he had been moving with great speed. Nearly off balance, he reached out and ripped at Martin’s chest, tearing the watch-mage’s robes. Martin shuddered as he felt the cold painful touch and the strength seemed to drain from his body. He dropped down to his knees, dragged down by his pack and gear. The air around the robed man was fetid and rotten; so thick it seemed to ooze up the nostrils and roll into the open mouth.

Ratchis hurried forward, just barely avoiding yet another arrow, he brought his hammer against the ghastr’s shoulder, and it crunched.

“There is another one over here,” Ratchis called to his companions around the corner, fighting the dwarf. “Martin is down!”

As Martin frantically pulled the straps of his pack off his arms, Kazrack was distracted by Ratchis’ cry and left himself open. The golden flail head struck him hard on the neck and the weight drove the dwarf off his feet. Before Kazrack could get up or raise a defense, he felt the flail strike him again. The flail was raised to come down again, but Kazrack

was able to deflect it with his halberd and stand, driving the huge axe-head into the ghoulish dwarven warrior.

“Sagitta Magicus!” Kismet chirped and two arrows of light shot from her finger striking the black-robed ghost squarely in the chest. He hissed and dove at Ratchis, tearing at him with thick black nails and his jagged teeth, but then tearing away before the half-orc could retaliate.

“Lentus!” Martin said, pointing at the ghost, but the spell had no effect.

Beorth chopped at the undead dwarf’s arm, as he swung at Kazrack, but the blow was not slowed. Slammed in the side of the head, Kazrack went down coughing blood. Before Beorth could react, the flail head came back, catching him behind the knee and sending him falling backward. Again, the flail came down on him, this time knocking the wind from his body. He felt a rib crack, and then all was black for the paladin.

In that one moment, two of the Fearless Manticore Killers went from fighting to having their life’s blood pouring from them.

The undead dwarven warrior turned to finish Anárie now that Beorth and Kazrack were bleeding out on the rock-strewn ground. He smiled, and the elf leaned her weight on her back foot taking a defensive posture, and not even trying counterattacks as the clang of flail against blade began to echo in the hall.

“Beorth and Kazrack are down!” she called in her lilting voice to the others. Despite her predicament, no fear made it waver.

“Never send a dwarf to do a gnome’s job,” Schlomo quipped, his face stern, and stepping in slammed his hammer into the small of the creature’s back. There was a resounding crack and it fell backward. The gnome side-stepped and spit. The dwarf jerked as if to get back up, but then shuddered and stopped moving.

The black-robed ghost, made as if to flee, and once again blurred out of view.

“That is a peculiar phenomenon,” Martin commented, hurrying to his feet and putting his back to the wall, when yet another arrow came flying past him.

Ratchis roared as an arrow bit into his rear end as he turned to aid the others. He did not even look back but surveyed the scene and fell to one knee to cast a spell of healing on the bleeding paladin.

“Keep watch,” the half-orc barked at Anárie, as Beorth sputtered awake, and he turned to Kazrack casting a second spell.

Downcast, Beorth called upon Anubis and healed himself of more of his wounds, and then applied his healing hands on Kazrack, who also awoke.

“Did anyone fall?” He coughed the words at Ratchis, concern swelling his eyes.

“You and Beorth, but you will be okay,” Ratchis replied.

Kazrack looked at the fallen dwarf and shook his head. He picked up the golden flail and examined it. The golden light flail was banded with obsidian at the top and bottom of the handle. The head of the flail, affixed by a chain of black metal, was shaped like a dwarf’s head with a beard of the same black metal as the chain and eyes that were two shining rubies.

Kazrack gave it a few swings. “Feels good,” he looking to Beorth. “Do you think it might be tainted with evil?”

Beorth shrugged. “This place is so foul my ability to determine such things does not seem to be able to distinguish between objects.”

Ratchis whispered a prayer to Nephthys. “It is magical,” he said.

“If no one objects I will keep this for my own,” Kazrack said.

There was a long pause, as everyone looked at each other and shrugged.

“As long as we get a cut later,” Schlomo finally said with a sneer.

After a brief discussion, it was decided they would go back up to the stone platform above and rest

“Food... Food... Give us something to eat,” the hissing whisper followed them back up.

“Ignore them,” Martin said.

“The dark brothers are ahead of you. They will get to it first,” the voice said. “What makes you think they won’t destroy it?”

“Who are the dark brothers?” Schlomo asked.

“Monks,” Kazrack replied.

There was a lot of time to kill, but the heroes had no problem getting some sleep, as the fatigue of their wounds drew them away.

“Who want to volunteer for the second watch?” Kazrack asked, after saying he’d watch first, noticing everyone nodding off.

“I’ll take it,” The hissing voice whispered from below. “I’ll watch you very closely. The sweat flowing from your pores is like gravy.”

“They may attack during that time,” Beorth said, sitting up and shaking off his drowsiness. “Whoever takes it should be alert.”

“Ratchis... I want to thank you,” It was Derek’s voice again. “Come and let me thank you in person. Bring me Beorth. Oooh! He smells delicious. You can’t imagine.”

“Ignore them,” Martin said again.

“Oh, or Martin? Why not send down Martin for a little snicky-snack?” Derek continued, his voice rising in pitch as he mocked. “He’s more of a liability than an asset. We all know it. It’s the unspoken truth in the group.”

Everyone was silent, and the silence grew awkward.

“We should just talk as we normally do. Ignore him,” Kazrack said, through clenched teeth.

There was more silence.

And still Derek’s croaking voice did not stop. “How can you stand it Ratchis? Looking after them, keeping them penned in all the time? Ironic for a believer in freedom, eh? Don’t you just want to sometimes give into your orcish nature and just let the weak fall where they will, as nature intended it? You orcish brothers would gladly eat the flesh of your companions to survive, to gain strength...”

“We will put you to rest soon,” Beorth said.

Kazrack shushed the paladin. “Don’t egg him on, get your rest...”

“Beorth is fighting a losing battle,” Derek called up. “He stands against a rising tide, soon the dead will cover the whole of Aquerra...or he can choose the winning side like his brothers.”

“Whose side is that?” Ratchis asked.

Derek laughed. “My new master has told me all. It is either the fiends or the dead. As least we will accept you into our ranks. The fiends will torture you for eternity. I know the truth now. The concept of good is an illusion. I wish I’d known before. I would have tasted living flesh before now... Sleep tight.”

There was an echo of his sliding off and then it was silent.

Schlomo took the second watch.

Teflem, the 13th of Sek – 565 H.E.

“Are we going back down there today?” asked Martin as they all did their morning preparations, eighteen hours later.

“Of course we are!” Kismet said, snapping her spellbook shut. She had been sitting and preparing spells.

Ratchis was able to *restore* Kazrack’s weakened constitution and Martin’s loss of strength, and then he and Kazrack cast many spells of curing to seal the wounds of their companions. Martin used *prestidigitation* to clean the bandages and rolling them up, stuffing them back into his healer’s bag.

Soon, the Fearless Manticore Killers and their gnomish companions were creeping down the steps once again in search of the map room.

They came back to where the two halls flanked the lower chamber. Ratchis looked down where the dwarven faces were, and where he knew at least one murder hole was hidden, probably more.

“Maybe we can smash through those faces to the space behind,” Ratchis suggested, and Kazrack smirked. “Dwarves made those,” was all he needed to say.

“Okay, forget it.” Ratchis crept over to the wall, and hugging it, slid a bit down the hall. He felt for the murder hole with his fingers and found it. A moment later, he was nosily hammering a spike into the hole to plug it.

Ratchis crept forward and found another murder hole. Again, he plugged it with a spike, as the party moved forward to catch up.

There was the sound of an arrow, and Martin cried out feeling the sharp pain of it slicing his shoulder. Ratchis turned to see what was happening, but suddenly the area around him was cloaked in darkness.

“You’re going to be so delicious,” Derek said, and he let another arrow loose as he approached. Martin cried out again. He came out of the rear hall.

“*Sagitta Magicus!*” Kismet said, and two arrows of light-struck Derek. Anárie mimicked her, and Derek hissed in pain and anger.

“Nephthys, give me light to pierce this darkness,” Ratchis prayed to his goddess and suddenly the light conditions normalized.

“I’m on my way,” Kazrack called, coming back down the hall.

Beorth turned to aid Martin, but suddenly there was the pop of air rushing away, and there was the black robed ghost. The paladin felt the thing’s filthy claws tear into him and pull him forward, as it sunk its teeth in. The paladin felt his muscles stiffen, and suddenly he could no longer move.

Schlomo let a bolt fly at Derek, but it simply lodged in his skull, seeming to do no effect.

Derek’s skin had begun to turn a bluish color, and his muscles seemed hardened, even though he did not move with any

less speed. He dropped his bow and unslung the battle axe he had taken off one Mozek's brothers. He chopped down at Ratchis, who came running up. The half-orc turned the blade aside with his hammer, but the haft still struck him with full force.

"Time to return the favor," Derek smirked.

"I'm sorry," Ratchis replied weakly, and then slammed his former companion in the head with his hammer. Derek fell down but spun away to avoid the follow up attack.

"*Sagitta Magicus!*" Anárie chanted and again, arrows of light came flying from her hand, and slammed into Derek's chest, as he got up. He swung his axe at Ratchis, but the half-orc parried the blow, and brought his hammer around smashing the former woodsman in the head. Derek's skull popped like an over-ripe melon and his dead body collapsed spilling rotting blood and gore on dusty floor.

Kazrack came to Beorth's aid and swung the golden flail he had picked up off the undead dwarf. The black-robed thing cried out and then blurred away once more.

Schlomo loaded his crossbow and Anárie put an arrow to her shortbow and they waited to see if the thing reappeared so they could shoot it.

Martin the Green readied a spell, and Ratchis scooped up Derek's exanimate corpse.

"Set, bring the power of shadow," they heard the now familiar hissing whisper say, as if from behind one of the walls.

"I'm moving down the hallway to see if I can find that thing and finish it," said Kazrack picking up the *Right Blade of Arofel* from the ground where Derek had fallen.

"We can't separate," Ratchis said. "That thing is up to something and is bound to come back when he thinks us weak or unaware."

Anárie touched the brooch on her neck and it began to glow with light.

"Let us move forward together then," Kazrack said.

"We cannot move forward with Beorth in this state," Ratchis replied and then he enchanted some small stones he picked up after lying Derek's body gently down out of the way. He was walking back to cover Beorth with suddenly he noticed two ghostly hands near the paladin. They tore at him, and even though they seemed insubstantial blood welled from the wound.

"Leave me this willing sacrifice to devour and I will lead you to what you seek," it hissed, eyeing Beorth hungrily.

With a word from Martin, an arrow of flame came flying from his hands at where the thing's body should have been, but the arrow simply flew right through and burst against a far wall in the adjacent chamber. A real arrow from Anárie did much the same.

"In the name of Nephthys, go back to whatever hole you crawled out of!" Ratchis cried, swinging his chain belt in front of him and concentrating pure divine energy out from his body.

"I piss on Nephthys!" the thing cackled, but then cried out as Martin cast *disrupt undead* upon it. It angrily ripped at Beorth's unmoving form once again and even more blood came pouring from the paladin.

"Kazrack! If you have healing left, use it on Beorth!" Ratchis cried desperately, and he dropped one of his stones as he made to throw it. He cursed.

"Someone pull Beorth away while I shield him," Kazrack said, thrusting the magical short sword where the thing's body should have been, as he stepped between it and Beorth.

“*Lumen Lustrum*,” Martin chanted and another flame arrow came bursting from his hand, and this time it seemed to disappear into where the undead thing was, and it shrieked.

“You’ll die for that!” It said, and suddenly its head appeared bobbing there, translucent, and ghostly. It turned to look at the watch-mage, its eyes glowing a cold red.

“Aargh!” Martin cried, when suddenly the thing was upon him and tore at his throat. So much blood started pouring down the front of his Academy robes that it threatened to permanently change their color.

Martin stumbled backward and put his hands up to fend off more attacks, but suddenly the thing was gone again.

“Martin, what has that thing done? Is it a spell?” Kazrack asked, looking around warily.

“It is in the shadow realm,” Martin replied wearily. “It is a realm that touches our own, and yet is not quite our own, but they can affect each other. It may also mean that he may be able to attack us from inside solid objects, so we need to be extra careful.”

Kazrack sighed.

“We have to go back,” Ratchis said.

“Again?” Schlomo was annoyed. “We need to move forward. There are things we both need and if we fail to get them bad things are going to happen.”

“Beorth, if you can hear me, I’m sorry,” Kazrack said, and with that he pushed on the paladin, who toppled over. The dwarf grabbed him and lowered him to the floor the rest of the way, before he could hit with too much force.

Anárie walked over to Beorth and placed her small hand on his forehead and whispered a word or two, fortifying the paladin’s constitution so he might survive his wounds. Kazrack followed up with his last two healing spells, but there were the weakest ones.³¹

After a few minutes, Beorth began to move some. He sat up and looked around groggily. He was in bad shape.

“Can you call upon the blessings of Anubis to heal you?” Kazrack asked.

“Yes,” Beorth replied.

“Will you then be well enough to move forward?”

“No.”

“I guess we gotta go on our own then,” Schlomo said to Kismet, licking the tips of his fingers and smoothing down his gray mustache. He said it loud enough for all to hear.

“Why?” Kazrack asked.

“We just gotta,” Schlomo said with annoyance born of fatigue.

“What if I give Beorth one of my potions of healing to drink?” Kismet offered, her little squeaky voice barely audible.

“If you are willing to give me your gift of magic, we will move forward,” Beorth said weakly.

“No! We need those for ourselves,” Schlomo insisted.

³¹ **DM’s Note:** Anarie cast *Bear’s Endurance* and Kazrack used two *Cure Minor Wounds* spells.

“We hafta do this!” Kismet was louder. It was her turn to be annoyed. “If we don’t, we’ll hafta go alone, and you know we won’t survive in this place long.”

Schlomo hung his head and did not respond. Kismet reached into her pack and withdrew a small metal vial, which she uncorked and handed to Beorth.

“Thank you,” the paladin said, bowing his head to the gnome woman. Sitting on the floor, their heads were nearly at the same height. He drank the whole thing down. It tasted something akin to sickly sweet black licorice, and then he felt the warmth and temporary discomfort of its healing.

“Thank you,” he said again, standing.

Everyone stood and checked their gear and wounds. Ratchis attended to Martin with another minor cure, and then they continued down the hallway with the dwarven faces, past the small alcove rooms that appeared to once have been for prepping warriors who went to fight on the battlements and use the siege weaponry above.

Kazrack noticed an area of wall that seemed like it should be hollow, as the alcove room behind it did not extend into that area. He insisted the party backtrack a bit and allow him to search it carefully for a secret door.

Anárie glanced at it and smirked. “I don’t think there’s anything there. I think it is just a stone pillar that helps support the floor above it.”

“Really?” Kazrack’s voice was full of disdain. “Well, if you don’t mind, I’m going to check anyway.”

“Suit yourself,” Anárie replied.

Kazrack spent the next hour combing every inch of the two-hundred and forty square foot area.³² Checking for seams, cracks, hollows and any other sign that there might be door there. Finally, after getting up from his hands and knees where he was checking one last time for a seam on the floor, he announced, “I think it is solid strut holding up the upper level.”

Schlomo chuckled and Kazrack glared at him. Anárie clucked her tongue.

“Enough, let’s go,” Ratchis insisted.

“What about those double doors in the other hall?” Kazrack asked. “Should we not check them and not leave them for something to sneak up behind us.”

“Something could sneak up on us from the other side while we do that. It doesn’t matter, I plan to have us check the entire place anyway,” Ratchis replied.

“But we might as well while we are here,” Kazrack insisted.

Ratchis huffed and stomped past the dwarf and the rest of the party. Kazrack and Beorth followed, while the rest spread out to watch the open area where the two halls and the open chamber met.

Ratchis walked right up to the doors and grabbed the large metal ring on one of them. As he pulled, he felt a great weight press against it from the other side. He suddenly realized what was happening and let go, but it was too late. There was the rumble of stone and dirt pushing open the door violently, and suddenly he felt the nearly crushing weight of the rubble driving him from his feet. He could see Beorth get dragged down as well, but Kazrack leapt free.³³

Kazrack and Schlomo hurried over and helped Beorth and Ratchis dig themselves out.

³² **DM’s Note:** Kazrack took 20 for the search, while Anarie simply used her elven ability to walk past and simply notice.

³³ **DM’s Note:** Those within 10’ of an opened door where the room beyond had collapsed had to make a DC 20 reflex save. Those between 10 and 20 feet had to make a DC 10 reflex save. Failure meant taking 3d6 hit points of damage.

“You should let me check doors before you open them,” Schlomo said.

“Or I could check them,” Anárie said.

Ratchis grunted.

They noticed another set of double doors at the top of that rear hall, but they agreed to leave it alone for now and check it later, and they all continued down the lower hall.

Further down the hall they found a small office on the left. It was dustier than the other rooms and the hall, and Martin could recognize the telltale fibers from old papers than crumbled apart. There was a desk cut from a single piece of granite, but molding green in one spot. Hanging on the wall was the torn tatters of what was one a canvas map.

They spent some time trying to figure out what the map was, and Martin noticed some fragments of runes that had been on the map. Unfortunately, he was unable to reconstruct it, and the map was too far gone to allow *mending* to work on it.

“If I spend a few hours, I might be able to piece together *some* of this,” Martin offered.

“We don’t have time,” Ratchis said.

“Well, we are looking for a map, *this* is a map,” Martin said.

“We are looking for a map room,” Beorth said. “This is more like a room with a map in it.”

“I don’t know from maps and rooms,” Schlomo said. “But we don’t have time.”

Leaving the room they came to the end of the hall, where there was another of the huge dwarven faces on the wall there. The hall opened up to two larger rooms to the left and right. The room to the left, was closed off by a long iron portcullis.

“You’re getting *colder*,” they heard the voice of the ghost-priest whisper from somewhere behind them, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The right room, had some more small metal doors, but Anárie checked one and Schlomo the other and both agreed that rubble was pushing at them from the other side.

There was a metal wheel on the wall next to the portcullis.

“Do you think the wheel opens the gate?” Kazrack asked.

“Well, we can turn the wheel and find out,” Ratchis said.

“I’d rather we didn’t,” Anárie said. “We can see in the room from here, and there seems to be nothing there. It is just another half-collapsed room that looked on out on the grounds when this was once above ground.”

“But look at that curved back wall upper supports and the angled stone struts,” Kazrack said. “It is worth examining for the excellent craftsmanship alone, not to mention it would be ripe for hiding a secret room or passage.”

“Then turn it,” Anárie said, and then quickly leapt away, light and graceful on her tiny feet. Kazrack sneered but did not touch the wheel.

“If Jeremy were here, he’d have already have turned it,” Martin said wistfully.

Kazrack smiled with the memory of his fallen companion.

“Yeah, if you wanna see what the wheel does the best thing to do is turn it,” Schlomo said. “Why would they trap a

wheel out in the open like that?"

Beorth sighed and walked over to turn the wheel, but Ratchis put his hand on the paladin's arm and stopped him. "We don't know what it does," he said.

"It probably controls the gate," Martin said.

"Yeah, it might do that," Ratchis replied.

"Why are you all so paranoid?" Schlomo asked.

"We've experimented with things in the past and the consequences have made us cautious," replied Kazrack.

Schlomo nodded.

Finally, Beorth turned the wheel. It was corroded and made an echoing screech. And then they heard the sound of chains and weights in the wall catching and pulling, but reluctantly, protesting the entire time. The portcullis raised four feet and then stopped. Beorth gritted his teeth and tried turning the wheel more, but it was stuck.

Kazrack tapped his head as an idea came into it and he ran back to the office. A moment later they all heard the sound of stone on stone and the dwarf huffing and puffing.

"Will someone come help me?" he called out.

"What are you doing?" Ratchis walked over and saw the dwarf pushing at the huge stone desk.

"I want to slide the desk under the gate, so if it slams shut while we are in there we will not be trapped."

"What if it just smashes the stone?" Beorth asked.

"This is good dwarven stone!" Kazrack replied.

"And the gate is good dwarven metal, what's your point?" Beorth retorted.

"We are not all going in there anyway it doesn't matter," Ratchis said, and walked out of the room.

Beorth shrugged and followed. Grumbling, Kazrack left the stone desk behind.

He ended up guarding as Ratchis, Anárie and Schlomo went into the gated room and looked around.

There was nothing there.

The Fearless Manticore Killers and their gnomish companions agreed that it was time to check out the next lower level and headed back to the central chamber with the broken statues.

End of Session #59

Session #60

With a snap of her finger, Anárie made tiny spark of light appear that shed its illumination as far as a torch, but without the flickering. It followed her, floating about a foot above her head.

They noticed that the entire fortress seemed have cracked along the horizontal plane, making the stairs and wall askew and making coming down the stairs treacherous in places. The stairs turned left, and just beyond a collapsed wall and other rubble blocked the way.

Martin the Green cast *mage armor* on Ratchis, who took off his chain shirt, in order to sneak more effectively and he went forward to investigate.

Creeping, Ratchis could see how precarious the rubble was. It seemed that sufficient pressure anywhere could make the whole thing collapse even further, but one solid stone slab held up a large portion of it, and the way it leaned at an angle on several smaller slabs, created a narrow way that could be crawled through. He lay on his belly and looked, sharp stones and rotten wooden beams loomed, but there seemed to be an opening just fifteen feet beyond.

He could hear snuffling beyond as well, and the sound of some of the rubble above settling as something struck the barrier from the other side. There was a snort, and the sound of flat, perhaps webbed, feet slapping on stone, and dripping water. The snorting continued. Something was sniffing around on the other side, and whatever it was, was big.

“...oooh, you are going to need my help to get through there,” the hissing phantom voice whispered to Ratchis as he returned to recount what he saw. “Leave me a little treat and I’ll guide you. I know this rotten dwarven grave well.

Ratchis ignored the voice.

“We’re going to have to go one at a time,” Ratchis explained. “And carefully, let’s wait a bit and see if the thing on the other side goes away.”

The party walked down to the rubble barrier to wait. Ratchis heard something on the other side—slurping and snorting—moving further away from the passage.

“Kazrack, you first,” the half-orc said, and the dwarf obliged. Ratchis went right after him. And then it was Martin, Beorth, Kismet, Schlomo, and Anárie took the rear.

Kazrack crawled out from under the rubble in another large central chamber at least sixty feet across. There were two columns, five feet in diameter reaching up to braces in the tall vaulted ceiling, and a huge fountain dominated the center of the marble tiled floor. The square fountain had a tall statue of a dwarven maid at one corner, holding a huge pitcher from whence water must have once flowed into the basin below. However, the stone walls of the basin were now cracked, and all the water had long escaped, and was a muddy puddle along the lower end of the room because of the slope of the floor. There were rotten corpses and bones of dwarves in two piles on opposite sides of the room, and a great set of double doors on the other side of the fountain.

Ratchis scrambled out and to his feet, his hand going to his hammer, but whatever it was he had heard was not in the chamber. Martin was struggling to get out, when the snorting and smacking sound began again, from down the ten-foot-wide hall in the center of the left wall.

“Get Beorth out here,” Ratchis hissed, fearing the thing was undead. The paladin appeared and got to his feet, followed by Kismet and Schlomo. The gnome immediately loaded his crossbow. Anárie sent the *radiant spark* out ahead of her and as she crawled out a huge loping figure appeared at the end of the hall.

“Whuzzt light em me newch hoze,” the thing said. Its voice was a deep throated gurgle, and its words jumbled by flat floppy lips. “Aaaagh! Maw fud.”

The thing began to rush forward, using its elongated arms in a simian gait. It was nine feet tall, but hunched and gangly, with sinewy muscles beneath mottled sea green and black hide. It had large black eyes that lacked pupils and gill slits in its veiny neck. It had strands of curled wiry black hair plastered to its scalp by something slimy that shined in the

shadowy light, and long flat breasts with green veins and crusted black nipples.³⁴

“In Anubis Name, what manner of creature is that?” Beorth swore.

“I think it’s a troll,” Ratchis replied. “Spread out!”

“Let’s stick together,” Kazrack countermanded, but immediately stepped forward, readying his halberd.

“If it’s troll run away!” Schlomo suggested.

The troll screeched like a bird and came charging at Kazrack, throwing her long arms at the dwarf, who easily avoided the blow, remembering his father’s lessons about fighting giant-sized creatures of this sort.

Anárie put an arrow to her bow and circumvented the melee, jogging to the left side of the fountain to keep it between her and the monster. Martin followed her, wheezing with fear. The elf’s arrow did not seem to be able to penetrate the thing’s hide. Kismet and Schlomo made for the other side of the fountain.

The troll’s black claw ripped at Kazrack’s armor. Its arms were so long that it could reach behind dwarf easily ripping chains from the mail and drawing blood from beneath. Kazrack felt himself get pulled towards the thing, and her gnarled pointed teeth crunched onto his shoulder. He pulled away as Beorth and Ratchis moved in to aid him.

Ratchis’ hammer slammed into the rubbery hide, fracturing bone beneath, but while the troll cried out in pain, she seemed to have no use of bones, and it did not stop her from plucking the helmet off of Beorth and leaving a bloody gash on the bald man’s neck and face.³⁵

Martin let loose a crossbow bolt that buried itself deep in the troll’s flank, while Anárie pulled a red fletched arrow from her quiver and fired. It transformed into an arrow of flame in mid-air and exploded against the thing’s back. It let loose an ear-piecing shriek and turned to face the elf. Kazrack stepped in its way and barely ducked another swing of the monster’s long arm.

The troll began to rush at Anárie, merely stepping over Kazrack as if he wasn’t there and deftly avoiding a halberd between her ooze-soaked thighs. Ratchis side-stepped and slammed his hammer into her ribs, and Beorth managed a small cut with his sword, but she would not be stopped, and as her feet touched the stagnant water, they could see all the wounds begin to close, except for the burn on her back.

“Meh shates peoples wit’ far!” she cried, knocking Anárie back into one of the pillars. The elf was able to roll with the blow and tumble away and back onto her feet firing another of her magical arrows, but this time it exploded harmlessly against the ceiling as it arced too high. Martin fled the creature’s reach. Kazrack and Ratchis came rushing in behind the troll and she whirled around.

“Sho many peoples! Why sho many peoples?” she asked, confused. Kazrack ducked another swing of her claws and hacked at her swollen knee with his halberd, cleaving off chunks of cartilage. Ratchis slammed his hammer into her face, swelling one eye shut and shattering three teeth, but then he cried out as her fist hammered into his face with all her fury.

There was a new source of light as Kismet had conjured one of her *flaming spheres*, but it simply rolling back and forth in place as if it had no where to go.

“If I roll it into the water it will go out,” she complained. “Get it out of the water.”

“Yes, get it out of the water!” Martin concurred. “The water heals it!”

³⁴ Streksis the Skrag entered the buried stronghold from the flooded levels below, forced from her tribe of subterranean water trolls in the Plutonic Realms by a stronger and tougher female, as troll society (if it can be called that) is matriarchal.

³⁵ **DM’s Note:** The troll scored a ‘helm removed’ critical hit on Beorth with her attack of opportunity.

The troll leapt back, towards the cracked fountain, with a parting blow to keep Ratchis at bay. Beorth's sword nearly took her by surprise as the paladin sliced her open and what might have been a black and shriveled kidney dripped out of the wound. The blow would have been enough to drop an ogre, but the troll merely shrieked and gave nearly as good as she got, only Beorth's armor kept him from being eviscerated.

Ratchis hung back, but Kazrack moved forward trying to keep those gangly limbs busy by warding off her blows.

Another arrow from Anárie lodged itself in the monster's back, but it was the normal kind. The thing shrieked again, and with a sudden increase in fury that the Fearless Manticore Killers did not think possible, she reached out and snatched Kazrack in both her claws, jerking him up and down and shredding his armor, as blood flew in all directions.

"Drop the dwarf!" Beorth ordered the troll and slapped at an arm ineffectively with his sword. The troll obeyed, however, and unceremoniously threw the dwarf down.

Ratchis dropped his hammer and pulled the great axe that he had taken from the dwarven ghastr on the topmost level from his back, but he refrained from running into battle and instead called on Nephthys to heal his wounds some, as he was gravely injured.

Kazrack was bleeding from several wounds, but he crawled to his feet and kept at the thing, though now his limbs felt heavy and his blows could not pierce the troll's thick rubbery hide.

"Krauchaar deliver me!" the dwarf cried.

"What are you doing? Get away from it! Get away from it!" Schlomo cried hysterically to the others. He was squatting in the pile of rotten dwarf corpses to keep the troll from noticing him by scent, and Kismet had moved in there with him. She dismissed her spell and drew her bow.

Ratchis was coming around to get a better angle of attack on the troll when he heard the scrape of stone against stone behind him, above the din of the battle. He took a quick look over his shoulder and noticed something at the top of the hallway they had seen before. It was decorated with a mosaic missing a great number of tiles and a portion of wall on the left side was opening up revealing a narrow secret room. Light poured from within.

A tall blonde man in a chain shirt and clutching a long sword in one hand stepped halfway out into the hall to better look at the chamber.

"I wonder who that scrag is killin' now?" he wondered aloud. "Oh shit, it's the pig-fucker and company!"

It was Gunthar.³⁶

Schlomo fired another crossbow bolt, but it went wide as he was being careful not to hit anyone else. Kismet left her spot beside her fellow gnome and hurried over to hide behind one of the pillars, as the fight was moving in their direction.

Suddenly the troll let out an ear-piercing hoot of rage and began throwing her head back and forth violently, her flappy lips whipping around, flicking saliva and ooze in all directions. She opened her mouth and webs of spit clung between her sharp crooked teeth, and her muscles seemed to swell and expand.³⁷ Her wounds seemed to suddenly begin to close even faster.

She stepped back and whipped her arms with a renewed frenzy that ripped a piece of flesh from Beorth, and sent Anárie spinning away, crying out in pain. Ratchis was slammed by the troll's forehead, as he just barely dodged being crunched in her teeth.

"I'm out of spells!" Martin alerted everyone, fear making his voice quake, but then he snapped his fingers as something

³⁶ The party last met Gunthar and his companions in Ogre's Bluff, soon after having encountered them in the Honeycombe. See sessions #23, #24 and #25.

³⁷ **DM Note:** Streksis, the skrag, had four levels of barbarian.

came to him. He reached into the red leather bag he had gotten so long ago and pulled out a furry ball, which he quickly tossed it in the troll's direction. As it flew through the air, spinning, it transformed into a screeching and hissing bobcat.

It cried out pathetically, as the troll caught it mid-air and ripped a huge chunk from its flank. The animal's small claws did not seem to be able to get through the troll's blood and ooze covered rubbery hide.

"Get that hag out of the water!" Gunthar said. He had an ever-present sneer on his angular unshaven face. He moved between Beorth and the troll as the former withdrew to help Kazrack. "She can even grow back her teats in that stuff."

Suddenly, above the sound of the battle could be heard a golden tenor. "*Cut out her bones and they won't grow / Kick her out of her home, she won't know / A troll makes for a bad neighbor!*"

The words were encouraging, and Martin could feel some of the quaking fear his limbs slip away. The homespun melody seemed to weave its way around the rhythms of the battle and lighten the hearts of the Fearless Manticore Killers, turning the melee into a dance of death.

From behind the secret door there stepped a familiar young man, with overly long curly brown locks and green eyes. He was wearing what was probably a fine waistcoat in brown, now stained with mud and blood and who knows what else, and he placed his hand over his heart as he sang, watching the battle intently, but holding a long sword, lightly in his other hand. It was Frederick the Amazing.

Bolstered by the aid, Ratchis hacked at the troll once again, feeling the blade bite into bone and get caught for a second. The half-orc barely yanked it free, but it was too late. He felt the troll's claws grab him on either side and draw him up by the armpits and bite deep into his shoulder, worrying him like a dog does to a small animal. Thankfully for him, he did not feel the pain for long, as all went black.

Martin lodged another bolt in the thing's back and it let go of Ratchis turning and looking more confused. The bobcat clawed, nearly ineffective, at the troll's leg, so she just reached down and crushed it with one hand. It disappeared. And then with great speed, the troll side-stepped and tore at Anárie, pulling her in for a bite. The elf maiden collapsed, beginning to bleed to death from a neck wound.

"Schlomo! We need those healing potions you have," Beorth called to the hiding gnome and pointing at Kazrack and Anárie .

A new figure came out from the secret room, shouldering past the bard rudely. It was a short broad man wearing wolf skins over his chain shirt. He had tangled black hair that reached past his chin, and a great two-handed battle axe.

Beorth began to creep forward to take on the troll again.

"That's the trick, baldy," Gunthar encouraged him. "Let's surround her! She can't kill all of us."

"Bah! Debo no care what you say," the squat barbarian said. "Debo can't die."

The troll screeched when she saw Debo approach as if she recognized him and with great strength punched her clawed fist right into the barbarian's gut, yanking him close to her by the end of an entrail she now held in her hand. She ripped up his back and bit his chest open. There was an explosion of blood, and gore dripped from the monster's maw. Debo fell and the troll screeched again. The man was a pile of ground beef on the tiled floor.

Beorth withdrew again, overwhelmed by the ferocity of the troll's attack and the sudden and gruesome manner of Debo's death.

"Are we all lost?" he wondered aloud.

"Eh, don't worry. Debo will get back up," Gunthar winked at the paladin, and then he charged at the troll, sword in each hand. He cursed as he felt a claw try to fend off the attack, but he did not stop plunging the sword into her thigh.

"It is better to leave such a beast and avoid it than to waste your time attacking it," said a voice, as yet another person

emerged from the hidden room. “Let it test the strength of others.”

It was Aldovar, the suspicious priest of Gunthar’s company. Dressed in black, and wielding a nasty looking mace, he had an olive complexion and was bald except for tufts of black hair behind his ears. He seemed to have lost some of his girth from the last time the party had seen him; his double chin just a withered flap of skin on his neck.

As Kismet poured a potion down Anárie’s throat, Gunthar paid for his reckless charge, and he too suffered a horrific rending from the troll.

“I’ve fucked wenches tougher than you,” he cursed through bubbling blood, slipping into unconsciousness on the floor.

Anárie coughed awake, and then quickly clambered away, screened from the battle by Kismet. The elf could feel a great weight on her body from having been so close to death just moments before.

Beorth was certain his next attack on the troll would be his last, so he knelt beside Kazrack and used the last of his healing power on him, just enough to stabilize the dying dwarf. While he did this Aldovar stepped over and place a single finger on Beorth’s head.

“Take the unholy strength of my lord and finish that thing,” the dark priest said. Beorth sneered at him but could feel magical strength coursing through him.

“Ahh! Ahh!” Schlomo cried out frantically and fired point blank at the troll as it began to climb through the corpses to get at him. “Help me! Help me!”

Anárie scrambled to her bow and lifted an arrow to it, even though her arms felt like dead wood. She let an arrow fly and buried itself through the back of the creature’s neck at an odd angle, peeking out the other side. The troll reached for her neck and clawed at the arrow, falling unconscious.

“Beorth! Drag it out of the water!” Martin cried to the paladin, dropping his crossbow to get a torch lit.

“My lord always respects great strength. Let this half-breed live so that he may learn to use it for his own benefit,” Aldovar said, kneeling by Ratchis to stabilize the half-orc with a spell.

“Get it outta the water! Get it outta the water!” Schlomo cried. The gnome climbed out from the pile of moldering corpses, fishing a flask of oil from his pack.

Beorth grabbed one of the troll’s feet and began to pull her out of the muddy, muck-covered water that had dribbled out of the cracked fountain, but suddenly she screeched and sat up, clawing the paladin viciously. Beorth lay on the ground, bleeding out.

Martin dropped his torch and scooped up his crossbow, while Anárie fired another arrow that missed. Aldovar walked over as the troll spun around and clawed his leg but was able to smash his heavy mace on her head. The sound of her skull cracking echoed over Frederick’s singing. The troll went down again.

“Musician! Do something useful!” Martin chastised the bard, but the bard kept humming, leaning on the wall casually and watching the action.

Schlomo began to splatter oil on the troll, even as they could see her skull begin to re-knit itself. The dark priest stood over it, and ready to smash it once more, but this time the troll leapt up with great fury and he was driven back and suffered another deep scratch along his side. Schlomo slammed his hammer against the troll’s knee and down she went again. Anárie fired an arrow right through here eye as she lay there.

There was a groaning sound, and Martin’s jaw dropped as he looked over to where Debo’s corpse had been lying. The barbarian was on his feet, and while he clutched his gut, most of his wounds seemed to have closed up leaving many scars. Debo spit on the troll corpse.

A moment later, the troll’s corpse was dragged out of the water and was burning brightly, filling the chamber with rancid

smoke.

Schlomo and Kismet used their last potion on Beorth, which was supplemented by a quiet song from Frederick that seemed to heal the paladin even more.

Aldovar saw to Gunthar.

“Uh... good fighting,” Anárie said to Debo who was just looking at the smoldering corpse with his emotionless visage.

He looked up at the elf, who as short as she was, was still taller than the barbarian. “Debo can’t die! Make babies with Debo!” His eyes bugged out as he stared at Anárie while giving his command. “Make babies with Debo!”

“Uh, you should get help with those wounds,” Anárie replied, stepping away from him.

“Make babies with Debo!”

“Debo, make babies later. Now is not the time for that,” Gunthar said, groaning as he stood. “Anyway, she’s not ready for your monster!” The warrior’s laughter collapsed into a cough.

He turned to Martin who was trying not to look too shaken about the fact that aside from the gnomes only two members of the Fearless Manticore Killers were conscious.

“So what have you all been up to?”

“Oh, the usual...” Martin tried to sound casual. “Looting and plundering.”

“Looting and plundering? I didn’t think that kinda thing was your style,” Gunthar replied, shrugging his shoulders. “And what about your friend, Jeremy?”

Martin explained very briefly about Jeremy’s second death.

“Well, you all can stay in this little secret room we’ve been hiding out in to rest,” Gunthar offered. “I don’t think anything in here knows about it, and we’ve been using it for a day or two while Rondar and some others heal up. It will be cramped, but beggars can’t decline picking corn from shit when they’re starving. Ya know?”

“I will not give further aid to these,” Aldovar pronounced. “If they want to join us in the room that is fine, but they must carry in their own dead and wounded.”

“Heck, I’ll help,” Frederick said, with a weak smile.

“Debo’s elf,” Debo said, pointing at Anárie and gritting his teeth at Frederick.

“*Levitatus*,” Martin intoned, and suddenly Kazrack’s heavy and unconscious form was floating beside him, allowing the weak mage to easily push him into the tiny secret room.

“Neat,” Frederick said, helping Gunthar drag Ratchis into the room. “I’ve always wanted to learn that one.”

The room itself was a small hollowed space in a support wall, with torches scones and a metal ladder at one end. It was no more than five feet wide and just slightly more than fifteen feet long. Both groups would be severely cramped in there.

There was a figure resting in the back corner, a tall lanky pimply-faced man. His cheeks looked sallow, and he had a bloody bandage on his neck and leg. Sitting next to his was short ugly man all in black, with a head of tight black curls, and pinched features. Martin did a double take. This man had not been with Gunthar’s company before, but the watch-mage recognized him none-the-less. It was The Square.³⁸

³⁸ The Square was the only member of Markle’s group of thieves to escape capture way back in Session #12.

Anulem, the 14th of Sek – 565 H.E.

The night was a cramped and frightening one for Martin and Anárie. The Fearless Manticore Killers laid out their wounded members so they could be as comfortable as possible, but also close to one another and to the conscious members. Gunthar and his group bedded down like soldiers. They seemed to have a set watch order, because no one said anything to anyone, but they would take turns sitting up awake.

Anárie could feel Debo's eyes on her for his whole watch. Martin gave silent prayers to Isis and Fallon and Nephthys and Thoth and every god of good he could think of that might get him and companions through this. He and the Square had not acknowledged each other, and were busy pretending not to recognize each other, but the watch-mage had seen the weaselly little man whisper something to Gunthar, and the blonde brute had looked him over. Martin did his best to warn Anárie and the gnomes but could not be sure that they understood.

"Do you think it is daylight out yet?" Gunthar asked Debo what might have been days later to Martin's mind.

Debo grunted his assent, and Aldovar spoke a prayer and soon the tiny room was filled with light. Debo got up and opened the secret door. From this side it was a simple iron bar and spring that held the door closed, from the other side it would have been indistinguishable from the mosaic if not for all the missing tiles.

"Is that safe?" Martin asked, looking at the door.

"We need to recirculate the air in here," Gunthar replied.

Frederick crawled over to Beorth, who like Ratchis and Kazrack had still had not awakened. However, the paladin was not as hurt as the other two, and the bard decided to help him on his way to consciousness. He sung prayer of Fallon in his ear. A moment later, Beorth sputtered awake.

"Uh, what happened? Did we all survive?" Beorth sat up and shook his head trying to knock the exhaustion out of his body.

Martin explained what happened and where they were. Smartly, he also added a reminder of where the party knew Gunthar and his companions from so that the paladin would not have to reveal his loss of memory.

"None of us died," Anárie added. "Thanks to Gunthar and his people."

Gunthar winked at her. "If you really want to show your appreciation, we can find a private corner, unless you elves all into the freaky out in the open kind of thing."

Anárie grimaced, but did not reply to Gunthar's crudeness.

Gunthar came over and pushed Frederick out of the way, plopping down beside the still gravely wounded paladin.

"So, Baldy!" he greeted him jocularly. "What are you guys here for?"

"Uh, we've come in search of an item that will stop the spreading evil in this land," Beorth replied.

"Spreading evil, eh?" Gunthar said, chuckling. "I prefer spreading ass-cheeks myself."

"We're looking for a key..." Martin shot Beorth a look and the paladin stopped.

"A key to what?" Gunthar asked, perking up.

"The entrance to..." Beorth paused again, not sure how to phrase it. "A center of magic."

"What does that mean?"

“We don’t really know.”

Gunthar’s eyes narrowed. “You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?”

“I do not lie,” Beorth said, lying.

“You are really looking for a key?”

“Yes.”

“You sure?” He looked to Anárie and then Martin. The elf noticed that Aldovar stood and was listening intently to the conversation from the other side of the small room. She could hear Schlomo and Kismet passing shrill whispers in gnomish between them.

“Yes,” Martin replied.

“Good then, because as long as we are not here for the same thing then we’ll have no problems and we can help each other out, right?” Gunthar said.

“What are you hear for?” Martin asked, a little too eagerly.

“It’s not a key,” was Gunthar’s reply. “But I’ll tell you this, it, just like what you are looking for it is probably below the flooded level.”

Kismet and Schlomo’s whispers stopped suddenly with the mention of ‘flooded level,’ Martin noted, and then the whispered continued more heatedly. Martin had picked up some gnomish while in Garvan, but just the basic necessities and the subtly of this conversation were beyond him. He picked up just a cluster of words here or there.³⁹

“Can you tell us more about what you seek?” Beorth asked. “We may have run across it on the upper levels and not have known.”

“I doubt it,” Gunthar said, shaking his head. “If you had you would either have it with you or you would have left already. I’m not dumb.”

There was an awkward silence, punctuated only by Schlomo and Kismet whispers, and then Gunthar continued.

“Let’s just say that it is the second to last piece required for our plan to slay the dragon.”

“So you think there is a dragon to slay?” Beorth asked.

“It would be stupid for all these people to come to this shit-hole backwater kingdom and not have a real dragon to slay,” Gunthar replied scornfully.

Meanwhile, Martin had heard enough from the gnomes’ conversation to determine they were talking about sneaking way in the night, and something about finding ‘the sword.’

The watch-mage had his journal on his lap and quickly scratched something down with a piece of charcoal, and leaned over to Kismet.

“How would pronounce this?” He said, pointing to what he had written and then said something in halting gnomish loud enough for Schlomo to hear as well. “Please don’t leave us.”

³⁹ **DM’s Note:** Martin picked up a single rank in the gnomish language, allowing him to understand and undertake simple everyday conversations one might need to get around in day-to-day life. He was allowed Speak Language checks to grasp more complicated portions of the conversation with varying DCs depending on the difficulty and specificity as determined by the DM.

“Yes, that is almost right,” Kismet replied in Common. “But if you want that to work in a spell incantation you need to work on your alternating-accent inflection in cases of past-perfect tense. Let’s practice some and I’ll correct you when you say it wrong.”

She winked at the watch-mage and what was supposedly a halting discussion on magic and language was really discussing the gnomes’ plans.

Kismet explained that she and Schlomo did not trust these humans, and that she was not sure she could trust the party to let them take what they wanted when it was found.

Martin promised to help.

“You have to swear that you will give us what it is we are looking for, if it is found and not let that other group get it, if it turns out to be the same thing,” she reiterated.

“What is it?” Martin asked. “It would be easier if we understood what it was we should be keeping our eye out for.”

“It is not a map or a map-room,” Kismet replied. “That is all you need to know for now.”

Schlomo nodded.

“Can anyone join in this conversation, or are you going to whisper and conspire in another language all private like all day?” Frederick said, walking over and kneeling between Martin and the gnomes. “You know, you aren’t the only ones that can be private. I could be private with my healing.”

While this was happening, Aldovar got involved in Gunthar’s conversation with Beorth, and things were getting a bit heated.

“I am not convinced that their goals do not conflict with our own,” the dark priest was saying. “I want assurances about the nature of this key. What sort of key is it?”

“Nay! I won’t tell you of it, for I know already the thought of what power it might bring you would lead you to slit our throats if you discover it,” Beorth spat back, standing.

“My god despises weakness and you are weak and frightened. I can smell it on you,” Aldovar’s face was covered in creases from his anger, and his words become covered in an accent that was not unlike Carlos’s.⁴⁰

“I think a fight is going to start,” Martin said to Kismet in Common and Frederik looked at them both suspiciously, but then up to Aldovar and Beorth with nervousness.

“You do not follow a path that is good!” Beorth accused.

“It is good for me,” Aldovar replied, thumping his chest with a black gauntlet.

“That’s not the same thing,” Beorth replied. “I am not letting us be led astray by these false monks of Anubis and let otherworldly fiends come spilling into this world, and I am not going to let you do it either.”

Martin gagged.

“So, monks of Anubis are trying to open the way for fiends to enter the world?” Aldovar’s dark eyes lit up. “Tell me more, what kind of fiends?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Beorth replied.

“Of course it matters, whether it is the demonic renouncers of the Abyss that do not obey the Masters of Hell, or

⁴⁰ Both Carlos and Aldovar are from the El Reino Unido de Familias Superiores (UKSF).

whether it is the Masters of Hell themselves, this matters...”

“It does not matter,” Beorth said. “Either kind would fall to my blade or I would fall trying.”

Aldovar gave a dry chuckle. “You are weak. It is strength that makes right. It is power that justice serves. Every tool is a weapon.”

“I have no more answers for you,” Beorth said. “You will learn no more of this from me.”

“I could learn it from your corpse with a sprinkling of incense and a word to my lord,” Aldovar said.

“Come and try,” Beorth replied, reaching for his sword, but he barely had it in his grip when Debo, returning from stretching his legs in the hall brought the flat of his axe down on Beorth’s head. There was loud crunch and down went the paladin, bleeding out again, laying there unarmored from when his wounds were being tended.

Martin leapt to his feet, seeing Aldovar pull his mace and step towards Beorth’s bleeding form. “*Lentus!*”

He did not have a chance to see who was affected, because he was trying to get out the door past Debo, when Anárie came hurtling over them both, leaping and diving, tucking into a ball and past the barbarian, who reached out to smash her but missed, but taking a nick from her sword as she passed.

“Frederick! Get them to listen to reason!” Kismet beseeched the confused bard and with a word two *magic missiles* slammed into Aldovar’s chest. She moved out into the hall as well, and the bard followed her.

Martin’s eyes were drawn to the Square who suddenly decided he did not want to see the outcome of this fight and hurried up the metal ladder through the secret door above. The watch-mage was unable to warn Anárie when Gunthar snapped up to his feet like a panther striking her with his long sword twice, sent her down to bleed atop Beorth.

“I didn’t want to have to do that,” Gunthar said, turning to Martin.

“We’ll fight them better in the open,” Frederick suggested, and stepped back to let Martin through. “Run!” he whispered to the watch-mage.

“Kismet! Get out of here!” Schlomo called to his friend, as he smashed his hammer into Debo’s hip. The barbarian’s axe rang out against the warhammer, and the force of the blow sent ripples of numbness up the gnome’s arm.

“Debo hate little things!” Debo cried. “Get away little things! Debo smash little things!”

Martin hustled out of the small room, and Frederick made an exaggerated gesture of catching him and ‘missing’.

Gunthar took off after Martin who hurried back into the chamber that was dominated by the cracked fountain.

Martin stopped and turned. “Gunthar, I know the truth about Jeremy Northrop.”

“What did you say about my brother?” Martin could recognize a resemblance in how Gunthar casually approached him, a sword in each hand, a grin on his dirty mouth. Jeremy had the same strut when fighting, though not as world-wise a look in his eyes.

Aldovar came out through the door, and Kismet tried to trip him, but the big man merely stepped over her, lifting his great mace. Frederick stumbled forward with his sword out and gave the dark priest a shallow cut as he emerged through the door.

“Oops! I thought you were someone else!” the bard lied through a smile.

Schlomo and Debo exchanged blows. “Aaagh! Debo hate little things!”

Martin continued to back away from the blonde warrior, and spoke an arcane word, several shimmering versions of the

green-robed mage appeared, hurrying hither and thither, each likely to be momentarily doing something else, as all to be doing as the real Martin did. He shifted back and forth, trading places with his mirror images.

“You have six seconds to explain what you are talking about,” Gunthar said, suddenly becoming very serious.

Kismet cast her rolling ball of fire at Aldovar, who side-stepped and swung at her, missing, for she used her size and speed to great advantage.

“I know! I’ll *charm* her!” Frederick announced and sang a little song and pointed at the gnome.

“It’s not polite to point,” Kismet replied, her will still her own. “It is better to gesture subtly and whisper.”

“I traveled with him for nearly a year,” Martin explained. “You met him. It was Jeremy. Our Jeremy. The resemblance was obvious to everyone but him, and he refused to learn more about you for some reason. He didn’t die, at least not when your family thought he did. He ran away.”

“So where is he now?” Gunthar’s blades lowered a bit.

Kismet hurried away from Aldovar who chased her further into the hall, and she willed the flaming sphere to intercept him. The flames licked his black robes and the priest leapt back cursing.

“We should stop fighting,” Kismet said, desperately thinking of a lie to keep her and her companions alive. “The half-orc has the information you want about what they are really here for. He is the only one who knows. Killing us won’t do anything!”

“Oh, dark lord,” Aldovar began to intone. “Let my service to you be as a shield.” A shimmering shield of dark energy seemed to encase the priest.

“We told you before,” Martin said, continuing his parley with Gunthar. “He died, but the reason behind his dying...it...it was all the fault of fiends, fiends like the ones Aldovar is in league with. He can’t be trusted, think about who you want on your side. We don’t even care about the dragon or the reward.”

“I hate lil things!” Debo screamed again, returning a hard blow that Schlomo had dealt him, that knocked the gnome off his feet. “Stay down, little thing!”

Gunthar sighed and looked to see where Aldovar was still bearing down on Kismet as she continued to back away and harry him with the flaming sphere.

“Well, I was going to have to kill him eventually anyway,” Gunthar said, turning around. “You can’t trust devil-worshippers as far as you can throw them.”

And with that the blonde warrior charged at the dark priest, cleaving into the man’s heavy armor. Aldovar was knocked back, his face a mask of anger and surprise. Keeping out of reach of Gunthar’s deadly blades, he cast another spell. “Asmodeus, give me your strength!”

The priest knocked away a dagger thrown at him by Frederick and licked his teeth,

“You will all rue the day you crossed me and my dark lord,” the priest said. “Your unwillingness to make the proper sacrifices will be your failing.”

“I give up,” Schlomo said, getting to his feet and then faking a stumble, smashing the barbarian in the groin. The gnome cried out as he felt his armor absorb the weight of an axe blow, but the pain was still fierce. However, Debo who was still hurt from his fight with the troll doubled over and for a moment began to bleed out again, having pulled open his wounds with the effort of the blow.

Schlomo thanked Fezzik and ran out into the hall to see to Kismet, but she was a safe distance from the dark priest now that Gunthar and Frederick were fending him off.

Kismet willed the flaming sphere to leap towards Aldovar even as she sent two more *magic missiles* to slam into him. The dark priest swore under his breath and fell over, unconscious, flames beginning to ignite his clothes.

There was a sudden roar from the room and Debo came charging out. Schlomo was taken unaware, but Gunthar got between them.

“Debo! No! The fight is over,” Gunthar said, still clutching his weapons in a defensive posture.

“I thought he was dead!” said Schlomo in shock.

“Nyah! It’d take a lot more than a gnome with a hammer to kill *him*,” Frederick said. “No offense.”

“Debo hates little things!” Debo said, weakly.

“I tried to tell him to leave me alone. I have no problem. Kismet, you have a problem?” He looked to his companion nervously.

“My only problem was with him,” Kismet replied, pointing to Aldovar.

“He’s no one’s problem anymore,” Frederick said, and then lifting his long sword whacked Aldovar right in his neck, nearly cleaving the priest head off.

“Oh my!” Kismet covered her mouth.

“You didn’t... I mean, was it necessary?” Martin said, covering his own mouth as he approached.

“He had it coming for a long time,” Frederick replied. “If you had seen him do some of the things I have seen him do, and knew of some of the things he hinted at, you’d have wanted to kill him yourself.”

“He was more evil than a limp-dicked pimp dragging his own daughter through Saltbottoms to find some customers,” Gunthar added.⁴¹

Martin suddenly remembered Anárie and ran into the room, but she had stabilized on her own. He tended to her wounds.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Gunthar said, laughing. “But it could have gone either way... So anyway, we helped you, and now you owe us.”

“Wha... What do you want?” Martin asked nervously. He checked on Beorth and stabilized him and then did a double check on Kazrack and Ratchis.

“Free exchange of information,” Gunthar replied. “You tell us why you’re really here and we’ll tell you why we’re here and we’ll help each other accomplish those goals and then go our separate ways.”

“Debo hate little things!”

“Debo, shut your damn pie-hole!” Gunthar snapped. “Aldovar’s dead, and I’m the leader now, just like it always was.”

He turned to Martin and whispered with a wink, “Little things remind him of what he’s got between them bowed legs of his.”

“Is that all you want by way of payment?” Martin asked, hopeful that that would be the case.

⁴¹ ‘*Saltbottoms*’ is a neighborhood of Earthsea City in the Kingdom of Neergaard.

“No.”

“No?”

“No, I also want to know everything you can tell m about my brother Jeremy,” Gunthar said. “That fucker had a chance to meet me and he didn’t, and I want to know why. I mean, I know that he never knew I existed until recently, but I always knew he existed. Our dad, that rotten bastard, would tell me all about what Jeremy was up to when he came to visit my mum every few years to make up for not sending money.”

There was a long silence, and suddenly Gunthar looked around the little room.

“Square!” He called up to the trap door. “You can come out. The fighting is over.”

There was no response.

“You know he’s a thief, right?” Martin asked. “We have run into him before.”

“Are we going to have more trouble?” Gunthar asked the watch-mage looking very serious again.

“Uh, no... not if he doesn’t start any,” Martin replied, worrying what Kazrack and Ratchis would say about the turn of events during their unconsciousness.

“Good. So, what are you guys here for?”

“Beorth was telling the truth. We are looking for the key to a great nexus of magic, of planes,” Martin said. “There is a map or a map room of some kind that is supposed to show us where it is. Have you seen anything like that?”

“No, but I bet it’s below the flooded level,” Gunthar replied. Martin noted that once again Kismet and Schlomo looked at each other when the ‘flooded level’ was mentioned.

“And you?” The watch-mage asked to mask the gnomes’ reactions. “What are you looking for?”

“A sword. Some magical blade or other,” Gunthar said, grabbing some salt pork from his pack. “Freddie Firepants can tell you al about it.”

“Don’t call me that again, Gunthar or we’re going to have a little talk,” Frederick said from out in the hall where he and Debo were stripping Aldovar’s body anything valuable.

“Whatever, hotpants!” Gunthar guffawed and then snorted. “Anyway, it is supposed to be some dragonbane or something. We plan to give it to Debo and let him have at it. Too big for me, and anyway I have another role in *the plan*.”

“What’s the plan?” Martin asked.

“That’s a secret!” Gunthar snapped his mouth shut on piece of pork and smiled. “In that regard I am going to keep my mouth as tight as your momma shoulda made her crack if she wanted to keep from having anymore kids as ugly as you, doughboy.”

Martin was taken aback by the insult.

“But he’s not doughy...” Kismet said, entering the room.

“Ah, but he used to be. He was when I last met him. Looks like the pig-fucker’s been starving you or you been in prison. That’s why it’s funny, it’s called *irony*. Iron as my pecker!” He laughed. “I’m going to sleep. In fact, we should all bunk down and get some rest. The sooner these losers wake up the sooner we can go find our sword and your map and get the hell out of the shit-hole. This place is blacker than the canker on the end of Old Pete’s cock.”

Gunthar laughed out loud again, and it reverberated out into the hall, even as Frederick was closing the secret door back up.

“Martin, we fought for you, you watch,” Frederick said, grabbing The Square’s bedroll and rolling it up into a pillow for himself.

Debo squat in the corner and grunted softly into the night, and Martin turned down the lantern so there was only the slightest glow.

Martin waited a long time until he heard the regular breathing of the others grow long and then he waited even longer. Finally, he whispered over to Kismet. “You awake?”

“Yes,” she whispered back.

“I got one eye open,” Schlomo added.

“You need to tell me what is going on,” Martin whispered. “If I am going to help you and we are going to figure out a way to survive this you need to tell me. Why don’t you trust me?”

“Can’t trust anyone,” Schlomo hissed.

“Hush, Schlomy,” Kismet said. “I think we should tell him.”

“*She* might know,” Schlomo said in the gnomish tongue.

“We’ll have to risk it.”

“Is ‘she’ the dragon?” Martin asked.

“Hush!” Kismet chastised. “Quieter and we’ll do it in gnomish. I’ll go slow and use small words, so you’ll understand.”

Martin took a deep breath.

“Okay, why are you working for her, or are afraid she’ll see or hear you?” Martin asked.

“I don’t think you should tell him,” Schlomo whispered angrily. “People lives are depending on us doing what she said.”

“And people’s lives depend on us getting that sword,” Kismet whispered back.

“You want the sword, too?” Martin was astounded. “Why does a dragon want a dragon-slaying sword and why send you?”

“So, it can’t be used against her, dummy!” Schlomo said.

“Because we were there in her lair and available for her to use,” Kismet replied.

“Huh? How did you come to stumble upon her lair?”

“There is a way there through the Honeycombe,” Kismet replied.

“*You* were in the Honeycombe?” Martin was astounded.⁴²

“Yes...”

⁴² The Honeycombe is the network of caves beneath Ogre’s Bluff where the Fearless Manticore Killers encountered the quaggoths (See Session #23).

Schlomo interrupted, "That's no way to tell a story."

Kismet nodded in the dark.

"Okay, stop asking questions and listen," the female gnome said, bringing her high squeaky voice down to a shrill whisper as she crawled over to talk right in Martin's ear. Schlomo waited a moment and squirmed over, too in order to hear.

"There were nineteen of us that left Garvan with the Chieftain and Creedadal the master illusionist to seek out the aid and advice of the elves about what to do about the humans encroaching on our forest and to reinforce the old treaties from the Mountain Wars. However, we took an old underground route, hoping to come upon the elven enclave from beneath, and we did not expect to run into the white bear-men."

"You mean the quaggoths."

"Hush!" Schlomo flicked the watch-mage's ear. "Just listen!"

"In the chaos of the caves, we became separated," Kismet continued. "We had been warned of ogres we might have to sneak past but fighting so many of those bear-creatures was too much for us. We fled and became separated, more than once, but two groups of us found each other very far from there, days and days away. We were lost though, in areas of the caves that we did not have maps for."

"I think we ended up northwest," Schlomo added.

"Now, *I* say 'hush'" Kismet reprimanded him a little too loudly, so they all remained quiet for a long time before Martin finally asked her to continue.

"It was way out there that we came upon a tunnel we thought was to the surface, but brought us to the dragon's lair, and she captured us," Kismet's voice was filled with fear from the very memory of the beast. I've never been so scared in all my life, but she spoke to us soothingly, almost lovingly. The chieftain said that she was of the forest kind of like how we gnomes are, or elves are said to be, but of a darker side and you could feel it when she looked at you with her amber-colored snake's eyes."

Martin shuddered.

"She informed us that she was going to use us to run some errands for her. She said if we got her the sword from here that she would let us all go. She sent out six at first, but they never came back. So, a few months later, she sent out another five of us, including Creedadal himself to get the sword, and that is what we are doing here. She told us that she had been sleeping a long time and was hungry and we had better hurry, and that she would know if we were not actively trying to get the sword. She also told us that it was 'below water' and gave us those potions along with some other ones that are supposed to let us breathe underwater."

Kismet paused.

"Do you really think the dragon will let anyone live who knows where her lair is? Dragons are tricky," Martin said. "It may not be wise to bring her the sword."

"What choice do we have?" Schlomo asked.

"And those men, they cannot kill the dragon with or without the sword," Kismet said. "Being in her lair is like being in the presence of an ancient storm that thinks...or something."

Martin shuddered again.

"We will help you how we can with your quest if you help us with ours," Kismet said, and Schlomo nodded. "This place you seek, does it have to do with the dimensional bleed?"

“The what?” Martin was surprised again.

“Creedadal mentioned it,” Kismet replied. “I could only just barely grasp what he meant, but he said that something was going screwy with the planes of existence and things were bleeding back and forth between them. He said that was where the fiendish wyvern came from.”

She paused.

“It was the fiendish wyvern that killed him,” she added, even more softly.

“Yes, we have found evidence of that as well,” Martin replied. “And I think the place we seek is the key to reversing it and making sure that others do not accelerate it.”

“I think *you* have a story to tell *us*,” Schlomo said, and Kismet agreed. Martin took a deep breath and went into a lengthy explanation of the party’s adventures, trying his best emulate gnomish-style story-telling.

It was hours before he brought them to the point in the story when Jeremy died, and around then Ratchis began to stir.

Not enough time had passed for this to be another morning, but then again, they had long ago lost all sense of time having been underground for days.

As Ratchis prayed, and Frederick sang a little hymn in Beorth’s ear once again, Martin asked Gunthar, “So, do you really think you can defeat the dragon?”

“Of course! We have a plan, and when it is implemented, I am going to split her open, like...” He paused, waggling his eyebrows in preparation for some new tirade of filth.

“Enough!” Ratchis barked, ending his prayers. “You are going to watch your mouth!”

“And you are going to stick to the deal dough-boy agreed to in order to save all your sorry-asses, pig-fucker!”

Ratchis looked at Martin and scowled.

“We killed our only source of healing for you and your crew, you damn do sure owe us!” Gunthar Northrop insisted. “We help you find this map or map-room or whatever it is, and you help us find the dragon-killing sword. Clean and simple.”

There was a long silence, during which Ratchis never turned his eyes from Martin the Green.

“It’s a deal?” Gunthar asked.

“It is a deal as long as you do not do anything that would ask me to compromise my ethics,” Ratchis replied. He still rested his stare heavily on the watch-mage.

“Oh! All these stipulations and guidelines! What am I? In my father’s house? A deal is a deal between men and between men and half-men-pig-fucker things.”

“Do not call me pig-fucker,” Ratchis replied.

“That’s what you are, or your blood is, dirty buggers that they are, not that I wouldn’t pop the ole Johnson in an orc lass if I was really hard up or something... and uh... didn’t have to look at her face, not that I am ever really hard up or anything, normally all the wenches are biting like fish at my manly bait, if ya know what I mean...”

“Shut up!” Ratchis barked. “It is a deal.”

“Hell, this whole agreement works out and I can go on to help you with the plane-nexus thing of whatever. Them crazy

places always have lots of magic and wishes and stuff in the stories about the *Age of Adventurers*, maybe I can even find a way to bring Jeremy back to life.”⁴³

Ratchis sighed. “He was already brought back once.”

“What!? That’s crazy talk!”

“But true...”

Gunthar looked to Martin who nodded.

“Jeremy Twice-Lived! I’ll write a song about him,” said Frederick.

“Well, if he was brought back once he can be brought back again, right?” Gunthar insisted.

“Anything is possible,” Ratchis replied without enthusiasm.

The others would not awake until the next day, even with Ratchis’ healing, but the days had long since begun to meld into each other.

Kazrack awoke with a start and had to be told right away everything that had happened.

Martin sighed as he felt *Lacan’s Demise* kick into effect.

End of Session #60

⁴³ ‘*The Age of Adventurers*’ is a large portion of the Third Age of great heroes in various parts of Aquerra.

Session #61

“Wow. That’s a nice flail,” Frederick said, pointing to the golden dwarf-headed flail that Kazrack had taken off of the wight dwarf. “Mind if I take a closer look at it?”

Kazrack looked the bard up and down but handed the weapon over without fear. He was still trying to digest all he had been told of what had transpired while he was at death’s door. Martin did not seem to be telling the whole story and Gunthar insisted they owed him their lives. Ratchis seemed eager to keep moving, trying to push the topic of a deal to be discussed later. However, he did want to talk with the rest of the Fearless Manticore Killers away from Gunthar and his crew.

Frederick oohed and aahed over the flail as he examined it.

“Where are you going?” Gunthar asked, suspiciously, as Ratchis cast *light* on a burnt-out torch and opened the secret door.

“We are going out into the hall to talk privately,” Ratchis responded.

“Huh? Keeping secrets? Why should I let you go and plan some scheme to screw me and my crew over?” Gunthar spat. “What do you think I am green-eared?”

“Do you know anything about my goddess?” Ratchis asked.

“Yeah, I know about your goddess,” Gunthar replied, exasperated.

“Then you know I will not betray you.”

“Ha!” Gunthar spat again and smiled. “Like a Friar of Nephthys never betrayed anyone.”

Ratchis just stared at Gunthar.

“You go and make your little schemes then if they are so important to you, just remember this is a dangerous place it is in both of our interests to work together, pig-fucker.”

Ratchis snarled and walked away. By this time Anárie and Beorth were also up as well, and they came out into the hall as well, followed by Martin and Kazrack. Schlomo and Kismet kind of hung out just outside of the doorway, not sure if they should join the conversation.

“Are we going to be down here much longer? I don’t like it,” Tuko whispered to Anárie in her mind. The fox shivered underneath her cloak.

“As long as it takes to help these people,” Anárie replied.

“I’m hungry,” Tuko said, changing the subject. “What do you think squirrel tastes like?” The scent of Thomas had whiffed into his nostrils.

“Hmmm, I don’t know, but I have heard it tastes like chicken.”

“Mmmmmmm, chicken! I love chicken!”

“Hush Tuko!”

Martin went over everything that had happened since the fight with the troll as best he could and explained about how the Square had been with Gunthar and his crew, but had since disappeared. He also explained that Gunthar and his people did not know that the gnomes were after the dragon-slaying sword as well, and that they both want help finding it. He also explained that the map-room was most likely in or beneath a level submerged beneath water. Anárie explained that she had the *water-breathing* spell in a book she carried but was not yet able to use it. She gave Martin

permission to study it, so that it might be used to get the party down there.

“We have potions, too,” Kismet added, walking over. Schlomo was right behind her.

“I don’t know if I feel comfortable helping that dragon take the sword,” Ratchis said. “She is trying to limit her chances of being defeated. How does Tanweil fit in?”

“We don’t know how he found out about us,” said Schlomo, but he attacked us one night as we camped. He might have been secretly listening in to our planning or something. Called us ‘servants of the dragon’ and said only he deserved to wield the sword and destroy the dragon.”

“I see our options as these,” said Kismet. “Slay the dragon ourselves with your help, sneak the chieftain out, or trust the dragon to keep her word and bring her the sword.”

“I don’t know what we can do,” Ratchis said.

“It seems our word has been given for us twice,” Beorth said sullenly. “But I trust these men very little despite our still being alive and I do not trust their chances against the dragon, sword or no.”

“Oh, ho! I heard that!” Gunthar’s voice came from inside the secret room. “I heard you mention a sword. You are considering double-crossing me, aren’t ya?”

The blonde and bearded Neergardian came out of the room.

“Pretend like me and Kismet are the ones you are betraying,” Schlomo whispered to Ratchis and Kazrack.

“Why should I have to lie?” Kazrack replied with disdain, a little too loudly.

“You don’t have to lie, just keep your mouth shut,” Ratchis responded with a hiss.

Gunthar walked over. “So, what in the name of Bast’s sandbox are you guys planning?”

“We aren’t planning anything,” Ratchis said.

“We were just discussing that maybe we should not help you because we know of someone else who is after the sword,” Kazrack said.

Ratchis grunted in shock.

“I can’t believe you’d betray me that way!” Schlomo cried out, getting huffy. “I told you that information in confidence!”

The gnome stormed off, tossing Ratchis a wink.

The half-orc sighed, as Frederick came out to listen as well, carrying Kazrack’s flail to return it. “It is a man named Tanweil, except he may not be a man. He has appeared a green winged lizard man. He is very powerful.”

“You are making this shit up,” Gunthar replied. “You are damn bad liars.”

“It is the truth,” Martin said. “He appeared as kind of draconic in origin. There is some connection between him and the dragon.”

Gunthar narrowed his eyes. “And this guy’s tough?”

“He killed several of our people, that is why we are after him,” Kismet added, lying well.

“Well, don’t you worry your big-bulbous nose,” Gunthar said with a smile. “We’ll take care of him if we come across

him. We'll see what he makes of Debo. Right, Debo?"

"Debo kill," Debo said.

"Or, you can let him get the sword and follow him to the dragon's lair and let him soften her up before you enact your plan, whatever it might be," Kazrack suggested.

"Wow, Stumpy. I didn't know you could think that way," Gunthar replied. "I mean, that sounds down right... uh..."

"Duplicitous," Frederick suggested.

"Yeah! That! But I don't think that will work with our plan," Gunthar said. "Debo gets to use the sword in our plan, not that we are going to tell you what it is."

"We don't care what it is, and we don't want to know," Ratchis replied.

"Yeah, right...Uh-huh. Tell me another one," Gunthar said, and then turned to Kismet who was walking off to 'comfort' Schlomo who was still seething. "Tell yer little friend that if he's worried that if we find the sword first that we'll just take off with it and then he can't use it to draw out this lizard-guy for your little ill-thought-out revenge scheme, then he is exactly right. No need to make more enemies than ya need, especially not some dragon-man flying thing."

"Debo kill dragon-thing," Debo said.

"You just may have to," Gunthar replied.

Frederick the Amazing told Kazrack about his flail.⁴⁴

"You must be very honored to wield such a weapon," Frederick said.

"I am even more honored now that I know more about it," Kazrack replied, grinning as he hefted and spun the weapon. The gold gleamed in the light of Ratchis' enchanted torch.

It was agreed that one more night would be spent holed away in the secret room before continuing to explore. Gunthar explained that he and his party had entered through uncovered doors one level below and had not found much down there except more bone shards and powder, and some armories with mostly rusted weapons, and a great curving hall that went deep down into the earth but looked partially collapsed and entirely flooded.

Martin spent the day studying Anárie's version of the *water-breathing* spell and many tedious hours later, people of both groups began dropping off to sleep. Kazrack took the first watch with Frederick, but as Martin's ring had kicked in, he stayed up as well, and watched along with Gunthar when he was awakened by Kazrack for second watch.

"Ugh," Gunthar grimaced when he opened his eyes and saw Kazrack over him. "For a second there I thought I was being woken up by my date, but the funny thing is I've been woken up by uglier women."

The warrior laughed and strapped on his armor. The watch-mage and foul-mouth fighter had not been watching too long, and Kazrack's snore had just begun to lend support to Debo's, when there was a banging sound above them, even as the secret door began to open of its own accord.

⁴⁴ *Ororon-Thiduil* is a golden flail is banded with obsidian at the top and bottom of the handle. The head of the flail, affixed by a chain of black metal, is shaped like a dwarf's head with a beard of the same black metal and eyes made of two shining rubies. The name "Ororon-Thiduil" can be translated to meaning "Dwarves Golden Pride," but a more direct translation would be "unconquerable will of the dwarven people." This light flail is enchanted with a +2 enhancement bonus. In addition, while wielding the flail the wielder benefits from Arrow-Cutting feat. Once per round, when you would normally be hit by a missile weapon, you may make a Reflex Save against DC 20 to knock it out of the way with your weapon, if you currently wield it. You must be aware of the attack and not flat-footed. If the missile is magical, the magical plus is added to the DC. Arquebus fire cannot be deflected; nor can exceptional missiles, such as boulders thrown by a giant or spells like *Melf's Acid Arrow*.

Gunthar stepped over to the space beneath the ladder up to the trapdoor, as the lantern was positioned there and burning low. There was a violent bang above as he leaned forward to open the light wider, and a figure came plummeting down, slamming into Gunthar who went stumbling into where Anárie sat in reverie.

The secret door opened and Martin the Green could see the slouched form of Aldovar of Asmodeus, his skin was now nacreous, and his eyes a dull red fire.

“I knew we should have dealt with those bodies right away,” Martin cursed under his breath, stepping on Ratchis purposefully to wake him.

“*Lentus!*” Martin chanted and suddenly Aldovar’s undead form swayed more slowly.

“*Sleep!*” Aldovar commanded, and Martin felt a weight upon his eyes, but he shook it off, even as he was forced to leap back to keep from getting the full brunt of the undead priest’s black clawed hands. Martin felt a rigidity go through his limbs, but again he was able to shake it off.

Ratchis leapt to his feet, not wasting time with questions. “Wake up! To arms! To arms!” he cried, scooping up his great axe and seeing that Gunthar seemed to have the other figure well in hand, he chopped at the ghoulish form of Aldovar, biting deep into bone.

Martin could now see that the short lanky form that snarled as Gunthar bit into it with a long sword, was none other than the Square. However, his skin was deathly white, and his eyes blank and yellowed.

Ratchis moving into melee gave Martin a chance to withdraw from the fight and cast *mage armor* on himself, while Anárie got to her feet with a quick leap, not sure of which way to go to join the fight effectively.

Gunthar laughed as he cut the Square into pieces and kicked at the still moving parts. “Ya should’nt’ve wandered off there Squiddy,” he spat at the pieces. They stopped moving and the Square was no more.

The temperature in the already cold room dropped suddenly as the ghostly figure of the black robed priest the Fearless Manticore Killers had faced on the level above came gliding into the room through the wall.

“Debo hate ghost-thing!” Debo cried, swinging his axe with great violence. The weight of the great blade dragged him forward and he swiped through the ghost form just as it became corporeal. A trail of clotted blood and rotten gore rained from the ghastr’s shoulder.

“You will serve me or will be served to me, choose!” the priest-ghast hissed.

“Arextes!” Frederick cried up jumping to his feet to keep from getting crushed in the melee. He recognized the figure from some of the tales of the final battles of this citadel. “He was a priest of Set, and a commander of some Black Island forces during the Mountain Wars.”

Aldovar and Ratchis traded blows and the half-orc staggered. Martin crept up behind him and helped with a *mage armor* spell, as Ratchis had not worn his more mundane version while sleeping.

“*Sagitta Magicus,*” Anárie chanted and sent an arrow of light streaming at Arextes. They could see him more clearly than ever before now, he had the face of a middle-aged man pock-marked and warted, but now raw and greenish-white, his neck and left ear and part of his face burned off in life. Gunthar spun on him, his swords ringing as they struck each other, going through the partially incorporeal form to no effect. He swung with such frustration that his long sword went flying from his grip, landing over by Schlomo who had awakened and was making his way to aid against Arextes.

“Natan-Ahb! I beseech you. I am your willing servant, use me to show these creatures your wrath!” Kazrack intoned. He stood, clutching his bag of runestones about his neck. Unfortunately, the undead were too powerful to be turned.

“Bing-badda-Bing! Bing! The best thing I can do is sing!” Frederick said, stepping back behind Martin to get cover from both foes, projecting his almost comical tenor.

“*Sagitta Magicus!*” Another two missiles came flying from the elf’s finger.

“Damn you!” Arextes cursed. “You shall die and be devoured here. You will never reach elven lands!”⁴⁵

Gunthar howled as he hurried past to get his sword at the same moment that a horrid stench began to erupt from the black-robed serpent undead priest. Anárie and Kazrack could feel their bodies weaken, as their stomachs turned. Gunthar pressed the back of his hand to his mouth and nose, while Schlomo just ignored it and stepped in, feeling his hammer strike something as it swung through the incorporeal form. Arextes lurched towards Kazrack as if about to charge and then disappeared with an audible ‘pop’.

Debo shouldered his way beside Ratchis who was desperately trying to finish Aldovar, and brought his axe down cleaving the priest’s torso in two large blood-erupting pieces.

“Debo hate dead Aldovar!” Debo said. “Aldovar deader!”

“Where did the other one go?” Beorth asked. He had never had room to get into range and strike a blow, though his sword was ready.

“Are they gone?” Frederick asked, stopping his song.

“Yes, I think so,” Martin replied.

“What in the Hells was that thing?” Gunthar asked. “And how do you kill it?”

“That is what we have been trying to figure out. We faced him twice already. This was the third time. He turns our dead against us,” Martin replied.

“Stay dead!” Debo said to the corpse of the foreign priest, chopping it into smaller pieces with his axe to be certain. “Only Debo can’t die.”

“Enough!” Beorth commanded, and amazingly the barbarian stopped, but snarled at the paladin, stalking away.

Ratchis stripped the Square’s body, and then Gunthar had Debo and Rondar (who had finally woken up) drag both bodies out into the hall.

This time they burned the remains.

Rondar, the Fearless Manticore Killers soon found out, was the least likeable of all of Gunthar’s crew. From the moment he woke up he had mumbled and wheezed a string of complaints and accusations. When he was not too busy laughing at the misfortune of others all he could do was bemoan his own. Ratchis could smell Debo’s desire to kill the whiny man.

Tholem, the 18th of Sek – 565 H.E.

The next day both groups seemed happy to be moving on, except for Rondar.

“I think we should just leave this place,” he whined to Gunthar, looking at Ratchis with great fear in his rheumy eyes. The man seemed unreasonably tall, skinny, and angular. He seemed to do everything awkwardly.

“Rondar is good for nothing ‘cept pissing his pants,” Gunthar said to Kazrack, as the two groups spread out and made their way to the steps down to the next level.

“Then why keep him around?” Kazrack asked.

⁴⁵ Elves need to be interred in designated elven land or their souls do not find rest in an afterlife. Instead, they stay and haunt the place where their body was.

“Eh... He’s another target. He’ll be the one that sets off the killer traps since he is supposedly our ‘boxman’. Heh. The only box that one ever opened was his momma’s and from the inside.”

“Um...”

“Of course, all the pleasure is in sticking something in there, eh?” Gunthar elbowed Kazrack lasciviously in the head.

“I don’t think you should talk to Kazrack about that kind of stuff,” Frederick said, catching up to them. “I have heard that dwarves are virgins until they marry. Are you married Kazrack?”

The bard had a mischievous smile.

“No,” the dwarf replied and Gunthar and Frederick burst out laughing.

“Hey, Rondar!” Gunthar called to his companion momentarily forgetting his disgust with him in order to share the joke. “Stumpy here has never planted his hammer against some dwarven anvil!”

Rondar guffawed.

The stairs down were ten feet wide and made of cracked marble supported by stone beams that were carved with the image of scores of dwarves, each on each other’s back working an anvil. Kazrack was awed by the sight of it but saddened that dripping water had worn many of the detailed sections away. He could see large cracks in some that made him worry about the stability of the stairs, but luckily, they had already passed over that part by the time he was in a position to see it.

Gunthar explained that they had entered on this level, and had looked around, but had only found the flooded hall, and some rooms full of rotten corpses and armories. They had pulled the doors to the stairs closed and wedged them shut in case they had missed anything, and it decided to come up behind them.

Kazrack, Debo and Ratchis were able to free the doors and push them open. They were large iron doors, now brittle and corroded at the bottom creating blue-green striations that matched Kismet’s eyes.

The hall beyond went in both directions, and Gunthar explained that the right passage led to the grand room that led to the flooded hall.

“We will search the rest of this level first,” Kazrack said. “This is a citadel of my people and I must see the extent of the damage and what there is to be found.”

Gunthar smirked.

To the left the hall ended in a portcullis that was wedged open about three feet from the ground with a rusty battle-axe.

“There are two more gates in here and some rooms we could not reach,” Gunthar explained. “We figured we’d check upstairs and then come back and smash them open if we could not find the sword, but this is leading back towards the front of the citadel if you look at the old maps.”

“Where did you get old maps?” Martin asked.

“I have my way of getting things, Doughboy,” Gunthar winked. “Don’t question my methods.”

“Anyway, that’s the front, so it is unlikely the sword is over there,” the Neergardian continued. “From what I could find out that rear hall reached to the lower halls, to the *real* dwarven city. I bet the sword and whatever you are looking for is down there.”

Anárie crawled under first, followed by Debo and then Ratchis. By the time the rest of the group came through, the elf had already scouted out the chamber. It was a vaulted accessway with portcullises to drive or avert traffic down one

corridor or another. The gate leading towards what Gunthar said was the front had a long hall behind it filled with a rancid smell of mildew; only rags and muck was left whatever soldiers died in that hall, though the scraps of armor seemed to be of both dwarven and human make.

“The humans had managed to get in,” Frederick the Amazing said, drawing on his bardic lore. “And the high priest called an earthquake from the voiceless god, and the voiceless god spoke but a syllable and the invading army was swallowed by a great rent in the earth, but the citadel fell into it as well.”

“How do you know so much about dwarves?” Martin asked.

“Oh, I don’t know all that much about them, just a snippet of lore here or there, though I did make sure to learn as much as I could about this place before we came here,” Frederick replied.

“Oh, where’d you do that?”

“Oh, you know... here and there,” Frederick winked.

“The wheel for opening the gates is in that room,” Gunthar pointed to the right. “But Rondar the Dimwit slack-ass couldn’t figure out how to work it. There is some trick to it.”

“I’ll figure it out,” Kazrack and Anárie said at the same time. The dwarf moved to the door and opened it, but as he stepped in, a dark figure rushed out at him, punching the dwarf soundly in the face.

“Ugh!” Kazrack stumbled back.

It was a black-garbed monk, tall and wiry, though showing signs of having survived a fight or two, as the right side of his face was purple and swollen. His bare feet were scraped and bleeding.

“Ha! Son of Jocham!” the figure said. It was Vander.⁴⁶

Kazrack grunted as Vander slammed more kicks and punches into him. The monk used the force of his last kick to leap back and avoid a counterattack. For a moment Schlomo and Kazrack struggled to get through the door into the room beyond to go after him.

Ratchis managed to squeeze past them followed closely by a salivating Debo. Ratchis’ hammer struck Vander hard in the shoulder, as the monk’s blocks were ineffective against the weighty weapon. Instead, he brought a kick down on Ratchis’ knee twice that made the half-orc buckle and roar. But the monk left himself open to Kazrack who, managing to get past Debo, swiped into the monk’s hip with his halberd. There was an explosion of blood and the monk swayed.

“Stop!” cried Beorth coming into the room behind Schlomo.

Ratchis dropped his hammer and slammed a hammy fist right into the monk’s face, sending him down definitely. It was then the ranger noticed that Vander appeared to have already been injured.

Debo raised his sword to finish the monk, but Ratchis raised a hand, “Stay your weapon. I will heal him. We need to talk to him.”

“Debo hate monks!”

“Oh, he is one of those boy-stealing monks we ran into before,” Gunthar said, coming into the room.

“You met monks here before?” Beorth was amazed.

“Yeah, right on this level to be exact,” Gunthar said.

⁴⁶ Vander was the leader of the monks that had captured the golden dire ram back in Session #31.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Ratchis fumed, kneeling by the monk to lay a minor healing spell on him to stabilize him.

“Ya didn’t friggin’ ask,” Gunthar shot back. “Anyway, they aren’t after the sword, so we didn’t care, and they were going to the flooded level first and I wanted to avoid that if possible.”

Ratchis growled and walked off to search the small room. There was the mechanism for opening the gates, consisting of two levers and one wheel. Beside it, impaled into the wall by a broken spear was the skeletal corpse of a humanoid in chain mail armor. The head was gone, as was whatever it might have worn on its feet and the feet themselves. Ratchis assumed it was among the bone dust he left tracks in. He was startled when he noticed that the figure wore a belt of scored chains about its waist. He leaned forward and saw what he was looking for, tiny ankhs engraved into some of the links. His eyes drifted over to something large hanging from the belt, beneath the tattered remains of a stained white tunic.

It was key. A large metal key about nine inches long with large loop at the turning end that could easily fit a human hand. The key was a corroded blue-green color, as if it spent a long time beneath the surface of the ocean.

Ratchis carefully took it from the belt and hefted it. Speaking a word to his goddess, he examined it for magic and detected three different auras, one faint, but the other two were moderately powerful. He knew it must be some relic of the friars of Nephthys, and he tied it to his own belt. He looked around on the floor to see if there was anything else that might have belonged to what was obviously a friar of Nephthys. He then found a single ankh earring. He slipped it into his ear.

In the meantime, Vander was healed by Beorth and was waking up. The paladin held the monk’s staff. It was exceptionally light and hard. It felt good in his hand, and he spun it once, before pointing one end to the floor to lean on.

“Where is your master?” Beorth asked.

“I will say nothing,” replied Vander. He was sitting up, his hands tied behind his back.

“Debo kill monk!”

“Kill me if you will. I will be rewarded for doing what is right,” Vander said.

“For someone who isn’t going to say anything this creep sure does talk a lot,” Gunthar quipped.

“I too am doing what I think is right,” Beorth said.

“What you think and what we know are two different things,” Vander continued. “Our way is the better way. Think on that before you defy the will of Master Hamfast and Master Adder.”⁴⁷

“Why is your way better?” Kazrack asked.

“Because we seek to remain true to Anubis, even if our own god betrays us,” Vander replied, cryptically.

“You have to understand that Beorth was not always forthcoming about his run-ins and experiences with you and your sect,” Kazrack explained. “And he has since lost his memory. We are not in a position to fully know what is going on unless you explain it more clearly.”

Beorth nodded.

Vander paused.

“Why are you wasting your time?” Gunthar complained. “This worm won’t say anything useful. Monks are suckers that hide their hankering for other hairless men behind two copper words and blank stares. The loosest hooer in Neergaard could slide his head in her snatch and he wouldn’t so much as get a stiff one before he suffocated.”

⁴⁷ Hamfast is the monk Beorth met at the Pit of Bones in the Interlude before Session #25

Everyone ignored him, but Rondar hoarse shrill laughter echoed up and down the empty chambers filled with bones. It seemed to call back from the darkness.

“Master Adder found at the great convocation in the Archduchy of Wallbrook that the Grand Master was going to announce some drastic changes to our order based on a vision he was supposed to have gotten from Anubis,” Vander finally began. “These changes undermine not only what the order means, but what following Anubis itself means, and we who are faithful will not let that happen. We seek the power to change this back to how it should be.”⁴⁸

“What exactly will you do with this power?”

“To put our will against those who would abandon their duty even at the behest of a god,” Vander answered. “At this will our master succeed or die trying.”

“And where is your master now? Looking for the way to gain this power, to talk to Anubis?” Beorth asked.

“I will not say.”

“Smack him around a little,” Gunthar suggested.

“I doubt a man so convicted can be convinced to speak through use of pain,” Beorth said.

“Who cares? It’ll be fun,” Gunthar winked at the monk.

“There will be none of that,” Kazrack said.

“What is your name?” Beorth asked the monk.

“I am Vander – Initiate of the Stone.”⁴⁹

“What happened the last time we met, Brother Vander?”

“Last time we met? You freed the ram-creature, the paragon...”

“The exemplar?”

“Same thing.”

There was a long discussion as to what to do with him, but it was finally agreed to just let him go, as murdering him in cold blood would not be right.

Gunthar snickered and Debo fumed, but the Fearless Manticore Killers insisted despite their better judgment. However, they took his staff from him, hoping it would cause him to leave the Pit of Bones rather than risk staying there unarmed.

After taking a quick look around the rest of this level, finding naught more than more piles of shattered bones, rusted weapons and shards of armor, and armories filled with other weapons (mostly crossbows and quarrels) in ill repair, Gunthar led the combined groups towards the large chamber that was partially flooded.

It was a tall and wide chamber that narrowed along its curved right wall down into a flooded passageway that spiraled down into the darkness. The murky water was ankle deep in most of the room, and occasionally lapped against the wall with a gentle slapping sound; even in the light of the *radiant spark* one could tell that walking into that chamber would have the water over your head in no time.

⁴⁸ In 564 H.E. all the monks of Anubis in central Aquerra were summoned to a Grand Convocation to discuss and adopt new ideals and guidelines regarding their order and their service to Anubis.

⁴⁹ As monks of Anubis rise in the hierarchy of the order, they are awarded set titles. *Initiate of the Stone* is a fairly low one.

There was another hallway that led around to the stairs to the level above, and a set of double doors that seemed to lead into a chamber nearly the size of this outer room. These two rooms together made up the vast majority of this section of the citadel. There were four pillars, four feet in diameter and varying in height with the arced ceiling.

“The jig is up!” Gunthar suddenly announced, spinning around, and placing his hands on the hilts of his swords. He looked at Schlomo. “We know the sword is down there and that you are here to find it, too. Your friends sold you out.” Gunthar’s eyes trailed to Kazrack, Martin and Ratchis.

“We’re getting the sword no matter what!” Schlomo announced, angry. His own little hands hefted his war hammer and he grimaced.

“Look, we still are looking for, you know, the other thing,” Ratchis said, stepping between them. “Why don’t you help us, we help you and we decide about the sword thing once we actually have it to worry about?”

“Bah! Why should I trust you when you are so willing to hold back information from us?” Gunthar harangued. “How do we know you don’t have some ambush or sneak attack planned for us?”

“We’re worried about *you* keeping *your* word!” Kazrack lamented.

“We’ve been nothing but reliable and honest with you losers,” Gunthar replied. “Bastards!”

“You did not tell us about your meeting the monks,” Beorth said.

“That had nothing to do with the friggin’ sword, and for all we know, with what you are looking for either so…”

“The monks are looking for the same thing as we are,” Martin said.

“Oh! Now you tell us! That is more information you held back, weasels!”

There was a long tense silence.

Ratchis noticed the double doors on the left were suddenly open some. He could not remember them being that way before the argument started. He began to creep over there.

“I don’t understand how a brother of mine could hook up with a bunch of self-righteous hypocrites. You would probably stiff a one-legged hooer knowing she couldn’t chase after you for her fee.” Gunthar swore and snorted back laughter. “Look, you have to go down into that damn dark water and so do we, so let’s just do it. Me and my crew will take the sword and use it to kill the dragon, and if the gnomes still need it then they can have it. Sound fair?”

“It will be useless to us then,” Schlomo said.

“What if you let Gunthar and his crew accompany you to ‘deliver’ it,” Martin the Green suggested.

“Who do you have to deliver it to?” Frederick asked.

Schlomo hesitated.

“Probably another group of dragon-hunters who suckered him into getting it,” Gunthar speculated. “No one else has nearly a good a chance of actually killing that dragon but us, so if you want for us to come with you to deliver it, we’ll handle convincing whoever it is that we are the best ones to have it.”⁵⁰

“I guess that is a good compromise,” Kismet said. Schlomo opened his mouth to protest, but the gnome woman elbowed him.

Ratchis was at the door, when Rondar cried out and pointed towards the water.

⁵⁰ Of course, the gnomes are supposed to deliver the sword to the dragon herself.

There to be a tiny wave swelling in the murky water, but instead of breaking against the wall, it seemed to move of its own volition, rearing up to a height of four feet, pseudo-pods seemingly made of living water began to thrash about its 'body'.

“What manner of magic is that?” Ratchis asked, grabbing his axe off his back.

“DEBO HATE MAGIC!”

The stocky barbarian charged at the thing even as Martin noticed the thinnest tendril of water whipping across the surface of the water, like a lifeline from the thing to the larger body of water.

Debo's sword cut right through it, but it was unclear if it had any effect, for it did not slow down.

“Debo, let it come to us,” Beorth said, too late, and drawing his sword, moved cautiously forward to support the barbarian against the strange creature.

Kazrack did not hesitate and came forward smashing at the thing with his new flail. “Martin! What is this thing?”

“I think it is an elemental beast! Are your weapons working against it?”

Before the dwarf could answer, Gunthar was looking up and letting out a stream of profanity.

Anárie followed his gaze and gasped. Crawling across the ceiling was some sort of fish-man. It was covered in mauve scales, with a wide splayed head with large unblinking eyes and webbed hands and feet that ended in sharp scale-like claws. It wore a webbed belt made of some kind of darker colored fish scales, from which hung some webbed pouches and a wicked barbed and curved knife. It had some kind of pole arm slipped into a harness on its back.

The thing's head turned almost all the way around and its unblinking fishy gaze fell upon Beorth. With unbelievable speed it flipped off the ceiling and the pole arm was in its hands. Standing nearly ten feet from the Ghost-hunter of Anubis, the snapping metal jaws of the mechanism on the end of the pole pinched Beorth's neck, holding him nearly helpless.

Rondar and Frederick made themselves scarce. The former sneaking behind a pillar, while Frederick moved to the right-side wall placing his back to it and examining the ceiling nervously.

Anárie heard a splash behind her and spun around, there was another one of fish-men. She jerked back but was too late. The arms of the thing's man-catcher snapped about her neck, jerking her back and forth easily. This one had more sickly yellow scales, and a set of frilly scales flapping back and forth atop its unusually tall and narrow head.

Beorth snapped free tearing skin from his neck and shoulders, and Ratchis came charging at the thing, but again with incredible speed, it swung the man-catcher in the half-orc's direction and caught him with a jerk.

“Urk!” Ratchis grunted, and then yanked free with a roar. His charge was broken.

The appearance of the new foes distracted Kazrack and he felt the sharp whip of water across his thighs. The small elemental had struck him and now his legs stung awfully.

Schlomo came charging in, hammer over his head and beard flapping behind him, to aid Anárie. However, the second fishman was too quick and jerked the elf around, forcing the gnome to check his blow or risk striking the person he was trying to help.

“*Sagitta Magicus!*” The fish-man could not dodge the arrows of light that blasted from Kismet's finger.

Beorth crouched and slipped into the first fishman's guard and brought his sword down on its leg. The wound gushed a foul-smelling oil that bubbled. The fishman's little puckered mouth twitched but made no sound.

Kazrack could see the volume of the water-creature before him lessen and he drove his flail into it, jerking his arm back awkwardly.

“Kismet! Try Fire!” Martin advised, fear in his voice. “*Lentus!*”

The fishman jerking Anárie around with the man-catcher suddenly jerked awkwardly himself, as all his motions slowed way down. Anárie was able to put her chin beneath the collar and painfully squeeze out of it.⁵¹

“What’s yer name again?!” Rondar called quizzically towards Martin from behind a pillar. “Mage! Watch out! Look up!”

“Huh?” Martin’s voice became a shriek as he saw a third fish-man on the ceiling. It reached down at him cutting a deep gash in the mage’s ear with a serrated curved knife. The thing’s knees and feet never left the ceiling. This one had deep blue scales running in stripes down the side of its body, and its face was strangely flat; a pouch of loose skin and scales on its neck.

“Oh! Fishy Fishy Squishy Fish! Get off the ceiling and in my dish!” Frederick began sing in a high-pitched silly voice, but the effect of it seemed to raise the spirits of his companions (including the Fearless Manticore Killers) as they struggled. “Get on my hook, Pishy-Pish! A fish is only good in a dish!”

As Ratchis and Beorth struggled with the first fishman and Kazrack, Debo and Gunthar struggled with the elemental, Schlomo croaked as the second fishman grabbed him about the neck and face, crunching his nose. He pulled free and hurried out of reach, as the fishman stumbled, struck by more of Kismet’s *magic missiles*.

Kazrack felt the whip of the water elementals tendrils again. Gunthar’s weapons seemed to do nothing no matter how many times they struck the thing.

Beorth smashed at the man-catcher and buried his sword into the first fishman’s shoulder. There was another explosion of the foul oil and the then the thing collapsed. Gritting his teeth, Beorth calmly began to walk towards the fish-man still hanging from the ceiling.

Another set of arrows of light struck the second fish-man, this time from Anárie. She stayed well clear of its man-catcher.

“I guess I should start helping,” Rondar mumbled, looking on from the relative safety of behind the pillar and began to load his crossbow.

The blue-striped fishman leapt from the ceiling, and spun around as Ratchis charged him. It made a sucking sound and its exaggerated long hands and fingers pointed at the half-orc. Ratchis could feel the spell come over him, but nothing happened. He slammed his warhammer into the side of the thing’s head. He could feel the soft bones crack and shift beneath the hammer, but it was clear: these things had no real skull to speak of.

Beorth backed up his companion, and drove the fish-man even further back, flicking scales from its upper arm.

Kazrack could start to feel a great bruise develop across his thigh, where the elemental kept striking him. He began to try to withdraw to draw the thing into shallower water.

“Debo, Gunthar, help me get this thing out of the water.”

Gunthar just kept swinging.

Anárie leapt backward. Flipping back and tucking into a roll, she went past the narrow-headed fish-man before her, avoiding the snap of his weapon’s pincers. However, as she came around to support Martin, she felt the bite of the newest fishman’s knife.

⁵¹ **DM’s Note:** Anarie made a successful escape artist check.

Martin ducked behind a pillar, as he was able to get away because of Anárie's screening him.

Rondar leapt out from behind his pillar and with a twang, a heavy crossbow bolt slammed into the blue-stripped fish man and it fell over, spurting a trail of black oil behind it.

"Yah-Ha!" Rondar cried with glee, pumping his fist in the air.

Ratchis smashed the thing's head where it lay in the shallow murky water. It crunched. Grunting with satisfaction, he began to make his way towards the remaining fishy-foe, but suddenly stopped, grabbed his stomach, and began to belch up a gallon of murky brown water. He swayed in place.

"Pig-fucker sick!" Debo laughed, as he withdrew from the elemental, tired of having no effect on it.

The water elemental melted away into nothing.

"Where'd it go?" Gunthar asked.

"Can anyone cure poison?" Ratchis croaked between gasps.

The remaining fish-man, despite still being under the effect of Martin's *slow* spell, was able to get free of the melee and dive towards the deeper water.

Anárie chased after it, pulling her bow from her back, while Ratchis puked more, but it was too late. It was gone.

Kazrack stepped over to the first fish-man. Its suckered little mouth and the gill-slits in its neck rose and fell very shallowly. Kazrack stabilized it with a minor orison.

"What the hell are you doing, Stumpy?" Gunthar exclaimed coming over. He buried his long sword in the thing's head and twisted. The thing's face exploded in greenish-yellow bubbling oil. "*That* is what you do to enemies."

Kazrack grimaced and pushed at Gunthar forcing the tall man to look down at him. "Gunthar, if you ever strike down one I choose to spare again, the next person I will have to consider sparing will be you!"

"Don't threaten me, Stumpy," Gunthar tapped Kazrack on the back of the head, and the dwarf pushed him away.

"It is a promise, not a threat."

"You don't spare enemies, unless maybe they are men..."

"We don't know what we might be facing down there," Kazrack replied. "I wanted to question it."

"It sure didn't seem to speak Common to me," Gunthar spat.

"We have blessings that might have allowed us to communicate with it," Kazrack explained.

"Well, I didn't know that," Gunthar said, backing down a bit. "But still, what were you going to do with it after you questioned it? Let it go? Kill it in cold blood after it has outlived its usefulness? Does that seem right to you? Friggin' hypocrites, you guys are."

"Ooh look! We hit the jackpot!" Rondar's voice was heard to say. As soon as the fight was over and the arguing had started, and everyone else was distracted by the liquefaction of Ratchis' guts, the lanky man had crept over and pulled a sack from the corpse of the blue-scaled fish-man. Inside he found a handful of gold and silver obles, and an impressive gold and silvery gauntlet with a heavy palm that did not seem able to grasp anything. It was encrusted with black and red gems. It was apparent that it was worth a fortune, but it was also etched with dwarven runes.

Rondar had the gauntlet on and was waving it around.

“Take that off!” Kazrack ordered, immediately recognizing it for what it was. He snatched it from the rogue.

It was called ‘*the Hand of Natan-Ahb*’ and while not a magical item, the masterful craftsmanship of the gauntlet made of gold and *truesilver* was undeniably breath-taking.⁵² It was worth more perhaps than the treasuries of all three of the Little Kingdoms put together. Crafted long ago, there were but a few left in the world, and were worn by high priests and thegns when presiding over a trial or making pronouncements of law.

“Hey!” Gunthar said, getting back into a mood to argue. “We split all booty equally!”

“This is a relic of my people. It is not booty,” Kazrack insisted.

“Fine, you can take it, but we’re keeping the dwarf coins,” Rondar said, putting the bag to his chest.

“Yeah, keep yer damn golden dwarf stroker,” Gunthar spat. “Wouldn’t be able to sell something like that in this piss-poor backwater kingdom anyway.”

Meanwhile, Ratchis was feeling somewhat better and Frederick having noticed the key hanging from the Friar’s belt for the first time recognized it and began to tell him about it.

He was unsure of its powers, but said that it was a relic of the Third Age and had its origins in Thricia during the time of Agon the God-King.⁵³ It was said to have been made from the doors to the palace of the god-king. It was to be worn openly where all could see it.

“Since it was forged it has passed through many hands,” Frederick added. “Friars of Nephthys don’t generally live very long, ya know.”

Ratchis nodded.

“I don’t know how Anárie and I are going to get our spellbooks safely to wherever we’re going,” Martin opined, looking at the water.

“Can’t you hide them away somewhere and we’ll come back for them?” Beorth suggested.

“Uh-uh. No way! Not after the last time,” Martin’s face pinched up as if he had smelled something bad. “We may be gone a long time and may not even come back out the same way. No way!”

But by then they had looked beyond the double doors to what Gunthar described as having been a storage room of some kind. There were scores of pots. Most were shattered, or severely cracked and fell apart by the slightest touch. There was a muck of wet rotted grain, and the stale smell of alcohol. However, some of the smaller pots were intact and Anárie had the idea of using them to transport the spell books. While the larger books would not fit through the tops, the pots could be carefully cracked and then fixed with the books inside using a *mending* spell. The tops could then be sealed pieces of stone from the broken ones and sealed with wax.

It was decided that someone should scout the flooded passage before everyone went. Ratchis volunteered, but Gunthar insisted he represent his group and come along as well. Finally, it was agreed that Beorth would accompany them as he wanted to be the first to deal with the monks if they happen to run into any.

The three warriors removed their armor and Martin the Green cast his spell of *mage armor* on each of them.⁵⁴ They split a potion of water-breathing that Kismet provided them. It was a sea-green color and had a nauseating slimy

⁵² *Truesilver* is a direct translation of the elven word ‘*mithra*’. The dwarven word is never shared with outsiders.

⁵³ According to human measure, this is currently the Fourth Age. However, elves, dwarves and other long-lived races still consider this the Third Age. Regardless of how it is measured, the portion of time is also called “The Age of Adventurers” and was when most of the powerful magical items found in Aquerra today were made.

⁵⁴ **DM’s Note:** Wizards may trade out prepared spells by preparing a different spell in the same slot. Re-preparing in this way takes 15 minutes per spell level per spell.

texture.⁵⁵

“Be careful of the grappers!” Kazrack warned as Ratchis, Gunthar and Beorth began to head into the murky water. Beorth’s helmet shone with light, and Gunthar had a dagger with the spell upon it too.

The three of them could feel their bodies panic and their minds reel as they first went in below the depth of their heads. The instinct in each of them was to struggle up and gasp for air, for a second Gunthar looked like he might do just that and Ratchis held a great amount of air in his powerful lungs, but Beorth simply hurried his pace and took a deep breath of water. He was aware of his fear, but a paladin never gives into it.

They moved along the bottom of the great passageway, half-walking and half-swimming. The passageway ceiling seemed to fall away above them as the sense of what was up and what was down was something they had to consider as they went further and further along the great spiral.

The water was cold, much colder than they had imagined it being. Ratchis was protected by his boots, but he could see Beorth and Gunthar turning a pale blue. The half-orc hoped there would not be much longer to go, as they had been traveling for nearly an hour. Along the way, they saw a lot of piled rocks, and would kick an occasional weapon, or piece of armor. They even saw a huge cart that must have been pulled by a team of oxen. Much of it had rotted away, but the main frame of it was made of metal, and it shone a bright-corroded blue-green in the spell light.

Eventually the passageway opened onto a great chasm. Pillars held up a level above them, and stone steps on the left and right went both up to the level above and down deeper in the murky water. Before them, the chasm seemed like an infinite black void. Ratchis signaled for them to climb up.

Two levels up they emerged from the water and could see that they were on one of countless levels of a great chasm more than a half mile in diameter. It must have once been the hub for a huge dwarven city, but now there was only the echo of dripping water, and the occasional sparkle of some golden statue across part of the way on the right or left.

Where they stood was a stone platform, with a ceiling above it held up by four pillars. Behind the pillars were great stone double doors with a bas-relief of a hand with an eye in the palm, flanked by a scene of armored dwarven warriors.

“Me prick’s so shriveled it’s like a pea!” Gunthar grabbed his crotch and hopped up and down trying to warm up, and then let out a great guffaw that echoed across the chasm. “Get it? Pea!”

End of Session #61

⁵⁵ **DM’s Note:** The amount drunken determined how long the effect would last. There was 12 hours of water-breathing in the flask, so each would be protected for four hours.

Session #62

When Ratchis, Beorth and Gunthar returned, they found Kazrack to be a good deal paler and more wounded than they had left him.

“What happened?” Beorth asked.

“Kazrack and Anárie went to retrieve a breast plate from one of the dwarven dead in one of the front chambers and were attacked by that strange priestly ghaist who could call upon an unnatural darkness and seems to go incorporeal at will,” Martin explained.

“Until a moment ago I was paralyzed,” Kazrack said weakly. “And I am still not feeling very goo...”

The dwarf fell forward and heaved. His wounds began to bleed afresh. His spell of *Bear's Endurance* had worn off and his body could no longer deal with the damage it had sustained.

With a word to his goddess, Ratchis was stabilized his stocky friend.

“Uh-huh. Uh-Huh,” Rondar's voice ranged from a gargle to a shrill clucking. “I told ‘em not to go.”

Ratchis snarled at the lanky man.

“Well, I guess we'll have to drag the dwarf behind us underwater,” Gunthar said. “You drag him, pig-fucker. I don't want to be saddled with stumpy little grunt.”

“We aren't going anywhere,” Ratchis replied. “We'll rest again, in the storeroom and go when we have retrieved our spells and miracles and when Kazrack can move under his own volition.”

Gunthar grunted.

“Maybe we can just wait for the monks to get everything and ambush them on the way back and take it from them,” Martin suggested.

“Hey! That's not a bad idea!” Rondar's Osiris-apple bounced up and down excitedly. “I, uh... don't really want to go down into the water.”

“That kind of cowardly maneuver is worthy of a better man than the likes of you, dough-boy,” Gunthar said. “But the problem is...”

“There may be another way out we don't know of and then we'll be waiting here for nothing,” Ratchis said.

“Not to mention that how would we get the information we need from the monks about where the Maze is?” Beorth reasoned.

“Okay, okay... It was just an idea, and admittedly a bad one,” Martin acquiesced.

The two allied parties sealed themselves into the storage room and spent the night taking turns watching, though most of the watching fell to the Fearless Manticore Killers.

Balem, 19th of Sek – 565 H.E.

In the morning, or the closest approximation to morning that could be made as none of them had seen the sun in days, Ratchis used his spell of *lesser restoration* on Kazrack, and in addition a good amount of healing was passed around to strengthen everyone for the challenges to come.

Anárie used *alter self* to give herself gills and a protective layer of blubber, which made Kazrack balk, his distrust of

arcane magic coming to the surface.

“I’ve stuffed fatter girls than that,” Gunthar commented, and the elf maid sneered.

Martin cast *water breathing* three times and soon everyone was making their way through the frigid murky water, following the trail that Beorth, Gunthar and Ratchis had taken the day before.

It took them slightly longer than before, as Martin and Anárie kept bobbing away from the others, clutching their air-filled sealed clay plots that held their precious spellbooks, but eventually, they emerged from the water in the great chasm, coming up the stairs to the huge stone double doors.

“What does it say?” Martin asked, seeing that the doors were etched with dwarven runes.

“*Chamber of the Guarded Lore*,” Kazrack replied. “It is the common way to refer to a temple dedicated to our deity that taught us of mining and the secrets of the earth. He is also guardian of runes.”⁵⁶

“All those runes say just that?” Martin asked with incredulity.

“No, there are also runes of protection, and if they are magical, they may protect the temple against being entered,” Kazrack explained. “Does anyone mind if I go first?”

“I insist!” Gunthar said with exaggerated courtesy.

Rondar’s laugh echoed out across the dark water behind and below them.

“Wait, I’m not sure if that is such a good idea,” Ratchis said to his dwarven companion.

“Doesn’t it make most sense that a dwarven priest would not set off any glyphs or whatever in a place like this,” Schlomo suggested, he was wringing water from his mustache.

Ratchis grunted, but then cast *detect magic* to check the doors and the surrounding area. “Go ahead,” he finally said. “I don’t see anything.”

As Kazrack pushed on one of the great stone doors, the half-orc Friar of Nephthys cast a blessing on a handful of pebbles he had collected.⁵⁷

The great door creaked open on its rusted hinges, as weighted chains could be heard within the walls to rattle and then settle, easing the great weight of the door. A dim low-burning light escaped from the chamber beyond, and Kazrack entered first, having only opened the door a few feet. The others followed.

The chamber was enormous; Greater in size than any they had seen save the lowest level of the Necropolis of Doom.⁵⁸ It was nearly one hundred feet to the huge raised altar section at the far end that looked like it was at least fifty feet deep itself. The chamber was sixty feet wide and six columns that were ten feet in diameter created a corridor up the chamber leading to the altar, while there were two raised alcoves reached by narrow stone steps on each side on the walls. Narrower columns that held the bas-relief forms of armored dwarven guardians flanked the entrances to these adjacent rooms. The ceiling was nearly forty feet high at its tallest point. The marble floor, while covered in dust now, appeared to have once been highly polished and slick.

Braziers burned brightly by each of the columns, and up in the small balconies that framed the shadowy raised alcoves. There were others upon the altar that helped to illuminate the great chamber. Kazrack continued to move forward, confident that no harm could come to him in this place protected by his gods, but in a moment, he stopped in his tracks. He could now see that upon a stone ramp that led up to the altar was the huge statue of a mastiff. Broad-shouldered with a big blunt head, the rear portion of it seemed stubbier, like the hounds that dwarves bred for attacking. He could

⁵⁶ Kazrack is referring to Lehrothronar.

⁵⁷ *Magical Stone*

⁵⁸ See Session #48

recognize it as *Aitan-Abel*, the hound of Lehrathonar. The dog statue stood six feet at the shoulder; The top of its head nearly nine feet off the ground.

And if the mastiff were not already familiar to him from the religio-historical tales often told to him by his father in his youth, the great statue, over twenty-five feet high of the great dwarven god of mysteries reinforced it. It was carved to display his long priest robes, his beard intricately braided, his eyes shining like silver-fire in the brazier light, an arm outstretched before him at a slightly downward angle, palm out as if in warning, or a gesture that said, "wait." Upon the palm was carved an eye.

Kazrack was puzzled by the statue because he could see other parts of it that stuck out from the left and right, as if it had multiple facets, and it seemed that the feet of the statue did not touch the altar, but instead hovered on a dark shadow.

As he began to move forward again, the rest of the Fearless Manticore Killers carefully coming in behind him at a distance, their allies even more cautious, a voice called out from the inner alcove on the left. "Stop! Go no further!"

"Who is in the holy place of my people?!" Kazrack called up, as three figures appeared at the balcony before the alcove. It was clear they were monks, dressed in simple robes of black and in brown leather sandals.

A short stocky monk stepped forward, letting his cloak fall away. He was olive-skinned and clean-shaven, and his muscles were defined as if he were the perfect example of the peak of human physical condition. Even at this distance, Kazrack could see the detailed tattoos on the man's shoulder's and arms, but he could not make out what they were.

"I am called Hamfast, and I am a master of my order. We have been waiting for you, son of Rak-Kazum," the monk replied. "I am known to one of your number, Beorth, Ghost-hunter of Anubis, though in this light I cannot tell if he is with you now."

"I am here," Beorth said, stepping forward, craning his neck to get as good a view as he could. He could not remember meeting this man, but he knew he had from his own painstakingly re-created notes.

"I feel honored that you would be waiting for me," Kazrack said. "Though I am uneasy that you would violate this sacred place. What are you waiting for?"

"First, let me warn you not to step any further forward than you already have," Master Hamfast said. His voice was a tight as a fist. "The guardian of this holy chamber may not recognize you as one of its own and will certainly not recognize your companions. Secondly, let me put your fears to rest about our defiling this holy place of your kin. As Beorth knows we would not disturb the resting place of the dead, or any holy places, and have even toiled against those that would come here to plunder."

"What's wrong with plundering?" Rondar said, a little too loudly. Gunthar shoved an elbow in the lanky man's gut, while both Ratchis and Martin the Green threw angry looks at him.

"And as to what we are waiting for," the monk continued. "We need you to enter the place we have been seeking so that we might gain its lore."

"Well," Kazrack cleared his throat. "Why would I help you?"

"Because even if you got in you would not be able to gain what you have come here to learn," the monk paused. "And this we have..."

"And that is?"

"The dwarven name of Hurgun's Maze."

Kazrack was silent for a moment, and then he replied with a question. "What makes you think we do not already know this?"

"You would not bother asking that question if you knew," Hamfast replied.

“And you seek Hurgun’s Maze to use it to try to communicate with Anubis?” Ratchis asked. The half-orc stepped forward, stepping just past Kazrack.

“Approach the altar no further!” Master Hamfast said, his voice firm and steady. “If you trust me in nothing else, trust me in that.”

Ratchis looked from the monk over to the shadowed altar.

“And yes, of course. That is why we seek this place. We told this to Beorth months ago,” Hamfast continued.

Kazrack and Ratchis looked to Beorth, and the three of them walked away to join Martin and speak where the monks could not hear them. Anárie hung back with Kismet to keep an eye on the others and on the other raised alcoves, while Schlomo moved a bit more forward to listen to the warriors and watch-mage speak.

“If you know the name in dwarvish, we should drive the monks away,” Ratchis hissed his suggestion.

Kazrack nodded, but mouthed “no.”

The Fearless Manticore Killers were silent for a long moment, each considering the situation on his own.

“I think these monks are telling the truth, but they are not telling the *whole* truth,” Kazrack said.

Beorth and Martin nodded.

“In fact, I think they need to be led by a dwarf to achieve their aim, and thus want me.”

“Is it just you they need or any dwarf?” Beorth asked.

“Just a dwarf, I suspect,” Kazrack speculated. “I am not very special as dwarves go.”

At that moment Gunthar stepped forward and shoved his way through the gathered adventurers to address the monks.

“I’m tired of all this cow filth,” he said, and looked up to Master Hamfast. “Have you seen a sword?”

The monk’s eyes widened as Gunthar cried out. The Neergaardian leapt back, barely avoiding being skewered by a long arrow. Instead, the shaft sliced through his shoulder, sending a rain of blood across the floor.

Everyone turned to see where the arrow came from.

“Ah, yes...” Hamfast said. “We did not get to mention that there is someone else we have come in conflict with.”

At the balcony at the front of the first alcove on the left stood a tall lanky figure with long white hair, dressed in rustic brown and green and holding a long bow.

“Tanweil!” Martin the Green cried out.

Debo immediately roared, pulling his great sword from the from sheath on his back, rushing towards the stairs to the new foe; an anxious smile growing on his twisted face.

“Wait! We should discuss things first!” Kazrack called out to the mysterious warrior. “We may not have a reason to fight.”

Ratchis hurried to intercept the barbarian, hoping to cease hostilities. Gunthar followed, his own intentions unclear.

Anárie quickly ducked behind one of the huge pillars to cast defensive spells on herself and did not see the squat barbarian reach Tanweil.

There was a flurry of movement from the lanky warrior. He dropped his bow and seemed to claw at Debo with both hands and then leap forward, perhaps head-butting him and then spun around quickly. Debo's body jerked as if he were struck several times, and then he was tripped by something, falling backwards onto the stairs, stunned.

"What the hell did he do to you, Debo?" Gunthar called out, as Tanweil, a blur of movement managed draw his bastard sword to block the blow of Ratchis' great axe; the half-orc realizing that diplomacy would not be an option now.

Beorth made his way around the opposite stairway and up towards Tanweil. "Kazrack is right! We must talk! Tanweil, stop!"

Frederick not sure what else to do, raised his voice in a rousing drinking song regarding victory over one's foes.

Kismet and Schlomo hid behind one of the statues near the door, while Martin joined Anárie .

Ratchis leapt back, ready to charge to the mysterious attacker, but Gunthar did not hesitate. He swung his long sword, and Tanweil ducked right into the follow-up blow from the short sword, but the foul-mouth warrior grunted as he felt a numbing pain up his arm, as if the blade had struck something much harder than armor or human skin.

"What tha...?"

Anárie swung out from behind the column hissing her arcane incantations, "*sagitta magicus*," and two arrows of light went flying from her fingers, but Tanweil still moving with incredible speed seemed to not pay them heed. The arrows dissipated against his chest with no apparent effect. He leapt off the balcony seeming to glide down toward the elfin maid, landing deftly to continue his charge at her.

But suddenly with a burst of speed of his own, Beorth was there to block his path. Calling to his god he drove his sword down onto the warrior, feeling something like thick hide give way beneath the blade. The paladin looked at the ground and was shocked to see green-hued blood dripping from the mysterious warrior.

"*Spherus igneus*," Kismet chanted and sent a sphere of flame at Tanweil, but with seeming weightlessness he leapt as it passed beneath him.

"Foul servants of the dragon," Tanweil hissed; his voice as sibilant and inhuman.

Debo groaned and shook his head and leapt to his feet, grabbing his sword on the way.

"Get 'im, Debo!" Rondar cheered from the safety of the doorway, where he had crept to during the chaos of the battle.

"Gunthar! Call Debo off!" Kazrack called out, even as he moved forward to join Beorth, and Ratchis charged at Tanweil ignoring his dwarven companion's tactical suggestion, but Tanweil spun around, easily parrying the blow. However, this allowed Anárie to cast *expeditious retreat* and hurry past back towards Debo and away from the fight.

Tanweil spun around on one foot, and then brought his weight down on the other leaning forward as he let out a huge breath. A green noxious clinging gas roiled from his lips, surrounding Beorth, Ratchis and Debo. Ratchis tried to cover his mouth, but he could feel the stuff burn as it permeated his pores. Debo took a step forward and dropped, unconscious. Beorth coughed blood and swayed, but kept his feet.

Before anyone could react, Tanweil leapt again, flying up to the opposite alcove from which he had emerged.

"If we are not even going to try diplomacy, we should at least not chase a flying opponent!" Kazrack continued shouting his tactical suggestions. "Fall back to one of the alcoves and let him come to us."

"That's a good idea!" Rondar agreed nodding vigorously, walking cautiously over to the opposite alcove from where the action was taking place; the one Tanweil had first emerged from. The lanky coward put away his sword and drew his crossbow.

“Bah! He can’t get us all!” Gunthar spat, moving towards the steps.

Kismet made her ball of flame chase Tanweil up the steps, and Beorth followed it, still coughing.

Schlomo took a shot with his crossbow, but it hit too low and struck the balcony wall.

“Beorth! Fall back!” Ratchis echoed Kazrack for the first time, as the dwarf hurried over to the alcove Rondar was making for. Anárie went over there as well.

But it was too late, Beorth had barely made it up the left-side stairway when Tanweil leapt down on him. The man’s bastard sword slammed into the paladin’s neck and only Beorth’s helmet kept his head from being forcibly removed from his shoulders.⁵⁹ There was an unpleasant sound of metal crunching beneath the blow and as Beorth began to fall backward, and upper-cutting blow from the blade hurried him along his way, blood blossoming explosively from his wounds. He lay at the bottom of the steps unmoving.

Frederick stopped singing. “The monks are on the move!” he warned everyone, as he made his way to the great doors which were still slightly ajar.

Unsure what else to do, Martin the Green decided Kazrack’s plan was best and hurried over to the alcove, but from the corner of his eye he saw one of the monks heading over to the altar they had warned against. And then he saw movement that made his head turn to make sure he was not hallucinating. The great statue of a dog that stood at the front of the altar moved with a great grating sound, even though the movements of the thing were fluid like living flesh of stone. It leapt to one side to give chase to the monk and looking back to make sure the dog was on his tail, the monk turned towards the general melee and poured on the speed.

“Oh shit,” Gunthar muttered. Schlomo hurried over to defend Beorth, but Tanweil did not leap down to finish the paladin, rather he jumped back down off the side of the steps onto the main level, taking stock of his opponents. Kazrack hurried back down the steps, having seen what happened to Beorth.

Ratchis kept the strange white-haired young man in his right eye as he hurried over apply a minor orison on Beorth to keep him from bleeding to death.

The monk came whizzing past between Gunthar and Kazrack, and the foul-mouth Neergaardian managed a shallow cut against the one called Maynard, who Beorth might have recognized as one of the two that came for him months before if he could remember anything at all.

Kazrack, however, was too busy putting his weapon down and walking towards Tanweil with arms open. “I will be your hostage,” he said to the incredible warrior. “Our goals need not be in conflict. Put down your weapon as I have done mine, or even put it to my neck, but let us talk.”

“Wow, that dwarf is crazy,” Rondar’s gurgled, drooling in amazement.

“Help me find the sword,” Tanweil said, his voice was a gurgling hiss that did not seem to sync up with the way his lips moved. “It is all I want.”

The crackle of Kismet’s sphere of flame could be heard as she rolled it towards Tanweil despite the exchanged words. There was near silence for a half-second, but it was shattered by Gunthar’s bellow. The great dog statue that had been chasing the monk reached him grabbing the Neergaardian in its stony teeth and shaking him as easily as a normal dog would to a tawny rabbit. It dropped him, and Gunthar did not move again. The thing turned its blind eyes towards Kazrack and Tanweil.

“The other two monks are making a break for it,” Frederick pointed to where Hamfast and his other underling were leaping up on to the great altar area. The bard hurried over to where Beorth lay but keeping an eye on the stone dog.

Tanweil leapt again floating down towards the altar. Kismet’s ball of flame bounced after him, as Ratchis sprinted

⁵⁹ **DM’s Note:** Tanweil scored a “Decapitation” critical effect, but the Beorth’s helmet lowered the effect to merely double damage.

towards the altar to catch up to the monks, leaving the bard and Schlomo to watch Beorth. At the same moment, the monk that had led the dog to this area stopped beside them, crouching into a fighting stance.

“Somebody come help me protect the paladin,” Frederick cried, holding his rapier out feebly. “I am no good at this stuff.”

As if in answer, the stone dog barked, or at least everyone assumed it did, for the bark was so loud that all other sound seemed to cease to exist compared to it. Anárie stumbled backward dropping her bow and clutching her ringing head. The reverberation knocked, Kazrack, Rondar and the monk before Frederick to their rear ends. Hamfast’s companion up in the altar area fell as well.

Kazrack scrambled to his feet and ducked behind one of the columns.

“If your heart is pure you need not fear the dog,” he called out to his companions. “The monks are our real concern. Tanweil did not strike me down when he had the chance; leave him be.”

“Crazy,” Rondar muttered of the dwarf as he climbed to his feet as well. The golem of Aitan-Abel turned and noticed the activity upon the altar. Tanweil was leaping on the ramp the dog had once occupied, as Ratchis paralleled up a shallow set of step to this raised area on the right.

“Master! It is returning to the altar,” Maynard cried out to Hamfast as he leapt to his feet, and then called to the stone beast, moving before it. “Over here! Over here!” He then had to immediately leap, as Kismet turned her ball of flame to roll through his position.

Now that the dog was menacing the people on the altar, Martin risked scrambling from the relative safety of the raised alcove and made his way to the dying Gunthar. He began to bind the man’s wounds.

Kazrack made his way towards the monk near Frederick and Beorth, but the monk took off for the altar, coming dangerously close to the dog.

Ratchis could now see that Hamfast had made it to a door tucked in the rear left side of the raised altar area. He seemed to be examining it carefully. He could also see now that the great statue of Lehrothronar was raised nearly three feet off the altar and was set on a smaller jagged metal wheel with another smaller one protruding from the altar at a ninety-degree angle. There was obviously some machinery to the thing, and he could see that each side the statue had a different face and had an extra set of arms in a different position. The angle of the great statue directly above him made it difficult for him to determine specifics.

Tanweil hurried past the monk that was holding his ground between Hamfast and the approaching dog. The monk stepped to one side and laid a high kick right in Tanweil’s face, but Tanweil did not slow. He poured on the speed, and Hamfast turned too slow to block the deadly blow to his gut. The monk stumbled back against the door clutching at his own entrails as they bulged out. There was a blast of electricity as the monk’s shoulder hit the warded door, and his body jerked several times before sliding down to not move anymore.

The dog ran up the ramp onto the raised area and snagged Maynard, jerking him back and forth and tossing the crumpled corpse off the altar.

Beorth’s eyes fluttered, and he could hear Frederick’s soft singing, and the bard’s calloused hands on his neck and side.

“What is happening?” the paladin asked.

“I dunno. They’re all up there fighting, except Kazrack, and Gunthar’s dying and... and...and...”

Suddenly Tanweil’s head jerked to the left and he stared at a stained pewter holy fount mounted on the wall there on the left side of the raised altar area.

“I found it!” He hissed and leapt into the fount, reaching down to draw a great gleaming bastard sword. “I found it!”

The dog slammed the flat top of its head into the guarding monk, and the monk stumbled backward and retreated some, endeavoring to keep a defensive posture up.

“Master, it is as it was before. Nothing can stop it,” he called to Hamfast, who miraculously was dragging himself across the altar floor to other side of the room to get away from both Tanweil and the dog.

“Surrender and I will heal you,” Kazrack said, cutting off Hamfast’s retreat. He held his flail above his head. Ratchis had his bow out and hurried over.

“Do you know the name of the Maze?” he asked the dying monk. Hamfast’s only reply was to choke out a bubble of blood.

Tanweil leapt off the holy water font and glided down off the altar to the main level.

“He’s got the sword!” Schlomo cried out.

“Come help me guard the door,” Beorth said, limping off towards the great doors to the chamber. He winced in pain with each step. “He has the sword. We can’t let him out.”

“Oh, no...” Frederick hesitated, and then followed. “I guess we need the sword for the plan.”

Ratchis looked up as the shadow of the great dog came over him. He leapt to one side, but still felt most of the brunt of the thing’s headbutt. The half-orc ran away from it hoping to lead it away from Kazrack. He could see the other monk, withdrawing from the altar to get away from the dog.

Suddenly Kazrack noticed that Hamfast had tried to take the moment of danger as a chance to begin to heal himself. The monk seemed to be in a deep meditation and had his hands to his open gut. Kazrack started as he saw innards and sinew suck back into the wound. He brought down his flail, and the monk turned, absorbing most of the blow on his muscular shoulders. The monk’s robe tore revealing his many goat and goat-head tattoos on his olive flesh.

“I said, surrender and I will cure you,” Kazrack repeated with a grunt.

Frederick hurried through the door and began to try to close it from the outside, while Schlomo pushed from the inside. Beorth stood right before the crack of the door, blocking it. He could see Tanweil’s long-legs pulling him closer and closer across the great marble floor stained in fresh blood. He could see Anárie and Martin struggling to save Gunthar’s life, while Debo lay apparently lifeless in the center of the floor. Closer to the altar was the shadowy outline of the broken body of Maynard.

The great stone dog continued to chase Ratchis, and barked again, and again Anárie’s sensitive elven ears seemed more affected than anyone else, holding her head and swaying. Martin’s cry in astonishment was drowned out, as her hands left Gunthar’s body just as they were tying off a critical wound.

“Only you can calm it,” Hamfast croaked to Kazrack, dragging himself further away from the dwarf. “Only you can keep it at bay.”

The words seem to echo in the dwarf’s head for a moment and he was certain they were true, but then he thought perhaps *too* certain, and he shook his head to clear it.⁶⁰

He slammed his flail into Hamfast again, and again the monk dropped and stopped moving, blood oozing out from under him.

“Over here, dog!” the other monk cried, kicking over one of the braziers near the edge of the altar. “Over here!”

Ratchis took advantage of the distraction and ran off the altar in direction of the door.

⁶⁰Monks of Rahkefet gain the ability to give *suggestions* as they rise in level.

“We don’t work for the dragon,” Beorth said, calmly to Tanweil as the man approached, slowing to a determined march. The paladin held his sword up. “We want to slay it.”

The door behind Beorth closed with an echoing thump.

“Beorth! Let the sword go!” Ratchis cried to his companion, hurrying to get there.

The remaining monk turned towards Kazrack and speaking an arcane word he pointed a finger at the dwarf, shooting a sickly green ray at him. Fortunately, it fell short. The monk made a quick turn, and the dog came into view from behind him and bit deep in the dwarf, but not worrying him as much as he had the others.

Kazrack pulled free and fell down.

“Loyal servant of Lehrothronar,” he pleaded in dwarven. “The monks are the enemies of your master. The monk that attacks me is the true enemy! Save your wrath for him!”

The dog as if obeying leapt over and slammed the monk again. The monk attempted to tumble away, but the dog snapped its powerful jaws on him and forced him to his knees. The dog worried the monk for a second and then let him drop motionless.

Rondar fired his crossbow at Tanweil from the safety of the alcove he had not left, since arriving there. The bolt skidded across the floor, coming short.

“*Sagitta Magicus*,” Kismet chanted from behind the nearby flanking statue. The bolts of light fizzled as they struck Tanweil.

“Nothing will stop me from slaying her,” Tanweil whispered, and he deftly leapt over Beorth’s attempt to trip him, coming down sword first. There was a burst of blood, and Beorth crumpled.

Schlomo turned from where he had pushed the door and slammed his warhammer into Tanweil’s knee.

“If you’re going to get out of that door with that sword you are going to have to kill me,” Schlomo said.

“Oh! Schlomo, no!” Kismet cried out. She chanted her magic words again, and again she struck him with her *magic missiles*. Schlomo saw a brooch about Tanweil appear and crumbled to the floor.

Ratchis charged at Tanweil, but the tall man leapt aside and turned, putting the hand-and-a-half sword between them. Beorth began to crawl away, whispering a prayer, as Schlomo moved to cover him.

The half-orc moved to parry Tanweil’s blows with his hammer, but it was no use. The sword flashed twice, and in a moment, he was unconscious and bleeding out as well.

“You would think that a half-breed like you would understand the need to destroy all traces of your hated origin,” Tanweil hissed, and stepped over him to engage Schlomo who still blocked the door.

“I’ll say it again,” Schlomo gritted his teeth. Kismet leapt out from behind the statue, casting a spray of color at Tanweil. The warrior was momentarily stunned. “You have to come through me to get to the door.”

Beorth dragged himself to his feet again, and sloppily swung at Tanweil, who moved aside. The poor paladin twisted his leg as he tried to land the blow and cried out. It convulsed in pain with every step he took.⁶¹

Tanweil grunted as a crossbow struck his rear left shoulder. Rondar had come off the steps and flanked.

Throwing his sword around him woozily Tanweil tried to keep his enemies at bay, but Schlomo stepped in and brought

⁶¹ **DM’s Note:** Beorth suffered a fumble effect that halved his speed.

his hammer down right on Tanweil's crotch. The tall warrior roared an inhuman roar.⁶²

"Martin, get one of those animals out of your bag!" Kismet called out, as she drew her bow and brought an arrow to it.

"Lehrothronar, if I am a worthy servant, please aid me and call off my fellow servant," Kazrack beseeched his god, as he focused his pure divine channeling into the stone dog.⁶³

The dog bit him again, and he barely was able to jerk out of its jaws.

Beorth swung his sword and Tanweil easily avoided the blow. Tanweil spun suddenly dropping the pommel of his sword on the top of the gnome's head, dropping him to his bottom. He swung the sword down and then back up with a quick whip of his wrists, flicking Beorth's chin painfully. The paladin fell backward.

Schlomo was back on his feet almost immediately and swung his hammer. Tanweil leapt over the blow, and then growled angrily, as two of Anárie's *magic missiles* struck him from behind.

Kazrack had scrambled over to the far-right side of the raised altar area where a low burning hearth, an anvil and set of tools were found. He squeezed behind the tool rack, and the dog knocked them away with a sway of its great head.

Rondar fired another bolt from his heavy crossbow, but it went wide. Schlomo raised his hammer to block Tanweil's sword blow, but one blow cut deep into his arm, causing his guard to drop, and the follow up blow skewered him through the side. The tall warrior kind of flicked his sword to pull it free of the gnome.

"Schlomo!" Kismet screamed and let an arrow loose, but it bounced off the warrior with no visible effect.

"Have you no compassion at all?!?" Martin screamed after Tanweil, firing his crossbow, and missing. "Or are you no better a creature than the dragon that made you?"

Anárie pulled her bow and fired an arrow at Tanweil as he pulled at the great door. The arrow bit into his back, and there was a spurt of green blood, but he did not let it slow him.

Kismet, Anárie, Rondar and Martin began to bombard Tanweil with a barrage of bolts and arrows as the dragon-blooded warrior pulled at the door, but as if by some miracle of Bes, Frederick held it closed against that mighty will from the other side.

"You're a selfish little worm, Tanweil!" Martin taunted. "What are you going to do once you've killed her? What then?"

The bolts and arrows continued to fall short or bury themselves into the door. The few that struck the man seemed to bounce off of him with no apparent effect.

Meanwhile, across the great chamber, Kazrack was making a break for it from where he had been penned in by the dog, but the animated recreation of Aitan-Abel was not having any of it. It pounced to one side as if he were just a dog of great size, but the resulting thud of his real weight reverberated throughout the room. Kazrack looked up just as the dog came down and swung his large head.

There was a sickening crunch and Kazrack saw a burst of his own blood entwined with twinkling stars and the most terrible pain he had ever suffered. He fell backward clutching at his beard.

Tanweil paused in his pulling, oblivious to the arrows falling around him and seemed to laugh at himself. He then stepped over three feet to the right and pulled on the other great door with one hand and it opened several feet.⁶⁴

⁶² **DM's Note:** Schlomo was able to take advantage of Beorth flanking Tanweil to make a sneak attack.

⁶³ **DM's Note:** A turning attempt can be used for various devotions by means of needing to accomplish something based on faith. For example, a door may be warded to wait until someone uses such devotion power on the door as a sign of faith to the god in question, or good in general.

⁶⁴ **DM's Note:** For several rounds, Frederick was able to continue to win the strength contests between him and Tanweil despite the latter's great advantage in strength score. The players took turns rolling for Frederick.

He chopped down through the opening and the others heard a horrific scream from Frederic.

"My arm! My arm!" the bard cried out.

Tanweil stepped through the door, and in a rare display of courage, Rondar followed and fired a last bolt from his heavy crossbow.

Anárie slipped past the lanky rogue firing at her last view of Tanweil as he dove into the cold murky water.

She let out a sigh and looked down. There lay Frederick, the dying murmur of a song his bloody lips, his right arm removed at the elbow; blood blossomed around him as his eyes rolled back into his head.

End of Session #62

Session #63

“Schlomo’s dead!” Kismet wailed. “Everyone I know is dead.” She collapsed hysterically atop her companion, clutching his bloodied body as she wept.

Anárie moved to comfort her, but remembered Debo and moved to aid him.

“Oh, don’t worry about him,” Rondar lips flapped, as he came back in the great chamber. “Debo can’t die. Just leave him.”

Anárie shrugged and moved to aid Martin who was weeping as he tried to aid Frederick, but the bard had lost too much blood, and the watch-mage was just sitting cross-legged, his face buried in his bloody hands.

She then went over to check Ratchis and Beorth. The half-orc had stabilized, but Beorth was still bleeding out and Anárie got to work. To her surprise, Kismet crawled over and helped, still crying.

On the altar Kazrack awoke to the feeling of warm breath washing over him. There was a great pain in his face, and he reached blindly for his jaw, and then winced and cried out. His mailed hands had pushed a shard of bone into the meaty mess of his face. The dwarf’s jaw was shattered.⁶⁵ He froze as he heard the sound of grating stone above him, and he opened his eyes slowly to find the stone golem of the great dog of Lehrothronar standing above him.

Kazrack closed his eyes and let his hand slide slowly down to the bag of runestones about his neck, and gave a silent prayer, projecting the power of his faith as granted by his gods towards the golem above him.

The dog’s stone head cocked down towards the rune-thrower, and then it looked up and stepped back, getting into a sitting position.⁶⁶

When Kazrack let out a sigh, he felt his blood dribble down his throat and choke him. The dwarf sat up with a start and spat the blood. The great living statue did not react.

“Are we friends now?” Kazrack asked the dog in dwarven, but again it did not react.

Kazrack stood, wary of the dog, but decided to have faith that it would not hurt him, as every moment jarred his jaw so much that he doubted he would be able to flee it anyway.

Holding his left hand to his face, he limped over to the front of the chamber to check on his companions. The great stone dog got up as it turned to follow him, but did not follow off the altar, taking up its spot on the stone ramp.

Martin and Anárie were happy to see the dwarf was still alive, but Martin’s own jaw dropped when he saw Kazrack’s mangled face. Anárie was impassive as usual. Kazrack tried to talk, but his words were indecipherable, and he spat blood and bits of flesh as he choked out words in the back of his throat; not to mention the great pain it caused him.

Rondar pulled Frederick’s body back into the chamber, and he and Kazrack pushed the door back shut.

An argument ensued after Kazrack decided that it would be best to get the wounded to one of the alcoves and hole up in there until they recover. Martin thought it was foolish to move them, but Kazrack’s inability to be understood was so frustrating to both of them, they just gave up and Kazrack hustled up to the alcove where the monks had been, and looked around.

Kazrack found several packs holding rations, and two different books. There were also several straw mats, and signs

⁶⁵ Kazack had suffered the following critical hit effect: Struck in Face: Apply Crit Multiplier +1 to Damage Roll (and armor DP damage) – Fort Save (DC 10 + ½ damage) (+15 to save if Full Helm) or Jaw Shattered, stunned for 1d4 rounds, 85% chance to fail spells with verbal components

⁶⁶ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack needed to successfully roll to turn a 10 HD undead, and then roll enough “turning damage” to destroy 14 HD in order to keep the thing at bay, and then subsequently speak to it in ancient dwarven to have it obey him.

that a small fire had been lit in the alcove. There were smoke stains on the statue of Krauchaar at one end of the alcove. There were several spots for prayer stones—like the one Kazrack carried everywhere—to be set before it.

Seeing there was no danger there, he went on to search the other alcoves, finding each one was dedicated to another of the dwarven gods.

After returning to help bring the wounded up to that alcove, Martin *levitated* himself and dragged himself across the ceiling reaching from support to support and floating down to retrieve the unconscious form of Hamfast. The great stone dog golem came to life again, but once Martin floated up and out of reach, it returned to its spot.

It was long hard work to get all the wounded up to the alcove without aggravating their wounds. Debo was left where he lay.

Rondar gave him a kick and said, “He’ll be alright, *eventually*.”

Kazrack retrieved the sealed clay pots Anárie and Martin spellbooks were in, and cracked them open for them.

Gathering together everything they could find on the monks, which included the two books (still in their oilskin bags), a rod in three pieces connected by chains and a pair of black metal and leather bracers worn by Hamfast that were covered with designs depicting ships, skulls and a full moon, Anárie cast her *detect magic* spell.

She cried out, as one of the two books exuded such a bright and powerful aura of magic it drowned everything else out and blinded her momentarily.

The book in question, which was nearly one and half feet high and a foot wide, and two inches thick, was removed from the others (but kept in the bag), and the aura of the other things was detected. The bracers detected as magical, but the other book did not.

Martin carefully pulled it out of the bag and flipped through it. It was a traveling spellbook, a *read magic* spell, and in a moment, he was oohing and aahing over what he found within.

“What about the other tome?” Anárie asked.

“Well, we can have Rondar go behind a pillar and open it and see what happens,” Martin quipped.

“Martin!” Anárie admonished disapprovingly. Martin shrugged with a weak smile.

“I’ll take watch,” Rondar said, coming into the alcove. He immediately sat down and fell asleep snoring loudly.

Teflem, 20th of Sek – 565 H.E.

It was impossible to tell if it was truly morning, but Kazrack allowed his dwarven intuition to guide him.

As Martin spent his morning learning *bull’s strength* from the captured spell book, Kazrack prayed for nothing but spells of healing, and proceeded to loosen spell after spell as his fractured jaw made the verbal components of the spells nearly impossible to intone.

In the end, he was only able to make one prayer work, bringing Ratchis closer to consciousness, but still a ways off.

Anárie cleverly used her *bear’s endurance* spell to temporarily bring Beorth to consciousness.

“Who calls me from Anubis’ Realm?” Beorth croaked.

“You must get yourself together and call on your god’s power to close your wounds so that you will not slip towards death’s door once again,” Anárie replied, calmly.

“So, he got away with the sword?” Beorth asked, slowly sitting up and holding his gut as he winced in pain.

Anárie nodded.

“Debo want sword! Where sword man?” the voice echoed from down in the chamber, and Rondar hurried to go soothe his companion the best he could and explain what had happened. Angry, Debo slapped the lanky rogue several times, causing the latter to flee back into the alcove. The seemingly immortal barbarian followed soon after.

“Heal Gunthar!” He commanded Kazrack. “Gunthar will have plan to get sword and kill leaping-warrior!”

It took a while to explain how that would be impossible.

He howled like a wolf, but finally settled down and slept most of the day away, his remaining wounds slowly disappearing as the hours wore on.

Martin explained to Beorth about the book that had been found among the monks’ things and how it detected so strongly of magic that is washed out all around it.

Beorth approached where the book lie, still wrapped in its oilskin bag, and reaching towards it, covered his eyes, calling to Anubis to reveal auras of evil in the area.

He suddenly stumbled backwards and his shaved head slammed against the marble floor of the alcove. Anárie hurried over to him, and saw blood pouring from the paladin’s nose. A moment later, he awakened, holding the bridge of his nose, and shaking his head.

“Pure evil,” was all he said.

Anulem, 21st of Sek – 565 H.E.

The next day Beorth was able to bring Ratchis to consciousness, and he in turn was generous with the healing of his goddess after having prepared some spells. He helped Gunthar last, while Debo roared to get him conscious. The barbarian was growing more irritable by the day.

“Ugh! I feel as raw as the space between yer mama’s legs,” Gunthar complained, sitting up

“He’s fine,” Martin commented on the Neergaardian’s health.

“Tell me ya got that crazy bastard who was a killing machine?” Gunthar asked the group.

No one replied, by way of answer.

“Well, at least tell me he didn’t get away with that filthy sword?” Again, there was no answer.

“Aw, son of a rotten-milk bitch,” he swore.

Ratchis spent a good deal of the morning resting, but in the afternoon he looked after Kazrack’s raw wound, and tried to tie the jaw in place with a bandage so that it might heal itself in time with the aid of magical healing, but he knew it would not likely heal without magical healing of significantly more power than was available to the group.

Later in the day, Martin took Ratchis aside and explained to him about the book among the monk’s things.

“So, we leave it alone, and just hold on it until we come across someone powerful enough to deal with it, kind of like we’ve done with that amulet Beorth carries around,” Ratchis reasoned.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ You have to go way back to session #8 to know what he is talking about.

“And so I would agree, except I think it is the Book of Black Circles,” Martin whispered in reply. “Since we have come here, I have felt that indescribable urge to fulfill the quest for Osiris grow, slowly at first, but now it feels more urgent. I think it is no coincidence that there is an incredibly powerful evil book among a brotherhood of monks who seem to have lost their way from Anubis.”⁶⁸

Ratchis sighed.

“So what do you plan to do?” Ratchis asked.

“I plan to take the book somewhere secluded, perhaps with you standing guard when you feel better and see if I can fulfill my quest right here and now,” Martin replied.

“Don’t be stupid,” Ratchis replied. “We need to get into this map room, which I think is beyond the door where Hamfast got fried and find out where the entrance to Hurgun’s Maze is, and *then* you can figure out what to do with the book.”

“I understand your point of view, but I am supposed to cast a spell from it before I destroy it, and I don’t know if the spell is what destroys it, or if I am supposed to accomplish something specific with the spell before destroying it, or even if the casting of the spell is beneficial to me, and maybe it is something we need, because we all know the gods work in mysterious ways.”

Ratchis sighed again.

“Show me the book,” Ratchis said.

Martin walked over and picked up the bag. He looked confused for a moment, and then turned away from the half-orc. He felt a strange sort of shame come over him.

Ratchis reached for the book.

“I... I can’t,” Martin said.

“What do you mean?”

“I feel compelled to keep it; to not let you have it.”

“Do you think that is because of Osiris, or because of the book?” Beorth asked, walking over, having overheard.

“What are all you sissies whispering and gossiping about?” Gunthar asked, walking over. “One of ya got a crush on the elf, or something?”

Gunthar’s guffaws died suddenly with a cry of pain. He was still somewhat wounded.

“Gunthar, this has nothing to do with you, now go sit down before I put you down,” Ratchis replied.

Debo leapt to his feet.

“Oh ho! Big ole bully pig-fucker thinks he can tell people what to do,” Gunthar snickered. “What would Nephthys say about that? I wonder...”

Ratchis growled.

Gunthar laughed at him and walked back out onto the balcony, followed by Debo and Rondar, where they did some whispering of their own, with occasional dismayed shrieks from the rogue.

⁶⁸ Martin’s task for Osiris in return for bringing Jeremy back to life was first discovered in Session #23

“Have you looked at the cover of the book?” Beorth asked. “Perhaps it holds some clue as to its origin and if it is truly the relic we all think it may be.”

Kazrack came over, “Ruh rehleh?”

No one understood him.

“The book radiates such powerful magics I fear that I would not be able to determine if it has any wards that might harm me if I open the book,” Martin explained.

“Uh ill uh-eh it,” Kazrack tried to say.

Everyone looked to him and shrugged. The dwarf made a gesture of opening a book.

“Rest, Kazrack,” was all Martin said.

“Uh um uh uh-eeust,” Kazrack replied.

“Here we go again, “ Ratchis seemingly understanding that once the dwarf was over-estimating his resilience.

“Kazrack, don’t be foolish,” Beorth admonished.

It was decided that the book could wait for the next day, when everyone would be more rested and more fully healed.

Ralem, 22st of Sek – 565 H.E.

Hours and hours later, hoping their body clocks were keeping with the habit of the days passing way above them on the surface world, they shared some soggy rations around a small fire.

Martin the Green scooped up the oilskin bag containing the book and gestured to Ratchis who followed him. They walked over to the opposite alcove. This one held a statue of Hodenar, the dwarven god of trade and song.

Ratchis waited out on the balcony, eyeing the great dog warily, while Martin sat with his legs crossed and the book in his lap. Taking a deep breath, he reached into the bag and pulled the book out.

He recoiled for moment, feeling the worn hide cover of the book, but there was also something intriguing about the cold covers of dead flesh. The black book slipped out into his lap, and for a moment he saw the raised black interlocked circles on its cover, but then all went black.

Isilem, the 2nd of Sek – 569 H.E.⁶⁹

“Marty! Marty! Wake up!” called a young woman’s voice. It was familiar to Martin, and yet he was confused as to why he should be hearing it. He turned over in bed and put his pillow over his head. He had noticed the sunlight streaming into the room, right on his face.

“It is always the same, when you wear that gaudy ring you shuffle around all night and keep me up, and when you don’t you sleep too much, and complain that being one of the legendary Fearless Manticore Killers you’ve earned the right to sleep-in some,” the voice continued. Martin could hear feet climbing towards him and then someone leapt into the feather bed.

“Come on!” She whined. “You know today is the party and plus tomorrow we begin our journey. We don’t have time to tarry! *Unless...*” A mischievous tone entered her voice. “Unless you want to get an early start on the children!”

⁶⁹ Notice the four-year gap in dates.

She yanked the pillow from his head, and he spun around surprised. She was awfully familiar, and then instinctively it came to him. It was Marion, youngest of the princesses of Gothanius, but something was wrong. When Martin the Green had last seen her, she had been a lot younger. Now she was a very pretty young woman of about seventeen or eighteen. She put a lock of her red-tinted brown hair behind an ear and smiled widely.

“Uh... children?” Martin gulped. Marion’s smile turned around.

“Oh, Marty! You always say the same thing! You aren’t in the mood, or we should wait until we get to Thracia, so I won’t be with child during the long journey. As if you could not just use your magic to swoosh us there safely in an instant, but oh, no... You could never abuse your power that way...”

She was climbing down off the bed loft by this point, apparently satisfied to have wakened Martin with her complaining, but annoyed at having her advances shunned.

Martin shook his head to clear it. His mind raced, as he tried to collect all the data of his environment to figure out what was going on. He was in a comfy bed loft in small cottage in the style similar to those he had seen in the various villages of Gothanius. He was apparently married to the youngest of the Gothanian princesses and some time had passed since the last thing he clearly remembered, as she appeared some five years older. And the last thing he remembered? The great fight in the temple chamber beneath the Pit of Bones, but there was another set of faint memories since that time. He struggled to recall them and became dizzy.

“Marty!” Marion’s voice called the main area of the house, below. “Don’t make me call you again!”

Martin snapped up and edged his way off the loft. He looked down at the rest of the finely appointed house, trying hard to gather clues and use his reason to figure out what was going on, and to squash the fear growing in the pit of his stomach.

The house was cozy. There was a small kitchen in an adjoining room, and what appeared to be a sitting room, with a corner with a desk piled with scrolls and books. There was nothing too fancy about it, but there were details that belied its wealth. There were silver candelabras and a finely woven rug of a style common to halflings textiles of Thracia. The curtains were fine lace, and the furniture was of a hardy and polished wood of the finest craftsmen.

Marion was busy in the kitchen, though she did not seem to be cooking anything, but was straightening it up, drawing the curtains and opening a window. She wore a simply gray dress, not all that different from those common to the wives of Gothanius, but again Martin’s discerning eyes noticed that the cloth it was made from was of fine quality, and the stitching not found among a common house seamstress that would make her own clothes.

He climbed down and made his way over to a wardrobe, and as he guessed, inside he found a few sets of his emerald watch-mage’s robes, along with travel clothes all stitched in green. He got dressed behind a screen, and then suddenly remembered!

“Thomas! Where are you?” He reached out with his thoughts to his familiar.

“I’m over here, silly!” Thomas chattered in reply. “Why so excited?”

The squirrel came scurrying across the rafters and leapt onto Martin’s shoulders. The watch-mage could see the beams were scored with holes, creating a home for his familiar.

“Thomas? What is going on? Where am I?”

“Huh? Stop being silly! We’re in Summit, but tomorrow we’re going home!” The squirrel replied. “Now if you don’t mind me, I’m going to get some nuts.”

“No, stay close to me,” Martin insisted. He could feel his familiar’s disappointment empathically.

“Um, when will they get here?” Martin asked his wife, trying to fake like he knew what was going on.

“Oh, any time now this morning. You know, you told the alderman last night at dinner,” Marion replied. “I do hope old Beatrice gets here soon with the things I asked her to prepare, and that awful Julissa.”

“Don’t call her ‘old Beatrice’,” Martin heard himself admonishing. Marion clucked her tongue at him.

“I, uh... need to look through some papers and, uh...prepare, uh... things for the, uh... trip,” Martin tried to cover for his sudden idea to check his own journals for clues as to what was going on and account for the apparent missing time.

“Oh!” Marion whined. “You promised you’d be done with all that days ago, but all you ever do is fuss over those things. When we go to Thracia, you had better not keep us stuffed inside libraries and visiting sages. I want to experience some of the culture and go to balls and visit the wonders you used to tell me about every night before we went to sleep...that first year we were married.”

Her voice grew sad, and Martin twitched uncomfortably.

“Uh, why not go check on the widow Beatrice?” Martin suggested.

Marion put her hands on her hips and stormed out, stopping only to grab a shawl.

Martin began to frantically look through his papers and found several volumes of what made up a journal, including a scorched and worn version of the one he last remembered having. He poured over the pages, looking to piece together what had happened.

What he found was perplexing. Here was the detailed record of nearly his every day since finding the *Book of Black Circles*, including the party’s journey into Hurgun’s Maze. He found many references to shifting rooms, planar gates, creatures of flame and of ice and of stone, and of shadow, and had to tear himself away from an account of the destruction of Mozek Steamwind to find what references he could to the Book of Black Circles. One thing he did find was that as the entries became more recent, there was all but the merest allusion to explaining events, and more and more spell theory and exploration of spell ideas.

Finally, he found what he was looking for, a reference to “taming the Book” and deciding it was best not destroyed, but its power tempered by wisdom and humility. Martin looked around the house once more. Surely, this was a humble existence. He wondered where the book was, and suddenly he knew it was in a hollow behind the bedtable up in the loft.

He flipped through his journal some more, hoping to absorb as much of his past as possible. He saw several references to casting spells beyond his ability using the book, and of a great number of magical items of great power to be found in Hurgun’s Maze.

“Marty! Are you still going through your papers?” Marion’s voice startled the Watch-Mage and he tossed the volume he was perusing onto the desk. “Come help me put out the things the widow Beatrice made; someone is coming up the road.”

Martin the Green found himself in the kitchen helping Marion set out various dishes of sausage and deviled eggs, and breads and jams. There were two huge skins of mead, and a pot of oatmeal drowned in honey. Marion talked on and on about how excited she was to see her sisters and her parents, and how glad she was that they would be staying at the castle for a few days before leaving.

“We will?” Martin asked.

“Stop playing stupid, Marty!” Marion bumped him with her hip, as her hands were full. “I have a lot of other things I want to pack, and you know you have to confer with father and greet your replacement from the Academy, that is if he shows up in time.”

“Oh, yes that’s right,” Martin replied, weakly. There was the sound of horses and loud voices from out the front window. Marion stopped what she was doing and threw open the door. Martin joined her.

There were four horses, one of which pulled a sledge on which was freshly hunted boar. The other three horses held warriors in very fine gear. The two men were dressed in fine mail and travel stained cloaks of purple in color. They both wore two swords and had long golden hair that shone in the morning sunlight.

Martin could not believe what he was seeing.

“Martin! It is so great to see you!” Jeremy cried, hurrying over, and greeting his friend with a tight embrace.

“Juh... Jeremy, how...how could this be?” Martin sputtered.

“What? I was invited...,” Jeremy scratched at his beard with one hand, while he waved to Marion with the other. “Oh, and Tracel sends her regrets and told me to tell you she looks forward to seeing you at the castle.”

Martin could see that Jeremy wore the replica scabbard for *the Right Blade of Arofel*, but the longsword he wore had a scabbard of similar make.

“We hunted you a fat whore of a boar,” came Gunthar’s gruff voice. He leapt off his horse. “Hey Marty!”

He hurried over and scooped up Marion by the waist and spun her around. She squealed like a child.

“Get your hands off my sister or I’ll skewer you like I did that boar, *husband*,” The third rider was a tall and lean woman, also dressed in mail and armed. She had crossbow tied to her saddle. She had long braids of auburn hair, and a handsome face that did not seem to have a feminine softness to it. It was Princess Selma, the second oldest of king’s daughters.

Gunthar dropped Marion and ran at his wife playfully. She pushed him aside, grabbing his arm and twisting it behind his back. He was broke free painfully and swung around grabbing her in a bear-hug. Selma began to punch down on his head.

Martin was appalled and was about to look to Jeremy to intervene when he noticed that the couple were now kissing. Selma bit Gunthar’s lip hard enough to draw blood.

“Oh, you are gonna pay for that,” Gunthar said between sucking on his lip.

“What are you going to do? Skewer me like that boar?” Mischievousness crept into her voice.

“Only, if you’re bad,” Gunthar replied.

Martin shuddered and went inside, following Marion and Jeremy back into the house.

“Are they always like that?” Martin asked Jeremy.

“They’ve been caught in almost every room of the castle,” Jeremy laughed. “Gunthar’s pretty rough, but I’m glad to have him around. Things get pretty boring over in Twelve Trolls. Oh... speaking of which, Gunthar and I want to accompany you from Twelve Trolls to Cutter Jack’s, along with Tracel and Selma. We’re going to catch a ship to Neergaard and visit our folks. They’ve spent a long enough time thinking I’m dead, when I was really dead twice.”

There was an awkward silence as they came into the sitting room, and Jeremy began to take off his chain shirt.

“Thanks again, Martin,” Jeremy said with a hint of sadness in his voice. “I owe you my life... twice over.”

“Twice over?” Martin was baffled. “I, uh... only did my part with the Urn of Osiris...”

“Oh, don’t be so humble, Martin,” Jeremy chided. “I don’t know how you did it, but those were some pretty powerful magics you harnessed in the Maze. We wouldn’t have been able to do it without you.”

“Uh, we’re going to go into the woods and look for a spot to *spar*,” Gunthar said, coming in to wink and nudge Martin with his elbow.

“Looks like someone else is coming up the street, by the way,” Gunthar added as he took his wife about the waist and showed her out. “Oh and get some people to start doing something with that filthin’ boar. It is going to take dog’s age to cook.”

“I’ll go see if Gib can give us a hand with that,” Jeremy offered, referring to the innkeeper over at the Sun’s Summit Inn. “Let’s go outside and greet whoever is coming, and then I’ll bring the boar over.”

Outside, a white robed bald figure bearing a staff, and wearing a shining silvery sword at his side came up the street. He was flanked on either side by six monks in black robes and sandals, but they were walking slightly behind him. They also had their heads shaved bald.

It was Beorth.

“Martin!” The paladin called. “It lightens my heart to see you well, and to know you are getting a well-deserved trip to your homeland.”

The companions clasped hands, and Jeremy waved as he led the horse drawing the boar towards the inn.

“Beorth, I am so glad you are here,” Martin the Green said. “I am not quite feeling myself and I fear something strange is going on.”

“What is it?”

“I fear something has happened to my memory,” Martin explained. “Or that this may all be a dream.”

“I do not feel like a figure in a dream,” Beorth replied with a rare smile. “Though I assume that none ever do.”

“Tell me of the Book of Black Circles,” Martin insisted.

“What of it?” Beorth’s face grew even paler than usual.

“Marty! Marty! Bring your friends in!” Marion called from within the house.

“Why did I not destroy it as Osiris asked of me? How did I avoid death, which was the alternative?”

“You were able to bend the book to your will,” Beorth explained. “You cast the spell from the book that helped close Hurgun’s Maze forever, and by breaking the evil spirit that guided it, you essentially destroyed it. But you know this. We debated it a great deal in the Maze, and in the end you were right. I mean, where would I be if you had not returned to me my memory in the Chamber of the Living Runes?”

Beorth placed a hand on Martin’s shoulder. “It is a great weight, such power and responsibility, but do not doubt your strength of will. We all witnessed it first hand in the Maze and would never doubt it ourselves.”

Beorth and Martin walked back into the house, where the watch-mage climbed up into the bedloft, while the paladin greeted Princess Marion.

In the hollow beneath the small table they kept there, Martin found a locked iron box, which he was able to open with a touch of his finger.

Inside he found five large spell books, one of which he recognized as having been his very first. It was well worn and scorched in one spot. He removed the books, flipping through them one by one and was amazed at some of the spells within that he *knew* he knew as he spotted them.

Beneath them all, in another false bottom was the book he sought. He recognized the worn cover of blackened human hide, and interlocking metal plates. He hefted it on to his lap and felt the raised circles on its covers.

He considered the Book of Black Circles for a long moment and then thought if the means to destroy it might exist within the book, as the book likely had the means to destroy many things. The cover flipped open of its own accord and the pages began to flip rapidly of their own accord.

Martin was startled as at that same moment he heard Marion's voice call from below, "Are you looking at your spell books again? You are being a rude host, and more of your friends have just arrived!"

Martin the Green's head drooped and he held the book in his hands trying to keep his breathing calm. He glimpsed at the writing in the book and immediately saw it was a spell of *disintegration*, and that he did not only know this spell, but for some reason had it prepared.

Pulling a lodestone and a pinch of dust from his satchel, Martin spoke a guttural arcane word as he pointed two fingers down at the book with severity. The magic discharged, but the book was still there.

"It would have been too easy," Martin sighed.

"Marty!!!!"

Martin came down off the loft after tucking the book back away to find three more visitors had indeed arrived.

Two elven women stood just within the door. One wore a blue cape and nearly transparent lavender clothing of gossamer and tall flared boots. She wore a short sword at her side and had shining blonde hair. It took Martin a moment to place her, and then he realized... It was Tirhas Tesfey. Beside her was Anárie, dressed much as she did when he last clearly remembered seeing her. In clean travel clothing of spun wool, and a green cloak. Her eyes shone in the morning light.

"Anárie ! Uh... Tirhas! What a surprise!" Martin said, coming forward to awkwardly shake their hands. Tirhas seemed unused to the gesture.

"It would have been rude to ignore your invitation, though it seems like but a moment since we saw you last," Anárie replied with a smile. "Tirhas and I, as do our people, owe you a great deal, and it is the least we could do to see you off on your journey."

"*Elen sila lumen olmentilmo,*"⁷⁰ Tirhas said in her melodic voice. "Anárie and I will be returning to Tempesta, so plan to accompany you to the coast where rumor has it an elven ship will be arriving soon."

"Oh, uh...that is lovely," Martin replied.

"However, if you have need of me I still want to fulfill my debt to you, for without you my body would still be the plaything of that ancient witch and my spirit would dwell in a stony prison," the elf added.

Martin was taken aback and stammered. It was then that he noticed a large figure hovering in the doorway. Dressed in travel-stained clothing of brown, dull green and gray was the towering half-orc Ratchis, still seeming uncomfortable within the confines of a house.

Soon the house was alive with chatter as Jeremy returned, and not long after so did Gunthar and Selma. The little house was crowded, and they all spoke of things that Martin wanted to digest, and it dizzied him.

"Hey pig-fucker! Don't hoard all the turkey legs," Gunthar shouted across the table. "Ow!" Selma had elbowed him hard in the ribs.

Ratchis sneered, and then challenged the Neergardian to an arm-wrestling match for the last drumstick. "Uh-uh, I see

⁷⁰ "*Elen Sila Lumenn Olmentilmo*" translates as '*A star shines brightly on the hour of our meeting!*'

you got your giant's strength belt-thing on," Gunthar protested. "I ain't stupid."

"I'll eat it," Jeremy said, grabbing it.

There was some kind of commotion outside, and everyone got up to go look, but Martin held Beorth back.

"Beorth, do you think you could do me a favor?" the watch-mage asked.

"Anything, so long as it does not violate the tenets of my faith," the paladin replied.

"Could you use the sight granted to you by Anubis to check for any evil aura I might have," Martin asked.

Beorth furrowed his brow. "If you would like me to, but perhaps after dinner?"

"Of course," Martin said. He followed everyone outside and saw a line of three great lizards, with a crowd of townsfolk following carefully from behind. The brown and green lizards were each being ridden by a pair of dwarves sitting back-to-back on elaborate saddles.

The dwarf at the head of the first lizard, yanked the reins to stop his creature and hopped off. He was covered in dust, and his red beard looked brown as he combed it out with a gloved hand.

It was Kazrack.

"Hail Martin! Watch-Mage of Summit!" He called happily, walking past all the others to grasp Martin's wrist in a firm dwarven shake. "It fills my heart with gladness to be able to see you off on your trip, and that I am reunited with all my old companions."

"Uh, yes... Uh, it has been so long," Martin stammered.

"Martin? Does something ail you? You seem paler than usual," the dwarf queried.

"Yes, but still not paler than Beorth," Jeremy quipped.

"No, I, uh... I'm just overwhelmed is all," Martin tried to bluff through his confusion.

"Come! Let's go inside while my crew attends to the mounts and have a glass of wine, or maybe a hearty ale," Kazrack slapped Martin on the back hard. "It will put color on your cheeks. You haven't been overusing that ring of yours, have you? How many times have I warned you not to trust those foul magics? Nothing can truly replace a good meal and a good sleep."

Back inside the companions continued to eat and talk of their journeys and plans. Martin barely spoke, trying to figure out what to do next. He scanned his memory and his satchel and was amazed at the spells he currently had prepared. Spells of the fifth and sixth house, that he would never have been able to prepare, let alone cast, before.

"Martin, you seem distracted," Kazrack raised an eyebrow suspiciously. "You aren't... You know, you aren't thinking this is all some kind of dream, again are you?"

The dwarf smiled and then laughed, pointing at Martin. "You are being foolish."

"I have said this all felt like a dream before?" Martin asked.

"Sure, every now and again," Kazrack said.

"Yes," Beorth confirmed. "You... you were under a lot of mental strain in the Maze, and I think your memory was affected."

"Yeah, but don't get too soft in head on us now, we still need you," Jeremy winked.

“Yes, speaking of needing you, Beorth and I wanted to ask your aid in an endeavor we will be beginning to undertake,” Kazrack said. “The clearing of the undead land of Dralmohir.”

Beorth nodded. “It will take many years, as we will be seeking to map it and raise money and permission to build monasteries of Anubis upon its border in the Principality of Rhondria, and handle this as one would any war.”

“We are hoping that you will return from Thricia in a few years when we are more ready and use your powers and that of your book to aid us,” Kazrack said.

“Marty! You aren’t going to run around risking your life even more are you?” Marion asked.

“Yeah, shouldn’t you be starting a family soon?” Jeremy winked.

“I can’t deal with this anymore!” Martin stood violently.

“Martin! Whatever is the matter?” Marion stood, to put an arm around her husband, but he shirked away.

“Why won’t you detect evil on me?” Martin asked, turning to Beorth.

“It is okay, Martin. If you want me to do it, I will do it now. There is no need to get upset.”

“Calm down, Martin,” Ratchis said.

“Anubis, grant me sight beyond sight so that I might see any aura of malefaction upon any in the room,” Beorth stood and covered his eyes, reaching out with the other hand. “Nothing.”

“There is something not right here!” Martin insisted.

“Do you feel disoriented? Do you need to lay down?” Beorth asked with concern in his voice.

“A glass of wine?” suggested Anárie .

“Has someone been here to speak with you? Could you be under a spell?” Ratchis offered.

“He’s thinking this is all not real again,” Kazrack said. “This is real, Martin.”

“Oh man, another friggin’ meal disrupted by orc-rubbin’ portents and prophecies,” Gunthar grumbled.

“Shut up, Gunthar!” Jeremy punched his brother in the arm.

“You little shit!” Gunthar and Jeremy began to smack at each other, until a dirty look from Ratchis stopped them both.

“Come on! You can’t take us both!” Gunthar taunted. “Not without your precious belt that is!”

“I insist that you tell me everything that happened in Hurgun’s Maze,” Martin asked.

“Come on Selma, let’s go spar some more. This is gonna take longer than a horse’s funeral in Wallbrook,” Gunthar took his wife outside.

“A lot happened in the Maze, Martin,” Jeremy said, trying to sound soothing. “One of the king’s bards wrote a song about it based on your re-telling. It was a horrible song.”

“It had a certain dirge-like quality I liked about it,” Beorth commented.

“Have you lost your memory Martin?” Ratchis asked.

Marion looked aghast and took Martin by the shoulders and sat the watch-mage down again, putting a flap of his thinning hair to one side with a kiss.

“It seems that since I woke up this morning, I can remember nothing of the things you speak of,” Martin confessed.

“You didn’t kill a pixie did you?” Kazrack asked.

Martin again stood up in frustration.

“I need to check my books and journals and figure this out,” Martin said. “The Book of Black Circles must be the key to this whole thing. I must look through it and find the spell to destroy it.”

“Yes, destroy it if you must,” Kazrack said, winking and elbowing Ratchis. The half-orc scowled.

“Is that so wise?” Ratchis asked. “At the time you said you were able to control the book and thus keep death from falling upon you even if it were Osiris’ will.”

“And since then you have done such good with it, like close Hurgun’s Maze, brought Jeremy back from limbo touched with planar goodness,” Beorth added.

“Not to mention bargaining with the dragon to have her leave this area alone,” Jeremy said. Martin noticed a subtle shine that seemed to emanate from the Neergaardian’s eyes and hair.

“Enough! I cannot concentrate on what I need to do with all of you talking to me at once!” Martin ran for the bed loft.

“Martin! Don’t be rash!” Beorth cried as he and the others stood.

“Let me check for a dweomer of charming on you,” Ratchis called, leaping over the table to catch the watch-mage. “You are not yourself.”

“Or he is too much himself,” Kazrack swore.

Instinctively, Martin willed the Book of Black Circles to his arms. He spun around at the base of the loft in time to see Ratchis charging at him.

“You are making a mistake!” the half-orc said, but it was too late Martin invoked one of the spells he had been surprised to determine he had prepared, and he disappeared.

Martin reappeared in an instant at an old campsite at the foot of the ridge the town of Summit was built upon.⁷¹

Afraid he might still be spotted, he pulled a miniature portal carved of ivory from his satchel, along with a silver spoon and a round piece of marble. In a moment, there was shimmering portal before him eight feet high and four feet wide and he stepped through it into an opulent mansion.

A translucent figure in green livery, led him to a chamber with a great desk and a table covered in food.

“Leave me!” he said, throwing himself into a padded chair, and slammed the Book of Black Circles on the desk before him.

“Give me the spell I need,” Martin growled, uncharacteristically.

The book’s cover flew open and the pages began to rifle by of their own accord. When they stopped Martin just sat

⁷¹ Several different times, the Fearless Manticore Killers camped on the outer edge of Greenreed Valley, at the foot of the trails that led down from Summit, including right before traveling to the Necropolis of Doom.

dumb-founded for a long moment, covering his open mouth, and afraid to look at on what spell it might have stopped.

Martin the Green took a deep breath and looked at the open page, and then gasped again.

On the page in runes and letters in several different hands was a spell of the Ninth House. It was a spell that could bend the fabric reality itself, but for a price. However, as he continued to read, he saw in black script directions would allow the caster to substitute other things for that price, souls.

“No!” Martin said in frustration. He tried to imagine a spell in the book that might would physically destroy the book. The pages began to flip again, and when they stopped Martin began to read a list of ingredients and the beginning of the detailing of complicated procedure by which a powerful priest or wizard could give himself near-immortality. The price was even more costly.

Martin closed the book and sat for a while trying to think of various ways, he might dispose of this thing permanently. The book opened and flipped back and forth with his thoughts, but he did not pay it any mind, assuming that each choice it gave him would endanger his soul.

Finally, he thought of a spell he had heard of before that would allow the caster to shift himself into another plane of reality.

The pages of the Book of Black Circles flipped like mad and then stopped. Martin looked and there was the spell.

He evoked the runes of the spell concentrating on the Positive Material Plane, clutching the book to his chest.⁷²

All went white.

“How long has he been like this” Beorth asked.

“I don’t know, better part of an hour, I guess,” Ratchis replied.

Martin the Green lay rigid on his side, the Book of Black Circles clutched tightly to his body.

“Maybe we should take the book from him,” Ratchis suggested.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” the paladin replied. He kneeled in close to examine the wizard. “His eyes are open, and he is breathing, but he seems to be in some kind of state.”

“Kick him,” Gunthar said, coming into the alcove behind them. “Works to get lots of things going.”⁷³

“Gunthar, I do not appreciate your demeanor,” Beorth said, sternly.

“Don’t get bent out of shape, Baldie,” Gunthar said. “I’m just trying to help.”

Suddenly, Martin sat bolt upright and tossed the book away from him. The book fell open, and the pages flipped of their own accord for a moment.

“It wasn’t real!” Martin cried.

“What wasn’t real?” Beorth asked.

⁷² This is the plane of pure good from which the power of the gods of good derives.

⁷³ **DM’s Note:** From when the dream sequence ended until the end of this session Gunthar was played by Ken, who formerly played Jeremy. He’d play Gunthar for another session or two. The idea was for him to continue in the game playing Gunthar, but eventually time did not allow for him to re-join our sessions. Nevertheless, we were happy to have him back playing Jeremy during the dream sequence, if only for one last time.

“Are you okay?” Ratchis asked.

“Dough-boy’s gone cuckoo,” Gunthar said, leaving to return to the camp in the other alcove.

Martin stood, but did not answer. He walked over to the Book of Black Circles and careful not to read anything on the page he picked up the book and closed it. A chill went through his body.

“Martin, what is it?” Ratchis asked.

The watch-mage merely walked out of the alcove and down into the great room and tossed the book into one of the burning braziers.

Ratchis and Beorth had followed. Ratchis walked over to the brazier as the fire died down and finally went out. The book, however, had not a mark on it aside from the singed quality the hide cover already had.

Ratchis made to grab it.

“Wait!” Martin warned. “It tried to tempt me. It showed me a life five years from now when all our goals were accomplished because I had taken to using the Book for good.”

“No such temptation would work on me,” Ratchis said. “My goddess protects me from those things that would seek to fool or ensorcell my mind.”

“If your goddess will protect you then bless you for trying,” Martin sighed. He sunk down to the ground once again.

Ratchis picked up the book and his face went pale. He stumbled backward and dropped the book on the ground, and then almost fell to his knees. The half-orc could feel the cold touch of negative energy shoot through his body in a way that he had not felt since fighting the wight outside of Garvan.⁷⁴

“No one touch it,” he said in shrill whisper.

Martin scooped the book up with the oilskin bag and sealed it back up. “Let us try to have as little to do with it as possible until the time comes to destroy it.”

“Then how will you know what spell to cast from it?” Beorth asked.

“I have a feeling that when the time comes, I will know which one it is,” Martin replied. “I just hope that the spell to destroy it and the spell I must cast from it are one and the same.”

“How could it not be that way?” Beorth asked.

Martin just shrugged his shoulders and looked sadly at Ratchis’ scarred and drooping face.

They went back up to the alcove where they had made camp where the others waited for them.

Beorth tried to get Kismet to talk about what her wishes were for Schlomo’s body, but she was despondent. All the while, Rondar let out an endless stream of complaints about how he wanted to get out of there. Debo grunted and growled at everyone as his form of complaining. A few times, he and Gunthar talked, which mostly consisted of Gunthar cursing at the barbarian.

“Debo want to go,” Debo announced as he returned to the alcove the third time. “Debo can’t die, but Debo still don’t want trapped down here forever.”

“Gun Ee-Un kuhn unlee uh uh uh-un,” Kazrack said, through the clenched mess of mouth he had. Ratchis had set it the

⁷⁴ See Session #38

best he could. Everyone looked at the dwarf and shrugged.

“I’m with Debo,” Rondar said. “I want to go.”

“I don’t care what happens,” Kismet said sullenly.

“How about you, Gunthar? Will you come with us?” Beorth asked.

“Whut are ya doin’?”

Beorth did his best to explain about the planar bleed, the demon-gnomes, the succubus, the monks, and Hurgun’s Maze.

“De-ruhn-Duh-lum iz cunnin on us,” Kazrack managed to get out.

“If this is so important, why not send for some heroes?” Gunthar asked.

“Ee are uh heroes,” Kazrack grunted.

Gunthar laughed.

“We have sent for others, but it will take a long time for them to reach Derome-Delem,” Martin tried to explain. “Until then, we are the only ones in a position to help.”

“Well, it sounds to me like the Hurgun’s Maze place is like those dungeon-complexes from the *Age of Adventurers*, and if there is anywhere I can find a way to bring my brother back to life, it is one of those places,” Gunthar reasoned aloud.

“He may be happy where he is,” Beorth commented.

“I don’t care. I just want my brother back,” Gunthar replied. “I been looking for him for a long time and I ain’t gonna let his *real* death stop me.”

“You can’t leave us!” Rondar protested. “We’re a group. We have a plan! Though it may be time to rethink the plan.”

“The plan can still work,” Gunthar said. “But it’ll work like I say it’ll work.”

“What was the plan? To give Debo the sword and have him jump down into the dragon’s gullet?” Martin asked facetiously.

“I guess the wizard’s smarter than he looks,” Gunthar winked and poked Rondar with his elbow.

“All of this is for naught,” Ratchis interrupted. “We still do not know the dwarven name of the Maze, and if what Hamfast said is to be believed, which I have a feeling it is, then we are still far from succeeding at what we came here for.”

“Eave aut tuh me,” Kazrack said, clutching the bag of runestones about his neck.

“And in the meantime, I will search Hamfast and his things and see if he might have had it written down somewhere,” Martin suggested.

The only thing of interest on Master Hamfast was a pair of black leather bracers burned and etched with a motif of knitted bones, skulls, and flowing water, with a tall-masted ship flowing towards a red moon with a skull-face within. The left bracer held a sheath for a dagger or dirk. A simple spell soon revealed their magical nature.

Martin was hesitant to put them on until he knew more about them. Ratchis stowed them in his pack.

Meanwhile, Kazrack cast his stones before the statue of Natan-ahb in the alcove across from the one where camp had been made.

Holding the idea of Hurgun's Maze in his mind, he cast the stones from the bag in a circular pattern and closed his eyes. Inwardly, he beseeched his gods to grant him the answer to the question.

When Kazrack opened his eyes he immediately saw the runes in the center had fallen in four groups of two, while a key runestone letter by itself meant 'together' and often used for 'and' was very near the left of them. The rest of the stones had scattered far. He would have had to get up on his knees and stretch to read them. He ignored them. Some instinct told him that these nine runestones were all he needed, for a second pattern was emerging, and he quickly moved the stones around until they could be read as "*ol'fargeh wurn, ol'sonn ihar*" or as *ol'fargeh ihar, ol'sonn wurn*" or "*ol'fargeh sonn, ol'wurn ihar*".

These were the dwarven words for the four basic elements, and the pattern they suggested let them be interpreted in all combinations. What else might dwarves call Hurgun's Maze?

Kazrack tried to cheer, but as he moved his jaw, a shard of jawbone shifted and fresh blood came into his mouth and he grunted in agony.

It was decided that the party would immediately try to enter the door that Hamfast had tried to get through and hope that having the dwarven name of Hurgun's Maze (or at least the words needed to create it) would be enough to protect them from whatever wards might be there.

"Are you coming?" Ratchis asked Gunthar.

"I promised to help you even though you didn't help me with my quest, but unlike you pretty-talking folks, I keep my word."

"Ut iz unerable uh you," Kazrack grunted out.

"And it is shitty of you," Gunthar sneered.

"I don't want to go in there," Rondar repeated. "Gunthar, Debo, let's go back."

"I already said what I'm doing, ya pansy," Gunthar replied.

"Debo go with Gunthar. Debo stay with plan," Debo said.

"I want to go with the plan too, but this isn't part of plan," Rondar brayed like an ass. "Why risk ourselves?"

"That elf girl has bigger balls than you do, Rondar," Gunthar lambasted him. "How do you expect to help with the dragon if you are pissing your armor all the time?"

"I'm good with the sneaking part of the plan," Rondar said this in a tone that suggested he had said something similar many many times.

"Then sneak your ass back out of here and meet us in Summit," Gunthar said. "The plan can still work, with some *changes*."

Anárie and Beorth looked at each other, and then both looked to Martin, who shook his head.

"Will doughboy cast the spell on me again?" Rondar looked to Martin.

"I am sure 'Doughboy', whomever he might be, would love to cast the spell of water-breathing on you. I, however, expect respect from those who seek my aid," Martin spoke up.

"Oh! Dough-boy's getting uppity," Gunthar said, looking to Ratchis. "Ya better slap him around and remind him who's

boss, eh, pig-fucker?”

Martin sighed.

After the spell was cast and Rondar made a stink about his ‘share of the treasure,’ the rogue took off to the non-flooded levels above, while Kazrack made ready to approach the altar once again.

Holding his arms out, palms up in a display of trust, Kazrack walked forward, chanting in dwarven and projecting the pure positive energy of his god towards the great dog golem.⁷⁵

The dog leapt off the stone ramp that led up to the altar area and smashed it’s head into the dwarf’s face once again.

Gunthar hustled behind a pillar well out of reach, snickering. He had described in colorful language this exact thing happening.

“I’ll distract it!” Ratchis cried and ran over, temporarily enchanted sword in hand.

But the dog was not to be stopped, and grabbing the dwarf up like a doll, it tossed him aside to bleed.

Ratchis took off after his companion as Debo ran past the dog towards the altar getting its attention. It turned to grab the barbarian, but he ran with great quickness and cutting sharply, made for the steps of the opposite alcove.

Beorth ran forward and the dog, sensing him, turned.

“Lehrothronar, in the name of Anubis I call on you to control this raging guardian that defends your temple for in Kazrack it shall be marshaled by steady hands!” The paladin focused the power of his own god towards the golem in much the same way that Kazrack had, but whether his faith was not strong enough, or that dog could only be moved by the dwarven divine was unknown to him; either way it did nothing but make the dog bound at him.

The stone golem barked, and the sound burst through the great chamber. Martin was knocked off his feet, while Anárie’s head was ringing for moments after.

“Nephthys! Heal my friend, the dwarf, so he may have another chance to be tested by his gods,” Ratchis prayed over Kazrack.

The dwarf climbed to his feet as the dog, turned to them after chasing off Beorth.

“Lehrananar, leh me me yuh sessel tuh duh yuh will an’ reveal the knowledge that will uhlow us tuh nave tuh um-land uh uhn dwarves!”

The dog stopped, and then sat.

Everyone let out a sigh.

Kazrack cringed as he tightened the bandage and rag holding what was left of his jaw in place.

“Go back to your perch,” Kazrack commanded the dog in the sacred tongue of the ancient dwarves.

Instead the stone golem dog stood and walked ponderously towards the dwarf, each step sending the sound of stone scraping on stone to echo painfully throughout the chamber. The dog stood over the dwarf and though the mouth was closed off stone, he felt a warm breath upon him, and most of his wounds began to heal.

In dwarven (which sounded like even more gibberish to the others), Kazrack thanked the golem for his loyal service and told him to continue to guard the room after he and his companions had left, until such time that he could return with enough dwarves to return this place to its former glory.

⁷⁵ **DM’s Note:** This uses a turning attempt.

The dog returned to its post.

The Fearless Manticore Killers and their greatly diminished companions, Anárie, Kismet, Gunthar and Debo, climbed up onto the altar area and towards the small metal door Hamfast had tried to get through. Kazrack was examining the door with Anárie's help when he noticed Gunthar over by the holy water font. He was splashing the crystal-clear water onto his neck and face.

"Whut uh you Ooh-ing?" Kazrack marched over and shoved the Neergaardian away from the font.

"I'm just friggin' sweaty!" Gunthar replied.

"Duh nuh dehile uh temple uh muh people."

"What? I didn't stick my head in it or anything! Sheesh!" Gunthar swore. "Friggin' grubbers are touchy."

"Juss stuh uh-wuy frum ieh," Kazrack grunted.

Gunthar chuckled at the dwarf and walked away from the font.

Kazrack filled three flasks with the holy water, praying softly to himself in dwarven as he did so.

"I can sense no evil from this door, or beyond it," Beorth said.

"There is no magic emanating from it either," Martin said. "But there is no obvious way to open it."

Kazrack walked back over and touched the door. It swung open of its own accord.

Kazrack led the way down a narrow corridor no more than six feet high. It had a gentle slope and after about sixty feet it ended in another door much like the first.

"This one detects as moderately magical," Martin observed.

Ratchis cast a spell upon Kazrack that would protect the dwarf from electricity and speaking the dwarven words for a combination of the four elements, the dwarf pushed open the door. It swung open without incident.

Beyond was another huge room, though this one had a much lower ceiling than the temple proper and it was circular. All about the room were metal shutters, most of which were shut, but a few were partially open, or even open all the way, and from within shone a bright light as if the sun were on all sides of these strange arched windows.

Kazrack noticed a round depression in the center of the floor and approached it carefully. He could see that the beams of light all seemed to point towards it but were unfocused by the time they reached it. What he saw within the depression was a huge map of Derome-Delem. It was incredibly detailed despite the scope of its scale. Suspended over the depression was a metal beam that was attached to slats on a rail around the map. It appeared to be made to turn the metal beam around the circle. In the center there seemed to be some kind of platform.

"Something sparkles," Debo's voice said, and Kazrack turned to look. On one side was a pile of ruby chips several inches deep.

"Nuh-uh tchruch uhnee-eng!" Kazrack commanded. Everyone seemed to know what he meant. A stout figure stepped out of the shadows between two of the shutters on the right. As he came into the light, they could all see that he was very very old and frail, and his skin was so fragilely draped on his bones that he seemed dead; even his beard was thin. Kazrack pitied him.

"Finally..." the venerable dwarf coughed out as he approached, and then got down on one knee before Kazrack, and bowed his head. He wore a suit of fine chainmail and had a battle axe on his shoulder. "I have waited long even for the stonefolk."

“What have you been waiting for?” Kazrack managed to mumble out in his native tongue.

“I have been waiting for you,” the ancient dwarf croaked.

“And what will you do now?” Kazrack followed up, finding that if he spoke very slowly it was easier for others to understand him.

“How should I know? You are the one seeking knowledge,” the dwarf replied a bit of surliness entering his creaking voice. The dwarf stood again.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” Kazrack asked, uncertain of how to proceed.

“No, but by coming here you have fulfilled my reason for being,” the sentinel said.

“Martin, do you think he is undead?” Ratchis whispered to the watch-mage leaning in close as to not be overheard by Beorth.

The watch-mage shrugged his shoulders.

“Master, how may I address you?” Kazrack asked, cautious of dwarven etiquette.

“You may call me the Keeper of the Map- Room,” the dwarf replied. “My old name is unimportant. Will you use the map?”

“If I may, my companions and I seek the location of Hurgun’s Maze,” the last word was in common and the old dwarf’s face crinkled as if he did not understand. “How can this be determined? I had thought this place would simply hold a map demarking the Maze.”

“No, I know not of the location of this ‘Maze’ you speak of, except some foggy legends,” the dwarf explained. “But this map was designed to hide and to show many of the secret places of the dwarven people, and the locations of other people and places and objects important to us whether they be friend or enemy.”

The Keeper went on to point out that above each of the metal shutters holding back the light from beyond them was carved a dwarven rune. There was one for each of the twenty-nine basic runic characters of the Xoth.⁷⁶ The ruby chips on the other hand, each was carved with one of twenty-five modern dwarven runic characters, plus several of the pictographic runes that vary by locality and that represent some common or important words in and of themselves.

All Kazrack need do if he wanted to find a location on the map was spell the name in ancient dwarven, both by closing all the other shutters but those with corresponding runes in the name, and then spell it in modern dwarven with the ruby chips, setting them in proper order on the overhanging platform at the center of the beam, and then use the numerological total of the name in the ancient language to know where to set the beam, as the track had engraved numbers at varying intervals along the circle.⁷⁷

It was then that Kazrack realized that it was not speaking the name of Hurgun’s Maze as he opened the door that protected him from the magical ward on the door to this chamber, rather it was what would make the map work. The Keeper went on to explain that the scale of the map was such that finding precise points could still be difficult as areas may have changed in appearance over time and the former masters of this place knew locations by visual clues tied to knowing some of the areas fairly well. He also said that the ambient light created by the beams could be used to determine if certain places could only be found in certain times of year.

Kazrack explained how it worked to the others, as he and the Keeper had only been speaking in dwarven. With Martin’s

⁷⁶ *Xoth* is the name of the ancient dwarven tongue and for all lore taught only in that language.

⁷⁷ The dwarven number system is based on the same runes used for writing, with the first letter being 1, etc... This means all words in dwarven can be given a numeric value by adding the individual letters’ values. Some dwarves use a rune based on an elven letter that represents zero, while others merely repeat the letter that equates to ‘O’ in common with a connecting line to represent a null set.

aid, the dwarf was soon at a parchment with a quill to work out the translations.

“Can you spell out ‘best lay in Derome-Delem’?” Gunthar asked with a wide smile.

Kazrack leered at him.

”Gunthar, shut up,” Ratchis warned.

“Feh... Like you aren’t curious.”

“I don’t think the map works like that,” Anárie said.

“Why not? It *is* obviously a magical device and puzzle, so it may reveal more abstract things,” Martin pondered.

“Ya see? Dough-boy wants to dip his wick into the best lay in this gods-forsaken place as much as I do.”

“No!” Martin turned bright red. “I meant, that it may reveal things in a less literal fashion, pointing out things we might describe more abstractly.”

“I doubt it,” Anárie said. “There does not seem to be many spaces for the ruby chips on that beam, and from what I know, dwarven is a verbose language.”

Kazrack grunted.

When Kazrack was ready he went over to the pile of ruby chips and one by one he held them up to the light to find the ones he needed. Unfortunately, he could not seem to find one that corresponded with “air”.

After describing it to the others, soon everyone was helping him look through the seemingly endless little ruby chips. Now that they had to handle and examine each one, they could tell how many there really were; hundreds, if not thousands.

“Use map to find great treasure,” Debo suggested.

“If we wanted to be self-serving,” Beorth replied.

“You put your quest before ours,” Gunthar countered.

“Yours is for personal gain, ours is for the good of Derome-Delem,” Beorth answered.

“If we wanted to be self-serving, we’d kill you now,” Kazrack said very very slowly to be sure he was understood, but without once ounce less of the venom he was spitting.

“If dwarf were not coward dwarf would,” Debo replied.

“If you really want to be self-serving you can spell out, ‘Best lay in Derome-Delem’,” Gunthar offered with a laugh.

“I found it,” said Kismet who had been half-heartedly helping the search. “But it seems to have a flaw in it.”

“Some of the other chips had marks inside of them,” Kazrack said.

“Yes, but this one looks more like a crack deep inside,” Kismet said, shrugging her shoulders. She gave it to Kazrack to examine. The dwarf sighed in frustration.

Martin tried to use his mending spell on the tiny ruby chip, and while part of the crack seemed to repair of it, there was still a discernible flaw.

Kazrack went about setting up the rubies and Beorth and Ratchis moved the beam at his direction. He then went and

made sure the runes he needed had their shutters open and all the others were closed.

As soon as the last shutter was closed, the steel beam began to hum, and the lights converged on the ruby chips sending a red beam to shoot across the map. However, the red light seemed disperse before striking anything significant.

“I need to try a different combination of runes that signify Hurgun’s Maze,” Kazrack said with great deliberation.

He changed the rubies about in a different order, and this time the red light stayed strong.

It seemed to hit the lip of what corresponded to the ridge around Greenreed Valley, and then was refracted and struck several places on the back side of the set of plateaus marked as ‘the Amphitheatre’ on their own map.

“Look! We were right next to it all along,” Martin exclaimed.

“Yes, but which is it?” Beorth asked.

“Perhaps we can go there and search,” Anárie suggested.

“And have whoever it is who has been scrying on us know as soon as we find it?” Martin said glumly.

“Wait! Look at the light,” Ratchis said, creeping up to the map on his hands and knees. “Look at how the red light comes in at that low angle. If the red beam were the light of the sun sometime during the dawn and it was the first day of autumn, or so...”

No one seemed to get what he was saying.

“All we need do is go to the ridge itself, somewhere in that area and we should be able to see the sun come over the ridge and where it strikes must be the entrance to Hurgun’s Maze,” the half-orc continued.

“The autumnal equinox,” Martin muttered.

“Exactly,” said Ratchis, seeming satisfied.

“But that is months away,” Beorth said.

“We shall need to be patient, and it will give us time to find the spot, and perhaps to finally go to Nikar,” Ratchis said.

“Nikar? Why do you want to go all the way down there?” asked Gunthar.

“To get Beorth’s memory returned to him,” Ratchis replied.

“And to possibly send a message that would have a better chance of getting to the Academy, or local Academy alumni,” added Martin.

“Well, as long as it is not for my memory alone,” Beorth said. “I am willing to bear my curse longer if it will mean the lives of innocents.”

Ratchis patted him on the back. “We will have time.”

“So, is that all we are going to ask this map?” Martin asked.

“What else is there to ask it?” Kazrack slurped awkwardly when he spoke, but at least he had learned the trick to being understood more times than not.

“Why not ask it the location of the first drow witch?” Ratchis suggested. “The one in the body of the maid girl, uh...”

Rahasia.”⁷⁸

“What is her name, again?” Martin asked.

“Solorena,” Anárie said, quietly.

“There ish no dwarven equivalent of that,” Kazrack pointed out, his bandage was staining with blood again, and Martin cringed to look at him.

“Uh... Try it phonetically,” Martin suggested, and then noting Kazrack’s puzzled look he added, “Sound it out.”

Kazrack shrugged his shoulders and tried a few combinations, but the red light either never materialized, or was too diffuse to point to anything.

“I guess only knowledge know to those that made this map can be discerned from it,” Martin surmised.

“What about Glamorganna’s lair?” Beorth suggested.

“The dragon?” Ratchis asked.

The paladin nodded.

“Dragon names are the same in all languages,” Anárie offered. “They are written either by specific sigils or phonetically.”

Martin frowned at the elven maid.

Kazrack gave it a try. The red beam landed in a southwestern portion of what they guessed was the Circle of Thorns.⁷⁹

End of Session #63

⁷⁸ She escaped Aze Nuquerna way back in Session #22

⁷⁹ See Sessions #30 thru #33

Session #64

“There is another way to leave this place,” the Keeper said to Kazrack. “But it can only be opened from this side. Once you have gone through you cannot return the same way.”

Kazrack conveyed this to the others.

“Debo say take secret way!” Debo said.

“Zank you fur yer dawts,” Kazrack grunted out quickly. “If they can be called such.”

“Let’s go back to the other chamber and rest and re-group and decide which way to go, and then go in the morning,” Ratchis suggested. “Or what we hope is morning.”

Back at their camp, Kazrack said he wanted to spend the time to clear this entire complex out and prepare it for re-habitation. The others disagreed, bringing up the danger of the place and the pressure of time.

“Zell, if ve ur going tuh go anywhere, let’s go where my jaw cun beh healed,” Kazrack said.

“Our choices seem to be limited,” Beorth said.

“Well, it seems like our choices are either Nikar or Abarrane-Abaruch,” Martin pointed out.

“Zuh ulfs?” Kazrack asked.

“Elves?” Martin guessed, and the dwarf nodded.

“I doubt Ethiel, or the other elves of Aze Nuquerna have the means to repair your jaw,” Anárie said.

“Is there a library in Nikar?” Beorth asked.

“I think there is a temple of Thoth,” Martin said.⁸⁰

“There is no temple of Thoth in Nikar,” Ratchis said.

“Oh,” was all Martin could reply.

“And what of Hamfast?” Beorth asked. “Do we leave him here to find his way back or bring him with us through the one-way exit?”

“I don’t care what happens to him,” Ratchis grunted. “Every time we have let these monks go it has tasted worst to me than the last.”

“Uh zay we let him live wit’ food and uh potion,” Kazrack managed to get out. “To show we have given kindness and mercy.”

“Since when have these monks ever cared when we showed them mercy?” Ratchis fumed.

“If out of a hundred...” Kazrack began.

“Debo don’t understand! Why not kill monk. He enemy!” the barbarian’s anger grew with his puzzlement.

It was agreed to let the matter sit until after the group had rested. In the meantime, Beorth spent his time trying to convince Kismet to part with one of her *water-breathing* potions for the monk; at least until Anárie pointed out that the magical potions that had been found among the monks’ things probably had the same effect.

⁸⁰ Thoth is the god of knowledge and wizardry, and his temples are always libraries.

Later in what felt like night, as Martin and Kazrack took watch, the Academy Wizard went off on a long detailed explanation of all the resources they might find if they took the time to go to Nikar, and how helpful it would be to their cause.

“Uh-huh,” was all Kazrack replied, seeming bored of the talk. Or perhaps, his shattered jaw was hurting him too much to answer.

“By all accounts Hurgun’s Maze is going to be a grave danger, and heavily protected and guarded with powerful wards and who knows what else,” Martin began on a different tack. “We will need more and newer gear, and perhaps access to some magics that Anárie and I do not have, and perhaps we may want to consider hiring a sellsword or two...”

“Uh-huh,” Kazrack nodded. “Wuh discush ut with uh ushers in uh orning.”

“But Kazrack, ultimately it is you who must make this decision,” Martin replied, and Kazrack’s face took on a puzzled visage. “We do not have the funds to get these thing, but since you are the new keeper of this place, perhaps there are some treasures to be taken from here to help pay for them, you know, for the greater good.”

Kazrack was furious and would hear nothing more on the matter. He did not speak again to the watch-mage for the rest of their share watch, even after receiving an apology.

“Does anyone know what day it is?” Martin asked. “I have lost track.”

He was packing away his journal after making some notes in it, as everyone else broke down camp and prepared to leave.

“The twenty-second?” Anárie guessed. “I often forget to keep track of days.”

“It is late spring,” Ratchis offered. “Summer will be here soon, perfect for our march to Nikar.”

“But we sill have sufficient time before the equinox, correct?” Beorth asked.

“Months,” said Ratchis. “A little more than three, to be precise.”

“Ze cun find out whun we get back to Shummit,” Kazrack had to suck back his saliva every five or six words to keep bloody drool from pouring out of his mouth.

“Summit?” Ratchis asked. “Why do we need to go there? We are just more likely to get embroiled in something else that will keep us from getting to Nikar at all. Better we head straight for the town and then come back in time to find where the beam will hit but keep a low profile.”

“But we may need to see what is going on, what if the gnomes are in trouble?” Beorth asked.

“That is exactly what we need to avoid,” Ratchis said. “This has become bigger than just the gnomes. I said before and I’ll say it again, if I have to choose between the gnomes and the humans, then my loyalty is with the gnomes first, but the truth is Mozek and his mother and what they can do with Hurgun’s Maze endangers everyone. We cannot afford to be sucked into some other conflict, perhaps killed or captured and then fail to be there when the beam hits and it is time to go into the Maze.”

Kismet began to softly weep.

“I need to at least return to Aze Nuquerna to let Ethiel know where I have gone,” Anárie said.

“And while we are there I can see if they have more specific maps of the area to and around Nikar,” Martin suggested.

“Also, I think such moral gymnastics to avoid making the choice dictated by our scruples is a treacherous endeavor,” Beorth said, and then he moved to comfort Kismet and get her going.

The Fearless Manticore Killers and company made their way back into the map room, and the Keeper brought Kazrack over to what appeared to be one of the huge rounded stones that made the room. Touching it gently and speaking a word in dwarven, the huge stone slid backward revealing a very narrow passageway to a spiral stairway.

“Up this way,” the Keeper croaked. “It will close behind you, and you must hurry. Anyone trapped in the stairway will be crushed. It also acts as one of the gears that moves the stone.”

“Master, I thank you for your unfailing loyalty to our people,” Kazrack told the venerable dwarven guardian. “What will you do now?”

“Once you have gone, I can lay down and crumble to dust,” the dwarf said. “I have fulfilled my duty. This place is now yours to look after.”

Kazrack bowed.

“I shall return,” he intoned, his dignity just slightly undermined by his drooling shattered lower face.

Kazrack stopped long enough to take the one of the ruby chips that they had needed to find the location of Hurgun’s Maze, to ensure that even if someone made it here, they would be hard pressed to replicate what they had done. And then he led the others up the dark narrow stair.

Anárie spoke an arcane word and soon a ball of light that illuminated the area like a torch was following her, and then she followed Beorth, who followed Kismet and Martin. Ratchis took up the rear to ensure that no one tried to get out with any other treasures.

At the top of the stairway was a small room, and as the last of them came into it, the opening they came through was sealed off by a rotating stone statue of Lehrothronar. There appeared to be no way of opening it from this side, and the addition of spots for prayer stones and low stone benches, made this tiny alcove seem more like a place for prayer than a secret entrance.

And so they began the long slow march up a narrow and low-ceilinged passageway. It had its constant slow grade only interrupted by occasional staircases of ten or fifteen steps.

The march was so long, eventually Anárie’s spell ran out, and the group marched on in the dark leading each other along for a while, until Debo complained of the dark after tripping on Kismet.

Anárie cast the spell again, and they found themselves in a damp room with stone benches, and a twisted and rusted weapons rack. The skeletal corpses of two armored dwarves were found in a stagnant puddle. They were too far gone to determine what had killed them, but there was no evidence of arrows or weapons left behind, except their own rusted axes and ruined crossbows.

“Dwarf, you’re telling me this place is long enough to need a rest stop?” Gunthar complained. “Do we even know where this place lets out?”

Kazrack moved the two bodies, with Beorth’s help, and said a prayer over them, and covered them over with stones to create a makeshift cairn.

After eating some rations they moved on, until nearly an hour later they came to what appeared to be a dead end. However, there were very narrow slits in the thick stone wall that let in dying light.

A quick search revealed the hand and eye of Lehrothronar carved onto one wall. Kazrack focused the divine power of his gods into the symbol and a secret door swung open onto a three-foot-wide ledge, high up on a canyon wall.

“Why in the Hells would they build a door up here?” Gunthar said, when the cold wind whipped into the tunnel.

“The geography was probably very different before the earthquake,” Beorth reasoned.

“Wait here,” Ratchis said, and he climbed out on to the ledge. It was a narrow ravine that he thought he remembered from his reconnaissance of the area from above with the aid of Martin’s spell of levitation.⁸¹

They were about eighty to hundred feet up from the trickle of stream that ran below. It was only forty feet to the plateau above.

Martin cast levitation on Ratchis and he was sent up to check the plateau above and to see if there was a safe way to get everyone up and out of the area from there without having to do too much more climbing.

Less than twenty minutes later, Ratchis was back to describe what he had seen.

“This ravine runs just about north-south,” he explained. “We only have a few hours light, so I recommend we use this spell to get everyone up top. The ravine will be too dangerous in the dark, and this upper way leads to the southern tip of the woods near the elves and Ogre’s Bluff. One thing though, I saw the silhouette of a large winged figure to the east. It was a shadow on a cloud. I am not sure what it was.”

“The wyvern! The wyvern is bad! It’ll kill us all. It killed Creedadal,” Kismet was hysterical.

“It was far away, and I hope that we will be even further away before sundown.” Ratchis said.

It was agreed. Martin would use levitation allow Ratchis to ferry people from the opening up to the plateau top. Kazrack was first. The dwarf straddled the half-orc from the front, and Ratchis held him in place with one strong arm.

“Ha! Ha! Stonefolk humps pig like dog!” Debo guffawed.

“Why duh you ‘ave tuh carsht ‘e uh dish ‘ay?” Kazrack asked slowly, letting go to wipe the drool soaking his mangled beard.

“Because it is safest,” Ratchis replied. “I can hold on to you with one hand, while I use the other to pull us over at the top.”

“I would have preferred the extra level of danger,” the dwarf said, embarrassedly; Gunthar and Debo’s mocking laughter echoed up after them.

The barbarian refused to be carried and climbed unaided to the top of the plateau.

Eventually, all were at the top. It was broken plateau at the edge of all the broken lands that surrounded the area around the Pit of Bones. It connected at a narrow point with a huge forested ridge. The same that held Aze Nuquerna and Ogre’s Bluff in the north where it met Greenreed Valley, and the stone giant homestead on its southern edge.⁸² It was covered now with brown and green fuzz that seemed ready to bloom into life.

It was a long march to the forest’s edge, and they barely found a secure place to camp before night fell.

As they ate from their meager rations, Kazrack once again brought up the subject of going to Nikar, and Ratchis immediately called for a vote. Kazrack only agreed to come along if the majority were for going.

“But don’t you want your jaw repaired?” asked Ratchis.

“Yesh, buh that cun be done in Abarrane-Abarush, or it can shimplly wait,” Kazrack said, enunciating each word carefully. “My gosh have sheen fit to inflict me with such a burden, just like past burdens, and if Uh must be inconveniensed so that others may live and buh free, sho buh it.”

⁸¹ See Session #55

⁸² See Session #53

“But Kazrack, you can hardly cast spells!” Ratchis argued.

The dwarf shrugged his shoulders.

Martin and Beorth both voted for Nikar, while Anárie abstained.

“I’ll go to Nikar!” Gunthar said.

“Debo with Gunthar!” Debo complained. “We made plan!”

“Easy there, you strained turd,” Gunthar answered. “The plan will still go off. You go and watch over the *you know what*, make sure it is still there and do your part of the plan. I’ll help them get to Nikar, and in return they’ll help me get my brother back when the time comes. Right?”

He looked to the Fearless Manticore Killers. They all ignored him.

“I say we go to Nikar,” Ratchis said.

“Sho, Uh am overruled,” Kazrack replied. “But Uh shtill shay we go tuh uh elfin firsht compound tuh shee whu we might learn.”

Anárie nodded, and the others compromised.

Watches were set and in the dark of night, Martin, Debo and Gunthar were stuck with the middle watch. Gunthar soon found a comfy spot under a tree and went to sleep. Debo went stalking off.

Late into the watch Martin heard something at the edge of camp, and he hurried over to grab a brand from the fire and see what it was.

There was a small figure in brush.

“Who’s there? Come out!” Martin hissed, unsure of himself.

It was Kismet.

“Kismet! Are you leaving us?”

“I...uh, was just going to relieve myself in private,” she feigned exasperation.

“With all your gear and your pack?” Martin put a hand on his hip. “You shouldn’t leave everyone without saying good-bye. That’s not right... At least come and visit the elves with us.”

“Oh... Okay,” Kismet walked back over to camp and plopped down. She did not bother to remove her pack but sat there sulking through the night.

Isilem, the 23rd of Sek – 565 H.E.

Morning greeted the party with a cold light rain.

“This is late spring?” Martin complained.

“Is it different in other places?” Ratchis asked. “Because this what it is always like in Derome-Delem.”

Martin the Green was in no mood to discuss the weather any further.

They marched north by northeast in a moody silence only punctuated by Kismet's fits of sobbing, and Ratchis barking orders. The thick band of woods gave way to sparser area with muddy soil. The trees here were younger and thinner than in other parts of the forest, and many were broken or uprooted, and leaves, still green, scattered across the ground made slippery patches hard to notice.

After an hour of this, they came to a river that gave them all pause.

"I don't remember a river," said Beorth.

"From what I hear, you don't remember a lot of things," Gunthar laughed.

"We came out further west than I first thought," Ratchis said. Martin examined one of his maps and nodded. "And we did cross this before, except that before it was a stream, and from what I can tell it has rained a lot while we were gone, and that with the melting snow from north of us turned it into this."

The river gurgled, as white water rolled over stones and fallen trees roaring down a broad divot.

It amazed them that a river had sprung up seemingly overnight. Ratchis, unphased by the abrupt changes possible in nature, stripped off his armor and dropped all his gear but a rope. He then swam across the strong current and fastened the rope to a tree on one side, and then braved his way back across with one end of the rope.

After fastening the end on this side of the river, and Martin casting *levitation* on him, Ratchis then used himself as a human bridge, to pull his weightless self across the river while carrying various members of the party.

Debo grunted and threw his pack across the river with a running two-handed throw, and then leapt into the water, deftly swimming across.

Ratchis brought Kazrack across first, followed by Anárie, and then Kismet and then Martin. The half-orc came back to get Beorth, but the paladin demurred.

"Take the gear and my armor, if you will" he said. "But I shall swim across of my own volition."

"You may drown," Ratchis said.

"I will not," Beorth said. "If you will bring my gear across."

Ratchis acquiesced.

Gunthar leapt laughing into the river, after having added his gear to the pile Ratchis was bringing across. He only wore his short sword about his neck.

Cutting across the rough water, shirtless, with his long blonde hair pulled taut across his back in the strong current, Ratchis could imagine Jeremy being the one swimming. But suddenly, the figure disappeared, and then cursing and coughing Gunthar broke the surface, waving his arms wildly, before being turned over twice by the river and washed way down stream.

"That could have been you," Ratchis said to Beorth.

"Yes, but it wasn't," the paladin replied. "You had better save him. I shall be endeavoring to cross the river myself."

Scowling, Ratchis dropped the gear and dove into the river after Gunthar, but after a rough going, he found Gunthar had managed to pull himself onto the other side a few dozen yards further down stream. He was sitting coughing and cursing.

Still scowling, he made his way to the west side of the river and walked up to get the gear. By then, Beorth had already made it across.

It was late into the evening when Fearless Manticore Killers finally came within site of the fortress of wood and upon the base of stone that was Aze Nuquerna. Lucky for them, the light grew longer and longer as summer approached.

“Debo hate elf-men!” Debo complained.

“Debo, it is an ass-lickin’ elf place!” Gunthar tried to convince him by dubious means. “It is bound to be warm, and comfortable, and *elves*... You know!” He wagged his eyebrows.

“Debo hate elf-men,” Debo said again. “Debo go to town, come back in two nights.”

With that, the barbarian took off for Ogre’s Bluff.

“Well, it was probably better the dumb bloated ballsack didn’t come anyway,” Gunthar said, shoving his hand into his pants to readjust himself. “He’d probably do something to embarrass us.”

As they came near the last great clearing before the elfin compound, there was a scuffle in the underbrush accompanied by barking, and a small dark form bounded out of the shadows at Ratchis. The half-orc dropped his hammer and grabbed up the brown and black mutt, which went crazy yipping and licking and nipping at him happily.

“Is that his girlfriend or his mother?” Gunthar snickered, and Ratchis shot him a nasty look.

“That is Kwa,” said Anárie .

A humanoid figure stepped out of the shadows as well, a tall blonde elf in studded leather armor. He wore a dagger and a quiver, there was an unstrung longbow leaning on his shoulder.

“Greetings Friends!” the mellifluous voice issued from the elven man like a song.

“Greeting Finduilas,” Anárie said coming over for a chaste hug. Both of the elves’ eyes seemed to shine when they spoke to each other.

“Greezings Finfushfeeshphush,” Kazrack drooled.

“I see Valto has found you,” Finduilas said to Ratchis, and noting the half-orc’s confused look. “We call him the elvish word for ‘luck’ or ‘chance.’ Is that not what the name you gave him means?”

Ratchis nodded, and Martin gave him a solemn look.⁸³

Finduilas led them into Aze Nuquerna where Ethiel greeted them with what passed for happiness.

“Well met,” the elder elf said. “It is good to have so diligent a group return.”

“She are pleeshed tuh be her,” Kazrack replied.

“You are always welcome,” Ethiel said with a smile.

They were brought to a common area where they had taken their meals and rested in the past. The elves brought them a warm mushroom soup with a sweet rose-petal bread to shake off the wet and cold.

Anárie introduced Kismet to Ethiel and some of the other elves, but the gnome woman barely said a word, whether it was from awe of meeting elves or the horrors she had endured was uncertain.

⁸³ ‘Kwa’, the orcish word of luck or chance, was the name Ratchis gave the stray dog in honor of the party’s former companion, Chance (see session #20)

Gunthar was indeed dumb-founded by the place and the elves, and for once in his life was quiet, except when after dinner he blurted out to Finduilas, “Are you a boy-elf or a girl-elf?”

The elf warrior did not reply but sneered.

“Its hair was prettier than this one’s,” Gunthar said, pointing to Anárie .

Kazrack and Ratchis both glared at the Neergaardian.

They were brought to rooms to sleep the night. In the morning there would be much to discuss.

Osilem, the 24rd of Sek – 565 H.E.

The next day Ethiel came to the party early in the morning, and noting Kismet’s deep sadness, he had one of the elves bring her somewhere where she could take a warm relaxing bath in some elven herbs that might help soothe her trauma.

Beorth and Martin took turns explaining all that had happened at the Pit of Bones, with Ratchis and Kazrack interjecting their own opinions on things occasionally.

By the time they were done it was time for lunch, and afterwards, Martin was escorted to the library chamber below so that he might copy a more detailed map that might show a good route to Nikar. Beorth went to aid him. Ratchis, feeling much better, spent the afternoon playing with Kwa and finding the dog was much better behaved than it used to be.⁸⁴ Kazrack continued to work on the stone pieces of the set of King’s Men he was making.⁸⁵ He tried to make one of the ‘priest’ pieces look like Beléar. Anárie spent the afternoon in closed chambers with Ethiel and Finduilas discussing whatever news of elves they might have gained since they last saw her.

Late that night, after everyone had retired, Beorth awoke with a start. He leapt from the bed, as there was the silhouette of a figure standing over him on the left, a fang-shaped green glow seemed to hover before the figure’s chest.

“Who is there?” the paladin said, grabbing his sword and lighting the lantern beside the bed.

Martin was standing there fully dressed, the Book of Black Circles clutched to his chest. The watch-mage’s eyes were wide open and unblinking. The necklace of undead control that Beorth normally carried in his pack was around the watch-mage’s neck.⁸⁶

“Martin!” Beorth called loudly, ripping the necklace from the watch-mage’s neck. Gunthar awoke in the other bed.

“Whut’s going on?” the blonde Neergaardian asked groggily.

“Huh? Wha...?” Martin blinked and crumpled onto the bed, dropping the book.

“The Book seems to have made you walk in your sleep,” Beorth said. “It seems to be able to control you.”

“Oh no,” Martin moaned. He sat up and buried his face in his hands.

“This tome is too dangerous to keep around,” Beorth said. “Perhaps we should wait no longer, and you should open it and use it right now and destroy it.”

“You might be right,” Martin replied. “But what if you are wrong and I am permanently corrupted by the book?”

⁸⁴ **DM’s Note:** Ratchis made his secondary save for the energy drain caused by the Book of Black Circles the night before.

⁸⁵ *King’s Men* is basically the Aquerra version of chess, though some of the pieces are named differently.

⁸⁶ The Fearless Manticore Killers found this on the caretaker of mortuary south of Stone Bridge, way back in Session #8.

“Then you will meet Osiris,” Beorth replied calmly, gesturing to his sword. He turned to Gunthar. “Go wake the others. This must be taken care of now.”

Gunthar ran over to the next room and banged on the door until it opened. Kazrack looked up at him angrily.

“Baldie wants you and the Pig-fucker,” he said by way of explanation. “Now.”

Gunthar ran further down the hall to awaken Anárie .

“Bring your weapons and armor,” he told the elf maid. “We may have to kill dough-boy.”

“Do not let them do anything rash,” Anárie said. “I will go get Ethiel.”

Gunthar winked at her and ran back to the room to find the four heroes arguing, though Martin did so sullenly.

“We should deal with this right now,” Beorth said. “He had taken the cursed necklace from my things. This is getting too dangerous to let sit.”

“I fear Beorth might be right,” Martin said.

“Have you felt any more compulsion from Osiris as to do something in particular?” Ratchis asked.

“No, but...” He choked a moment. “We don’t know that that is what will happen. I have the book now, maybe there will be no more compulsion because if I fail to destroy it, I will die anyway.”

“I don’t think so,” said Ratchis. “Kazrack and I both felt a compulsion that seemed to grow stronger or weaker depending on how far along we were in completing our task. We have no reason to believe yours should be any different.”

“Why wait to be compelled?” Beorth asked with frustration. “Would that not go against the tenets of your faith? Would it not be better for him to do it freely now?”

“He took on this oath freely to begin with,” Ratchis said. “Whatever comes of it now, he knew getting into this it would not be easy.”

“Uh ‘ill conshult uh wuneschtonesch n’ shee ish my gods uv any guidance for ush, even though this is a muhtter that originates with Oshirish,” Kazrack offered through the clenched fragments of his jaw. No one had any idea what he meant.

“Patience is a good idea,” Ethiel’s smooth voice was from the doorway as he entered the room. “And at the very least, if you plan to use such a powerful artifact, I ask that you do it far from here. We are already charged with watching over one evil. We need not tempt it with another.”

Beorth nodded.

Kazrack went back to his room to consult the dwarven rune-stones and returned about twenty minutes later shaking his head.

”Uh do nut think my wishdom was equal to tuh tashk,” he said his solemnity undone by his ridiculous way of speaking. “The runesh were vague, but there were definitely shignsh that we should prosheed with great cau-shin n’ peehapsh even timlinessh.”

“So that settles it for me,” Ratchis said. “We wait.”

“So what now? Am I to be bound to my bed each night to keep others safe?” Martin asked.

“Perhaps it is when you are sleeping that you are vulnerable, and you should keep the ring on and sleep as little as

possible,” Ratchis suggested. “We can keep a watch on you for those two hours.”

Martin nodded.

“Un peehapss the amulet hash as much to blame, Beorsh,” Kazrack added. “We should not keep two such curshed objectsh of power in such a clush proshimity.”

Beorth and Martin nodded.

Tholem, the 25th of Sek – 565 H.E.

After another elven breakfast that Kazrack sneered at, but ate anyway, the Fearless Manticore Killers packed their gear and made ready to head overland by foot to Nikar. It would be a journey of several weeks, though with the map Martin had copied, Ratchis thought he could lead them there in as little as two; Bes be on their side.

Ethiel and all the other elves of Aze Nuquerna gathered at the door to the stone and wooden fortress to bid them a safe journey. They provided them with what they could in way of supplies, but it was not quite enough. It was decided that Gunthar and Anárie would make a quick journey to Ogre’s Bluff to get the rest of it, as no one would recognize them. They would all march to within an hour of the town, and then the two of them would go the rest of the way on their own.

Ratchis confided in Martin that by sending the two newest members of the group he hoped that they would be less likely to hear some news that would delay them, as they would be less likely to recognize a name, or what have you.

Martin sighed, tired of moral acrobatics.

However, they had not gotten far when they spotted Debo jogging towards them, his great sword on his shoulder, and his wolf’s head hood bouncing up and down on his back. The three of them walked to where the others were waiting.

“Time for plan?” Debo asked Gunthar.

“We went over this dog-breath,” Gunthar replied.

“We need to go to dragon now,” Debo said.

“No, Debo, we have to hold off on that part of plan,” Gunthar said. “We have other things to do before we can do that. Well, *I* do anyway.”

”Where we going?”

“Nikar,” Ratchis answered.

“Where?”

“It is about a month to the southwest of here,” Ratchis said.

Debo hollered and threatened Gunthar. But the Neergaardian would not give in.

His face a bright purple, finally Debo said, “Me go guard Kan-On then.”

“Shush!” Gunthar put a hand up to the barbarian’s mouth, and Debo bit at it fiercely and brought his sword off his shoulder.

Kazrack and Ratchis tensed to draw their weapons, but Gunthar put up a hand.

“Guard the what?” Beorth asked.

Martin snickered. “*That* is your plan? To use a cannon against the dragon?”

“What is a cannon?” asked Kazrack.

“It is a Kan-On,” Gunthar said. “For someone who is supposed to be educated you sure do sound like an ass half the time.”

“It is a gnomish weapon of war that explosively launches heavy iron balls,” Martin explained.

“Ifish thish weapon ish sho fearshome how come we do not shee them more often?” Kazrack asked.

“They are unreliable,” Martin said. “You are as likely to blow up yourself as you are to fire it correctly.”

“Bah!” Gunthar said. “Frederick said he knew of two distinct tales where Kan-Ons were used to fight a dragon, both leading to the dragon’s death... Well, at least gravely wounded, but with the dragon-slaying sword, it was supposed to make up the difference. Thus, the change in plan.”

“What is the plan now?” Ratchis asked.

“You guys are the plan,” Gunthar said. “I help you do your things and maybe get my brother back and then you help me and Debo, and Rondar—if he ever shows his wart-covered ass again—to slay the dragon, using the Kan-On. I figure the pig-fucker and stubby here won’t be needing any princesses, and though I have heard that elf women can marry each other in their culture, I try not to think about it too much because it gets *hard* to think about anything else...”

He winked at Anárie. She made no response whatsoever.

“So even including Jeremy, we still have plenty of princesses,” Gunthar continued. “Unless you count Baldie, and while I think he has balls, he must certainly pee sitting down.”

Beorth stiffened, but Ratchis put one of his huge hands against the paladin’s to gently hold him back and calm him down.

“You know, Gunthar,” Ratchis growled. “We invited you into our group and we can uninvite you.”

The blonde warrior turned back to the short dark barbarian. “Yeah, that’s a good idea. Take your wolf-skin to where the Kan-On is and guard it and see if Rondar shows up, and if you get hungry, eat him.”

“It is going to be a long time,” Ratchis said. “Months.”

“Debo can’t die,” Debo said, and then without another word took off jogging to the northwest.

“Eh, waste of flesh,” Gunthar swore, as he and Anárie began their short trek to Ogre’s Bluff.

A little over an hour later Gunthar and Anárie were entering the town square of Ogre’s Bluff. There was a large crowd gathered, and a large gallows had been set up on the far end of the square. There were so many people they would have had to force their way to the crowd to get up close and get a good view.

“What’s going on?” Gunthar asked a middle-aged pot-bellied man with wiry hair.

“Oh just some robbers n’ looters,” the man said. “They was some of them there so-called ‘dragon-hunters,’ but they gots ta ‘bey the law like anybody else. I say.”

“Sure. Sure,” Gunthar nodded. “What’d they do?”

“I know, robbed or looted or sumthin’,” the man replied.

Six men with sacks tied over their heads were led on to the gallows and each had a noose affixed about his neck. Without so much as a word of ceremony, the platform was knocked out from under them and they began to jerk on the ropes.

Disgusted, Anárie stepped into Margun's General Store.

"Wait, you're gonna miss the best part when they shit themselves right before the stop wrigglin'," Gunthar teased.

"It seems unfortunate that people hired to protect the land would turn against its people," Anárie said, as she made her way through the packed shop, while patting the overenthusiastic golden dog that leapt at her happily.

"It happens," Margun replied, his eyes growing wide in awe of an elf in his shop.

"I have a list of things here I need to acquire," Anárie said, and it was all business.

The two of them had been gone less than three hours when they returned, laden with goods.

Anárie mentioned the hanging.

"Good," Kazrack said.

Ratchis threw his dwarven companion a disapproving look.

"Uht? Ifish they were robbing ur looting they got what they desherve," the dwarf reasoned.

"Could you tell who they were?" Ratchis asked.

The elf and the man both shook their heads.

"There is nothing to be done about it now," Ratchis said. "Let's go."

"I hope they get a proper burial, whoever they are or whatever they did," Beorth said.

And on they marched.

The woods gave way to the river once again, but this time they were crossing it much further north where it crossed a narrow plain and was much shallower; crossing it was no problem.

Soon they were traveling among sparsely wooded hills, weaving about them at times, but occasionally Ratchis would lead them over one to get a good view of the lay of the land and compare it to Martin's map. Tall black mountains loomed like an impenetrable wall several days west of them.

The end of the day found them making camp at the top of a squat wooded hill that had reminded Martin of something like a half-melted ziggurat that leaned over to one side, making northeast side slightly more steep than the rest.

Ratchis and Beorth watched first and then woke Kazrack and Gunthar to watch in the dead of night. It was a cool night, and they had made a small fire, which Gunthar fed occasionally, while the dwarf marched around the camp.

Some hours into their watch a violent hoot echoed in the night. Kazrack stopped in his tracks, while Gunthar leapt to his feet.

"Sounds familiar..." Gunthar began, when another echoing hoot cracked the night. This time, closer.

"It's those shit-bears from the Honeycombe!" Gunthar hissed to Kazrack.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Also known as 'quaggoths'. The second time the party ever met Gunthar's Crew was in the network of caves beneath Ogre's Bluff, called the Honeycombe (see Sessions #23 & 24).

Anárie's reverie was very odd. Instead of reliving the memories of her own life, she experienced the broken images of someone else's life. She was marching through a dark place, all color washed out of it, except for the occasional gleam of mail from ahead of her. She was marching with other elves.

Soon she found herself beside a pool of clear water, kneeling to fill a black leathery skin. As the bright moonlight glimmered on the surface and saw her reflection; hair white like silver; eyes, a steel shining gray, and skin like charred ebony.

"Be on the alert," Anarié said, her unblinking eyes suddenly moving as she leapt to her feet. "Wake up! There are *novilustani* around. There are drow around!"

In a moment all were awake. Ratchis prayed to Nephthys to increase his strength, while Martin cast *mage armor* on Beorth, as there was no time to put on his splint mail. Gunthar, a sword in one hand and a javelin in the other, jogged off into the darkness of the trees, as moonlight streamed into the clearing.

"Martin, if you could cast that *armor* upon me as well, I would appreciate it," Ratchis barked.

"There are three shit-bears coming around from the north," Gunthar hissed.

"Remember, there are drow here as well," Anarié said. "They are crafty opponents."

"Everybody stay together. Let them come to us," Ratchis rousing his companions, as they all felt a fear creep over them. There were no sounds of night birds or insects, and the breeze had fallen out of the trees, leaving only the sound of deep snarling ragged breaths syncopated by padded feet scrambling up over the rock, grunting as they pulled themselves from tree to tree.

Those coming from the left hooted and this time the hoot was echoed by the sound of more far below on the right, at the bottom of the steep side of the hill.

"There!" Gunthar pointed to a dirty white shaggy form breaking through the trees with a javelin, as he prepared for an opportunity for a clear shot.

With an arcane word from Martin, Ratchis was also the recipient of a protective spell. With a prayer from the Friar of Nephthys, the paladin, too did receive the strength of a bull.

Beorth moved to fill in the ring of heroes, as Martin ducked behind Kazrack.

"Huh-Hra!" Gunthar flung his javelin with all his might even as the shaggy man-beast first came into the dwarf's view. The javelin shattered one of the quaggoth's ribs and there was an explosion of flesh and blood. The bear-man tumbled to the ground.⁸⁸

The next quaggoth to leap up to the top of the hill felt the bite of two of Anárie's magic arrows of light. It stumbled but did not fall.

Beorth stepped to his left to block the path of another quaggoth who came leaping from the shadows. It slammed into him with great force, and Ratchis stepped forward to meet the first one and cleaved its head open with his great axe.

The quaggoth felt the bite of the Beorth's sword, and its progress was stopped. It crouched back to snarl and circle him.

Anarié spoke a word and soon her cloak was shining with the smoky light of a torch, and she hurried over towards the tree where Gunthar waited to spot any more that might be coming up.

The fight had moved away from the center of the camp, as Ratchis, Kazrack, Anárie and Gunthar formed a line that

⁸⁸ **DM's Note:** Ken (who was still playing Gunthar at this point) has the greatest luck with crits. As Jeremy, he scored more than anyone else (seeming to have an affinity for "Hand Removed at Wrist"), but the streak seemed to pass on to the playing of Gunthar.

reached from the trees out to where the quaggoths might approach from.

Beorth, however, was slowly drawn away in the other direction by his foe as they continued to trade blows.

“Are you okay back there, Beorth?” Ratchis called to his companion. “Can you hear me back there?”

Three more came over the top of the hill and one ignored Ratchis to go for Kazrack to its error. Noting the thing’s left flank was open, Ratchis swung his axe up under its arm pit, nearly cleaving the thing’s head and shoulder off. It collapsed into a quivering pile of matted hair and meat.

“Ut un uz i-een!” Kazrack cursed incomprehensibly.

Another of the bear-men came out of the shadow of the wood; perhaps it had snuck around the very edge of the top of the hill. Gunthar was hard-pressed to get his guard up as his attention was on the where they thought all the quaggoths would emerge from. He grunted as links of his mail were caught in the jagged claws of the beast.

Anarié moved past the Neergaardian to listen for more coming around to flank from the darkness, and Beorth, finally dropping his foe with a sword thrust, stopped to listen as well.

Martin cowered unsure of what to do, as yet another quaggoth came over the crest of the hill and charged at Kazrack. Ratchis swung around striking deep into its shoulder, but it refused to drop. Its squeal of pain, turning into a roar of anger.

“Friggin’ shit-bears!” Gunthar swore. “You decided to climb up the wrong friggin’ hill!”

Gunthar fought off his attacker at the base of a tree, and several of his blows did not hit their mark, for it kept withdrawing into the branches. Suddenly, it roared and pushed through the branches to sink its teeth into Gunthar’s arm.

“Son of a bitch!” Gunthar swore. The thing huffed and puffed, and its matted hair became bristled and its chest expanded.

Ratchis, distracted, felt the club of the one before him. Three more quaggoths were pulling themselves over the edge.

“Ow!” Beorth felt something like a sharp pinch at his neck, as something clanged against the bottom edge of his helmet. Reflexively, he reached up and brushed at it and tiny crossbow bolt fell away. The wound burned. He looked around frantically for its source.

“I’m checking on Beorth,” Ratchis announced, still holding his ground as more quaggoths approached, hooting and swinging their wood and stone clubs over their heads.

“Unteh-oo tuh huld uh lun,” Kazrack called, as he thrust his halberd into the gut of the man-bear before him and with a twist of the broad blade ripped its insides out. It tumbled over into the blood-soaked grass.

Anarié fired two more of her magic arrows at one of the quaggoths, not noticing that Beorth had spotted the source of the bolt.

There, barely visible in the shadow of a tall fir tree, stood a lithe dark figure, only a few loose strands of silver-white hair falling out from under a black leather helmet. He wore a muted gray mail that looked so finely woven that individual links could not be discerned. The dark elf held a tiny crossbow in one hand and held a short sword in the other.

“Anubis, help me strike down these evil foes of light,” Beorth prayed to his god as he rushed over, inwardly thanking his keen eye-sight, but it was too late that he realized that the elf had allowed himself to be seen. Beorth had been drawn into a trap. He felt a sharp blow to his side and swung around, a second dark elf, this one wielding two long swords had been hiding there, too.

From the darkness below the hill there came the sound of even more quaggoths hooting to each other.

One ran past Kazrack, and Martin only barely turned away, getting a painful glancing blow off his hip. As it was, it nearly knocked him off his feet.

Suddenly, the watch-mage cried out as he saw green and black flames begin to lick up his robes and surround him in an aura of arcane fire. It moved with him, shedding dim green light in the clearing.

“What the...?”

Not thinking anything of this seeming new spell of Martin’s, Kazrack stepped over and drove his halberd blade into the quaggoth’s back. It howled and turned to face the dwarf, suspicious of the green fire.

Gunthar and his foe traded blows, but it was too wild now and leaving itself open. The Neergaardian feinted a thrust and the thing dove for him, missing. It slammed its face against the hard ground.

The dark elf opened his mouth in a smile of brilliant white teeth. He dropped his crossbow and pulled a longsword in a blur of movement, and Beorth’s was only barely able to turn away blows that would have killed, making them into ones that merely drew blood.

“Betrayers from under the hill, you will die tonight!” Anarié cried with rare passion, and she ran to get a better view of the ancient foe of her people. Two bolts of white light flew from her finger, slamming into the elf.

“Are you not happy to see us, cousin?” he sneered.

Martin had managed to draw and load his crossbow, but his bolt went flying high over the quaggoth’s head.

The drow that remained invisible to all but Beorth struck out with one of his blades, whipping at Beorth’s weapon hand, slicing open gauntlet and hand alike. The sword flew from the paladin’s grasp and he turned to withdraw, feeling the bite of the drow blade twice more despite the enchantment on him. In less than a moment, he was bleeding on the ground, growing colder by the moment.

“The drow are here!” Ratchis announced rushing back to help Beorth, a quaggoth on his tail.

“There’s no such thing as dark fairies, unless you count the ones down by the docks in Earthsea City,” Gunthar quipped. He made short work of another quaggoth, ignoring the one on the ground momentarily.

Kazrack swung around and finished the one on the ground and swung out his blade to trip up the one chasing Ratchis, but it deftly leapt over the blow.

“*Askula!*” sang a voice above them, and they looked to see a tall female drow dressed in a long black coat covered in gray and purple spiders. Her hair was cut in four stripes of shocking silver that wound down her back, kept in place by silver spiked barrettes, tied in intricate knots of hair. Her skin was like ash, and about her neck was black metal spider pendant.

A globe of magical darkness covered part of the clearing, engulfing the two drow, Beorth’s dying form and the charging half-orc. Two sharp blows greeted him to the deep darkness, and he frantically tried to keep up some guard, listening out for a footfall, but the sounds of battle were a cacophony.

“*Sagitta Magicus,*” Anarié canted again, aiming at the drow sorceress, but this time the two arrows of white light seemed to fizzle out of existence just before striking her.

“Weak surface magic,” the drow said in thickly accented elven.

Martin tried for a shot at the drow sorceress, but it arced low.

Ratchis leapt back out of the darkness and called to Nephthys to close his wounds. Luckily, the quaggoth that was following him, had turned off to chase Martin, but Gunthar skipped out of the shadows with kick to its groin, and he slid

his longsword into its chest through the shoulder when it doubled over.⁸⁹ It did not get back up.

By now the clearing was a mess of dirty white and red. More quaggoths had come over the side in the confusion, and Kazrack charged at one to keep two from ganging up on Anarié who was keeping them at bay gracefully, taking openings when she saw them.

Ratchis was caught unaware by one of the new-comers, and grunted in agony as he felt a stone club against his kidneys.

The darkness lifted and suddenly it dropped again, this time covering the main area of the battle.

“You want magic?” Martin cried out to the floating drow sorceress from beneath his mantle of green and black flame and sounding a little crazed. “Here is some magic for you.”

And suddenly the spell he had been chanting was completed. There was a flash of blinding light, and there stood, roaring on its hind legs, a golden bear that gleamed in the gloom. The bear clawed angrily at one of the quaggoths, but the thing leapt back, and hooted in fear.

The drowess ascended out of sight.

Martin hurried around the darkness, ready to cast a spell at the first foe he saw, but instead he felt the bite of a tiny crossbow bolt. The world became a dark blur and he felt himself slowly falling to the ground, and then all was black for him.

Kazrack instinctively leapt out of the darkness, and with two chopping blows, finished the quaggoth harassing Anarié.

“Oh Spider-Goddess! Bring me your servant so that we may slay the surface-dweller and her weak companions,” the sorceress hissed.⁹⁰

There was a pop and Anarié was startled by a fat black spider—nearly three feet in diameter—that appeared on the tree behind her. She ducked and twisted to avoid its bite, but it scurried after her. Ducking a quaggoth’s blow, she moved to flank it, putting it between her and Kazrack, and shoved her long sword through its lower back. It howled, but did not fall, spinning around and whipping blood in great arcs.

The golden bear ignored its foe and went after the spider instead, smashing its soft body easily, while turning to find the next closest foe.

Ratchis rushed his way through the darkness towards where he had last seen Beorth, but his joy at coming out into the moonlight was short lived. He saw movement to his left and turning to look, heard a twang, and suddenly his right eye was burning. One of the tiny crossbow bolts of the drow had pierced his eyeball.⁹¹

Roaring, he fell backwards, dropping his axe and clutching at his eye, and he wheeled around frantically. In all the commotion, he did not even feel the venom on the dart that put him in a questionably merciful sleep.

Gunthar whipped around to barely avoid the furiously quick blows of the drow elf with two long swords.

“Bast’s Flabby Kitty Titties!” Gunthar cursed. He gritted his teeth as he tried a riposte that was easily parried. This elf also wore the gray finely woven mail but had a burgundy cloak that seemed to flow in and out the darkness beneath the trees.

“There is a such thing as drow elves!” Gunthar cried out, and he yelled to Martin, who had just managed to stumble out of the darkness close by. “Fat ass! Get behind me!”

⁸⁹ **DM’s Note:** This cinematic piece brought to you by the “Dirty-Fighting” Feat.

⁹⁰ Translated from the drow dialect.

⁹¹ **DM’s Note:** Ratchis suffered the following critical effect: Struck in Head, Apply Crit Multiplier to Damage Roll – Reflex Save vs. Attack Roll (+5 if helm, +15 if full helm) or Eyeball Pierced, Stunned for 1d3 rounds, -2 to hit in melee, -4 in ranged until repaired; -4 to spot/search checks.

Gunthar and the drow fell to fencing, trading blows, and parrying. Again and again, their blades met and turned. Gunthar put his strength into it, but the drow's forms were practiced, and soon he had cuts in his wrist and forearm.

The Neergaardian cursed.

In the darkness, the summoned celestial bear squeezed the last life out of a quaggoth and bit deep into its shoulder to make sure.

Clear of quaggoths for a moment, Kazrack ran to Ratchis' large pack and pulling the long bow from atop it, began to try to string it.

"Ruchus! Ur buh! Uh jrow 'itch en ee uhr!" he said and looking up he saw the drow sorceress point a finger at him and hiss an arcane word. A sickly green ray enveloped in a mist shot out at him, but Kazrack ducked out of the way of the spell, but right into the club of a quaggoth.

And now it was Anarié's turn to come to Kazrack's aid as she drove her blade into the back of a quaggoth moving to flank him.

Glad to have some support, Kazrack fit an arrow to Ratchis' bow and fired up at the drow witch, but the arrow flew awkwardly and dropped short into the dirt.

The sorceress disappeared once more.

Dropping the bow, Kazrack drew his flail and leapt at the other quaggoth, smashing it full on in the face with a satisfying crunch. It fell, unmoving, to the earth.

Anarié instinctively ducked a tiny bolt fired from the trees over her left shoulder and spinning to knock the quaggoth she fought off balance, moved to support Gunthar, hoping to draw the other drow into a fight. The celestial bear grabbed this quaggoth from where it stood at the edge of the darkness, and tore into it, killing it easily. It was the last one.

The bear now bounded out of the darkness and charged at the drow wielding the hand crossbow, but the dark elf deftly spun out of the way. However, he was startled by his comrade's cry, as Gunthar found the opening he was looking for and cut deeply into his foe's thigh, nearly cutting the whole leg free of the crumpling body.⁹² With one fluid movement, coming out of that blow, Gunthar spun into place to flank the other drow warrior against the glowing bear.

"Now we gotta little something goin'," Gunthar said, licking his lips of his opponent's blood.

The drow holding the crossbow moved away cautiously, ducking and weaving to avoid Gunthar's blows, and getting dangerously close to the bear. The Neergaardian pulled his swords back to avoid hitting the bear, allowing for temporary escape. Gunthar, however, was not to be deterred. He moved to follow. Noting the elf's greater speed, he slid both swords away with a flick of his wrists, and pulled a javelin from the quiver on his back.

But the bear was quicker in its reaction and ripped at the elf with a claw. Crying out, the drow threw himself over the side of the hill, tumbled down its steep rocky surface into inky shadow. The bear, still following Martin's last command to chase down and slay their foes, dove off the side after him.

Kazrack spun and threw a hand axe at the floating drowess, but she stayed just out of close range, surveying the melee as if she were not a part of it.

Anarié quickly cast a spell and moved with great speed away from the battle.

"Flee! Flee!" the drowess mocked from above in her accented elvish, but she seemed to be doing the same. Reaching

⁹² **DM's Note:** Ken (as Gunthar) scored a "+1 Total Damage Multiplier" critical hit (which causes damage a number of additional times equal to the weapons critical damage multiplier plus one; so, in this case x3).

out to grab a treetop to pull her levitating form around.

Anarié returned, and with a word she ran towards the tree leaping fifteen feet in the air and into the tree the drowess clung to. Unfortunately, the elf maid failed to get a good footing and slammed through the branches and needles to land heavily on the ground.

The drow sorceress laughed.

Gunthar cursed and ran back to the campfire, sticking his javelin into the flame until it caught.

Meanwhile Kazrack began to climb the tree Anarié had just fallen out of, while she drew her bow and looked for a shot at the sorceress.

“*Teneraél Undol, grant me spider’s grace,*” the sorceress chanted, and then leapt from the tree, clinging to a narrow branch at the top of one a handful of yards away like an insect.⁹³

Gunthar threw his smoking javelin at the sorceress, but it just landed awkwardly in the tree, slowly making its way back down through the branches.

Anarié let an arrow fly, but it arced over the tree.

Looking down and then back up. Kazrack leapt back out of the tree and ran over to check on Beorth and Ratchis.

Gunthar ran over to Martin’s slumbering form, and took up the mage’s crossbow and loaded it, taking a shot. The sorceress leapt again and Anarié fired, but the arrow flew past the target. However, in ducking to miss the shaft, the arc of her leap was ruined, and she slammed on the ground at the base of the tree she was leaping for.

Kazrack looked up from where he was using a *cure minor wounds* spell to stabilize Beorth, when he heard Anarié call, “She’s on the ground!” The dwarf leapt to his feet and jogged in that direction, flail in hand.

A flurry of arrows followed the sorceress back into the tree. She climbed with great speed and deftness, seeming to barely need to touch the branches.

“I hate these things,” Gunthar swore loading and firing again. Again, he missed.

The drowess leapt again, and this time Anarié’s arrow struck home! Or seemed to, only to bounce away as if it had struck some invisible barrier.

They chased her across the top of the hill, until bleeding from an arrow that nicked her, she leapt into the top of a huge tree that was actually planted on one of the lower levels of the stepped hill. She began to climb down with great speed, and Kazrack leapt right off the hill at her when she was nearly level with him, but the dwarf fell short, slamming into the tree and sliding down.

Gunthar did not even bother to try for the tree and did a running jump down to the next step. His feet slipped out from under him and he landed painfully on his tailbone.

The drow sorceress leapt again, followed by one last arrow from Anarié, but it was too late. She was gone.⁹⁴

End of Session #64

⁹³ Translated from the drow dialect. *Teneraél Undol* is the drow spider-goddess.

⁹⁴ **DM’s Note:** This was the last session that Helene (Jana, Derek, Anarié) was able to play in the group as she had to return to France because her visa had expired. Coincidentally, it was also the last session Ken ever played in as well. We miss them both.

Session #65⁹⁵

Anarié climbed a pile of stone at the edge of the hill and sat there, contemplating the battle in silence, Kazrack made his way back to the others. Ratchis was awake and carefully poking at his eyeball that hung on his face attached by frayed threads of sinew. Gritting his teeth, he shoved it back in its socket and tied it in place with a strip of his hyenadon hide.

Martin sat there curious about why his mantle of green and black flame was gone and how it might have been triggered. One thing he was certain of, it had been caused by the Book of Black Circles.

“Wow, those things really exist,” Gunthar said, coming back into the camp. “They aren’t so tough, though.”

Martin shot him a disgusted glance.

“Hey, I told you to stay behind me fat-ass,” Gunthar said to him. “Lotta good growing all green and flashy did for ya. Just makes you a bigger target.”

“I did not do it on purpose,” Martin replied quietly, fear creeping into his voice.

Kazrack tried several times to cast curative miracles upon Beorth but failed. Eventually, Ratchis came over and took care of it. Kazrack cursed his shattered jaw that made intoning the words of prayer to his gods so difficult, but no one understood him.⁹⁶

The dwarf went over to where Martin the Green had begun to search the dead dark elf for any clues or anything of value.

“Ut duh ya mehk uh dis?” Kazrack asked, holding up a long sword, and showing the mage the gray quality of the metal, and how it shone in places as if filled with speckles of some mineral, and yet turned in a certain way and it seemed to shimmer with shadow.

“I have no idea,” Martin shrugged his shoulders. “Some Plutonic Realms metal, I suppose.”

“We dwarves have talesh uh theesh dark elvesh ushing metal lat eh evil in shum way. Eh is shupposht tuh be potent, how-eh-er,” Kazrack said.

“It is not evil,” Anarié said, suddenly arriving to look at what they might have found.

“Whu ish et ‘en?”

“I cannot say for certain,” Anarié replied. “There is something about it that makes it sharper, stronger, but if I remember correctly, sunlight will make it lose those properties fairly quickly.”

“Do you want to use it?” Martin said, standing and taking the sword from Kazrack.

“No, I would not use such a weapon, no matter how good,” the elf replied.

“I’ll take it,” Gunthar said. “I’ll take anything.”

He swung the sword with satisfaction.

“Can I have the cloak too? It looks great,” Gunthar asked.

Anarié shrugged her shoulders. Kazrack took the cloak off the dark elf and wondered at its craftsmanship. He could not determine what it was made from, but it seemed to give to his grip, but was tough and sprung back into shape without a crease. Each tiny stitch was in the shape of a gray spider, however, much like the sword, shadows seemed to cling to it

⁹⁵ **DM’s Note:** This session was played August 23rd, 2003.

⁹⁶ **DM’s Note:** Remember, Kazrack now has an 85% chance of spell failure for spells with any verbal components.

when turned against the light of the moon.

“We have to leave this place,” Ratchis announced.

“Uh tink we shoult stay,” Kazrack managed to get out with great difficulty. “Uh kwuguth cun track ush anyway; better tuh shtay uh night un gech uh goot shtarch in uh mornin’.”

“The quaggoth know exactly where we are,” Ratchis countered. “This way I can try to cover our tracks.”

Kazrack nodded.

“Gunthar, help me with Beorth,” Ratchis gestured to the still unconscious paladin.

“What am I, your beast of burden?” Gunthar complained.

“You ur part ub our team,” Kazrack said.

“Go team...” Gunthar grabbed up Beorth’s legs, as Ratchis took him by under his shoulders.

A couple of hours later, they were making camp in a ditch at the bottom of a small gully. Ratchis spent some time scouting the area and trying to cover up any signs of their passing.

“We can stay here tomorrow and rest,” Ratchis said, when he returned. “It will be light soon, and we will only have to worry when it is dark again.”

Kazrack tried to call upon the favor of his gods once again, and this time patience and diligence worked for him, and two orisons were all that were needed for the paladin to cough into wakefulness.

“Who...who brought me back?” Beorth asked, choking.

“Kazrack and I did so, working together,” Ratchis answered.

Ratchis explained to Beorth that they had moved from where they had been and why.

“In the future, Beorth, you need to stay with the group when we form a line,” Ratchis added, after a quick overview of the fight. “It is a sound tactic against other foes, but the drow, being so deceitful, against them it is especially important.”

“Yes, I know I was a fool for chasing one into the darkness,” Beorth replied.

“You can say that again,” Gunthar added.

“Gunthar, shut up,” Ratchis said.

Gunthar laughed and went over to find a spot in the gully wall to lie in.

Morning came sooner than they expected.

Balem, the 26th of Sek – 565 H.E.

Martin the Green and Anárie were on the first watch together, as the golden light from Ra’s Glory in the east streaked the indigo sky into a watercolor wash of blue.

“It is a beautiful day,” Martin said. “It does my heart good to see the dawn.”

“When fighting such foes as the betrayers one learns to fully appreciate the coming of dawn, and the brightness of

noon,” Anarié said. “Unfortunately, its coming also means that I must now leave you and your companions.”

“Why?” Martin turned to the elf, surprised.

“I must return to Aze Nuquerna under the bright eye of the day to warn them of the drow menace,” Anarié explained.

“Will you re-join us when we pass this way again?” Martin asked.

“I cannot say,” Anarié replied. And with that she stood and took her pack and looked at each of the sleeping Fearless Manticore Killers and then jogged off, hopping up the steep gully wall and climbing over the edge and into the woods.

“Good-bye,” Martin whispered.

“Is she gone?” Thomas asked in the mage’s mind.

“Yes.”

“Did she take that fox with her?” Thomas asked of Anarié’s familiar.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

When Martin woke Ratchis and Kazrack, he explained that Anarié had left. The half-orc shrugged, and Kazrack said something. No one was sure what it exactly was, but no one bothered to ask him to repeat it.

“What were those swirling colored flames around you during that battle?” Ratchis suddenly barked at Martin, easing the tension by getting back to the familiar.

“I believe it was the book,” Martin replied meekly. “I think it was trying to channel its power through me.”

“Looks like it succeeded,” Beorth said.

“I think it is triggered by certain spells, or certain kinds, though I cannot be sure,” Martin said.

“Then he should stop using magic,” Beorth said to Ratchis.

“Or he should at least stop using magic that forces a challenge to his will,” Ratchis reasoned. Martin looked back and forth between his companions, ignored.

“Or someone who does not use arcane magic should carry it,” Beorth said, and Martin frowned.

“It is my task to do,” Martin said.

“When I picked up the book it... It wounded my soul,” Ratchis said, still ignoring Martin. “It is best no one else touch it.”

“What spells make you feel like you might lose control,” Beorth asked.

“It doesn’t quite feel like that,” Martin replied. “And anyway, I am not sure. I felt something when I summoned that celestial bear, but I don’t know...I focused and it went away.”

“Hmm, I still think you should stop using magic altogether,” Beorth said.

Kazrack nodded.

“I feel useless as it is,” Martin dejectedly. “Without magic I would become a hindrance.”

“Well, we need to move while there is still light,” Beorth changed the subject. “I hope they do not go after Anarié alone in the wilderness.”

“She’ll be alright,” Ratchis said.

They began to pack up camp to move on.

“Hey Doughboy! Don’t you go all dark powers anywhere near me,” Gunthar laughed, turning to pee against the gully wall. “I may have to sprinkle you with some Northrop holy water.”

“Martin, do you like being called ‘doughboy’?” Ratchis asked, glaring knives into Gunthar’s back.

“It does not please me,” Martin said.

Gunthar turned back around to find Ratchis’ broad chest in his face. “Do not call Martin ‘doughboy’ again, or you’ll answer to me. Don’t be such a rude boor all the time.”

“Oh no,” Gunthar stepped back, brandishing a smile beneath his full blonde mustache. “I think you are boorish enough for both of us. I should call *you*, Snuffles.”

“You can call me Snuffles; just don’t call Martin Doughboy.”

“It’s a deal, Snuffles,” Gunthar winked.

“Must you?” Martin asked him.

“How do you all get along without a sense of humor?” Gunthar asked. “Maybe you can pray to you gods for one. Huh, Snuffles?”

“The only gift my god gives is death,” Beorth said.

Gunthar burst out laughing. “You see? Now *that’s* funny.”

They marched south out of the gully, and then Ratchis led them to a rocky area with very sparse vegetation. It was a steady climb, but he hoped it would lead to a place to cross the river, which at this point was far at the bottom of huge wedge-shaped crevasse.

“Why do you think the drow attacked us?” Beorth asked, as they marched. A cold rain began to fall, echoing out across the hills.

“Maybe to kill us because we know their secret,” Ratchis offered.

“How dijg jay chrek ush?” Kazrack asked.

“Maybe they caught our trail at the elf place,” Ratchis said.

“It still does not explain why us and why now,” Beorth said.

“Well, hopefully Anarié can figure it out and she and her brethren can do something about it, while we are in Nikar,” Ratchis said.

“Have we given up our promise to help that poor girl, Rahasia?” Martin asked.

“Und what about Tirhash?” Kazrack asked.

“The Maze is more important than any of that right now,” Ratchis said, stopping to look at everyone. “It presents the biggest and most immediate threat. We cannot let ourselves get distracted. I want to save them, too, and will gladly join a group to go into the very Plutonic Realms to get them, but after we deal with the Maze... after...”

He kept on walking.

The next few days were hard walking, most of it uphill, and when it was down, it was through loose dirt and treacherous roots leading to jagged plateaus of black basalt that seemed to have burst out of the ground long ago. The only foliage here were crabby trees, and thick vines on rocks that cracked them to reach the sparse water.

The weather was warming up, but the nights still had a frost to them, and when their trail brought them above the level of the river gorge, a fierce wind would whip down and sting their eyes and chill them to the bone.

They finally reached the gorge after five days of marching, and all were disappointed that there seemed no easy way across. The other side was at higher elevation, and they could see the dark shade of many thick green trees above them. The gorge was as wide as two hundred feet in places, but they could see that further north where the gorge turned west around a black hill atop the opposite cliff, it narrowed some.

“We’ll find a way to cross up there,” Ratchis said with confidence. “But it will be getting dark soon. I’ll bring us another mile or two closer and then we’ll find a place to camp and get a good look in the morning light.”

Everyone agreed wearily. Even Gunthar did not seem to have a quip ready.

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In the deepest part of night, Beorth stood and walked around the camp once more, as he and Kazrack kept watch. He had caught the smell of something burning, now he thought he saw sparks flying up into the air from the other side of the crevasse; near where the other side turned away and narrowed.

As usual, Kazrack was busy carving away at his King’s Men pieces.

“Kazrack, did you see that?” Beorth hissed.

“Whut duh you shee?”

“Smoke... Fire...Sparks...” Beorth replied.

Kazrack got up and stretched but could see nothing through the tall dark trees and gloom.

“Uh dunt shee anytung.”

“Why are you so busy carving when you are supposed to be watching?” Beorth reprimanded.

“There ish nothing there,” Kazrack ignored the question.

“We are not alone, someone is out there, and they have a fire,” Beorth insisted, even though he no longer saw a sign of the fire.

“Well, whut duh yuh pehposh we do abut it nah?”

“Remain aware,” Beorth said. “Keep better watch. Make sure to tell the others first thing.”

Kazrack shrugged and nodded.

“We should go back southward and find another route,” Ratchis said. It was morning and the news of the smoke had made him reverse himself completely about the best route to take. “We cannot risk running across anything that will delay us.”

“That is unavoidable,” Beorth said.

“It will take tuh lawn tuh guh ‘round,” Kazrack said with great determination.

Ratchis looked to Martin.

“It does stand to reason that we may come across other travelers in the wilderness, and we may not be able to avoid them all if it means we may never get to our destination,” the watch-mage reasoned.

“It sounds like something interesting to break up the monotony of this ridiculous journey,” Gunthar said, hefting his pack. “Right, Snuffles?”

“We’ll approach as a group, but once we get close, I’ll go ahead and scout it out,” Ratchis said, and off they marched.

It was an overcast day, but while it threatened rain, and more than once they heard distant thunder, the clouds never actually broke. The ground here was broken, and often at an angle that made keeping a steady footing difficult. The forest grew up around them again, and while not as thick as the forests in western Gothanius, it still managed to obscure the chasm.

It was close to noon when they finally came within sight of something unusual through the trees.

Below them they could see a raised road had been made with mounds of dirt that did not look like it was from this region. They could see most of the top of it had blown away, and other sections had huge chunks ripped from it, but it was clearly a road.

“There was a great fire here, or something,” Ratchis said.

“Huh?” Kazrack made a guttural questioning sound.

“He’s right,” said Martin. The trees here are younger than there were in the other part of the forest.”

“That road seem like it will lead right to the point the opposite cliff starts to turn; where that hill of black stone is,” Ratchis said. “Maybe there is a way across. I’ll check.”

The half-orc jogged ahead, disappearing into the trees. It was not long before he came back.

“There is a tower at the entrance to an old stone bridge that crosses the river chasm,” Ratchis said. “The dirt road goes right up to it, though it looks like maybe that road was once paved with huge stones.

“Who could get such huge stones up here?” Martin asked.

“Whoever built the bridge,” Beorth said, matter-of-factly.

“Yes, well... I meant...”

“Ish kunt be that good if it wushnt beelt by dwarsh,” Kazrack drooled.

“Who else would have built it?” Ratchis asked. “It looks like something dwarves would build. It goes all the way across, and part of it seems go do all the way down to the bottom of the chasm for support. I want Martin to cast his spell of

invisibility on me, so I can scout the tower and beyond where there is some wide flat area. I am not sure. I did not want to get too close.”

The whole group moved up to the edge of the forest where the road broke out of the trees and through a fifty-foot clearing to the entrance to the bridge. The bridge itself was made of huge blocks of a smooth white stone, but in most places (especially the seams) it was stained with a deep mottled green or had weathered to gray. It was thirty feet wide and had low walls running along its length that seemed to have once had a wooden rail above it; long rotted away.

Kazrack sucked in a deep breath and let it out. His engineer and stone-mason’s eye saw something that others could not begin to imagine. The curves of the arches! The precision of the stone interlocking and seaming! The stone did not seem indigenous to this region. The central tower ziggurated by mere inches all the way down, creating a broad base of support in a way that he would have had no idea how to begin doing, and it was this that convinced him that dwarves had not made this bridge.

Martin cast *mage armor* on Ratchis, who took off his chain shirt, and it was followed it up with *invisibility*.⁹⁷

Once again, this time, unseen, Ratchis took off.

There was no sign of a door in the tower that guarded the entrance of the bridge on the right side. It was round and had a carved stone roof, like a cap, though it was greatly worn. Ratchis made no sound creeping up the long wide steps up to the bridge. The smooth white stone seemed wiped nearly clean of most small debris by the wind.

The tower was dark. He approached it but looked quickly across the bridge. It was at least one hundred and eighty feet long, but thick foliage and the flanking stone of the taller cliff obscured the other end. In addition, near the center of the bridge where the ziggurating support held up a slight widening of the bridge, like a small plaza, where a squat building made of the same white stone as the bridge stood.

He stopped and listened, hearing nothing but the sound of the distant water below.

He looked in the tower. Inside it smelled of animal musk and mold. Nothing human, or even orcish had been here for a long time. There was a rotted stair that led to the upper level, but even to Ratchis’ untrained eye, it did not look original to the construction.

The ranger let the tower be, and slowly made his way along the bridge towards the plaza and building. Here he could see that the low walls that ran along the bridge’s edge were shattered in places, and others just seemed to be missing. In more than one place cracks went all the way through the thick stone surface of the bridge, making long jagged holes ranging from a few inches to nearly two feet in diameter.

At the plaza Ratchis was taken aback. There was relatively fresh blood here, and a pair of swords and a shield that looked as if they had been dropped hastily. There was a shattered spear and several broken crossbow bolts. The half-orc re-created the battle the best he could, following it around the squat building.

He could look into the gloom within the building, by means of a shattered wall around an empty window casement, and an open doorway. Ratchis walked over to the doorway and saw the broken remains of stone tables and chairs within, and a stairway of carved gray stone leading down into the support tower below.

There was a body over by a corner where the low wall had been torn away all together. The white stone next to it was scored as if by great claws.

Ratchis went over to the body and ducked down from instinct, even though he was still invisible. The man’s chain shirt was yanked up nearly over his head. There was a broken long sword just out of his reach, and he wore a dented helmet.

The half-orc turned the body around and it let out a gasp. A wound near its neck opened and fresh blood began to come out in gouts.

⁹⁷ **House Rule:** Despite the switch to 3.5E, *invisibility* has a duration of 10 minutes per level.

“He’s alive!” Ratchis could not keep himself from saying aloud. He said a quick prayer to Nephthys and in a moment the man’s life-threatening wound was closed. He was stable.

Ratchis risked a couple of more spells and soon the man’s eyes fluttered.

“I am invisible by magical means,” Ratchis whispered in his rasp. “I will carry you off the bridge.”

By this time the others had made their way to the entrance to the bridge, sticking close to the tower entrance as not to be spotted from the higher cliff across the ravine.

Kazrack was astounded by the work he saw and kept mumbling about it, but no one could understand a word of it.

Soon, they saw the strange sight of a body bobbing along towards them six feet in the air.

“What is that?” Beorth asked.

“Uh ashume ish D’nur returning wish shumwun,” Kazrack drooled.

“I found him behind that building,” Ratchis said, still invisible when he had brought the man into the abandoned tower. “There was a lot more blood there and claw marks, that I am guessing are from that demonic wyvern that was after Kismet and Schlomo.”⁹⁸

The man stirred as everyone gathered around.

He looked up to where Ratchis should have been and fear came into his eyes, and then he looked at Kazrack and then Martin and the look turned to confusion. He had a lean build, and unkempt thick brown hair, and a beard growing in. He had the olive complexion of a Herman-lander, and green eyes.

“What is your name?” Martin asked him.

“I am Dorn,” he replied, choking. “Where is Digger? What happened to Digger?”

“I saw no one else, uh, alive,” Ratchis said.

“I thought I was dead,” Dorn said. “Is everyone else dead?”

“We found no one else with you,” Martin replied.

“Did Digger send you?”

“Nuhwun shent ush,” Kazrack said. “Only forchun.”

“Last I remember, Digger said he was going to get help,” Dorn said, finally sitting up. He rubbed his face with his hand, and then gingerly poked at his neck wound. “He was going to get Flora.”

“These are your companions, you are mentioning?” Beorth asked.

“Yes, we had explored an abandoned subterranean fortress, days north of here,” Dorn explained. “There were six of us: Me, Flora, Bones, Digger, Fleece and Gissa. We lost Gissa to a great spider’s venom. We found a few things down there, but more loss of life was not worth all the treasure in Derome-Delem, so we headed back.”

“What was this fortress?” Martin asked.

“It belonged to the Ancients, sometimes called the Mystics,” Dorn explained. “They looked like men but were here before men. They once had a great empire in Aquerra before a catastrophe of some kind befell them. They made this

⁹⁸ See Session #58

bridge. It's probably thousands of years old."

"What happened here? What gave you these wounds?" Ratchis asked.

"...the three-headed beast," Dorn began.

"Oh. No," Martin gulped.

"What?" Kazrack asked.

"Chimera," was all Martin said.

"Wuzzat?" Kazrack asked.

"A nasty beast that has the head of a dragon, a lion and a goat," Martin explained. "It is the creation of foul magics."

"A goat?" Beorth looked at Martin with skepticism.

Martin the Green shrugged.

"Are you sure you saw no sign of Digger?" Dorn asked, worry in his voice. He pointed to Kazrack. "He's a dwarf like him."

"I saw no dwarf," Ratchis said.

"Ish Digger uh fumlee name?" Kazrack asked.

Martin translated.

"I don't know; that's just his name," Dorn replied.

"Maybe you can tell us what happened, so we can stop badgering you with questions," Beorth suggested.

"Yeah, if we're gonna have to kill some three-headed freak of nature then I want to do it soon,' Gunthar said. "I'm itchin' to fight something."

"Be careful what you wish for," Dorn said. "We made camp up on that hill on the other side of the bridge, as we were coming from that direction. It was getting dark, and we didn't want to cross the bridge at night because we were afraid something might use it as a lair. However, in the early morning barbarians overran our camp. They were savage, wearing wolf pelts, and necklaces of human ears and stuff. The worst part was that they attacked to capture, and they got Flora and Bones, right away. Digger, Fleece, and I ran to the bridge, hoping to escape to re-group and plan an attack to get our friends back, but that was when the three-headed monster attacked. It swooped down on us as we came across the bridge. I don't know what happened to Fleece, but I was knocked down by a devastating claw attack as Digger and I tried to get around the building, hoping that since it did not seem to fly well that by sticking close it, it would have to make wide turns. The thing was about to rip me apart with a bite of its dragon-head, but Digger blocked my body with his and then said he was going to get help. He never came back... I guess."

"Was Fleece human?" Ratchis' disembodied growl asked.

"Yes... Was?"

"I'm sorry. I saw a human corpse on the bridge. I think it was probably him."

"I wonder why barbarians would take prisoners?" Martin asked.

"Slaves," said Beorth, and Ratchis growled.

“Let’s go take care of them now,” the half-orc barked. “They could not have gotten far.”

“They are probably still at the camp,” Dorn said, finally standing and stretching. He winced in pain. “They said something about that hill being one of their ‘spots’.”

“You stay here,” Beorth said to Dorn. “We will return for you when we have rescued your friends and have struck down these barbarian slavers.”

“No! I want to come. Those are my friends. I have to go,” Dorn insisted.

Kazrack shook his head.

Invisibly, Ratchis nodded. “Friendship cannot be denied. He can come.”

And with that he called to Nephthys and cured the defeated warrior.

“Nephthys?” Dorn said, with awe.

“Yes,” replied Ratchis roughly. “Now just use a crossbow and stay in the rear. When the fighting starts look for an opportunity to get your friends out of there.”

“I’m pretty good at sneaking,” Dorn said.

The party readied themselves and then with Ratchis in the lead, they hurried across the bridge. After a cursory look into the tower at the end of the bridge, they made their way up the stone embankment where the bridge was cut into the cliff face. On the right there were bright thick trees and bushes on a layered hill, and Dorn pointed it out. The bushes moved as Ratchis crept through them. The others fanned out slowly making their way to the clearing at the top.

Martin looked down and noticed that the earth here was spilled over a manmade stone plateau. In fact, there was a worn wide stairway crawling with manzanita. Centuries ago, an avalanche must have covered this part of the bridge complex and trees and other foliage had grown since. He theorized that the flat top of the hill might have once been a plaza.

Ratchis made his way around a tall slab of stone that was half-buried in the earth, and he heard voices ahead of him. But suddenly a huge red and brown dog broke through the trees. It seemed to be drawn right to the half-orc despite being *invisible*, and it barked a deep bark that sent goutts of flame out either side of its snout.

“Uh, I never saw those things before!” Dorn said, from the rear flank, as two more dogs leapt through the brush at the group.

“Is that your momma, Ratchis?” Gunthar laughed, pointed to the great hellish hound with one of his swords. The drow metal smoked in the long afternoon light; he had already noticed that it seemed to be losing its edge. “I can see the resemblance.”

One of the two new dogs hung back, while the other leapt down the obscured stairs at the rear portion of the marching order.

Dorn hurried off at an angle to come around the left flank, keeping his crossbow trained on the monster. He seemed a cautious fighter.

Martin let a shot go from his own crossbow at the approaching hellhound, but it went wide of its mark.

Ratchis took advantage of the first hound’s caution in dealing with an invisible foe and called to Nephthys quietly, as he moved behind the largest tree.

A bright golden and glowing spear appeared in the air, and thrust at the fiendish dog, but it leapt out of the way with a yelp.

Kazrack hurried towards Ratchis's side, as the half-orc retreated, and with one blow of his golden flail, sent the hound down on its side. It let out a howl followed by a cough of flame, and then lay still.

The third dog, leapt down towards Kazrack, but Ratchis was able to cut it off, mentally commanding the spiritual weapon to interpose itself and thrust. Again, it missed, but the half-orc's great axe didn't. He appeared without a sound, steaming blood dripping of the axe blade. The dog turned awkwardly and snarled. It let out a sharp bark and coughed out a gout of flame, but it was all turned around and completely missed Ratchis, catching Kazrack, Gunthar and Martin instead, as the three moved up the hill.

"By Horus' Hairy Man-Teats!" Gunthar swore and thrust his blades into the creature without remorse. "Outta my way Snuffles! Let a full man do this!"

The hellhound was nearly cut clean in half when it fell; its tumbling guts belching small gouts of sulfurous flame.

The newly visible Ratchis hurried on towards the top of the hill, and crouching a bit looked into the clearing to see a naked man hold a crude morning star headed towards him. The man had orange hair that was tangled into a beard covered in fresh mud. He had ruddy skin plastered with layers of dirt and mud and blood. He was barrel-shaped, with stubby legs and arms, but he swung his weapon with an abandon even Ratchis had rarely seen.

Beorth hurried up the hill, calling to Anubis to enchant his blade, and drawing the attention of the last hellhound. It seemed to notice the paladin's awkward gait and sensed that he might be easy prey. He spun around to gauge his approaching foe, but a caught a glimpse of the naked man charging across the clearing at Ratchis who stood at three o'clock to the paladin's six.

Ratchis stepped through the brush and stopped, crouching slightly in a ready position, growling. The naked man let out a ferocious yell and leapt the last bit of the way at the half-orc. The great axe came swinging up, batting the man out of the air, a stream of bright blood arcing behind him. He landed heavily on the ground, but was immediately struggling to get up, oblivious to the pain.

Kazrack was at the top of the hill now, complaining that proper tactics would have had them wait at the edge of the clearing to surprise their foes as they came through. Instead, he had a clear view of the naked man dodging Ratchis' repeated blows, and the rest of the clearing. There was a large smoldering fire in the center, surrounded with stones. There were two figures near the fire, lying bound and unmoving. One was clearly a lithe woman with long curling red hair, and the other seemed like a mop-headed child dressed in traveling clothes. There was a pile of packs and loot near by, along with the remains of a charred boar, mostly picked clean.

A woman wearing naught but a ragged fur that held her breasts in place came screaming out from behind the pack, swinging something on a clump of black line or wire. She sent it flying at Kazrack, and the dwarf leapt up, as it just missed slamming against his leg. He looked down and saw it was a desiccated human head filled with small stones. The wire was the black hair still connected to the dried scalp. She shook her spear in the air and gibbered unintelligibly.

"Gunthar! Kill that last dog!" Ratchis commanded, still trying to get at the downed man.

"Fine! I guess I gotta do everything," the Neergaardian complained, leaping back down towards the hound approaching Beorth. "That is what us Northrops are best at... Huh? Where'd you come from?"

Gunthar spun around and swung his sword awkwardly at a broad figure wearing a leather kilt, but naked from the waist up, that had stepped out of the brush. He had bronzed skin, and rippling muscles, and long locks of curly black hair that fell down his back. The barbarian easily avoided the blow, and Gunthar had to squat even more awkwardly, his legs still positioned as if mid-stride, to avoid the return blow from a battle axe, and slammed his head against a tree trunk. He fell backwards, stunned; his weapons flew from his hands as he shook his head and tried to get his senses.⁹⁹

"I hope I got this right," Martin whispered to himself as he put the last touches on his long spell. "*Tenerus tertio*

⁹⁹ **DM's Note:** Gunthar suffered a fumble forcing a Reflex save (DC 15) or fall and be stunned for 1d4 rounds.

apshai! Blessed Servant of Apshai, come to my aid!”¹⁰⁰

There was a whooshing sound as two things happened. A great insect glowing with white divine light appeared from a flash beside the broad barbarian that had surprised Gunthar. It had great oblong eyes, and a triangular head, and long razor-sharp forearms that were bent backward as if in supplication and pinched together with a deadly “Clack!” Its tiny mandibles constantly working. It was over ten feet long, and nearly seven feet tall as it menaced the barbarian, upright on its rear legs. At that same moment, Martin was once again cloaked in a mantle of translucent green and black flame that reached nearly as high as the celestial preying mantis.

“Gods!” the dark-haired barbarian cried out, and just barely managed to deflect the creature’s bite with the haft of his axe. He began to pant and huff and puff and drool, as a crazy look came into his eye. “Gods! Forst sends you one of your own!”

Beorth rushed past the great insect, charging the woman with the spear. She grunted, as a hard blow slammed her own weapon against her chest and face.

“Hedda will kill you!” the woman said to him, thrusting at him with her spear. Her muscled arms were covered in a fine red down.

By this time, Ratchis had made sure the naked barbarian on the ground did not get back up, but he had barely turned to gain perspective on the battle, when another wild warrior leapt out of the brush and across the clearing, slamming him in the shoulder and neck with a club. The man was decorated with tufts of hair of many colors woven into his leather harness. He had a tall bright red tuft of his own atop his high sloping forehead, and spiked dog’s collar about his neck. He had many sheathed knives and daggers hanging from his belt.

Ratchis barely got his axe around to parry a follow-up blow that would have crushed his skull. He was saved from being knocked off balance by Kazrack’s arrival, bringing his flail head around to hit the tuft-covered man in the crotch. The barbarian let out a high-pitched yelp and bit his own tongue, spraying blood and spit out of the side of his mouth.

The hellhound took advantage of the chaos and took a bite at the still stunned Gunthar, attempting to drag him off, but Martin turned and sent a crossbow bolt that way, piercing its snout deeply. The bolt flew through the mantle of green and black fire with no obvious effect on it.

“Elbow bones!” Hedda cried, inexplicably.

“Anubis, I call on your anger to deal your wrath on this barbarian who very likely eats the dead!” Beorth cried to his god and channeled the divine might of his god through his sword. The barbarian woman lifted her spear haft to block the blow, but Beorth pulled his sword close and whipped it across her bare side. He felt a piece of her hip bone chip as blood came exploding outward.¹⁰¹

Amazingly, she did not fall, but pushed off the paladin awkwardly to regain her battle pose, screaming of elbows and bones; tossing her head about with such fury her red-hair was as a wild flame.

Neither Martin nor Gunthar were in any danger from the barbarian that had called himself Forst, as the preying mantis now had him pinned between its pincers and was scraping at his face and scalp with its sharp mandibles. The barbarian shrieked awfully, and he struggled to free himself. However, the remaining hellhound left Gunthar to come after the watch-mage. It bit cautiously at Martin and missed, wary of the green flame, so it breathed some flame of its own. The fire roared over the mage, but the mantle of fire absorbed it, burning even brighter for a mere moment before dying back down to its normal aura.

With a quick and heavy blow from his axe, Ratchis dropped the tuft-covered barbarian, and gave Hedda a taste of its blade as well. She swung around to face both her opponents, unwilling to die despite her gaping wounds. She even managed to parry several blows from Kazrack who came around to flank. She thrust at Beorth once again, and this time

¹⁰⁰ Apshai is the Lord of Insects and Agriculture. It is one of the Beast Gods that is also part of Ra’s Pantheon. His most common form is that of a great preying mantis.

¹⁰¹ **DM’s Note:** Beorth scored a critical hit with this blow, doing 32 points of damage.

he felt the spear's bite, but gritting his teeth the paladin brought his sword down and cleaved her head open. Even then she hesitated to fall, even though some of her brains were smeared on Beorth's gauntlet.

There was a flash of light that followed an arcane word and gesture from Martin the Green and he appeared, bewildered on the other side of the clearing just in time to see a fourth barbarian, bearing a hand-and-a-half sword sneaking around in the brush to try to surprise Ratchis and Kazrack.¹⁰²

"Ratchis! Look out!" he cried, and the half-orc instinctually leapt up on the broken base of a stone column in the clearing.

The last barbarian came charging out, roaring like a bear. He wore coat of white and gray wolf pelts, with a hood not unlike that Debo wore. He had coarse black hair and ruddy skin, and flaming green eyes that glowed brightly in the gloom of the cloudy day.

There was something familiar about them, but Kazrack did not have time to think, taking a devastating blow to the chest. His chain shirt turned the cut of the blade, but he could feel the bruise immediately swelling up, and the give of his ribs coming back into place. It hurt to breathe.

The doughty dwarf tried to return the blows, but this new barbarian was a better fighter than any of the others had been. He grinned through broken teeth as he fought.

The hellhound turned back to Gunthar, but the blonde warrior had found his wits and one of his swords and buried the blade deep between the fiendish dog's shoulders.

Forst's shrieking stopped, but the celestial insect jerked his body back and forth one last time, before dropping it, followed by a partially masticated head.

Beorth whispered a prayer of thanks to Anubis, as he saw the new barbarian's back open to him, and he brought his sword down, but as if he had eyes in the back of his head, the barbarian turned away from the blow, leaving only a deep cut on his shoulder and back, instead of eviscerating him.

He let out another roar, and seemed to grow several inches in stature, as his neck and shoulders grew even broader and covered in pale green scales, a bleeding forked tongue hung out of the corner of his mouth.

"Demon!" Ratchis cried, followed by a quick prayer to Nephthys to enchant his own weapon.

"Demon, eh? Let's see whatcha got, big boy," Gunthar quipped. He brought his sword down as the barbarian almost lazily brought his sword across to parry, and then roared in agony. Gunthar had seen an opening at the very last moment and grunted as he brought the point of his blade through his foe's wrist. The hand dropped to ground. Gunthar smiled "Heh. I love disarming opponents."¹⁰³

However, the barbarian leader was not to be dropped that easily. Using the remaining momentum of his blade he swung it up and brought it down catching Gunthar on the forearm and drawing blood. Without hesitating, the wild warrior dropped the bastard sword and drew his knotted cudgel from his side.

The stump made a puddle of green and black blood at the barbarian's feet, but it quickly began to grow over and seal itself, though the arm was still useless.

"Oh, stopped bleeding, eh? Let's see what else we can cut off," Gunthar said, but his sword was stopped several times by the club. However, Kazrack was able to get a hard blow in, and the summoned celestial preying mantis, clawed at him, but was not strong enough to pin him as he had the other.

¹⁰² Martin actually lost control of himself there for a moment and cast a spell other than the one he meant to cast. He cast *Dimension Door* (a spell he does not even know) instead of *Shield*. The first level spell slot he had prepared shield in was the only thing lost.

¹⁰³ **DM's Note:** All of Gunthar's dialogue during this combat was brought to you by Martin's player, Eric Minton, who ran the fighter in combat.

Meanwhile, the recently rescued Dorn had been slowly making his way around the clearing from the west. He stayed low, with his crossbow loaded, and watched the action, waiting for a chance to make a difference despite his weakened state. He spotted a small figure doing some creeping of his own. It was a boy of probably no more than fourteen summers old, but his gait, and how he held his short sword betrayed him as one to whom killing came easily. The boy had his head shaved on either side, except for long trail of sandy brown hair tied with bits of dried gut. His nose was pierced with a thin bone, and he held a sling in the other hand.

The young barbarian was creeping along the western edge of the clearing, within sight of Martin, but the watch-mage was crouching by the woman lying by the fire asking if she was okay, and thus could not be seen by him. The green and black fire still encircled him, however, so he was loath to actually touch her.

“Watch-mage! Look out!” Dorn called, firing a bolt that went wide of its mark.

Martin looked up and spotted the barbarian trying to make his way round to flank Kazrack. Unfortunately, Dorn’s cry alerted him, and he let loose a stone at Martin. The mage now had a bloody welt on his head. Martin let loose a bolt from his loaded crossbow at the young sneak, but it missed as well, as he deftly dove out of the way.

However, Dorn’s next bolt found its mark, burying itself in the boy’s thigh.

Ratchis had leapt off the column and joined the melee with what should have been a devastating blow to the barbarian leader, but despite his many green and gory wounds, he would not fall.

“May the wretched blood of Thoon’s mother smite you!” the barbarian cried, and Ratchis swooned from the pain, as the bastard sword cut him to the rib. There was a taste like fear and metal in his mouth, and he had to fight to remain on his feet.¹⁰⁴

The celestial preying mantis kept clawing at the barbarian, while Beorth and Kazrack insured that he was fully surrounded, Gunthar and Ratchis flanking him. The battle was a cacophony of ringing metal, grunts and hissing.

Martin lifted his reloaded crossbow to aim at the sling-wielding barbarian again, but suddenly dropped it and spoke some arcane words. When he came back to himself, he was directing a spectral hand towards the foe.

“Just run away now!” Martin called. “I don’t know what that is going to do!”¹⁰⁵

The barbarian did not let up his attack on the half-orc and a short thrust took them all by surprise when Ratchis dropped and the wild warrior followed through, slamming the flat of the blade against the side of Beorth’s head. The paladin was knocked off his feet, his helm ringing in his ears.

The preying mantis disappeared with a ‘pop’, and the barbarian spun to gauge the new position of his foes, and this was the opening Kazrack had been waiting for.

“Kur-churr, gie-guh muh bluh!” he said through clenched jaw, and the barbarian’s knee exploded in a rain of green blood and black cartilage.

He paused as he fell, “I deserve this fate... I am weak.”

A follow-up blow crushed the barbarian’s skull as he dropped. The dwarf let him have it two or three more times to insure he stayed dead.

Beorth immediately knelt beside Ratchis and lay his hands on him, passing the healing graces of his god into the half-orc.

The young barbarian ran at full speed westward into the woods. Dorn let another bolt loose, but it missed, and the boy

¹⁰⁴ **DM’s Note:** The barbarian leader (called Thoon) used his *Smite Good* ability and dealt 28 points of damage to Ratchis.

¹⁰⁵ **DM’s Note:** Once again Martin failed a Will save and found himself casting spells he normally does not even have access to against his will.

was gone.

“He went that way,” Dorn pointed into the woods, but then remembered his companions on the ground and ran to them.

“Martin!” Kazrack grunted, cautiously approaching the watch-mage, who had seemed to have fallen in some kind of trance. His body jerked and the green and black flames dissipated instantaneously. “Ut ‘appuned?”

“Uh... I think I blacked out,” Martin replied.

Ratchis crawled over to the bound woman, and began to remove her bonds, while Dorn held the mop-headed boy’s head in his lap. Beorth noticed the boy’s disproportionate feet, covered with curly hair on the top side and thick leathery sole on the other. He instinctively knew that this was one of the little folk, called halflings, but was certain he had never seen one before.¹⁰⁶ However, he left the halfling to Martin and Kazrack, who cut the bonds, and instead saw to the corpse of a curly-haired blonde woman. She had received a mortal axe wound to the chest and neck.

“Shull we bind duh barbariuns?” Kazrack asked when healing spells had brought the two living prisoners to consciousness.

“To what purpose?” asked Ratchis.

“We cun question them,” Kazrack replied.

“What are we going to question them about? They’re just barbarians doing what barbarians do. Are we going to save them only to kill them?” He stood and walked over to where the first barbarian that he downed still bled out. “I say we let nature take its course.”

“Uh think we cun show ‘em mershee,” Kazrack sucked in some spit.

“No, we can’t!” Gunthar protested. “They’re barbarians!”

“They can learn, just as we do,” Beorth offered.

“No they can’t,” Gunthar responded. “They are barbarian savages!”

The paladin looked at Dorn’s wounded companions and the still dying barbarians, and then hung his head. “Fine, we will let nature take its course, but we must stay in the area long enough to inter them in the earth when they have passed on before we move on.”

It was agreed.

Dorn’s two remaining companions were called Flora and Bones. Flora was a bard, originally from Cutter Jack’s, and despite her swollen black eye and bloody scalp and other wounds, it was obvious she was very beautiful. She was lithe and had shockingly red hair and alabaster skin. Bones was a tallfellow halfling. Standing nearly four feet tall, only his feet and the hint of mustache that only grew just above the corners of his mouth gave him away as anything but a young athletic human boy. He had sparkling blue eyes, and a mop of curly brown hair and wore leather armor.

As the party discussed where the safest place to camp might be, Dorn collected all his party’s gear and possessions from among the barbarian’s things. He laid out the rest for the Fearless Manticore Killers to choose from, and Kazrack soon fell to counting gold and silver obleks and other foreign coins for splitting.

Among the things were also found a half-dozen dwarven “beard-scalps,” which Kazrack took and burned while saying a dwarven funeral prayer for whoever they might have been.

¹⁰⁶ Actually, Beorth probably had seen, if not met, several halflings while growing up in Verdun, but alas, he did not remember.

Dorn was concerned about Digger's disappearance, so while the others collected loot and broke down the barbarian camp, and made graves, Kazrack, Beorth and Ratchis made their way to the central tower building to see if the dwarven companion had gone in there. All they found was a dark stone stairway going all the way down the tower support, and even a cursory examination revealed it to be worn and cracked in many places. It would be too easy to go tumbling down into the darkness, and for something down there to wait in ambush.

They returned in time to help finish the graves. Words of remembrance were spoken by Dorn, Flora and Bones about their two fallen companions, Fleece and Gissa of Bast, the latter being the dead woman they found in the camp. Flora sang a sweet funeral song common to followers of the Cat Goddess.

Beorth gave a blessing as well, as the others stood by solemnly.

Afterwards, they all made their way back to the central tower and made camp there.

Watches were set.

During the first watch, Beorth, Kazrack and Dorn heard voices and splashing far below from the dark stairway. They waited alertly, but the voices never approached.

They warned Gunthar and Bones about the voices when they were awakened for the next watch.

"Trolls," said Gunthar.

"How do you know?" Martin asked.

"What else lives under bridges? What have you been living under a mushroom all your life like a crusty booger of a snotling like this little guy?" Gunthar pointed to Bones who sneered.

"What did you call me?" Bones asked.

"You heard me, snotling," Gunthar mimed picking at his nostrils. "I have pulled more fearsome things out of my nose."

"And I've hamstrung men with bigger mouths than you," Bones shot back, reaching for his short sword. "And I was drunk."

Beorth, Kazrack and Dorn went to sleep, and Martin with the aid of his ring stayed up for the second watch.

An hour had passed when Gunthar started in on Bones again. "Where you from, snotling?"

"Stop calling me that," Bones stood and put his hand on his sword again.

"Oh, you better get your little sticker ready, snot... I mean, *halfling*," Gunthar spat. "I'm sure it reassures you in your half a manhood you have in your little boy pants."

"Say another word, big man," Bones threatened.

"I'll do more than that, little snotling thief!" Gunthar stood and with great speed smacked Bones across the side of the head. "Best teach you who you daddy is now."

Bones drew his sword but looked to Martin for a sign of what to do.

"I *will* hurt you," Bones said.

"You think I can't take your little toy away from you?" Gunthar mocked and moved in closer, taking a fighting stance.

There was a flash of color from Martin and suddenly Gunthar was drooling stunned on the ground.

“Hopefully that will calm him down,” Martin said to Bones.

“I’m not trying to start trouble,” Bones said, meekly. “But nobody talks to me that way.”

“Gunthar is just an ass,” Martin replied, and looked down at the loud-mouthed Neergaardian.

A few moments passed and Gunthar did not get back up, instead a slight snore emerged from him.

“Let him sleep,” Martin said.

Tholem, the 4th of Ter – 565 H.E.

In the morning, Flora and Ratchis took the last watch, along with Martin who finally bedded down for the second half to have the two hours of sleep he needed.

It was decided that they would rest here another day before moving on.

Later in the afternoon, Dorn and Ratchis scouted the perimeter of the area for more signs of Digger.

“What do you plan on doing next?” Ratchis asked Dorn.

“Well, we were going to make our way to Cutter Jack’s, but with half the party gone I doubt we’d make it,” Dorn explained. “I was hoping we could come with you to Nikar, and then make our way east on the Mountain Door, which is safer.”¹⁰⁷

“I will have to ask the others, but there is safety in numbers.”

“Actually, I wanted to ask you something else,” Dorn continued. “Was it Nephthys that gave you the ability to be invisible?”

“Uh, no... It was one of Martin’s spells. Why do you ask?”

“Um, when you saved me, I did not know you were um, you know, that uh, one of your parents was an orc, and to be honest if I had known I might have refused your help.”

There was a long pause.

“It really opened my eyes,” Dorn continued. “When I found out you were a priest of Nephthys, I was astounded... You see, my grandparents were former slaves that escaped the Black Islands Barony with my mother when she was a child, and she always tried to instill in me reverence for Nephthys, and I did give a token prayer or donation now and then, but this...”

“We can never know where her hand guides our own,” Ratchis replied.

“Do you think this is a sign? I think it may be a sign,” Dorn said. He cleared his throat.

“It may be, but you are still free to do as you like. A reminder of Nephthys’ love is not a command to do anything in particular.”

“I don’t care. I mean, I want to help you, if it means doing as Nephthys would want me to, and to repay the debt I owe you,” Dorn.

“Do as you will,” Ratchis replied after a long pause. “We should head back.”

¹⁰⁷ *The Mountain Door* is a road that runs east-west from Cutter Jack’s to what is called ‘the One Road’.

Later that same day after a long talk with Flora on various kinds of lore (and she recognized *Lacan's Demise* after a brief look) they showed her the black bracers they had taken off of Master Hamfast in the Pit of Bones, and she identified them.¹⁰⁸ Martin the Green, not wanting to deal with the small chance they would interfere with his spell-casting, let Ratchis take them, as no one else in the party seemed interested. The half-orc was happy to no longer need to wear his chain shirt.

Balem, the 5th of Ter – 565 H.E.

The night passed with little event, Gunthar got away with not taking a watch to avoid him and Bones going for each other's throats, and more splashing was heard down below the group, but nothing came up. Now three members larger, the party crossed the bridge and made their way into the hills west of the river.

The terrain here was marked by scores of steep round hills covered in tall elms and maples, creating muddy tracks that wound round in all directions. The runoff of melting snow from the north brought lots of silt with it, and getting over some of the hills when cul de sacs were reached took a grueling effort in the increasing heat of the day.

In late afternoon they came across an abandoned campsite that Ratchis was sure the barbarians had used three or four days before. He was certain they had come there from the northwest, but he turned the group south to find a way through the imposing cliffs they could see several miles west.

Teflem, the 6th of Ter – 565 H.E.

The next day found the Fearless Manticore Killer and their new companions moving along a shallow stream that undercut the steep western cliffs. Only narrow treacherous cracks that moved up very steeply would allow them to move westward, and Ratchis rejected every possible spot they came across.

"We can afford to go further south before we risk a climb," he said several times after examining the map Martin had copied at Aze Nuquerna.

Just before mid-day, they splashed through the stream where it undercut the cliff and turned with it to the southwest, in order to stay out of the sun. Summer was finally coming to this mountainous central region of Derome-Delem, and while the nights were quite cold, marching in armor and with pounds and pounds of gear was exhausting under the light of Ra's Glory.

Ratchis was leading the way as usual, about sixty feet ahead of the rest of the group. Gunthar lagged behind admiring Flora's rear-end, as she gabbed away with Bones and intermittently broke into song.

Martin walked alongside Beorth discussing some of the black necromancy spells found in Hamfast's spellbook, and how to destroy them, while Kazrack marched steadily despite the pain in his mangled jaw from every step.

Dorn moved back and forth from walking beside the dwarf to taking the lead of the main group.

They came around a deep bend beyond which the stream broadened and was much shallower. Caps of white foam crashed lazily over many stones, and occasionally a large fish could be seen to struggle to go up stream past them. Ratchis was standing in the middle of the stream hand in the air and turned back to hiss everyone quiet.

¹⁰⁸ These black leather bracers are burned and etched with a motif of knitted bones and skulls twined with flowing water. At the center of the pattern, a tall-masted ship drifts towards a red moon that bears a skull-face within it. The artistic style of the bracers' ornamentation is typical of High Elves of Siron-Ehkor, but the content is not. The left-hand bracer has a sheath built into it that easily holds a long-bladed dagger or knife. Axo-Morë was an elven knife-fighter and necromancer of ill-repute. It is said that the fact that elves do not die a natural death made him obsessed with the secrets of life and death, so he chose to study necromancy. As a result, he was exiled by his people. He fled to Thracia, and later settled in Haffar's Port. From there he visited many corners of Aquerra, reportedly killed during a trip to the City of Ash in Derome-Delem. *The Bracers of Axo-Morë* give the wearer a +4 armor bonus to armor class, as the *mage armor* spell. However, the weight of the bracers on the wearer's wrists imposes a 5% arcane failure chance. Any dagger or knife kept in the left-hand sheath can be drawn as a swift action, as the Quick Draw feat.

Everyone stopped.

Before them, eighty feet down stream was a group of five bears happily fishing. One of the bears was particularly large and grizzled. Two more smaller and younger bears were on the western shore splashing around.

The large bear sniffed the air and looked up, and then suddenly reared up on its hind legs and bellowed.

All the other bears looked up and one moved over to block the young.

That was when Ratchis noticed that the smallest bear in the middle of the stream was no bear at all. It was a man of a kind. He wore a bearskin and stood nearly eight feet tall, and half again as broad as the half orc. He wore a necklace of bones and teeth, and had a short spear in one hand, and a basket of still flopping fish on a rock, partially obscured by another. The man had a pinched and ugly face and a dirty orange pallor, and a battered battle-axe hung from his side; a bow was on his back. Ratchis had seen his type once or twice before; half-ogre.

Ratchis took several steps back and signaled for everyone else to move slowly.

“What do we do?” Bones asked, moving up along side Beorth and Martin.

“We mean you no harm!” Ratchis called first in common, and then repeated it in orcish, though the phrase was a foreign one to his warlike people.

The large man dropped his spear and drew his axe.

Beorth sighed and pulled his own sword, “This is a battle we should not fight.”

“Yesh, D’nar, let us chruy tuh avoid thish fight,” Kazrack said, as the bears spread out in a semi-circle and moved to create phalanx with the half-ogre in the center.

Gunthar moved up and readied a javelin.

“We only seek to move through this area and mean no threat to it or your kin,” Ratchis called in orcish, and then added to Gunthar in common. “Stay back.”

“This is Shadarach’s land,” the big man said looking at each of the Fearless Manticore Killers and their companions in turn. He spoke in halting common.

“We seek to travel through this land,” Beorth said, not knowing he was only repeating what Ratchis had already expressed.

“The stonefolk are not welcome here,” he said, pointing to Kazrack with his axe. “They are polluters and exploiters.”

Kazrack’s eyes opened wide, insulted. “Why dosh he shay that?”

“I look over these lands and its beasts. I am Shadarach,” the half-ogre said.

“I am a man of the woods, as well. Please let us pass,” Ratchis entreated. “We seek a route west over these cliffs and through the mountains to turn south again to Nikar.”

“Heh,” Shadarach cleared his throat and then made another sound. The largest of the bears went back down on all fours and moved beside him. The half-ogre buried his hand in the bear’s fur and scratched it hard, while the other bears went back to fishing. “There are many passes over the cliff, but you will not make it through the first coming of darkness if you go that way.”

“Why?”

“Your ancient kin. The black orcs,” Shadarach said by way of explanation.¹⁰⁹ “Deep in the cliffs are the homes of scores of scores of scores of them, as thick as maggots on meat, and they emerge under the cover of darkness to hunt and find spoils.”

“We have no choice but to try,” Ratchis replied. “Perhaps if we travel by night and camp by day, we will have a better chance.”

“You will end a meal for your kin.”

“Do you know of another way?”

“Heh,” Shadarach paused. “There might be another less dangerous way, but it will cost you something, though I hate to aid the stonefolk.”

“What arv muh people done tuh you?” Kazrack asked, angrily. A line of spit hung from his mouth that he had to wipe away.

“The stonefolk are polluters,” Shadarach repeated. “The tunnels of the black orcs were once part of a dwarven mine that stretched for miles north of here within the cliffs, and as they devoured the earth, they rerouted the river, and spilled the minerals of the deep earth that turned the trees black and sickened and killed the beasts and birds. They are long gone, but only now has nature begun to heal this land. It remembers the stonefolk and shudders.”

Kazrack was silent.

“What is this other way?” Beorth asked.

“A secret way,” Shadarach replied. “Under the cliffs, not over them. It will also save you many days on your journey. I will lead you, and I have an old map.”

“We have some silver we might offer you,” Ratchis said.

Shadarach spit.

“Keep your gold. What good is gold to me here? I would have some tools and weapons. I see you are laden with them.”

After a long negotiation, it was agreed that Shadarach would show them the way in exchange for Ratchis’ great axe, and the masterwork battleaxe that had been taken from one of Mozek’s brothers, and that Derek had long wielded. In addition, he was given some other minor items, a knife, a whetstone, some sacks, and the like.

“I will bring you somewhere to rest,” Shadarach said once the agreement was made. “We will not be going until nightfall.”

End of Session #65

¹⁰⁹ There are two sub-races of orcs in Aquerra. High orcs live on the surface, or in near-surface caves and have intermingled with a great amount of human blood over the eons and are a relatively newer breed of orc. Black orcs are their chaotic subterranean cousins that live deep underground and eschew the light.

Session #66

Ra's Glory was beginning to set when Shadarach led them further down river to a recess in the cliff face. Here the rock face was black and more jagged. A large brown boulder that had obviously been dragged from somewhere else was wedged in a crack at the end of the recess.

"It ish good that we guh back under duh muntun," Kazrack said. He ran his fingers through his beard to comb out the drool that saturated it whenever he spoke.

"Do you trust this guy, Ratchis?" Dorn asked. He wiped the sweat from his brow and slipped his helmet over his curly brown hair.

"I think he is living a simple life and what he says is what he means," Ratchis reasoned. "I think that if he meant us harm, he would say so and act that way."

"Uh juss wonder know who deez dwarves 'at polluted the land were," Kazrack said.

"They were probably just miners," Ratchis said. "Dwarves like any other dwarves."

"Uh think et is dwarves that betrayed uh ways of our people," Kazrack frowned. "This man seems tuh uh taken uh likening tuh you. Would yuh mind delving intuh who these dwarves were?"

"I think your interpretation is strange," Ratchis replied.

"Kazrack, it is not like dwarves are known for their concern for the wood and the wild," Martin the Green said, butting in.

Again, Kazrack frowned.

Shadarach cupped his large calloused hands around his mouth and bellowed. A few minutes later, the largest of the bears arrived, sniffing at the Fearless Manticore Killers as it came past them. Dorn stepped away nervously. The woodsman pulled a leather harness from a sack he carried and gently put it on the bear. It was attached to some ropes with metal claws tied to the ends and in that way the great boulder was pulled out of the crack.

He took the harness off the bear and whacked it on the rump and it took off.

"If you have a spell that increases your strength, use it now," Shadarach said to Ratchis. "I will need your aid to re-seal it. It must be kept sealed so that orcs do not emerge."

"There are orcs...in the tunnel?" Martin gulped.

"I will lead you to the spawning grounds. There are few there, and you may be lucky and not meet any, except perhaps some of their women," Shadarach addressed all his comments to Ratchis. "The women of *your* folk are queens when compared to the black orcs that spawn here."

There was a long silence.

"And there will be orc children there?" Beorth asked, as they moved through the crack one by one into the dark tunnel beyond.

"This leads tuh un interesting question," Kazrack said. "If you have the chance tuh uradicate uh people, would you? They are vile, yesh, but cun we kill children?"

Ratchis looked at Kazrack but said nothing.

"The black orc spawn will be as thick as insects down there," Shadarach said. "Their early years they do nothing but crawl in the filth of their people and fight for the meager scraps and even kill and eat each other so that only the strong

survive. It is said that even as infants, some gain such a taste for their mother's teat that they will tear the flesh from her and devour it."

"That makes uh deshishun eashier," Kazrack said.

The tunnel beyond the crack in the cliff face quickly narrowed. The others waited as Shadarach and Ratchis used the harness to drag the boulder back in place. The surrounding stone protested, and dust filled the crevasse making all but Kazrack and Shadarach cough.

In a moment they were in an oppressive darkness. The sound of dripping water echoed in the distance above them.

Beorth and Dorn lit torches. Shadarach led the way with Ratchis right behind him. The others were staggered out, though Ratchis warned several times for everyone to remain close. The half-ogre led them through the narrow tunnel past a maze of fissures and cracks. In places the ceiling was so low, the half-ogre had to get on his knees to pass, while at others the crack extended way above them out of the reach of the light of the torches. The walls were cold and wet, and the uneven ground was slick in many places, weaving left and right, but moving consistently up, though many of the passages they passed seemed to go down into bottomless abysses.

"I hate these kinds of places," Flora complained.

"Don't worry, honey I'll keep you safe," Gunthar whispered.

They came to a wide tunnel seemed to have been carved from the black stone as opposed to created by water and shifting rock like all the others they had passed or gone through. Shadarach signaled for them to wait and then hurried into it and up to the right, disappearing for several minutes. He returned and gestured for them to hurry and make no sound.

Forty feet up this worked tunnel, they cut to the left again down another narrow crack. Ratchis waited at the opening and made sure everyone made it through, and then squeezed his way back up to the front to catch up with the guide.

"Soon you will see the true measure of your people's evil, Ratchis," Shadarach whispered to him. "Lest all your time among the men you serve has made you forget where you come from."

"I do not serve men," Ratchis replied coldly.

"Heh. You are poisoned by words," Shadarach said. "You lead them from place to place and fight to protect their towns and books and walls, convinced by their many meanings and fancy words, even as they seek to stab at the bosom of nature. You can believe in the oaths of civilization, but civilization can do naught but devour... Poisoned by words, weakened... You are less yourself all the time. I have seen it before."

Ratchis did not reply.

And on and on they went. The torches went out and were not re-lit, instead they bumbled through the darkness, hand on the shoulder of the person before them. Light would be too dangerous, Shadarach warned. At one point, they made their way up a narrow-curved stair carved in a style that Kazrack recognized as uniquely dwarven, 'the stair cut' was one of the first cuts learned by an apprentice stone-cutter like himself, and was common to both dwarven mines and citadels.¹¹⁰

They had been marching nearly five hours without a break when they first heard the echo of harsh voices. There was momentary panic, and weapons were drawn.

"Not yet," Shadarach said. "They are distant and do not hear us. But soon..."

Another hour had passed, when the narrow curving passage they traveled down single file emptied into another broad hall that ran nearly perpendicular to the way they were traveling. Shadarach stepped out and moved across the hall and

¹¹⁰ The dwarven stair cut is ten to fifteen times longer than it is high, creating long gradual climbs, allowing for wheeled carts to be rolled down them, or pulled up them with less effort than typical stairs, but giving more control of descent than ramps.

up a bit to the right. Ratchis followed, and Kazrack was close behind.

Suddenly, from down this thirty-foot-wide hall came snarling voices. Ratchis could just barely make out complaints about being left out of the surface hunts through the thick black orc accent.¹¹¹

“Orc voices!” Ratchis hissed to Kazrack. “Pass it down. Make sure Gunthar keeps his voice to a whisper.”

“Nun-wurriers! Muv mack shash! Uh ill ‘old uh pussuge,” Kazrack said to Martin who was just emerging into the wide tunnel. The watch-mage didn’t understand the injured dwarf’s hurried words, but he turned around and herded Dorn and Bones back down the passage anyway, hoping he got the gist.

“If ya see something point it out,” Gunthar stumbled past the three of them to get through the opening and drew his swords. Beorth who had a hand on his shoulder followed.

“Hey! Stop pushing! I want to kill some orcs,” Bones complained, drawing his own short sword.

“Bones, be quiet!” Flora chastised, as she reached out to grab on to them and move away from the tunnel as well.

In the darkness there was the twang of bows, as Ratchis let loose with an arrow and Kazrack fired his crossbow at the surprised orcs that came around the bend.

Kazrack’s bolt buried itself deep in an orc’s neck and it fell, while Ratchis turned away to cast a spell, making his arrow go askew.

“Nephthys! Grant me light!” Ratchis called to his goddess and planted a hand on Beorth’s helmet; a bright light then emanated from it, revealing their horrid foes.

Before them were seven orcs unlike any in the group had ever seen before. They had ashen pock-marked and scarred skin, blackened at the neck and joints with large translucent eyes. They had the protruding jaw of high orcs, and broad shoulders, but were even more misshapen and walked with an uneven gait, as their bodies were lean. Their ears were pointed like elves but looked as if they had been violently chewed on since birth, and the hair on their heads was greasy long and black. The black orcs wore corroded scale mail of gray and black metal, and carried beaten bronze shields.

They shrieked and drew javelins from quivers on their back, but another fell from another arrow from Ratchis’ bow.

Without a sound, Shadarach moved towards the orcs, and two fell for the bait moving to meet him in battle. They then fell on the ground, their skulls cleaved open by the half-ogre’s great axe—which he wielded in one hand—as the orcs could not get close enough to strike their own blows.

One of the orcs at the rear of their group let his javelin fly and it bounced painfully off the half-ogre’s hide armor. Another threw at Kazrack but missed completely.

A third orc turned to flee, but another arrow from Ratchis drove it to the rough tunnel floor.

In less than a moment, Shadarach had killed the last two.

“Dammit! I never got to kill even one,” Gunthar swore. “I hope it isn’t gonna be like this the whole time.”

Shadarach stripped the bodies, while Ratchis looked to retrieve what arrows he could. Gunthar took some javelins.

“What should we do about the bodies?” Ratchis asked. “Other orcs might discover them and will be alerted to our presence.”

¹¹¹ Orcish is actually a very difficult language to learn, and it varies greatly by locality. While it has a very narrow base vocabulary, it uses inflection, context, and body language to convey a wide variety of meaning to groups of words that would sound the same to the untrained ear. It also makes deciphering the crude goblin runes sometimes used to write it incredibly difficult.

“It will be a long time before any more come here, and even then, dead orcs are not rare among their own kind,” Shadarach explained.

“I need to do something with their corpses,” Beorth said. “What are their death rituals like?”

Shadarach just walked away to continue to lead and the paladin looked to his half-orc companion for direction.

“They have none,” Ratchis said. “They leave them to rot, or for scavengers to eat them. It is part of their beliefs.”

“Very well,” Beorth acquiesced. “But I will say a short prayer for their damned souls.”

Shadarach led them at unflagging pace for another two and a half hours. The tunnels were much wider and taller now, though those without darkvision had no way of knowing. Ratchis’ *light* spell had long run out, and Beorth had slipped his helm in a sack anyway. Kazrack noticed several dug-out areas where he was certain scaffolds had once been built for mining, and one side passage had track laid for carts. Occasionally, they even came across the broken and rotting handle of a tool, or some moldering sacks and strips of leather.

They were all on the verge of exhaustion when Shadarach brought them to a rounded plateau nine feet above the tunnel floor. It was sixty feet across and had three passages leading beyond it. They all clambered up there.

“We go through the middle one, but first we rest,” Shadarach’s voice rumbled in the darkness. “Someone watch.”

“Shouldn’t we camp down ‘un uh tunnels?” Kazrack asked.

Shadarach began to roll out a fur to sleep on and did not respond.

“I think we need a choice of ways to go in case more orcs come,” Ratchis reasoned.

“I will use a spell to cover us,” Martin said. He cast silent image and made the area look as if it had been covered by a cave-in.

They risked some light to make a camp, and soon despite the danger, all but the watch-mage were sleeping, as exhaustion took them over.

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Hours later, Shadarach awakened them before Martin had had a chance to get his two hours of sleep. It was a truncated rest, and no one had time to replenish spells, if they even could; it was impossible to tell if it were night or day out.

The half-ogre led them down the center passage. Here the halls were carved and buttressed, though they showed signs of wear from the flow of water and the moving of earth. The halls were broken up by long wide steps by which they slowly ascended, though they could still feel the oppression of the tons and tons of rock above them.

A few hours later they came to a wide hall that looked like it was once reached by a stair-lined shaft on its right, beyond it was an archway that had thick cracked stone double doors ripped from its hinges long ago.

“Beyond here is spawning,” Shadarach said to Ratchis, while the others listened on. “Here Shadarach leaves you. It will be too long for me to get back to my lands otherwise. Here is a map.”

He pulled out a ragged piece of yellow stained cloth marked with charcoal and blood and handed it to Ratchis. It was folded up into a wad and was moist to the touch.

Ratchis handed it to Martin.

“It smells,” he said as he unfolded it and examined the markings. “Where are we on it?”

Martin lit a torch to examine the map. It was marked with crude runes similar to those used by goblins, which he had learned to decipher at the Academy of Wizardry, though these were somewhat different.

Shadarach pointed to a point on the map. “This is the column room; you will find it directly ahead. Always stay to the left when faced with a passage splits off but avoid any small cracks that just go that way.”

“And what is this?” asked Martin pointing to a green spot near the top of the map.

“That is slime column insect horde,” his big finger moved down the map. “This is spider wall.”

“And that?” asked Beorth looking over Martin shoulder and pointing to a crude skull rune.

“Death,” replied Shadarach.

“What are these pale men?” Martin asked, interpreting a rune on the top right of the map.

“Avoid them,” was all Shadarach said. “Now I leave you to rejoin the bears. Geb be with you.”¹¹²

There was long series of half-hearted good-byes to the half-ogre, as he walked past them to go back the way they came.

“Ratchis, may your heart and mind walk free of the shackles of men once more,” Shadarach grumbled, and then he was gone.

Martin made a few notes on the map of his interpretations of the runes based on what Shadarach had said.

Less than an hour later, still stumbling in the dark and now led by Ratchis with Martin right behind him, (and Kazrack keeping everyone penned in from the rear) they all heard the sounds of lapping water ahead.

“That must be the ‘passable water’ marked on the map,” Martin whispered.

Ratchis went to scout ahead. He hurried up a short broad stair silently and came to an archway that once held stone double doors, long ago shattered off their hinges. Beyond was a great gallery flooded with black brackish water. The water level reached up to the jutting stone support the archway opened onto, but the vaulted ceiling was another thirty feet up from there. He guessed the water might be as much as thirty feet deep.

While the place was crumbling and worn in many areas, it was certainly had once been an impressive room indeed.

There were the remains of several columns, both jutting out of the water, and reaching down from the ceiling, that looked like they might allow someone skilled at jumping to leap from each to make their way across, but even Ratchis’ darkvision could not illuminate the other side of the long gallery to see if this was the case. The walls on the right and left were lined with many narrow steps and balconies that led to much smaller galleries and alcoves that seemed to stretch across the room as well. Everything was decorated with interwoven dwarven runes and images of hammers, anvils, and hearths, though much of it looked like it had been intentionally scratched out. There did not seem an easy way to get over to either wall however.

Ratchis went back and reported this to the others.

“Leaping from column to column seems too dangerous,” Ratchis said as they made their way to the flooded gallery. “Especially since we don’t even know if some of those columns will hold us, and some of the jumps would be too far for some in the group.”

¹¹² Geb is the God of Earth and Stone.

“That means you, snotling,” Gunthar said.

“Watch yourself,” Bones growled.

At the gallery, Martin cast *levitation* on Ratchis and raised him up so that he might pull himself across the ceiling and check the other side of the room. It took a while, but he finally returned.

“It looks all clear,” Ratchis reported. “Now one by one you will grab on to me, Martin will raise me up, I will pull us over to the right gallery wall and we’ll make our across to the other side.”

Ratchis cast *light* on his belt of chain links holy symbol.

Kazrack was first. He clutched on to his half-orc companion for dear life, eying the black water nervously.

“Dwarf sure likes to hump the pig-fucker,” Gunthar laughed.

“Uh shay when we gut tuh Nikar, Uh give um uh a lashin’,” Kazrack murmured to Ratchis as the half-orc grunted pulling them both across the small stretch of ceiling to the gallery wall. It was only a stretch of about twenty feet.

Flora and Bones were brought over next, as Kazrack moved slowly along the gallery, pausing to look down a narrow hall that ended in small metal door, before passing it.

Suddenly, there was the distant sound of drums.

“They must know we’re here,” Martin the Green gulped.

“That big log of ogre-shite musta let them know we’re here!” Gunthar cursed loudly.

“Shut up, fool!” Ratchis admonished.

“Hurry Ratchis, Martin, keep doing what you are doing,” Beorth said, grabbing on to Ratchis to go next.

Flora followed Kazrack cautiously, while Bones could not resist creeping down the narrow hall to listen at the metal door. In a flash of light from Ratchis’ approach to the gallery wall, he could see it was broken and hung slightly off the top hinge.

Beorth was about to walk past an alcove, when he heard the sudden sound of movement from within. He swung out with the masterwork quarterstaff he had taken from one of the monks down in the Pit of Bones, but the orc leapt over the blow and out on to a small adjacent balcony to give the orcs behind him room to come out on to the wall as well. It screeched and spun, dealing a deep blow to the paladin’s shoulder. Beorth stumbled back a bit as blood poured down his armor.

Several more orcs appeared from the tiny niches and halls further along the wall and began to rain arrows down at the group. These were smaller and more hunched than those they had faced before, but with the same ashen complexion and broad misshapen shoulders. Their black stringy hair hung from beneath their metal caps, and they wore armor of cured black leather.

“We need light!” Bones cried coming back out of the hall.

“Augh!” Gunthar cried out, as an arrow bit him in the dark. He, Dorn, and Martin were still on the stone platform by the doorway in total darkness, as Ratchis made his way back. All they could hear was the twang of bow strings, and the grunts and cries of battle. “Where’d that come from? Gimme some damn light!”

“Nephthys! Grant me light!” Ratchis called to his goddess as Martin lowered him once more to take the next person across. He touched Dorn’s helmet, and now light shone from there as well.

Kazrack hurried up one of the narrow staircases that led up to a gallery where one of the orc bowmen was making ready

to shoot again, and he cut it open. It tumbled over unconscious and would soon bleed out.

Beorth smashed open the skull of the orc that stabbed him, and it tumbled into the brackish water, but more orcs spilled out above on the wall. Arrows and javelins rained down at Beorth, but for once the paladin deftly dodged. Kazrack on the other hand grunted as an arrow found a spot between greaves.

Bones yelped and fired an arrow at an orc that came through the broken metal door. As it fell clutching at its throat, with the new light, he could see more behind it.

Flora's voice filled the flooded chamber as she sung a rousing song of Ra's Light overcoming the darkness of night and Set, and the Fearless Manticore Killers and their companions, felt a wash of pride and courage come over them against these horrid foes.

As Ratchis struggled to come back across, this time with Dorn in tow (leaving Gunthar to grumble about being left in the dark again), Martin chanted his arcane words and a wall of flame leapt up in front of Bones, blocking the progress of the orcs beyond.

"Whoa!" cried the halfling leaping after Flora across the wall. Martin's illusion cracked and smelled like a real fire, and even gave off heat.

Kazrack continued to smash orcs with his flail, wading through them with the fury of his people, while more arrows rained around him and Beorth.

Gunthar cursed and leapt to one of the cracked pillars, leaving Martin alone to concentrate on keeping his illusory flame going.

"They are getting something!" Ratchis warned, interpreting their barks and snorts. "Watch out!"

He had dropped Dorn on the wall, and now made his way to get Gunthar.

Suddenly, two orcs came out of a narrow hall that Kazrack had already passed. They carried a wooden board. They laid it out to one of the cracked columns and began to make their way across.

Dorn fired a crossbow bolt into an orc making its way down some stairs at Flora. It wielded a heavy bronze blade that was rounded at one end where it thickened.¹¹³ Flora's soprano voice echoed through the great chamber still filling them all with vigor, but the passionate singing did not keep her from thrusting her short sword into the charging orc's chest. It fell over dead.

Beorth hurried past Kazrack and into the midst of three orcs that had been firing down on them all. He cut one down immediately but was forced back by arrows from the two orcs out on the column, allowing the two others to reposition themselves above another of the smaller ante-galleries. The paladin over-extended himself, trying to hit the last one, and fell flat on his face. A moment later, Gunthar came leaping over him, swords swinging over his head. Ratchis had helped him across.

"Get up, Baldie!" the Neergaardian chided, as he cut the leg from one of the stumpy orcs, smiling. "Fighting these things is like cutting butter with a warm knife! Ha! Like the butter I spread on the ass of my whores!"

Gunthar covered Beorth as the paladin got up, shielding him from arrow fire from the cracked column out on the water. Dorn and Ratchis returned fire on those orcs, while Bones discreetly searched the orcs Beorth had left behind. The paladin charged up and down another set of the small steps parallel to the wall, but a particularly stocky orc turned and brought its strange blade down on the paladin's already wounded shoulder. More blood coated his armor.

Kazrack's progress to aid Beorth was hindered by another orc that stepped out of a hall. The dwarf tried to stop himself too quickly as he swung his golden flail and swept himself off his feet. The orc showed its cracked yellow teeth and

¹¹³ A scimitar.

brought its bronze blade up, but it struck a lip of stone from a gallery above this level and it tumbled from his hands.¹¹⁴

“Anubis, please bring me a little of your light in this place of darkness,” Beorth prayed to his god, holding his right hand to his wounded shoulder, and felt the familiar and welcome ache of his wounds quickly closing.

Martin let his concentration on the illusory wall of fire slip as he fired his crossbow at one of the orcs on a column, and moment later it slipped into the water grabbing at the bolt in his chest. Kazrack and Gunthar dispensed with the orcs that blocked their progress, but now that the illusory wall was gone, by the time Ratchis got over to grab Martin, a fresh stream of orcs came out onto the gallery wall. Orcs with bows supported the bronze blade-wielding ones, but the Fearless Manticore Killers and their companions were ready for them and cut them down with sword and bow.

Soon, they had made it to the opposite side of the grand gallery and pried open the intact stone doors on the other side. They marched into the dark hall beyond, Ratchis leading the way, and Bones smiling to himself his pouches a bit heavier with orcish coppers.

When they felt they had put a good distance between them and the gallery, they stopped and risked a torch so they might examine Shadarach’s map.

“Shadarach said that this middle area that looks like it is connected to several small rooms was the nursery,” Martin pointed to what looked like bad drawing of a spider to Kazrack. “If we go that way we may have to deal with the young. I am not sure how I feel about that.”

“This seems like an evil people,” Beorth said, solemnly, looking at the rocky ground and not the map. He ran a hand over his bald head to wipe the cold sweat, before putting his helmet back on. “We will do what needs to be done to escape here with our lives.”

“Why not go this way?” Gunthar suggested. He pointed to a passage leading to several on the right side of the map.

“There will be scores and scores of orcs there,” Martin said.

“Why don’t we just go through them? They don’t look too tough.”

“And they will have shamans and witch-doctors with magics...” Martin began.

“We go the way Shadarach said to go,” Ratchis decided for everyone and began to walk. “Put out the torch.”

They walked for several more hours in the dark. Here the tunnels were wide but had low ceilings with large uneven sections that made the humans all have to duck to get by. This area had many round tunnels at floor level no more than three feet in diameter that all dove down deeper into the rock when examined. In a few places they found the tattered remains of spider webs waving in the cool air coming up from below.

Beyond this, the ceiling climbed again, the tunnel widening evenly on both sides, but eighty feet ahead egress was blocked by a twenty-foot wall, at the top of which the tunnel continued with a ceiling no higher than six feet. It was covered with molding webs and bat guano.

“I think this is the ‘spider wall’,” Martin said.

“Naw! Ya think?” Bones snapped, and then let out a long breath.

“I’ll scout ahead,” Ratchis said. Martin offered to make him invisible and Ratchis agreed. Soon, he was off.

Dorn lit his lantern, and Martin took the map out again.

¹¹⁴ **DM’s Note:** The orc fumbled and dropped his weapon.

Suddenly, Flora screamed. She and Bones were in the rear of the group, as Kazrack had moved up to listen to Beorth and Martin discuss the route.

They all turned, and Dorn raised the lantern. A huge purple and white spider was poised over the bard. There were puncture marks on her arm and shoulder, and indigo venom dripped from its fangs and from her body.

“Get back girl! I’ll save you.” Gunthar pulled Flora back and stepped forward, his sword not even drawn. The spider reached forward and sunk its fangs into him as well. “Augh!”

And then the spider was suddenly not there.

“Where’d it go?” Bones asked.

Gunthar could feel the burn of venom in his system, while Flora weakly dragged herself behind Kazrack.

“Ish invisibull!” Kazrack warned, and Gunthar swung where the spider had just been.

Bones readied his short sword, while Dorn loaded his crossbow.

“I don’t think it’s invisible,” Martin said. “It slipped into the shadow realm.”¹¹⁵

Beorth turned back around, his staff held lightly in both hands, and tried very hard to listen.

It reappeared on the wall above Gunthar and Kazrack. The foul-mouthed Neerguardian leapt in front of the dwarf.

“There it is!” He cried, pointing with his sword. “Come and get me!”

Beorth reached up with his staff and smashed into its deep indigo eyes, and one exploded. It screeched and disappeared again.

“Shtand in duh minnel uh nuh corriderr!” Kazrack commanded. “Sho et cun’t git ush from above.”

“Where is it?” Bones said, as they moved as a group. “Oh, I hate spiders.”

“Ooh, little snotling’s scared?” Gunthar taunted.

“Not of you!”

“Enough!” Beorth commanded, and all were silent waiting for the spider to re-appear.

Suddenly it was beside Kazrack and he swung as fast as he could, but it leapt above the blow, and came down with both his fangs into the dwarf’s stomach. The dwarf could see himself reflected in its large moist eyes. Martin gasped as he noticed the eyes were unharmed.

“It’s like Debo!” Gunthar cried. His long sword cracked one of its fore legs, and ichor began to pool beneath it. One of Bones’ arrows stuck out of the hairy maw.

“We need this creature’s attack to cease,” Flora sang. “So, help us out with some grease!”

A slick patch of oil appeared beneath the spider, but its many legs gave it stability.

“Beware! There are two of them,” Martin warned, correcting Gunthar and fired his readied crossbow. The bolt buried itself deep in the spider’s head and it stopped moving. “Stay alert!”

The first spider, the eye still wounded re-appeared behind Gunthar, who had taken that moment to turn and look to the

¹¹⁵ In the Aquerra cosmology, the ethereal plane is actually the Plane of Shadow.

other side of him. He wheezed as he felt even more venom pumped into him, as the fangs pierced his back and shoulder. He turned back around, coughing up blood, but it was already gone.

Everyone tensed waiting for it to re-appear.

A few seconds turned into a minute and then several minutes. Flora collapsed, gasping for breath. She felt as if she were drowning.

“Hurr, jink thish,” Kazrack said, pouring water from a skin into his rune-stein. He intoned the ‘*findar*’ rune and she drank.¹¹⁶

“Is it gone?” Bones asked, craning his neck to look around more.

Martin walked over to the spider corpse and cut free a fang, taking a sample of both its venom and its blood.

They all tensed again as they heard something coming from up the hall. It was Ratchis, still invisible.¹¹⁷

“Beyond this wall is a deeper drop. It is probably thirty, thirty-five feet down on the other side,” he explained to them. “It is wet down there, running water, and it much narrower.”

They followed his voice over to the wall. They could now see that the wall here had been made, rather than carved, as a sort of dam of the tunnel. The wall was made of boulders, logs, rusted metal, and patches of dried and rolled spider’s webs, along with bones, hair, dung, and mud.

Ratchis went up first and Kazrack was soon after him, grabbing blindly for the invisible half-orc’s hand.

The dwarf was being yanked up atop the thick patchwork wall, when the purple and white spider appeared. Kazrack leapt to his feet, unknowingly getting between the spider and Ratchis, who had his sword ready. The spider bit deep in the dwarf once more but felt a strong blow atop its head from Kazrack’s magic flail. Screeching, it disappeared once again.

“Is it dead?” Beorth called up.

“No,” replied Ratchis.

They waited a few more minutes, but it did not return. The others made it to the top of the wall, and soon after they were all at the narrow cavern on the side, Ratchis was visible again.

There was a brief discussion about what time it was and if they should find a place to rest soon, but Ratchis insisted on continuing through what they assumed was the night to get out of this particularly dangerous area.

The ground beneath them here was soft dirt and the tunnel walls dripped and oozed with moisture. It was like a pocket of muck within the overwhelming black and gray stone everything else had been carved from. The ceiling varied in height from as low as five feet to as high as seven, and as they marched along, a fetid smell grew around them. The air was heavy with a mix of rotten meat and tavern outhouse. They could hear churning and running water ahead of them.

The tunnel narrowed to a crack barely four feet wide. Just beyond the crack was a rough alcove, with another patchwork dam as its rear wall. The dam was only about ten feet high and not nearly as thick as the one they had already passed. It oozed a black and brown swirling gritty viscous liquid, and the stench was over-powering.

“We have to climb up through this,” Ratchis said, stepping through and looking up to examine the climb. Something dripped in his mouth and he gagged and spit. “Who goes first?”

¹¹⁶ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack won an immediate action die for using a one-time use item (there are a limited number of runes that do not reappear for the same owner) on an NPC.

¹¹⁷ **DM’s Note:** Ratchis’s player (Eric G.) had to leave the session early, so it was convenient to have him “scouting ahead” as he usually does during this encounter.

“Send Gunthar. He likes this sort of thing,” Martin suggested, his face pinched in a permanent look of disgust. He covered his mouth and nose with his left hand.

“Not without light,” Gunthar protested.

“Nuh turches!” Kazrack warned, explaining about the possibility of explosive gas in deep caves. While understanding Kazrack’s exact words was not getting any easier for everyone else, they were increasingly confident of the gist of his garbled speech.

Ratchis cast *light* upon Beorth’s helmet once again, and then hauled himself up to the top of the wall. He pulled up Beorth next, and then the two of them helped Kazrack get over the wall. The area beyond was a long-rounded cavern. The floor was covered in foot and a half in gray scummy water in which floated chunks of orc feces that collected among the rocks in brown sludgy floating puddles. Sixty feet wide, the cavern was likely twice as long, but none could see the other side. Partially submerged great black stones that directed the filth one way or the other made the place into a maze, impeding progress across this room though none of the stones touched the ceiling. There were several places where more filthy water splashed into room by means of narrow channels carved in the rock walls, but it also oozed and plopped from cracks in the ceiling.

“Filth! What is this flargin’ filth?!” Gunthar swore as he splashed into the muck.

“This is the nursery,” Beorth replied.

The others came over one by one, though Bones stayed up on the wall until Dorn was over and then rode on his friend’s shoulders, as the raw sewage would have been above his waist.

Ratchis hustled forward to check the room and found the footing to be very slippery. He fell down to his knees and leapt back up splashing sewage all around.

“Oh, I don’t feel well...What is that little thing?” asked Flora, spotting a small gray creature that seemed to be paddling towards Ratchis.

“Merciful Isis!” Martin gasped. “Ratchis watch out!”

The Friar of Nephthys spun around to see the small thing leap at him. It was tiny black orc, no more than a toddler, with fat baby limbs, and a bush of wiry black hair, and covering of pin-like hairs on its ashen body. It had a snarl of glee on its piggish face as it grabbed at him to bite into his shoulder.

Ratchis pushed it off and it let out a wail, and two more appeared from behind a rock. The first was not so easily discouraged. It came again.

Ratchis stood and drew his sword. He skewered it as tried to bite him again.

“Nephthys, forgive me,” he whispered.

“I have to get out of this place,” Flora cried, horrified.

“Continue tuh moof!” Kazrack said, his jaw in agony with each attempted syllable. “If we ur fallen upon en dish room we will beh cut dun!”

“Kazrack is right!” Beorth said. “We need to move as fast as we can through this room. The young will not be able to catch up with us.”

The two other orc infants waded through the sewage at them, mouths open. One of them wailed incessantly.

The paladin hustled around them towards the first set of tall rocks on the left, while everyone else moved more slowly, wary of slipping.

“Look!” Martin cried and fired his crossbow. On the left-hand wall was the raised lip of a tunnel entrance that led to a side chamber. Standing there, mouth agape, was a black orc wearing a long, ragged burlap shirt, and woolen pants that it was trying to tie off with a long strip of rag. It let out a grunt and turned.

Kazrack and Dorn let off shots as well, but both missed.

As Martin hurried to reload his crossbow, he also moved to the left of the tunnel entrance, however the orc reached out and swung its club awkwardly at the mage. Martin avoided the blow, throwing his back to the wall in time to see a horrifying site.

Beorth hurried to get out of the way of the tunnel opening, and hoping to find a path through the room before more orcs arrived, moved to a narrow space between two of the maze stones. He could feel the floor give way under him and there was a whooshing sound, as the hole in that spot camouflaged by sewage and long clogged with feces, muck, hair, and bone gave way under the paladin’s weight.

Everyone’s mouths dropped open as the holy warrior of Anubis dropped out of sight into the hole that had opened up beneath him. It was draining sewage at an alarming rate at first and then began to clog back up.

The light was gone, and Beorth gone with it.¹¹⁸

There seemed to be silence for a moment despite the eternal dripping and the gurgling cries of the orc babies, and then there were drums sounding the in deep.

“He fell in the shite-hole!” Gunthar announced, and then without hesitating leapt towards the hole crawling flat through the sewage feeling for the hole and then reached his arm as far down as it could go.

“We need light now,” Dorn said to Bones, who was still sitting on his shoulders, and handed a torch up to him.

Not disturbed by the lack of light, Kazrack moved towards the side tunnel opening. The orc there swung his club half-heartedly at Martin one more time and then fled down the tunnel.

“You’re going down there!” Ratchis said to Gunthar reaching down and grabbing the now filthy warrior’s ankle.

“You better hold on to me Snuffles!” Gunthar warned, and then he nodded and Ratchis shoved him down the hole as far as he could, lying down in the sewage himself. He had to turn his head every few seconds to take a deep breath or aspirate the filth.

“This disgusting place just isn’t right let its shame be revealed by a bit of Ra’s light!” Flora sang and, in a moment, her short sword gave off the light of a torch, but steady and unflickering.

Kazrack waited at the tunnel entrance with his halberd at the ready, certain the orc would re-emerge, perhaps with more of his kin, while Martin began a long chant, feigning drawing a circle before him with his right foot.

A figure appeared in the tunnel, and Kazrack immediately shoved his pole-axe into its gut. The figure screamed. It was an orc with a long muzzle of a face, and pale ashen skin, only blackened in spots. Most of its hair looked as if it had been pulled out violently, leaving bloody patches of missing scalp. It had wide round hips, and flaccid gray breasts and wore absolutely no clothes. It was an orc female.

She fell over dead; the look of fear frozen in her lifeless eyes.

The male orc was behind her, and threw a javelin at Kazrack, but it struck the corner of the wall and missed.

“Pass this down to Gunthar,” Flora said to Ratchis, when he came up for breath. Bones had lit a torch. The half-orc lifted the warrior halfway from the hole, allowing the bard to put the glowing short sword in his hand.

¹¹⁸ This was Beorth’s player’s final session as he moved to Milan, Italy to start a new career.

There was a blast of flame over in front of Martin as the muck before him bubbled and steamed, and from beneath came a stony worm whose segments burned orange-white with heat. Martin commanded it to go down the tunnel after the orc, and it obeyed. The muck hissed as it squirmed by.¹¹⁹

“My beast will take care of it,” Martin said. “Let’s keep going.”

“And leave Beorth?” Dorn asked, as he readied his crossbow at the tunnel entrance, just in case.

Kazrack looked over and saw that Ratchis was struggling to keep from slipping down the hole himself and moved over to give a hand.

But suddenly the orcish drums drew louder and there was the bellow of horn from the other end of the filth-filled chamber. He could barely make out the silhouette of a tall and broad black orc wearing a bronze breastplate standing atop a raised entrance into the room, above the level of the maze stones. Behind him, the red glowing eyes of his minions moved about in anticipation.

“Something is coming,” Dorn said.

“Shumtin ish here,” Kazrack corrected.

End of Session #66

¹¹⁹ This was a thoqqua.

Session #67

“We have to get out of here,” Dorn said, stepping away from the tunnel entrance, and looking at the others with desperation.

“Nut without Beort!” Kazrack said. The dwarf moved to Ratchis. “Duh ya wunt meh tuh ‘old er ankles?”

“There are orcs coming?” Ratchis asked, sitting up to get his breath and pulling Gunthar back up for air as well.

“Down! Down! He’s barely holding on by a pube just out of reach!” Gunthar spat, his face and hair were a smeared brown mess, and his eyes were burning bright red with irritation.

“*Imago Crearé Majorus!* Martin chanted, and a wall of flame shot up at the far entrance. The orcs howled in anger. “That should give you some time!”

Ratchis nodded and shoved Gunthar back in the hole, and Kazrack grabbed onto the half-orc’s legs. Ratchis was now in the hole down to his ankles headfirst.

Screams echoed out of the tunnel Martin had sent the thoqqua down.

“Be ready fer those uks!” Kazrack commanded, drool bubbling over onto his beard. “Dun! Ull have tuh gud meh.”

Bones leapt from Dorn’s shoulder and atop of one the tall partially sunken rocks that made this maze of filth. He hopped deftly from rock to rock to get a good vantage of the orcs. He wedged the torch between two of the stones and drew his short bow.

“Aah!” Martin cried, as one of the forgotten orc babies had caught up to him and began to chew on his calf.

As he tried to kick it away, they all heard raised orcish voices from behind the wall of fire. They seemed to be chanting in time, but above the chant was one desperate voice saying “Nagh! Nagh! Nagh! Naaaaaaagh!”¹²⁰

“Oh my corns and bunions!” Bones swore, watching the action from his perch. “Those crazy orcs are throwing their comrades through the fire!”

The orc on the other side of the illusory fire, sat up dazed, spitting and shaking his head, before making his woozy way to his feet. Now safely on the other side of the fire, he mocked his companions as cowards.

The orcs wasted no time to throw another through, followed by one that leapt of his own volition.

“They are gonna start coming this way,” Bones warned.

“Duh ‘est uh you have tuh ock eh enneh un pick dem oshf uz dem come truh,” Kazrack mumbled vehemently.

“Uh... what?” Flora asked, bewildered. “Which way do we go?”

“Yuh ned tuh brin duh shire-urm buck, Mutton!” Kazrack craned his neck to look at the green-robed mage.

“Uh, I need to keep the fire wall up, unless you want them to all come through at once,” Martin shot back, guessing at what Kazrack had said.

The three orcs that had made it through so far began to make their way towards the party, stopping occasionally to listen for splashing and voices. They kept close to the tall stones, often out of view of Bones.

The halfling crouched down, disappearing into the crease of two stones, as he spied two pass him moving from right to left, he spilled out a pouch of coins.

¹²⁰ Translation: “No! No! No! Nooooooooo!”

“Come and get me! Come and get some shinies!” Bones taunted, and the two orcs turned around. One sheathed his thick bronze blade and drew his bow, while the other tried to retrieve the coins.

Meanwhile the third orc had snuck past on the right and came around a large stone to appear beside Kazrack. Its blade came down on the hollering dwarf and struck heavily, but its cutting side was turned by the dwarf’s chain shirt. He slid to the left, splashing into the muck, and felt Ratchis’ feet slipping through his gauntlets.

“Can’t...lit...Borth...dun...” he struggled, but to no avail. Ratchis slipped all the way down into the hole.

Ratchis felt himself slip a couple of feet, and instinctively drove his legs and arms into the sides of the hole to keep from slipping freely. The sides of the wall crumbled beneath his great grip, and he had to continually re-adjust to keep from going. He could feel Gunthar scrambling desperately beneath him, clutching at his cloak and arm.

Dorn jerked out of shock and fired his crossbow at the orc that was about to cleave the scrambling Kazrack in twain. The orc fell with a grunt and a splash, thick green blood floating atop the curdling sewage. Kazrack immediately leapt back to the hole and threw his arm down to grab hold of Ratchis.

Bones leapt back towards the others atop the tall rocks, as he felt the nip of an orc arrow. The two orcs came around the stone and one fell upon Kazrack with his sword; once again the dwarf was wounded and had to withdraw. Ratchis cursed as he felt the dwarf’s grip loosen, and even more muck slid into his mouth.

Dorn fired his crossbow again, but though he missed, it caused the orc on Kazrack to hesitate. The dwarf grabbed a fallen orc’s spear and shoved into the hole, butt first for Ratchis to grab on to. He looked up in time to see the orc swing down on him again and was barely able to avoid it. Flora fired her bow point blank at the orc, sending his blow astray. The arrow, however, still managed to miss.

“Argh!” Martin cried more from frustration than pain. One of the orc young managed to catch up to him again and this time the tiny sharp teeth made him lose his concentration. “I lost it! The wall of fire is going to come down momentarily.”

The orc by Kazrack turned to its left and charged at Dorn. The bushy haired warrior swung around to get out of the way, but felt the heavy blade smack his shoulder. The orc that had collected some of Bones’ spilled money came around the stone, arrow ready to shoot Kazrack, but a bolt from Martin sent it floating face down in the sewage.

Gunthar managed to climb out of the draining hole, using Ratchis as a makeshift rope, and then he and Kazrack dragged the half-orc onto the chamber floor. The three of them lay there prone for a moment, bubbling in filth as they took deep breaths to get their strength back.

“There are more coming around behind me the other way!” Bones warned. One came around the corner and met death on the end of arrow flying from Flora’s bow, while the one going after Dorn dropped with one of Martin’s quarrels in its back.

“*Hush orc babies!*” Flora cooed, and the orc infants fell into a slumber sinking into filth to drown. One of the approaching orcs took advantage of her distraction and forced her back with a whip of his blade across her face, bringing up a welt, another orc came around to support his companion.

“You will all drown in your own blood and filth this day!” Ratchis bellowed in orcish, and he cut the head from the orc attacking Flora.

“Beorth is gone,” Gunthar said, leaping to feet as well, trying to wipe his mouth with the back of his hand, which was as filth-covered as the rest of him. “I’m gonna kill every last one of these pig-fuckin’ pigs!” Gunthar pulled his sword from the gut of a now dying orc that had just come around the corner.

Readying his flail, Kazrack put his back to one of the rocks and checked around the corner the orcs had come from.

He looked back and shook his head to indicate he saw no more orcs coming at the moment.

A handful of more orcs came around from the other side of the collection of stones in the center and with an arcane word, Martin the Green made them drop off to sleep as well. However, at that same moment he became engulfed in a mantle of green and black fire that threw tall shadows on the black rocks around him.

“Not again...”

“Mutton!” Kazrack began to step towards his companion, when another orc came around from the way that had been clear a moment before and let loose a javelin that struck the dwarf squarely in the back; only armor kept Kazrack from being skewered.

Gunthar hurried around the corner to support Kazrack, but as the dwarf turned suddenly to defend himself, he slipped in the muck under foot and went down.

“Get off your lard-ass, stumpy!” Gunthar chided.

Ratchis took some time to heal Bones, while Flora used a song to close some of her own wounds. Martin and Dorn moved to follow Gunthar and Kazrack through the tall stones.

These four had made it to the other side of nursery chamber. They could see there were a total of three raised tunnel entrances like the one Martin had sent the thoqqua down on each side of the chamber. The stone on this side had sunken further, and many could be seen over, or easily squatted behind. The illusory wall of fire was gone and the ashen orc with splayed nostrils, eyes like burning coals and broad shoulders made misshapen with bone spurs, bellowed commands in orcish to his troops. They wore the gray scale mail of the other orcs they had faced so far, but it seemed in better shape, and their swords were not as badly dinged and beaten. He held a thick haft in both hands, each end holding a fan-shaped axe blade notched in several places, but still sharp enough.

Gunthar and Kazrack looked on from around either side of a particularly large rock.

“Looks like a two-for-one pork special down at the market,” Gunthar smiled. Two orcs began to lead the way for their companion by way of the large rock and Kazrack was startled to find his guard down. He barely blocked the blade and felt the weight of the blow send tremors down his arm.

“Come here, pork-chop!” Gunthar said, stepping out and cutting out the kidneys of one with his long sword.

“Yuh uhz nuh ope! We uhz uh duck demon from ‘ill un ur side!” Kazrack said, joining the fray to keep the orcs from advancing any further, hoping to intimidate them into hesitating or even retreating.

“What’s going on?” asked Martin, his mantle of fire looming tall in the chamber, sending glints of green light to reflect on the moisture beading up on the ceiling and down the running trickles of waste pouring down cracks in the rocks. He came around to view the open area. An orc toddler covered in fine gray hair came splashing at the mage. It had large open festering sores on its fat cheeks and chest. It let out a shriek that was instantly cut off as a bolt from Dorn’s crossbow went through its neck.

Ratchis ran through the narrow path between stones over to where Gunthar and Kazrack had killed some orcs before moving on, to find that Bones had already snuck over there and was taking what valuables he could from them.

The halfling looked up at Ratchis and the expression of having been caught on his usually fresh face, now worn with dirt and fear, changed to a smile. “Don’t worry, I’ll cut you all in on the spoils.”

“Good, we’ll need it,” Ratchis said, and moved on. Flora followed close behind.

“More orcs over here!” Gunthar said, moving to the left side of the room where six orcs were trying to cut off the group by sneaking past some tall stones. “Here piggy! Piggy! Piggy!”

An orc shoved another frightened female at the Neerguardian. She shrieked and swung a club half-heartedly, her face looked freshly beaten and bloody. Gunthar cut her down and moved on to the one that did the pushing, and in a

moment, it was dead in the muck as well.

“Full buck, Gunter!” Kazrack called. There was another half dozen orcs streaming off the platform and coming in his direction and he could not keep them all from advancing.

One made it around the rock and stabbed at Martin.

Martin cried out, his robes tearing where the blade hit his upraised forearm, but it was the shriek of the orc that was most startling. The green and black flames around Martin shot up the blade and seared the orc’s arm. It fell over, its arm distended and curling back where the flame has scorched it.

Ratchis healed Kazrack with a spell, as he came into the melee, and then thinking better of entering quite yet, stepped back and asked Nephthys for *Bull’s Strength* for himself, as well. Flora stepped out from behind a rock and screeched. Two orcs fell over, bleeding from the ears, while the others managed to cover their ears with their closed fists enough to resist the *sound burst*.

Ratchis took advantage of the distraction to break through the orc line and call to the leader who leapt off the raised stone lip of the other entrance.

“Come and face me leader of scum!” Ratchis challenged, as he spun around cleaving into the head of an orc, while leaning back to avoid the swing of another one causing it to slip in the muck and fall prone. It clambered quickly back on to its hands and feet, but a bolt from Dorn sent it back down.

The orcs lined up behind the tall rocks on the left-hand side at the top of the room, unable to go further because Gunthar clogged the way in heated combat with a particularly fat orc wielding a morningstar and a shield. They popped up and all chucked javelins at Ratchis, but he cut them out of the air with a roar.

Another fat orc with a shield and a morningstar came roaring out from behind a rock. Kazrack turned and slammed the head of his flail in the thing’s face. Ratchis swung right and cut the legs out from under it and followed up with a downward chop to the face. He was barely able to bring his sword up in time to deflect a blow of the leader’s double axe. Knocked out of alignment, the heavy haft cracked against Ratchis’ collarbone and then smacked him one the side of the head as it was brutishly pulled back.

The orc snorted and spat a big yellow and green hawker in Ratchis’ face. The half-orc searched it out with his tongue and swallowed it with a smile, and then fell into a frantic melee.

Gunthar finally finished his own fat orc and cut into the line behind it with glee. The orcs withdrew and tried to come around the tall rocks from the other side, meeting arrow fire from Flora, Bones, and Dorn.

Dorn looked back at Martin with a smile that quickly became look of horror. Martin’s eyes were rolled back into his head and he had his arms outstretched and a large black book clutched to his chest.

“*Ash nisarg eh sem necros porsh,*” he chanted, and suddenly five of the dead orcs began to climb to their feet, their bodies twisted and rigid.

“Kill them all!” Martin the Green commanded.

“Ratchis! Zombies!” Dorn warned as the shambling dead staggered forward and slammed their former companions with their undead strength.

“MARTIN!” Ratchis roared. “GET RID OF THESE FOUL CREATURES NOW!”

The orcs seemed equally mortified. One shrieked and let off attacking Kazrack to go after one of the zombies, but Ratchis and Kazrack ignored them, concentrating blows on the plate-armored orc leader. The orc captain winced as his armor crunched beneath one of Kazrack’s blows, but he was successful at keeping Ratchis’ repeated blows at bay.

“*Manus il spectro!*” Martin chanted, and a translucent hand appeared before him, and sent it after one of the orcs; that

one shrieked as well.

Three orcs seeking to flee the zombies, decided the best way to go was through Kazrack. They rushed him, swords up raised, but the dwarf side-stepped and knocked one blade into another to send them both offline. The last blade fell just short of his barrel chest. Kazrack swung his flail over his head and brought it around for a skull-crushing blow, but it clipped one of the nearby stones and the dwarf stumbled into the approaching Gunthar. The flat of the Neergaardian's longsword slapped him in the face and he fell back stunned.¹²¹

Gunthar jerked back so hard trying to avoid killing Kazrack, that he fell backward onto his ass.¹²²

“Stumpy!”

“Martin!” Ratchis roared again.

“Huh? Wha...?” Martin shook his head, and saw he was holding the Book of Black Circles in his hands. “Oh no!”

He quickly put the book back in his pack. The *spectral hand* dissipated before it touched anyone, and the mantle of green and black flame faded, but the zombies kept grabbing at their former kin.

“Where’d the zombies come from?” Martin asked as he re-loaded his crossbow, not meeting anyone’s eye.

Gunthar pushed himself up to his knees, and was about to shove himself to his feet, when one of the broad-bladed orc swords came down on the side of his head. He dropped both his swords and fell back down clutching the side of his face as hot blood streamed out between his fingers.

“My ear!” Gunthar cried. “Where the fuck is my ear!”¹²³

Bones, who had managed to sneak all the way around the orcs in the dark, let loose an arrow that dropped the orc that was now chopping at the crawling Gunthar.

Ratchis strained his one eye to see where Kazrack was in the muck and left his defenses open, suffering a deep chop to the hip from the orc leader’s war-axe. The Friar of Nephthys stumbled, but blocked the follow-up blow and slammed the orc’s helmet off as re-payment. The orc’s face was swelling with bruises, and he had several cuts on his arm.

“Ow!” Dorn accidentally hit the trigger on his crossbow before raising it to fire and shot himself in the foot.¹²⁴

Again, Ratchis was distracted, and he had to struggle to keep another orc from flanking him, allowing the leader another solid hit.

Ratchis roared again, and ignored the new orc, chopping at the orc leader with great ferocity. He cut through its forearm and into its face and then chopped it twice more as it fell.

The approaching orc hesitated as Ratchis turned back to him face him, but fell from one of Bones’ arrows to the neck before he could decide to fight or fly.

Two of the zombies was no longer animate, one had just been chopped down by an orc that looked up to see the rest of his companions had been killed by either the party or the zombies. He turned to flee, but another of the zombie orcs smashed him in the face with both fists, knocking him into one of the tall stones. He slid down its length leaving a smear of blood and did not get back up.

The other zombie turned and surprised Ratchis by slamming him in the gut just as hard. The half-orc coughed blood and fell over, unconscious.

¹²¹ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack fumbled. He was required to make a Reflex save (DC 15) or fall and be stunned for 1d4 rounds.

¹²² **DM’s Note:** Gunthar fumbled. He failed a simple Reflex save (DC 12) or fall.

¹²³ **DM’s Note:** Gunthar suffer a critical hit effect: Apply Crit Multiplier to Damage Roll – Reflex Save (DC 10 + ½ damage) or Ear Removed, Stunned for one round.

¹²⁴ **DM’s Note:** Dorn fumbled and got the “Hit Self – Full damage” result.

“Ratchis!” Martin cried and dropping his crossbow drew a dagger and charged at the zombie. The orc zombie put up its hand and the dagger pierced the palm to no apparent effect. The undead thing swung at Martin, who hopped back. Dorn hobbled over and chopped one of its arms off, and as it wobbled off balance, he cut open its neck and send it crashing into the muck.

Kazrack got up and smashed the last zombie, and then stopped to wring the sewage out of his beard.

Martin and Flora moved to tend to Ratchis’ wounds.

“Where’s my fuckin’ ear?” Gunthar said again, splashing back towards the other, still looking down with the glowing short sword.

“Huh?” Kazrack cupped his ear towards the warrior mockingly.

Gunthar stood straight up with a snarl none had seen on his face even during his most desperate fight “I said, ‘Where’s my fuckin’ ear!’” He punched Kazrack full on in the face.

The dwarf stumbled back but was immediately in a fighting pose. “Thish is nut uh tahm,” he said.

“Ah, forget it! Who can understand what Stumpy says anyway? I should be happy I can’t hear him now,” he said, dismissing the dwarf. He winced as he picked at the torn place where his ear had been. “It’s just that now I have a bad side.”

“This is a bad place to stay,” Martin said. “We have to move Ratchis somehow.”

Kazrack nodded and knelt beside his friend. He proceeded to attempt to cast healing spell after healing spell, but every single one failed because he could not intone the verbal components properly.

“Leave it to me,” Flora said, and sat in the muck with Ratchis’ head in her lap and began to softly sing to him. A few moments later, he stirred, coughing, and then wincing in pain.

“Who died?” he croaked.

“You almost did,” Flora replied. “Now please do me a favor and lead us out of here.”

Ratchis slowly got to his feet and turned to Martin. “Why did you raise those orcs?”

“I am losing my battle with the Book,” Martin sighed.

“Does that ever happen when you are not casting a spell?”

“Only the time that Beorth said he awoke with my standing over him.”

“From now on don’t cast any spells, unless it is absolutely necessary,” Ratchis decided.

Martin paused, and the nodded.

“Yeah!” Gunthar walked over, he was combing his hair down over his missing ear. “I don’t hold with the making of the undead. That’s just not right.”

Ratchis began to dole out healing, while the others prepared their things for leaving the room.

Gunthar was last.

“And lastly, great Nephthys, fill this wayward soul with your healing light,” Ratchis intoned.

“Yeah, fill me up like I fill up the lovely ladies,” Gunthar smirked.

“You will not mock the power of my goddess,” Ratchis barked.

“Oh yeah? What are you gonna do, deprive me of my freedom? I think she’d like that even less than some bawdy jokes at her expense, not that statues of her are hard on the eyes, but I’m sure a big boy like you know exactly what I’m taking about, right? Rowr.”

“If you continue to speak of my goddess, or any of the gods in this fashion I will withhold the healing and benefits of Nephthys from you,” Ratchis threatened.

“End Uh ‘ill ash well,” Kazrack spoke as slowly as he could. “Fur I dun tink you respect muh Lords n’ Leddy, eeder.”

Gunthar laughed.

“You do as your conscience dictates, holy boys,” Gunthar smiled. “I’m sure you’ll do the right thing, unless you are only paying lip service to the service of Good, only licking its boot like a good dog during the day, so you can widdle out your territory at night. Bah!”

Kazrack’s hands tightened into fists.

“Let’s move on,” Ratchis said. “It is only Bes that has kept more orcs from arriving.”

They marched for another three hours. Twice more they heard drums, but no more orcs came. Eventually, on the brink of exhaustion (and Ratchis already there), they climbed into a narrow shelf-like crack high up on one wall of the wedge-shaped tunnel they now traveled through.

Martin used a *prestidigitation* spell to clean everyone off.

As the others made camp, Kazrack brought Martin aside and spoke very slowly.

“Uh wunt you tuh know Uh dun hold any uf this book stuff aginst you,” the dwarf managed. “Uh believe you cun overcome this.”

“Thank you, Kazrack,” Martin replied. The dwarf clamped a big hand on the mage’s shoulder and squeezed.

“Uh ‘ill udd you tuh my pears,” Kazrack said.

Ratchis walked over.

“Do you think Beorth is dead?” Martin asked them.

“That filth and water has to go somewhere,” Ratchis said. “Didn’t the map say something about an underground river?”

Martin pulled out the map and looked, and then nodded. “So, we are going to go look for him?”

“No,” Ratchis replied. “We have no way of tracking him. We have to just have faith that he was washed far from any orcs and will find his way to the surface and Nikar, eventually.”

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Three days later found them still deep underground. The cold black stone had given way to warmer softer rock, and they passed several passages that had caved in with thick black mud. After long hours of marching, Ratchis would find the most out of the way spot he could find, and they hid and slept. Once they heard orcs pass by very closely, but they were

not discovered.

The path Ratchis led them along did seem to slowly rise over time. Kazrack would breathe in deeply and announce how deep they all were a few times a day and the average kept going down by about sixty feet per day. There were fewer signs of these tunnels ever having been worked. In fact, something about them nagged at the dwarf because it did not seem like it was made by flowing water.

Up ahead, the tunnel turned severely to the left.

“Thut’s et!” Kazrack exclaimed. “Diz tunnas dug by bih insuhs!”

“What?” Ratchis asked.

“Bih Insuhs! Insucks! Insucks!”

“I think he is saying ‘big insects’,” Martin said.

“More spiders?” Bones asked.

“Actually spiders are not categorized as insects at all,” Martin replied.

Everyone began to make for the end of the tunnel. As they approached the top of the turn, they could see that the tunnel dropped nearly as quickly as it turned, making a corkscrew path. Down and down, they went, as the tunnel narrowed to a mere twenty feet wide compared to the tunnel above that had led to it.

In the distance they heard a repeated rhythmic bursts of clickity-clack! Clickety-Clack!

Round and down they went. Ratchis and Kazrack took the lead while Gunthar took the rear. They risked torches, being fairly certain they had left orcs far behind. The clickity-clack sound started and stopped several times, but every time it started again it seemed louder and closer, though once the sound seemed to be answered by another further away. It echoed up from below bouncing on the curved walls of the tunnel spiral.

They had gone around about seven or eight times, when the tunnel widened about thirty feet ahead, opening in a cavernous chamber beyond that was devoured by darkness.

Around the corner came a hulking humanoid figure. Kazrack and Ratchis could see it immediately. It was nearly nine feet tall and had a chitinous insect-like exoskeleton that vibrated making the clacking noise they had heard before. It had a spindly neck protected by raised areas of the plates that covered its chest and shoulders, atop of which was a drawn and harrowed bird-like head with a cruel-looking curved bony beak. It had no wings, and its two muscled arms ended in bony hooks .

It came slowly towards them, clicking and clacking.

“Whu isha ‘ul uish ‘at!?” Kazrack exclaimed. It came into the light and Gunthar drew his swords and moved up to support the dwarf and the half-orc. They could now all see the yellowed curved hooks and the pale translucent quality of the armor plates.

Ratchis did not hesitate. Sword in hand he ran right at the thing, ducking one of its horrific hooks, and cracking the shell over its chest. The tone of its click and clacking became lower and muted, as pink and yellow ichor dribbled from the crack.

It swayed off balance and reached down awkwardly to hook Ratchis, but the half-orc ducked and the hooked horror toppled over, ichor pooling beneath it.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ **DM’s Note:** Ratchis scored a critical hit on his charge, dropping the hook horror to zero hit point with one shot. By attacking while disabled, the monster dropped to negative hit points.

Unfortunately, Ratchis backed off right into another of the monsters that appeared from the right. He took a glancing blow to the head, but Kazrack was there to distract the thing, smashing it with his flail. It clicked and clacked angrily, as Ratchis spun into a defensive fighting stance and deliver a blow to one of its muscular legs with his sword. The creatures seemed less armored there.

Martin and Dorn began to load their crossbows, while Gunthar and Bones moved to support the dwarf and half-orc, but it was for naught, as a second resounding blow from Kazrack and the second hooked horror fell. It twitched for half a moment.

“Wow! These friggin’ bug things look worse than the actually are,” Gunthar said, too loudly, kicking at the head of one of the dying monsters.

“Hush!” Ratchis chastised. The echo of more clicking and clacking called to them from the darkness of the great chamber.

Ratchis gestured for the others to wait, while he snuck out into the great dark cavern. The cavern went off behind were the corkscrew tunnel let out, way beyond what he could see. From this vantage point, he could see that the curling tunnel was within a huge tapering column of earth and stone that touched the ceiling forty-five feet above the cavern floor. Obviously, the mound was in the top left corner of a cavern that he could only compare in size to that on the lowest level of the Necropolis of Doom.¹²⁶ Though, unlike that cavern, this one’s ceiling was supported by scattered columns and fused stalactites and stalagmites. He could see the walls of the cavern before him and to the right. While they looked like treacherous climbs, he could tell there were many jagged nooks and outcroppings that would make for good hiding spots.

The wall directly across the opening from the mound had an opening about fifteen feet off the cavern floor, accessible by a crude stone ramp. It was a little more than ten feet wide and close to fifteen feet high.

Ratchis hurried back and explained what he had seen. “We should go up the ramp. I don’t want to spend too much time in that big cavern, too easy that we’d be ambushed by something and as far as we know we can be very far from another exit.”

The others agreed, though some grudgingly, but before continuing Ratchis beseeched Nephthys for *Bull’s Strength* for himself and for Kazrack.

They made their way across the cavern, marching close two by two and keeping alert as the clicking and clacking echoed around them. The light of Gunthar’s lantern threw crazy shadows all around them, especially against the towering columns.

Just as Ratchis and Kazrack, who were both in front reached the bottom of the ramp, they could see another hulking hooked horror appear at the opening at the top. There was at least two more behind it, trying to push their way down.

The monster in front ran down and swung its long arms at Kazrack, but the dwarf knocked the bony hook away and retaliated with two mighty blows of his own. Cracks cascaded up the thing’s exoskeletal plates.

The thing lurched away from Kazrack and swung both claws at the bigger target, while pecking with its treacherous beak. Ratchis easily avoided all the blows but landed a few of his own. Kazrack slammed it again and it fell.

However, one of the other hooked horrors had leapt down about halfway down the ramp and had made its way around, clawing at Flora. She took a slight blow to the head. Ratchis leapt over to her and with two mighty blows the hooked thing dropped to the cavern floor dead.

“Huh?” In the rear guard, Gunthar spun around and raised his lantern in time to see two more of the monsters charging out of the darkness from their right. “There’s more bugs back here! I friggin’ hate bugs!”

He put down the lantern and drew his short sword to accompany his other blade.

¹²⁶ See Session #47

Flora, Dorn, Bones and Martin all got their missile weapons ready, as two more hooked horrors appeared at the opening and hurried down. Kazrack and Ratchis positioned themselves to block their path. Again, one came barreling down at Kazrack, as bolts and arrows bounced off it, a few finding tender spots between plates. The dwarf ducked and spun around out the way to his left but did not see that the second horror had used the other as a screen and had come down unseen. Kazrack grunted as his armor did little to dull the blow. Kazrack swung his flail furiously, sending bony chips flying. Ratchis took up the spot Kazrack had been in and went head-to-head with the first hook horror, grunting with each satisfying crunching blow of his long sword into the thing.

Gunthar did his best to keep the two horrors that approached from the rear at bay, but one distracted him with a fierce blow to the chest, while the other batted the curved end of its hook across Martin's chin.

"Isis help me!" the watch-mage cried and withdrew, fumbling to reload his crossbow.

Flora turned and fired an arrow into a weak point near its groin, to keep it from pursuing.

Gunthar put himself between the two hulking monstrosities and flicked his swords in both directions trying to draw them off from the others.

"By Horus' huge hawk-headed cock!" he said, as the two hook horrors spun and flanked him. His arms stung as he parried the blows and he felt himself go numb for a second and he collapsed to the ground.

Ratchis also felt the weight of a blow that drove him down onto his rear, but he sprung back up and cracked the thing's chest shell and it fell backward and tumbled off the ramp.

The hooked horror that had attacked Martin now saw Dorn open and swung wildly at the brown-haired warrior. Dorn withdrew and fired at it point blank, but the bolt shattered harmlessly against its chest. Flora and Martin's missiles reacted similarly.

"Fuhwuh meh!" Kazrack cried, crushing the skull of the falling hooked horror before him and charging up the ramp. "Wuh uh fuh muh comin' ish aeh!" It was getting to the point that half the time folks were more successful guessing at what the dwarf was saying—especially in the heat of battle—than actually trying to understand his garbled words.

Ratchis turned away from the ramp charging at the one lumbering towards Dorn and the others. He swung out, cleaving into its hip. It let out a long trill of clicks.

Gunthar scrambled to his feet and spun as the hooked horror hovered over him, about to come down with all three of its attacks. Instead, it stumbled, and its right foot rolled. Gunthar hopped back, and the hooked horror hobbled after him, leaving itself open to a cruel blow from his long sword across the face.

It reared and came down on him again, and again he slashed across its face with the long sword and this time followed it with a jab from his short sword. It fell over.

Gunthar slipped away his short sword and scooped up the lantern.

Ratchis suffered cuts to his face from the hooked horror's blows but managed to slam it backward into the on-coming Kazrack, who had charged back down the ramp when he saw that no one had followed him. It slammed him as it fell to his blows.

More were now coming down the ramp, and even more emerged from the darkness beyond the mound behind them.

Gunthar walked over to Bones and put the lantern down by him.

"Carry this, snotling!" Gunthar said and kicked the halfling in the rear, knocking him down. Bones spun around and tried to punch Gunthar in the groin, but the Neergaardian had already moved on to meet the approaching hook horrors.

Two came rushing at him, clicking madly as bolts flew from both Dorn and Martin. Ratchis stepped up to form a line,

but one of the hooked horrors went around to claw at Bones. The halfling let an arrow loose straight into its head, but it did not slow. The other clawed at Ratchis, but met the flat of his blade instead, and was driven back by a thrust into a space between plates that spurting pinkish ichor. Kazrack slammed it as well.

One of the hooked horrors coming down the ramp leapt at Bones, who barely avoided it and then scurried away from the melee. The first hook horror seemed obsessed with the halfling and clawed after him, sending the halfling flying to the cold cavern floor.

Dorn shot it with his crossbow.

Kazrack turned to the monsters that had come down the ramp while Gunthar and Ratchis beat the one between them down, cracking its plates and smashing one of its legs clear in half. The dwarf spun with all his might and knocked one on its side, bashing a huge ichor-oozing scrap in its thigh, and crushed its skull with a follow up blow.

Martin picked up the lantern and moved clear of the fight, closing ranks with Dorn. Bones scrambled to his feet and ran behind Dorn as the warrior provided cover. The hook horror came running at Dorn as if still determined to get at the halfling behind him. Dorn cried out as the heavy hook clubbed him on the side of the head, knocking him from his feet.

Gunthar spun around and charged at the last hook horror to come down the ramp. He ducked the wide swinging hook and slammed the pommel of his sword between the thing's legs and then thrust upward to strike it under the beak. He fought in close to avoid the hooks. He shoved his short sword into the gaping wound and thrust with all his might, moving it around. It fell dead. Ratchis grunted with satisfaction as he cut down the hooked horror attacking Dorn. It was the last one. At least for now.

"Do you think perhaps that more and more of these things keep coming from that opening might mean we shouldn't go that way?" Martin inquired.

"Duh yah think dish lids tuh thair lair?" Kazrack asked eagerly.

"Whatever. Who cares? Let's go kill all of them," Gunthar nodded.

"Fer once Uh agree," Kazrack replied. He combed the drool from his beard with his fingers.

End of Session #67

Session #68

“Should weh tuck a momen tuh cull upun tuh blessinghs uh ur guds?” Kazrack asked.

“Yeah, heal me up, Stumpy!” Gunthar poked the dwarf in the side of the head with an elbow.

Kazrack’s frown became a grimace of pain, which shocked his face into more convulsions, until he could only hold the fractured remains of his lower face and shudder. He tried to cast two curative spells, but both failed.

“Let’s just go have a look,” Ratchis said. “We won’t go too far into the opening.”

He and Kazrack led the way, with Gunthar close behind. Dorn and Bones took up the rear, as Martin and Flora followed the warriors hesitantly.

Not more than twenty feet into this tunnel it widened and forked, turning sharply to the left and sinking one way and turned and climbing more gradually to the right.

Another of the hook horrors came charging up from the left, clicking and clacking frantically as it swung its hooks over its head. Gunthar leapt forward and sliced its leg open, and Ratchis swung around and struck it in the same place. He chopped its head open as it fell to the ground.

“Muh!” Kazrack warned. They all looked up and saw four more of the monsters coming. Two from each side.

Ratchis stepped up and braced himself to block the two on the left, while the two on the right came charging at Kazrack. The dwarf deftly ducked the attacks, though one did scrape his helmet.

The half-orc traded blows with one of the bird-insect monsters, but his heavy blows brought it down. Meanwhile Gunthar struggled with the other one on the left side, but Ratchis was able to help flank the creature and soon it was pouring out ichor and shuddering on the cave floor.

Twang! Flora fired arrows to keep the remaining two from overrunning Kazrack, who grunted with every blow he dealt and received. The dwarf was beginning to look badly beaten and bloody in many places. One blow from a hook horror knocked him off his feet. Again, and again it slammed him on the ground with its hooks ignoring the flurry of arrows and bolts from Martin, Flora, Bones and Dorn.

Ratchis and Gunthar struggled with the remaining hook horror, as it moved to block access to its companion that threatened to hook Kazrack like a squirming worm to be used a bait. Gunthar was able to get in a blow as the monster shifted over, but it did not fall.

“Kazrack? Do you have it?” Ratchis called to his friend, his view obscured by the hulking horrors.

“Uh um shorly oondid!” Kazrack drooled as he rolled to his feet and slammed the monster with his fading strength. The central carapace cracked, sending pinkish ichor to splatter across the tunnel. The hook horror fell.

The dwarf stepped up to flank the other, but it spun around to hit him. However, its hooks slammed the tunnel ceiling and it lost balance slamming its head against the wall as it fell, stunned.¹²⁷

In a moment, Kazrack, Ratchis and Gunthar had destroyed it.

“We need to pull back out of this area and back up that corkscrew passage in order to hide and rest,” Ratchis said.

Martin mumbled under his breath that he had already suggested something like that.

The Fearless Manticore Killers and their companions climbed back up the rounding ramp, alert to the echoing of more clicking and clacking behind them. Near the top they found a flat recess they could camp in and perhaps avoid anyone

¹²⁷ **DM’s Note:** The hook horror fumbled. It needed to make a Reflex check against DC 18 or fall and be stunned for 1d3 rounds.

or anything that went by in the dark.

They risked a little light as they set up their gear and rolled out their bedrolls. Martin took some time to use several *mending* spells to make repairs in Kazrack and Gunthar's armor.

"I don't know if you've noticed, but Beorth is gone," Gunthar said as they were all settling in. Kazrack was mumbling angrily to himself as three of his cure spells failed due to his shattered jaw. "None of you have said a word about him since he fell down the shite-hole... And you call *me* heartless."

"Beorth is alive," Ratchis replied.

"That would ease your conscience, wouldn't it," Gunthar said with a smirk.

"Shut up, Gunthar," Ratchis growled.

"Oh, please feel free to dampen my own freedom, mister friar of Nephthys Snuffles, sir," Gunthar mocked.

"Bayorsh ish likely dead," Kazrack said.

Balem, the 12th of Ter – 565 H.E.

In what they hoped was morning, the priests prepared their spells, and Ratchis used a great deal of his goddess' power to heal everyone's wounds. Soon after, they all found themselves making their way back down to the great chamber below by means of the spiraling tunnel. This time at the egress that went to the right behind the great hollowed mound.

They were amazed to find that the corpses of all the monsters they had slain had been dragged away.

The area behind the tapering column was pock marked with conical dirt mounds that each had small scoop taken out of the top. All the mounds were spread out nearly evenly around a bizarre feature of the cavern, a translucent green and sickly yellow conical column of some kind of hardened material. It was as tall as the cavern and seemed to have been spit out over time from a hole above. It was twenty feet at the base and rose up steeply to a narrow point at the top.

"What is that?" Dorn whispered with awe. Gunthar's lantern reflected against the shiny green thing and sparkled up and down it.

"The insect birds must have made it," Martin said. "Perhaps to preserve eggs or valuables."

"I hope valuables," Bones said. "Because these things don't have pockets, so their ain't much profit in killing them."

The party was startled as a loud clacking came around the column of hardened slime. Two of the plated monsters came around from the right side of it, clacking and beating their hooks against their chests in challenge. They took up spots on either side of the column and did not approach.

"Why aren't they attacking?" Martin the Green asked Ratchis.

"I think they're defending their eggs and calling to others," Ratchis surmised. He rushed towards them and Kazrack followed. Dorn hesitated and then followed as well.

Gunthar stayed back with the others who were more cautious and looking around to see if more were coming.

Bones let loose an arrow and it bounced against the head of the first horror as it approached Kazrack.

Dorn grunted as he took a blow to the shoulder as he and Ratchis moved to flank the other hooked horror.

Sighing, Gunthar advanced to aid Kazrack. The dwarf was doing a good job avoiding blows, but he could not seem to land a solid one until the Neergardian arrived to provide distraction. Ratchis and Dorn managed to defeat the one they

took on with help from arrows from Flora and Martin.

The half-orc then hurried over and cut the leg from the other and Gunthar removed its head while it struggled on the ground.

The echo of their battle died out as it rung across the great chasm and returned as a vague hum bouncing against the columns and spires of stone.

They all approached the slime column and could see spots of luminescence deep inside of it and way up above. Ratchis, Bones and Martin examined it. They could see the shape of humanoids trapped inside of it frozen in space. One was a human hanging upside down and missing a leg. The other, only about seven feet up was a dwarf with his back to the party. He had a torn pack and seemed to have been climbing a rope when the slime slid over him suddenly.

Ratchis used the masterwork hammer he had taken off of one of Mozek's brothers to smash through the hardened slime and was able to retrieve two of the bodies; the dwarf and a human. The two bodies appeared to be that of adventurers, clearly dead but remarkably preserved. The dwarf's pack was full of gems, jewelry, coins, and some clay jugs wrapped in some kind of prayer rug. Martin cast *detect magic* and discovered the rug and the jugs gave off a dweomer.

Kazrack was given the pack to carry after the two bodies were buried under stone cairns and words were spoken.

A couple of hours later the party had moved on to the far end of the huge cavern and picked their way up the wall towards a group of tunnels they spotted that they hoped would lead them out. The map Shadarach had given them was of very limited use from this point on, and many times Kazrack and Ratchis conferred about the most likely routes to the surface, with Martin chiming in occasionally with his plethora of maps.

These narrow tunnels climbed up and up. In many places they crawled up on their hands and knees through slick black mud and silt, nearly digging their way upward through the earth. Mud-covered, they finally pulled themselves into and intersecting cavern with slick cold rounded walls. After another quick look around by Ratchis and a consultation with Kazrack, they took off in one direction following carved steps in limestone that reached another series of narrow tunnels.¹²⁸ The air was fresher here, and Ratchis smiled as he led the way.

This sloping tunnel had crude worked stairs that Kazrack cursed as "goblin work." They were now far from the dwarven mines and chambers they had entered with Shadarach. In time they came to a room that connected with three other passages, but more importantly, there was a tiny shaft on the left had side through which came a shaft of moonlight.

"Isis smiles upon us," Martin said.¹²⁹

Ratchis examined the shaft and could see that it was scores of feet to where the moonlight breached the rock. The shaft was no wider than four inches.

"The moon must be full," he said.

"Look!" Bones called attention to the corpses of three squat orcs in torn hide armor. They had no weapons and looked as if those curved blades the black orcs had been using before had killed them.¹³⁰

Ratchis held up a hand and looked around using Gunthar's lantern.

"These orcs were dragged here from somewhere else," Ratchis surmised. "Maybe they were killed near the surface and others dragged them here."

"These look different in dress than the ones we face before, and they are squatter," Martin observed.

¹²⁸ Kazrack was using his inherent intuit depth ability.

¹²⁹ Isis is the goddess of the moon, magic and motherhood, and a patron of witches.

¹³⁰ Scimitars.

“We should press on,” Ratchis said, and Kazrack nodded.

The half-orc walked over to each of the exits in turn, and then called over Kazrack and Martin to consult with them. The faint sound of drums came from the right-hand passage. The passage climbed very steeply and turned off to the right very sharply. The middle passage smelled freshest and had a gentle grade upward, while the left-hand passage plummeted awkwardly. There was a damp smell to the air that came up from down there.

“The middle it is,” Ratchis said, and led the way.

Fatigue began to crawl into their muscles by the time they were able to see moonlight again. The tunnels had led to a network of passages that honeycombed the side of a gorge overlooking a river far below.

Bones was sent out to sneak ahead and check it out, he and returned with the all’s clear. There was enough solid rock directly below to allow them all to climb down and then find a way across the river further up or down stream. However, it was only thirty feet to the cliff above while a more treacherous eighty feet to the bottom of the gorge.

Ropes were hastily set up and Kazrack began to make his way down slowly on one rope, as Gunthar and Bones slid down the other.

The Neergaardian was the furthest down the cliff-side, about halfway, when he was startled by an arrow clattering against the stone beside him.

“What!? Friggin’ pigs! Pigs!” he cried and pointed and swung wildly. Bones cursed, holding on desperately to the jerking rope as Gunthar slid all the way down to the bottom.

Kazrack turned his head and saw two squat orcs with short bows hunched in a tiny shielded outcropping that was reached by some other tunnel in the cliff-side.

Still inside Martin and the other began to hear drums.

Bones slid down the rope and in a moment had his bow was in his hand. He stopped to shoot at the well-covered orcs as he ran out to the edge of the tall grass that lined the river here, hoping to get a better angle and some cover of his own.

Kazrack was still clumsily making his way down, lowered by Ratchis, and he felt the bite of orc arrows, slowed by, but still punching through, his armor.

Gunthar, meanwhile, began to climb back up the cliff-side to get at the orcs.

Dorn and Martin loaded their crossbow and stepped out to the ledge, looking down at the orcs as they popped out to take shots. They both let loose, but Dorn’s caught a lip of stone. Martin’s bolt went clean through the back of the orc’s neck as it peered over the stone at Gunthar and over it went! The orc corpse slammed into Gunthar with incredible force, and yet he still managed to hold on, feeling bruises begin to swell up on his face and shoulder.

“Agh!” Ratchis cried out. He had leaned forward to get Kazrack’s rope past some rocks and a heavy stone slammed into the back of his head. He looked up, and in the bright moonlight could see humanoid silhouettes moving back and forth at the top of the cliff. “They are also above us!” he warned.

Gunthar felt a stone slam into him as well, but he remained resolute and slowly made his way back up towards the orc archers.

Kazrack was finally down, and he drew his crossbow as well and began to fire at the orcs.

Bones sent arrows clattering up into the shadows, but he could not tell if he hit anything.

Flora began to sing a loud song in elvish and three small balls of light appeared before her and hurried down to harass the archers.

Ratchis pulled up the rope, as Dorn began his descent on the other.

By this time, Gunthar had gotten to the orc hole, and barely missed having his head cleaved open by a battle-axe. He leapt into the hole, drawing his swords, and disappeared into the darkness with a cry of joy.

More rocks fell from above, forcing Martin to retreat a bit and sending his bolts off target. Flora had her lights fly up to the top of the cliff, but then ducked away as more rocks came down.

Dorn joined Bones and Kazrack at the bottom of the cliff and lent his crossbow to the difficult task of picking off the well-covered orcs.

Ratchis coiled the rope at his feet and then pulled out his great bow and took aim where he had seen one of the orcs above. The next time it looked over to drop a rock, it fell back with an arrow through its eye. The stone scraped past the half-orc's head.

Below Kazrack did his best to yell suggestions to Ratchis between shots, but over the distance and with his excitement, it sounded like naught but desperate groans.

Gunthar emerged from the orc hole covered in gore and holding a black bow and a leather quiver of arrows. He began to make his way back down the cliff.

With a lucky shot, Bones took out one of the orcs way above and it tumbled down the cliff, its body emitting two satisfying crunching sounds.

Martin and Flora took this opportunity to begin to climb down, as the others waited with bows drawn for more orc forms to appear at the top of the cliff; except for Kazrack he only continued to mumble encouragement.

Soon the whole party was down and crossing the river where it was wide and very shallow. They climbed up a much lower and gradual rock face and headed towards a thick wood to the southwest.

At the treeline, they stopped to drink water and patch up their wounds. Flora sung for Ratchis, closing a bit of the Friar's wounds.

"I think we should go through the dwarf's bag now and split the booty," Bones suggested.

"Ut cun wait," Kazrack said.

"What if we get separated, or you fall over a cliff into a river or something?" Bones said. "It makes sense to do it now."

"Snotling's got a point," Gunthar, smiling. "I deserve my cut now for all the fighting I had to do to cover for you guys." He gestured to Kazrack and Ratchis.

Kazrack looked to Ratchis, and the half-orc nodded.

A few minutes later the coins were divided, and several different people were holding pieces of jewelry. Gunthar was not one of them, but he was promised a cut when they were sold.

"I can't wait until we get to an inn," he said. "I'm gonna get me a whore. Hell, with all this booty I can get a helluva lot of booty."

"You're disgusting," Flora said.

"Can't ya just eat me up?" Gunthar winked.

"Whuh would juh buy more boody?" Kazrack asked.

Dorn, Bones, Gunthar and even Flora laughed.

At Ratchis' insistence they marched through the darkness of night in order to put as much distance between themselves and the orc tunnels.

"We should march until as close to daybreak as possible," he said.

Several hours later exhausted they collapsed into a wooded knoll that Ratchis found for them. The dawn was an angry red blur that rose up from behind the mountains the party had emerged from.

Teflem, the 13th of Ter – 565 H.E.

Before them stretched seemingly endless miles of thickly wooded hills that stretched south and westward, climbing until meeting the distant shadow of even taller mountains.

The weather was perfect. A cool breeze slipped around the hills and small fluffy clouds crawled away to the east.

Anulem, the 14th of Ter – 565 H.E.

By midday they were moving at a brisk pace though broken rocky plateaus covered in places by winding gray vines, some of which had begun to sprout bright yellow and green flowers.

At many places they had to climb down tall plateaus, and cross deep cracks where subterranean streams split the rocks down below. Every now and then they'd pass a small copse of trees, some had the tiniest buds of apples growing on them.

After crossing one long stretch of barren white stone riddled with veins of black and dull green, there was a narrow band of trees behind which they could see the outline of some buildings and a low wall.

"This is the cemetery," Ratchis said. "We are nearly there. There is a monastery dedicated to Anubis here, so we have to be alert for monks."¹³¹

He led them to the stained white stone wall of the cemetery. The tall peaks of tombs and statues were visible over the twelve-foot wall.

"There is no gate on this side," Ratchis said.

The half-orc ranger led the party and their companions along the eastern wall of the cemetery. The ground declined beneath them as the wall became gradually taller.

"Dish ish dwarven conshrukshun," Kazrack commented.

The ground gave way very steeply before them, and the wall went beyond it, reinforced, and buttressed to support some kind of stone platform above. Ratchis pointed out a narrow alley in the wall that led to stone steps up to the cemetery level. They passed an open rusted gate. The narrow hall turned left and then another set of steeper steps led to a courtyard before a squat black building. The courtyard looked as if it had not been cleared for some time. There were piles of dirt blown by the wind into the corners, and dead leaves and mud streaks. The statue of Anubis, jackal-headed with his arms folded across his chest, holding a key in one hand and a hooked scepter in the other, was stained with pink and white bird-droppings.

"Like everywhere else in Aquerra... The monks are all gone," Flora said.

"They're on their way back," Martin said. "I wish Beorth were here. He would do something about this neglect while

¹³¹ Ratchis lived in Nikar for a time, so he knows it well.

here.”

Gunthar snorted, and Ratchis glared at him.

Beyond the courtyard to the right they saw scores of tombstones amide tall grass and a few trees. To the left, there was a stone balcony of sorts connected to stone steps leading down the side of the cliff face this was built upon. It led to the plateau below.

Ratchis led them this way. Kazrack was awed by the construction.

Down the steps they went. They were made of stone and carved into the side of the cliff turning in a neat rectangular pattern, with an open side, which gave view to rolling hills beyond to the south. The steps led to a wide plateau fashioned into a road. Large stones marked the far edge of the road showing where the edge of the plateau was and the sudden plummet beyond. The road curved around and out of sight to the east, and to the east it led through a dark tunnel cleaving through the mountainside.

“Nikar is just beyond this tunnel,” Ratchis explained. “Just a warning. The guards here are serious about enforcing the law and they’ve had bad experiences with adventurers here so be careful what you do and don’t get caught doing it.”

He glared at Gunthar, but let his vision pause on Bones an extra second as well.

As they approached the tunnel, they could see that it was built up on either side with windowless stone towers from which could emerge a heavy black metal gate, which could completely block the way. Kazrack took a moment to look to see if he could get a glimpse at the mechanism used to do this, but Ratchis hurried him along.

“The gate is closed at sundown from the far end of the tunnel,” the half-orc said. “We will have to hurry to make it in time.”

The tunnel was twenty-five feet high at the center and curved down on either side in a perfect arc. The ground was paved with rounded stones, and gutters had been carved on either end to allow water to drain.

It was nearly a quarter-mile to the other end of the tunnel, and there they saw the lights of several lanterns reflecting off another gate. This one was closed, but a small doorway through was open and adjacent to a guardhouse and tower. The top of the tunnel here was lined with murder-holes through which came torchlight.

As they approached the gate, Flora used a *prestidigitation* spell to clean everyone off, except Gunthar.

As they approached, they saw a dwarf in chainmail holding a battle-axe appear on the other side of the gate. He had a full red beard and a helmet that covered the top part of his face. There was a horn at his side. Behind him were two more dwarves with loaded heavy crossbows.

“Hail! Who seeks to enter Nikar at this late hour?” the dwarf called out.

“Greetingsf, my brushers! Weh uf travushed far tuh git here,” Kazrack raised a hand as he came forward to speak.

“Well met, brother! Come forward into the light. I am having a hard time understanding you,” the dwarf said.

Kazrack approached and the shattered remains of his lower face made the dwarven guard grimace.

“Ugh! That is some grievous wound you have,” the dwarf said. “Please speak your names and your business in town.”

“Uh em Kashrack Devver. I hail from Lurgh-Schplendar-Tarr,” Kazrack said. “Theesh ur my companionsh. Uh em uh rune-thrower and sheek to pray and shtudy ut uh temple here. One of my companionsh hess from thish town.”

Ratchis came forward, and one of the dwarves with the crossbows murmured something to the other. There was a look of recognition in the eyes of the guard at the gate.

“I am Ratchis of Nephthys, friend of Jetta and Narcil of Nephthys who reside in this town,” the half-orc ranger said.

“I know who they are,” the dwarf said brusquely. “And I know who you are, you best be watching yourself while you are back here. Rest assured that the captain will be told of your arrival.”

“Ish thur uh problem?” Kazrack asked, wiping drool from his chin.

“No disrespect to you honored rune-thrower,” the dwarf said, swallowing down his disdain to take on a tone of deference. “But I am surprised that you would call one of the foul breed a companion, especially one that is a known rapist.”

“Wow Snuffles. At least pay for it if you can’t get it another way!” Gunthar laughed, coming forward.

“I was cleared of that charge,” Ratchis said.

“A technicality that gains you entrance,” the dwarf said. “But there better not be any vengeance getting while you are here, and as you are clearly an adventuring group, I hope whatever business you have while off on your adventures is done with and does not come following you here. We do not take kindly to your kind brawling and killing both in town and in its jurisdiction.”

“We understand,” said Martin, coming forward. “I am Martin the Green of the Academy of Wizardry. Could you point me in the direction of the local watch-mage’s abode when we are done here?”

“There is no watch-mage here,” the dwarf said. He began to take down the names.

“I am Gunthar Northrop of Neergaard, adventurer and hero,” Gunthar said. “And don’t let my companions be too humble they are the cold-blooded and Fearless Manticore Killers!”

“Uh-huh,” the dwarf said making a note and smirking. “Come through one by one and step to the right so I can explain to you some of our local laws before you make your way to the inn or wherever, Fearless Manticore Killers.”

“Maybe we should change our name,” Martin whispered to Ratchis.

End of Session #68

END OF *OUT OF THE FRYING PAN* - BOOK III: FANNING THE EMBERS

To be continued in “Out of the Frying Pan” – Book Four: Into the Fire. . .