

Prologue - Gathering in Antioch

The Museum

Irwin opens the door to the hall and allows each of you to leave. After signing a paper at the inkeeps desk, Irwin leads your party out the door and down the street toward the center of the city.

The gardens are beautiful, even in the early spring. You approach the museum from the front, the paths of the park flow right up to the raised entrance. After climbing a dozen stairs and you come to the fluted marble façade with heavy iron bound door. Irwin opens the door, allows you to pass in, and then locks the door from the inside. You are in the main entry foyer. Irwin walks over to meet a small man inconspicuously seated at a table in a corner, reading some papers by candle light. After a short talk and a brotherly hug, they walk back to you.

"Welcome, friends, I am Monsignor Westcott, Cannon and curator of the facility here. Monsignor Irwin thought you would like to visit our museum, and I would be delighted to show you around."

"I leave you in Monsignor Westcott's capable hands. You may contact me at the City Hall any time before you leave town. May the flame of Eli light your path." Irwin turns and leaves the building, re-locking the door behind him.

"Well, a brief tour first?"

"A tour, Certainly! Monsignor, please lead the way." Relsyn bows his head slightly toward the small man. The Canon leads the way toward the first exhibit, limping slightly as he does so. As the party walks further into the dimly lit building, their footfalls echo loudly on the ancient stone floors.

"How many years have been the Canon here Sir?" asks Relsyn.

"Twenty four years..."

Relsyn continues to engage the priest in small talk surrounding the man's scholarly pursuits and his interests.

The Museum of the Ancient and Venerable Church is a marble building as marvelously artistic in its own way as many of the treasures stored therein. Marbles of various colors highlight various areas. Stone pillars as large as mature trees, and carved to approximate these, support the building. Gold inlaid lettering in many walls points the way toward various wings and exhibits. Many objects of art are present, as the tour group passes through "the gauntlet," a hall of religious statues depicting many Saints, Blessed and others of significance. The small priest proves to be consummately knowledgeable about the Art of many eras.

"I have been considering pursuing my Doctor of Letters degree, on which topic did you write your dissertation?" He pauses to wait for an answer, "I have been considering writing mine on the character and generalship of St. Salix," replies Relsyn when asked.

The tour continues, with Monsignor Westcott pointing out several historical highlights, including the Iron Spear, The Codex ur Devda, The Journals of St. Dismas (Forged), and St. Xantas' Star Gem.

"As pleasant as this private tour has been, as you well know, we are here with a more pressing agenda: What more can you tell or show us about the Elioim Staff or Eli's tear, Monsignor Westcott?" asks Relsyn as the brief tour ends.

Airith eyes over the stuff in the museum. "Smoke, those bones aren't for you." It really doesn't interest him in terms of how old it is, only the value. "Yes, as interesting as this all is, please allow us to see what we really came here for."

Inwe looks around in wonder at the amount of pieces collected here. For her also, the age is not particularly impressive, as "old" is judged a little differently in elven terms. More interesting is learning more of the history of this place and of the church. But she also is ready to get started on what they are really seeking.

The Library private rooms

As the group approaches the front hall again, Monsignor Westcott turns into a small alcove, and opens a concealed door and leads you into a small chamber. He strikes a sun rod which immediately illuminates the room.

The room is only ten by ten, and has a stairs leading down along the south wall. You follow him down the stairs, through a series of passages, rooms, vaults, laboratories, and libraries. It is apparent that for all the show and grandeur of the halls above, the academic knowledge and true treasures of the museum are not available for public display.

Monsignor Westcott leads you into another small room, with drawings and files obviously about the Staff of the Elioim.

"Here are the documents we have relating to the Staff.

We have arranged the documents, mostly by date - oldest in back. I must request you handle these documents carefully. While they have been copied many times in the thousands of years since their writing, they are still fragile and precious."

Relsyn lights up and immediately heads for one of the older stacks of paper. He scans through sets of reports, written in Old Rhiann, from the first crusade, mentioning hearing about a staff in the south. Another set of papers report on an investigation into the same staff. It claims that the staff was said to herald the arrival of the Great Ships with the Remnant on them. The aboriginal people say it flashed and flamed some weeks before the arrival of the ships - and grew so hot that the chamber walls of its shrine were blackened.

There is a document telling the tale of the origin of the staff.

The Story of Creation, the Elioim, and Eli's loss.

It is said that soon after Eli formed the world, he traveled his creation. Through air, water, and earth he traveled. Wherever he went, he lived for a time with the creatures he encountered, giving them a gift as he left to continue his journey.

The first land he came to was Eire, where he encountered the races we now know as the strongheart or true races. His presence alone granted them long life, good health, and improved abilities. He lived long with them, sharing his knowledge and power with all of them. Thus his gift to them was the knowledge of the workings of the world and the joy of himself.

Aside: Over many generations, they forgot his gift and instead turned their mighty civilization to proud acts and boasting. Their acts were so atrocious to Eli that he finally destroyed the civilization, and even their blessed land, so they could never go home. The remnants of that nation settled as refugees on the land now known as Rhiannon, contrite and devoted to Eli and worshiping him in atonement.

He traveled other races with wings, who could float on the breezes over island paradises. He walked the depths with races burrowing deep in the hard stone at the core of the world. He swam and raced with the glistening races of the far off sea. Everywhere he went, and in whatever form he traveled, he gave his gifts as he moved along.

Then he came across a simple race, the Elioim, both beautiful and fragile. He loved them as children, for their simple ways and artful joy pleased him. They were both translucent and jewel tones. Their emotions played across their glassy skin as oil travels on water - shimmering, glowing, and shadowing. He made merry with them as they danced around the evening fires. He swam with them as they fished in the sea. Eli was happy to be in their presence and they loved him. When it was time to leave, he cried for the separation from his beloved. A single tear fell from his eye and landed on the land. The tear danced there on the land and formed a gem of great worth and power. He fashioned a staff for it and gave it to the Elioim for protection and comfort.

The staff, drawn out of a living oak, was smooth and hard. The depth to the grain was unmatched. As Eli picked up the gem, its dazzling whiteness burst into rainbows of color. The Elioim clapped joyously in

the sight. He brought it close to the top of the staff and caused the staff to grow up and around the gem. The beauty of the staff and gem together was unique.

As Eli passed the staff to the Elio patriarch, the gem slid down the staff, resting unseen in a nest of solid wood. Confused, the patriarch asked Eli why the sunlight stone could not be seen any more. Smiling, Eli taught the people the words to bring back the sunlight stone to the top of the staff when needed. In it, they could be comforted by his light, knowing he could see them and they could see by his light when afraid.

Eli took his leave and moved to the next race in his visits.

Nearby, the Sheloin, a race of shelled people in the nearby sea watched as Eli left. Expecting Eli to come to them, the Sheloin grew dark and angry, jealous of their neighbors. Some years later they gathered their hate and formed a party to punish the Elio for loving Eli so much and keeping Eli from them. On a dark night, the Sheloin crept up the shores of the bright lands and skittered on all six to the homes of the sleeping Elio. In a cry of hate, they burst in and tore apart the men, women, and children in their powerful claws until none remained. Eli, in great anger, caused the gem to flare and strike lightning into the party of Sheloin. They died where they crept back into the water. No one has seen the Elio since, but their structures still endure where they grew. The Sheloin are said to be dark creatures of the deep now.

As Relsyn is reading through these reports, Westcott is leafing through the same stacks, occasionally reading or translating a story for the group. "Ahh, this is a short description of how the staff was said to save a town. It appears a plague of locusts was heading for the town after destroying everything on the plain. The priest at the time went into the sacred chamber and took hold of the staff. Whatever he did, it appears that the wind struck up out of the ocean and blew the locusts eastward and southward. The fields were saved.

A few minutes later, in another section of the room, Westcott shows the group the liturgy for the canonization (making a saint of) of a worthy person. It appears that the staff is used to invoke the spirit of the Saint and beseech Eli to allow the Saint to intervene on our behalf. It appears that the staff gem glows brilliantly as the service continues, a sure sign Eli is listening.

Airith, also perusing the more recent documents, finds a section on "Malta and the staff." It tells a tale of a cleric, who also belonged to a high Malta family, taking the staff from the 'spur.' He took it for his family, as a symbol of the family's status and obvious favor in the eyes of Eli.

Inwe, looking through a sheaf of papers on the description of the staff, comes across several descriptions of the staff. All say the staff is oak. Most say the rod has a bole in upper 1/4, but does not have a stone or gem on it. Some documents, mostly reports of events in which the staff was part of the ceremony, battle, or cure describe the staff as smooth oak with basket on top, a large white gem delicately held by a wood basket setting.

Relsyn, still looking in ancient documents, comes across a set of inquiries from church history: Dated RY 2021. The 'theft' of the staff was ordered by a patriarch, Damas III - a patriarch who was not known for his piety. The cleric in the small town of Malta, Brother Lucas, carried out the decree with utmost tact. 'Few know of the theft,' the report says. A hand written note, dated a year later, claims that it was discovered that the stone was taken, but not the staff. Degrading remarks are made about the quality of the brotherhood, especially those who fail at their task, and then disappear from the face of the world without a trace.

A story, in old common, written in Malta, dated 3268 RY, comments on the audacity of Rush Greyson. The report / story documents how Mr. Greyson somehow got his hands on the staff, taking out of the Spur personally. Then, to show he is the most pious of the leading families, shows off staff during a ball, claiming his staff is his scepter of high society.

Along with this story is a sampling another 210 years of society papers. Several claim the staff changed hands back and forth within the Greyson family, and eventually wider society. At some point around 3285 RY, another staff showed up, looking very much like the original. Once there

were two staffs, several more were made as trophies, some looking like the original, others quite different.

In 3518 RY, an in-depth search questioned 'Who has the real staff?' It was clearly narrowed down to three circles of Players, centered around the Greyson family, Cuthbert Family, and the Youngstrom family. These staffs look the most alike, but the rules of the society appear to make it impossible to cross 'class' lines and bring them together to compare them.

...

After about forty-five minutes of scanning the documents, you have seen everything that the museum has concerning the Staff. Old family names in Malta are mentioned several times, as are several other small incident reports that involve the staff or reports of its use somehow or other. Nothing is definitive about its true uses or current location.

"Well, I have shown you all we have, can I answer any other questions?"

Airith's eyes and muscles are starting to get sore. He has read several stories, accounts, and descriptions of the staff but none descriptive enough to be able to tell the real staff from a fake. He puts down a book of papers when he hears Monsignor Westcott say, "Well, I have shown you all we have, can I answer any other questions?"

"Monsignor. Westcott, I don't mean to be rude and by no means am I questioning your knowledge of the Staff of the Elioim, but do you know of any distinguishing marks, carvings, or decorations on the staff? I only ask because of the fact that there happens to be several replicas and I would hate to return with a fake staff."

Airith rubs his eyes as Westcott answers the question. "I see, and what about the gem, is there any reference as to who took it exactly? Maybe the family name or church he was affiliated with?"

"Well, Airith was it? Yes... Well the real staff, as I believe the oldest stories tell" he points to the pile that include the The Story of Creation, the Elioim, and Eli's loss " the staff is definitely of oak. It seems to have two forms, which I cannot explain. One has the stone inside the wood in a cavity, and the other the stone is visible in a setting of wood."

" I suspect that the staff, once reunited with the stone, will somehow show a symbiotic power."

"As for how they were separated, let me just say it was not one of the churches better days. One of our own, we believe, ordered the taking of the staff. During the taking, it accidentally broke into two parts - staff and stone. I would rather not say more about that.

The actual cleric is now known, privately mind you, as Brother Lucas the Unreliable. His birth surname, I think, was Youngstrom. Yes, one of the names mentioned often in later years."

Inwe looks up from the stack of documents in her hands. "As numerous as these descriptions are, it seems as though the staff would not be too hard to replicate in appearance. And since the staff and its gem have been separated, isn't somewhat probable that we come across a staff without the stone? Do you know some way to identify the true staff without its counterpart? Echoing Airith, we don't want to come back with the wrong one."

"Thank you very much for the access to all this information. It has been helpful for me to learn more of these names of families supposed to be involved and of the history of this treasure. And hopefully we can still learn more in Malta."

"The gem and staff together will act as differently as the two separately."

He digs into one of the piles of papers perused by Relsyn, and finds a small paper towards the bottom of the pile. He scans the words and points out a line to Relsyn.
"What do you make of this?"

He shows Relsyn the text...

Dopo l'agitazione grande del pavimento, un'onda gigante si è avvicinata alle nostre sedi. Grandinano l'alto priest, che ha tenuto il personale del Sunstone in alto, portato giù dirigersi verso l'onda e detto le parole "l'alito di Eli." Un fron balzato vento mighty il personale, aumentante di resistenza fino a che non colpisca l'onda d'avvicinamento. Ringrazi Eli! L'onda è stata piegata indietro dal vento, arrestandosi all'est e verso ovest, ma non nuocendo il nostro villaggio "

As Relsyn reads the story, Westcott says:

"Briefly, this says to me that the staff can produce a cone of wind. I believe this use may work without the gem. I do not think the replica staffs have magical abilities. I suggest you try the spell, but not in the City of Malta."

Relsyn gingerly holds the scrap of paper given him by Msr Westcott and reads through it quickly, then less quickly, then rather slowly. His eyes betray wonderment amongst the concentration. He sets the paper gently down on the table from which it came.

"Yes," He finally says, "This scrap of paper, which is stunningly old, but which appears to be a copy of another, older, document, records a story whereby a priest saved a village by using the staff to create a mighty wind. He invoked this power by uttering the words, 'The Breath of Eli,' presumably in some form of Old Rhian which would be 'l'alito di Eli.'"

"l'alito di Eli." echos Jewel the raven from Relsyns shoulder.

"Although," Says Relsyn hesitantly, "though the note is written in Old Rhian, based on what we've now heard about the staff, it is more likely that the command words would be in the language native to this continent, which today forms the basis only for the Barbarian tongues spoken in the north. This language I do not know."

"Monsignor, do you know how to say the "the breath of Eli" in the Barbarian tongue? Also any idea how it might be different from the original base language? If not, Garret my know a linguist at the University that can help us with that?"

"Alas, I do not know the older tongue either. It surely is in the priests language before the time of the Remnant. That tongue is almost completely lost."

As Monsignor Westcott is speaking, Wrinkle is humming a tune quietly. It is odd, not quite tonal to your ears. He closes his eyes, nods his head a little, and then smiles. He takes the mouthpiece out and plays.

"leee noooooooo iiiiiiit" he plays proudly.

He takes out a piece of paper from his pack and writes

Respiração de Eli,
Rah-spy-race-ay-oh Da Eli
old song quotes 'breath knocked out of me...'

"sink taats iit"

Westcott: "How could you possibly know any songs.... That language is nearly dead?"

Wrinkle shrugged and smiled broadly (a cruel sight considering the scar on his face) and said no more.

It takes Relsyn Saffire, decorated priest of St Macedone the Scholar, a few moments to overcome his surprise. "Hardly anyone knows that language..." He mutters. He then works on pronouncing, "Respiração de Eli" until Wrinkling nods to tell him he is pronouncing it correctly.

"Macedone's blessing on the songs of bards, and yours specifically, Wrinkle." He says with a broad smile and a clap on the sturdy bards back.

"Relsyn you best remember those words. We may need them to find the real staff." Airith carefully closes the book he was studying and stretches his back and arms. "I am not seeing a whole lot more here that will help us. How about we call it a day and get a good night sleep."

Monsignor Westcott nods. "Please, if you ever need my advice, feel free to come back. You have seen everything I can show, but perhaps some other trivia will snap into this puzzle that we overlooked."

"Still, it worries me if those words are correct. Something not quite right. But, it may be the test we need to authenticate the staff. Of course, another non-magical staff will probably break if you tried to chop it and the Staff of the Elioim will not. May not want to try that one - the proud of Malta might not look favorably on that." He practically laughs the last part out.

"Fare thee well on your trip."

"I agree with Airith" says Relsyn. "Shall we leave for Malta in the morning? By Ship?"

Inwe says "Sounds good to me. I would like to return for the night to the elves I have been staying with. What is a good place and time to meet in the morning?"

Wrinkle nods in agreement. "aal wheee mmeet aat iiterrr innnnn irsst iigt?"

"First Light at the Mitre Inn then. A good evening to you all." He bows slightly toward Monsignor Westcott, "And to you as well Monsignor." He turns to leave, first checking to be sure that Jewel has alighted on his shoulder.

"Blessings of Eli Most High to all of you and Godspeed your trip." says Westcott in an official sounding voice.

As the group leaves, Relsyn makes his way back toward the Cathedral of St Macedone, which houses the largest library in the (known) world. Once there he walks quietly past the honor guards through a small door. Inside the great building he pauses for a moment to deposit two of the platinum sovereigns in the collection box. "Bless this donation oh Champion of Illumination" He quietly prays. Then he heads off to the small cell that is his bedchamber.

"See all of you in the morning." Airith begins walking towards the Mitre Inn. "Looks like only one more night here Smoke. In a couple of days we will be back home." The both of them, along with Wrinkle, find their way twisting and turning through the streets until they finally approach the Mitre Inn.

Airith enters to find the establishment rather busy. Matteuw Burshel is entertaining guests with a grand story of riches and danger, Kaydar is attending to the needs of guests at the bar, and the rest of the work crew is scrambling to meet the needs of all the other guests. Airith raises a hand to Kaydar, to get his attention, and Kaydar walks over to that end of the bar.

"Hello Airith, can I get you a pint?"

"Thanks Kaydar but no, I am in need of a room for the night."

"Of course, of course, the room you checked out of this morning is still available. I trust it will be to your liking."

"Thank you Kaydar, that room will be fine. Looks like you are doing quite well tonight."

"Yes we are. Not sure why, but I'm not complaining." Kaydar answers as he attends to a customer's need of ale.

"Come on Smoke, time for bed." Airith makes his way to the room twisting and dodging patrons. "If you get me up early enough I'll be sure and get us a nice breakfast."

Wrinkle, having followed Airith and Smoke into the establishment, sits in the corner for a bit. Feeling more cheerful than usual, he order an ale from the serving girl, and watches the stuck-up Matteuw strut around his little stage. *He has talent, he has. But dwarf is he full of himself.*

When Matteuw starts a musical number on his lute, Wrinkle approaches with his ocarina and begins to play a perfect counter melody. Within a few minutes, Matteuw warms up to his competition especially as the coin in his hat starts coming in faster. They spend the rest of the night trading tunes and accompanying each other.

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Airith awakens to a wet tongue across his cheek. Smoke has made good on his job of making sure Airith was awake early so he could partake in that breakfast he was promised. "Morning already. Yaaaaawn." Airith gets his gear together and heads downstairs.

The hustle and bustle of the evenings guests is still some what present. Airith thinks to himself, "Must of been busy until late in the evening. Usually it is cleaner than this." Airith scans the room to see that most things are put away. There is one broken table and two of the three chairs for the table are kindling now. Kaydar doesn't appear to be up yet, probably still sleeping. It does appear that the morning kitchen staff is busy in back.

Airith pokes his head in, "How soon 'til breakfast." To which the cook replies, "It will be out momentarily."

Airith finds a clean table against a wall so he can see the entrance. "Are you looking forward to getting home." Smoke just rests his head on Airith's leg. "Me too."

Inwe returned to the elves in the park and enjoyed their company and singing. Of course, she said nothing of what she was in town for, only that she was visiting. Still, thoughts of what might lie ahead of her and her new companions flooded her mind. But she tried to quiet them, at least for a while, and joined in the singing by starlight that continued until late into the night. Then to rest before the dawn's twilight meditation.

As the sky began to brighten, she made her way back to the Mitre Inn. She walks through the door and looks around until she sees Airith and his dog at a table. She says a few quiet words to Cildar to keep him calm, then walks over to Airith to say "good morning."

"Good morning, Inwe, please take a seat. Breakfast should be out shortly." No sooner do the words leave his lips that the bar maid comes through the doorway with a tray of food and drinks. She sets the tray on the table and goes about her other errands. "Please help yourself to anything you like. I tried to order enough for everyone." Airith sets down a plate of kitchen scraps for Smoke and begins to prepare a plate for himself.

Relsyn rises early, dresses in his travelling outfit, carefully packs away his belongings and attends morning prayers. His thoughts and meditations are highly distracted as he ponders the adventure ahead.

"what if we can't find the staff?"

"can we find the right one?"

"where would the gem be?"

"what if we have to fight?"

"what about repercussions?"

"what if we find the right staff but can't prove it?"

With these questions and many others left unresolved, Relsyn, leaves the Cathedral Of St Macedone, collects Jewel from a nearby tree and makes his way to the Mitre Inn.

"Greetings to you all," He says as he joins Airith & Inwe at the table. "Everyone rest well?"

"Good morning Relsyn, yes I did sleep well. Thanks for asking. Please help yourself to something." Motions to the small spread on the table and then pours some tea for everybody. "Has anyone given any thought as to how we are getting to Malta? By ship is definitely the fastest but also has a price." Airith gives his tea a gentle blow to cool it down and takes a small sip.

"I also had good rest and the refreshment of elfish song." Inwe reaches for some bread with cinnamon, bacon and a large green apple with thanks to Airith. She picks up her tea, but before drinking asks, "What are our choices for travel? By ship or by foot? And I'm sure there are good and bad aspects of any choice." Breathing in the steam from the hot tea, she takes a sip, then begins to eat.

Wrinkle comes down the stairs and whistles to Kaydar. When Kaydar finishes pouring some juice for another customer, he comes over to Wrinkle. "Well, it's been great having you here again. Thanks for playing your -whatsit- last night, the customers really love it!"

Wrinkle pays his account at the inn and then comes over to the table and gives a friendly salute to everyone. When Inwe is done speaking, he pulls out his instrument and plays a snippet of a well known traveling tune and then says "moorrning aaaal" with a smile.

He pulls out a pencil and paper, and writes

	Pro	con
Land	_____	
Sea		seasick dwarf

Airith takes a look at the note Wrinkle is writing, then adds, "Well Wrinkle, you can add cost to the con side of sea but time saved to the pro. I suppose you could also add the reverse to the land." Airith sets down a small bowl of water for Smoke. "If the group was a little smaller I think there would be a couple of bargain spots aboard a ship, but with the size group we have we would probably have to pay top dollar."

"I was thinking about this last night before I fell asleep. We could look at maybe joining a trading caravan to Malta. We could be hired on to protect the shipment and what not. I know there is a major trade route between the two cities, so finding a caravan probably wouldn't be too hard and we might be able to make a little scratch on the journey. The only downside is that this may take a little longer than just traveling on our own due to the stops the caravan would make along the way."

Inwe: "Do we really have need to hurry? I wouldn't think a caravan would take too much longer than going on our own. Finding one to join with sounds the best to me so far."

Wrinkle writes

	Pro	con
Land	save some money caravan & make gold	slower
Sea	faster	seasick dwarf cost more

"Well then, shall we make are way to the trading area. Probably a good time to see if any of the caravans are heading to Malta. Later in the day the place will be very busy." Airith scraps the last of rice pudding from his bowl and picks up the dishes he set down for Smoke. "Hopefully we get lucky and there will be a caravan leaving today." He drinks the last of his tea.

"Sounds all right to me." Inwe finishes her bread and tea, then hands the apple core and remaining piece of bacon down to Cildar. The remaining 4 apples and bread she wraps in a small piece of cloth to pack away for later.

Wrinkle nods in agreement and puts the paper back in his pack. He looks at Inwe as she puts the food into he bag, wondering why she would cover her gear with pudding and eggs, but says nothing (he can not anyway).

Relsyn sits quietly, lost deep in thought, as the rest of the team quickly debates the pros and cons of travel methods.

"Oh wise Macedone, Servant of Eli Most Mighty, bless this small group. May the light of the Eternal Flame be our guide." His prayers devolve into more mundane thoughts of hardships to come.

The merchant district.

Everyone but Relsyn stands up.

Relsyn is jolted from this by the sound of the party standing and storing food away in their bags. As he stands up, Relsyn asks "How are we getting to Malta?"

Wrinkle looks at Relsyn and whistles- "haave oou been paying assenson? fee are oing to assash oorselves oo aa arafan aas aan escort or someting." It takes Relsyn a moment, and a whisper in the ear from Inwe, to understand what Wrinkle said.

There is a natural pause as each looks around, lost in their own thoughts of how a new beginning is being made for each.

For Relsyn, it is leaving the quiet cloister and security of library for the unknown.

For Airith, this is perhaps a job that can release him from day-to-day worry about the next job.

For Inwe, it is a journey to discover a balance in herself.

and for Wrinkle, perhaps a way to move on after losing his voice.

The moment passes, then all move toward the door and into the street with packs in hand, weapons stowed [there is a law against wielding weapons in the holy city]. They head North to the center of town, through the park, past the museum, and finally into the eastern side of

Antioch. All is quiet around the city. Your party, talking quietly to each other about how you are going to join a caravan, is the only sound other than church bells tolling the quarter hours.

The sky is very clear this morning, and your breath hangs in the air with the end-of-winter chill. Here you find a large square, surrounded by warehouses and shops. At various places around the square, horses shiver a little while eating their grain or drink from the ice skimmed troughs. Three or four people are passing by on the Eastern street, and a few workmen are going about their business.

On the South side, there are two different stables. The first, with a sign identifying it as "Bernie's Beasts of Burden" has the barn doors open and the sound of an anvil and hammer working somewhere back in the darkness. The second is the "Royal Trading Company-livery." Its doors are still closed and there is a painted sign hung on the door, just out of reading distance.

To the West, there is a series of shops where you can buy tack, traveling gear, weapons and armor, post mail (a courier service), as well as a general trading post.

On the North and East sides are warehouses, identified as The Royal Trading Company, Middlebrooks Trading, Caldwell's, and Youngblood Supplies.

The center of the square is open, with low stone walls to identify a central path surrounded by three staging areas for caravans and four areas for individual wagons and horses. There is a vendor, dressed in the local farmers garb, standing in the middle of the circular path with bags of grain on a hand-pulled cart. Apparently he just sold a bag to a large man who is carrying it back to an individual wagon parked just off the street.

One staging area has four wagons. A guard posted there is watching you, as well as the other activity in the square. The workmen you have noticed are unloading these wagons and bringing the supplies into Middlebrooks.

Another staging area has five carts in it, all empty. There is no one around these that you notice.

After walking into the south-west corner of the central plaza, Wrinkle stops and stretches his legs and arms while scanning the area.

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Airith lets out a small yawn. "I hope we don't have to get up this early every morning." He stretches his arms and back. "Might I suggest we split up into two groups. One can talk to the guard over there and see what he knows, the other can try to locate the caravan leaders and see if there is any leaving for Malta. I think the best bet would be the Royal Trading Company over there but beggars can't be choosers."

Relsyn surveys the square, trying to remember if he has ever been here before. He does remember an errand to the Royal trading Company on behalf of one of the more important Priests in the Order, but that was to their administrative office closer to the center of town. After thinking about it, Relsyn is sure he has not been here before.

After hearing Airith's suggestion, Relsyn glances toward the guard. This man is not the elite-well equipped sentinel used by the Church, nor is he a member of the well trained City guard who man the gates and not much else--this is the Church's city. Instead he looks a bit rough, like hired muscle watching over a trading company's interests.

"A ruffian." thinks Relsyn.

"I'll go speak with the trading company. Anyone else want to come?" He starts to walk toward the Royal Trading Company's Livery.

Airith makes his way towards the guard as Relsyn heads to the Trading Company. "The guard looks more my type." The guard eyes Airith and the group behind him as Airith approaches. He is rather rough looking with a couple scars on his muscular arms and wearing old studded leather.

"Hello there." Airith greets him as he walks towards the guard. "Fine morning."

The guard replies with a rather gruff and unfeeling "Hello."

"Well, I was wondering if you knew of any caravans heading to Malta from here?"

"I only work for Middlebrook and since they just got in yesterday, I doubt they are heading anywhere soon."

Airith scratches his face, "Do you know anything about the other caravans?"

"I told you I only work for Middlebrook. I don't know anything about the other traders. Now get out of here." He points with his hand the way Airith walked up.

Smoke growls at the man's tone but Airith sets his hand over his muzzle. "Fine, we'll be on our way. Have a good morning." Airith turns and walks where the others were heading.

Relsyn, Wrinkle, and Inwe approach the door to the Royal Trading Company. It is a solid, large, barn-style door with a man door in the middle of it. There is a sign on it, hung from a hook on each corner, that reads...

Quote:

Help wanted

Wagon leaves Coldeven 29

Inquire within.

Airith joins the three others a minute after the others and reads the sign as the others begin to talk about what they are going to do. "The stooge by the wagons wasn't much of a talker. I think we can be fairly sure that Middlebrook isn't going anywhere soon. Apparently they just got in yesterday." Airith looks around inside. "See anyone around here to talk to?"

Relsyn Saffire reads the hand-lettered sign on the door of The Royal Trading Company's Livery.

"Three days from now. I guess we better determine if it is even going our way." He says to those standing around him.

Relsyn rubs his hand over the scraggly growth of beard on his face. He knocks on the people-door and opens it. He sees Airith approaching, the look on his face betraying that he got nothing from the ruffian looking guard.

"Shall we..." He enters the building.

The building is a large combination of warehouse and stable. It smells strongly of horses and livestock. Various cargoes sit in various states of loading and unloading, looking very haphazard to Relsyn. Empty wagons and tack occupy this front part of the building. Off to the left a wagon missing two wheels is propped up, awaiting repair. Relsyn looks around for someone to talk to.

As you enter, man in rough leather riding clothes comes out of the tack room from the right.

"heard ya come in" he says with a drawn-out accent.

"ya must be inquiring 'bout the wagon run to Malta."

As Relsyn nods and Airith says "yes", the man continues.

"we'll be leaving in ... three days, and need a bit of an escort. Not that we'll be carrying much of value, but a larger party makes it less appealing to raid."

He eyes each of you briefly...

"The dwarf is the only one a ya who'll scare anything. The bookish one looks, well, 'bookish.' The elf, not so common round here, may be useful, but seems lost. The boy, oh halfling?, won't scare much. So, the rest o' the lot o' ya would only be eating the grub. I'll pay 20 Crowns for the dwarf to accompany us. The rest o' ya, can't use ya for the trip."

Wrinkle looks at the others, then back to the man. Takes out a paper and writes "All of us."

Need passage. no gold but will help where we can.

The man considers a second. "Come back on the 29th, first light. If'n I don't have a crew, ya can come along. If ya miss the leaving, I won't wait."

As everyone huddles by the door, the man heads back to the tack room.

Wrinkle plays "what can we dooo? goo by ourselfss?"

"I'd be surprised if that guy ever even opened a book." Notes Relsyn somewhat miffed. "I say we go by ourselves or book passage on a ship."

"Opened a book, I bet he doesn't even know what scary is. For that matter he probably doesn't know what a bath is either." Airith waves his hand back and forth in front of his nose. "It would have been smart to hire us on if he wanted numbers in the caravan. It isn't often that four people come along looking for work like that."

Airith walks out of the building with the group.

"I suggest that we set out on our own. Waiting three days for a job that we aren't even sure we have isn't worth it. I know Wrinkle here would prefer to be on land rather than water so lets get walking."

Wrinkle takes his pointer finger and middle finger and makes and wiggles them to make a walking gesture. He plays, "whaat ellse can whee do? Otherr plaaces" he points to Caldwell's, and then to and Youngblood Supplies.

"Whaalk alone? shhip?" he shudders.

"I'll follow group whaatefer whee decide"

"We could try the other places I guess but I don't recognize the name of Youngblood Supplies. Why don't Wrinkle and I go check out Caldwell's quick, while Relsyn and Inwe check at Youngblood. We can meet up over there by the well." Airith points to the well the trading companies must use to get water for the horses.

"Well come on Wrinkle." As Airith heads towards the Caldwell's building.

Following Airith, Wrinkle approaches the warehouse of Caldwell's. Looking in a chink in the siding, Airith notices there are indeed people inside. Airith and Wrinkle look at each other, then Wrinkle knocks at the door.

A second or two later, they hear a commotion inside like boxes being thrown on to a wagon and several men talking harshly to each other. Again, a few more seconds pass and then the door opens.

A thin, pale man pokes his head out the door, looks left, right, and then finally down at the two of you. He visibly relaxes as he asks you "What can I do for you?"

Airith addresses the pale man, "Hello sir, we are travelers looking for a caravan and maybe work to Malta. Do you know if any caravan is heading out to Malta today?"

"Sorry, we don't get ta Malta very often. Could try the Royal Company over dare or maybe Middlebrook."

"We tried them already and didn't have much luck."

"I don't know what to tell ya then, could always take a boat."

"Thank you for your time."

The man gives Airith and Wrinkle a courteous head-bob and then shuts the door.

"Well Wrinkle, I think we are out of options. Maybe Relsyn and Inwe are having better luck."

Relsyn walks across the square to Youngblood Supplies. This building is small and older looking than the much more impressive Royal Trading Company Livery across the square.

The storefront consists of not much more than a small porch-like boardwalk and a small wooden people door. Relsyn pulls the latch string and enters the building. "Anyone here?" He asks, poking his head inside.

"Hello - someone there?"

A very short man turns around at the work table he is standing at, puts down a spokeshave, and dusts the wood shavings off his apron. "Ah, hello what can I do for you?"

Relsyn explains their need for a job, or at least a caravan, going to Malta as soon as possible.

"Well, I know this farmer going there tomorrow. Got his wagon wheel right here for repair."

He gestures to a wheel on the ground, missing a few spokes, and the new spokes on the desk.

"He may not mind assistance on the trip. Don't think he'll pay much, but he is good company. His boys usually go along too. I think he will be back for his wagon at dinnertime."

Relsyn: "Sounds good. Please have him wait for us if we are not back when he arrives."

"Can-do. I will be here too."

Leaving the Youngblood Supplies with Relsyn, Inwe makes her way toward the well to find Airith and Wrinkle. When they arrive she relates what they have found out about the farmer and sons.

"Looks to me like this may be our best option yet. We can hopefully talk to this farmer around dinnertime tonight at Youngblood."

"Well, what do you want to do?" Airith gives Smoke a pet on the head. "We have the day to kill."

Airith sees the man by the Middlebrook wagons and gives him a scowl. "My suggestion is to head to that inn we saw just before we got here. Looked like a quaint little place and no sense being on our feet more than we have to."

As the group is deciding where to spend the day, the big barn doors of Caldwell's opens and a horse pulling a wagon comes out. Then another wagon follows into the circle, and a third. The pale man Airith talked to is walking beside the last wagon pointing in your direction and you hear "Yea, those two"

The older man on the wagon bench, wide brimmed hat on his head and pipe in his mouth, looks your way. They are talking quickly and quietly, but at last you overhear "Get 'em"

The pale man scampers to you over the cobble of the road, all apologetic like. As he approaches, he straightens up a little, but keeps looking past you without making eye contact.

"Uh, Are you still interested in going ta Malta? My boss there," pointing to the third wagon driver, "says he can take ya there now, but ya have to help provide your own grub. And can't pay ya but 8 gold Crowns for the lot of ya."

"I'm in" says Relsyn hurriedly. "The rest of you ready to go?"

"Sounds good to me." Airith makes his way to the first wagon with Smoke following behind. "So where do you want us."

The caravan leader replies, "Pick a wagon and get on. We're kind of in a hurry and would like to get out of the city and on the road before things get busy around here. I'll give all ya 2 crowns tonight and the rest when we get to Malta. That is provided we don't lose to much along the way to raiders."

Airith loosens Somke's saddle and bags, "A, Wrinkle could you put this stuff in the back of the wagon for me? I would but the height of the back end is a bit of a challenge for me." Wrinkle smiles and gladly puts the saddle and bags in the back. "Thanks" Airith replies. He climbs up unto the first wagon and takes a seat.

"Be right back" Inwe says, then makes her way quickly across to Youngblood to leave word for the farmer not to wait. Then quickly back to the wagons. She climbs up with her gear also into the first wagon, setting her pack within reach but out of the way. Cildar jumps up beside her and settles his head on her knee.

The wagons start moving the second that Wrinkle seats himself on the back of the middle wagon.

Each wagon is tarped, with little room to spare.

In the first wagon, Inwe sits on a medium size box, with Cildar eventually playing with one of the strings of the tarp. Airith, gear at his feet, sits cross-legged on the only spot on the wagon floor not otherwise occupied with boxes. On the driving bench is a tall lean man, probably about thirty years old. His hands hold the reigns of the horses comfortably, but you notice that both arms are covered to the elbows with red scar patches. After reaching the main road, he looks back and nods at the two sitting there. "Earle's the name. Guess y'all will be riding with us to Malta. Should be there in ... Three weeks, if I guess right."

He faces forward again and continues to drive.

On the second wagon, Relsyn and Wrinkle ride at the back of the wagon next to the cooking supplies. Wrinkle whistles a tune or two while watching the people of Antioch begin to come out of their houses and join the hustle of life in the city. Relsyn sits back and closes his eyes in meditation or prayer. The driver introduced himself just after turning out of the square heading North towards the main road. Zane is a medium sized human, with wiry arms and legs. He is quite smartly dressed in brown cotton trousers, a handsomely cut leather vest, and heavy wool overcoat and mittens.

On the seat on the last wagon sits the man who invited you along. He is older, perhaps in his fifties. He is wearing a wide brimmed pressed felt hat that has seen a day or two too many. His eyes are black, and he squints as he drives his wagon along the road behind you. Every so often, he looks as though he is about to talk to Relsyn or Wrinkle, but he stops before saying anything. As the party passes out of town and into the plain beyond the city, he introduces himself as Sheldon Havenhill.

By the time the sun rises half way to its peak in the sky, the party has made its way over the bridge and on to the road heading East. The party has begun its journey.

***THUS ENDS THE PROLOGUE OF
Spheres of influence: Rhiannon: in Jopardy.***