

Out of the Frying Pan

Book I: Gathering Wood

A D&D Story Hour

Written and Compiled by Osvaldo Oyola

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

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Out of the Frying Pan - Book I: Gathering Wood

Cast of Player Characters (in order of appearance)

- Kazrack Delver - a dwarven fighter of an immigrant family, raised in a human city.
- Malcolm MacDuligh - a human bard with a barbarian heart, seeking his fortune.
- Jana of Westron - a human girl with a mysterious past that dabbles in witchcraft.
- Beorth Sahkmet - a human paladin dedicated to Anubis, guardian of the dead.
- Jeremy Northrop - a human fighter from Neergaard, seeking adventure.
- Ratchis of Nephthys - a half-orc cleric/ranger dedicated to an abolitionist god.

Session #1¹

Ralem, the 22nd of Keent, 564 H.E.

It all began in the city of Verdun, largest and most cosmopolitan city in Aquerra. It is the capital city of the Kingdom of Herman Land, which is embroiled in a civil war to reclaim authority over its wayward protectorate.

Kazrack was a black dwarf² of some small fighting skill, but mostly just a loyal son to his father, a dwarf of some repute in the small and oft-overlooked dwarven community of Verdun. He was returning home from the market with an armful of supplies for his family's smithy, when he found the town guard waiting for him at the shop. Kazrack was eligible for conscription in the war effort. He was given three days to appear before the Council of Conscription at the Temple of Ra.³ Talking it over with his father, and being the only son, he decided to consult a barrister to see if there might be a legal means to get around this duty. While residents of Herman Land, Kazrack's family and most dwarves living there, felt little duty to fight for the human-controlled government.

Meanwhile, Malcolm MacDuligh arrived at Verdun upon a ferry. A skald from the area of the Archduchy of Wallbrook called the Dubh Moors; where men still live in their traditional clans – and do not consider themselves to be part of the nation or to have any particular loyalty to the Archduke or the King of Herman Land. He had never seen a city like this. The stench and noise hit him like a brick. Malcolm was noticeable for his colorful kilt and the huge bastard sword strapped to his back. Also on the ferry (but unknown to Malcolm), was Jana—a young girl fleeing her home in the city of Westron (also in the Kingdom of Herman Land). Being new to the city, they independently decided to head to the marketplace in the Temple District, where information could always be gleaned from the infamous Dwarf Wall.⁴

The marketplace was a cacophony of activity. A myriad of vendors hawked their goods, while rumor-mongers yelled some of the latest news beneath the Dwarf Wall. City guards wandered through the stalls, watching and questioning people all along. Overwhelmed by a city of this size, Malcolm stepped back among some vendors who sold wood-carvings. Catching his breath, he noticed a trio of guards approaching him. The sergeant asked Malcolm for his conscription papers, which of course the barbaric skald did not have. After an exchange of terse words⁵, and the threat of incarceration, Malcolm was warned that he had three days to appear before the Council of Conscription to be assigned a unit in the Herman Lander Army.

¹ The “Out of the Frying Pan” campaign began in February of 2001 with five players, John Giotta, Eric Gershik, Helene Villaume, Brian Walker, and Ken Ip.

² In Aquerra, mountain dwarves and hill dwarves are referred to as Black or Red dwarves (respectively) by humans. Hill dwarves tend to have light brown to red hair and mountain dwarves tend to have dark brown or black hair.

³ Ra is the head of his pantheon. He is the hawk-headed lawful good god of the Sun and Kings.

⁴ The Dwarf Wall of Verdun is the outer of two ancient walls that protect the heart of the city. The outer face of the wall faces the Temple District and its market and is famous for the many bills, posters, and graffiti posted and scrawled upon it. It is also where gossip-mongers will tell you all the local news for a few coppers.

⁵ **DM'S Note:** At this point in the campaign, I did not yet have any of the players keeping a log of quotes and snippets of dialogue, so I often had to rely on descriptions of conversation as opposed to exact words, which I could do much more readily later.

Jana was not too far away trying to figure out what was the best thing to ask the rumor-mongers by the wall to read to her, as she could not read herself. The market crowd parted to reveal a tall man dressed in shining plate mail with long feathered blonde hair and a helmet under one arm and a great sword in his other hand. Getting down on one knee, beneath the statue of Horus in the center of the market,⁶ he swore aloud to gain his revenge upon the followers of the Red God of the West and their “false” god. With that the paladin slipped on his helmet, stood, and marched determinedly over to the temple of the Red God of the West.⁷ He began to bang on the door to be let in, intermittently calling them cowards and asking them to call forth a champion he could vanquish.

The market crowd followed the paladin at a distance to watch the fun. This included not only Malcolm and Jana, but Beorth, a quiet young Paladin of Anubis⁸ who was watering the plants of the nearby monastery yard when this altercation began. Putting down his watering can, he ran out to get a better vantage point to see what was happening. Meanwhile, Jana looked back to see a group of about a dozen young children wildly running to and fro between some of the abandoned market stalls and stealing all they could shove in sacks or under their shirts. The crowd was so caught up in the actions of the paladin, that no one else seemed to notice or care. Jana smiled.

The temple door lurched open and the Paladin of Vengeance stumbled in. The door slammed shut again. There was a momentary sound of scuffling, then silence. The crowd closed in on the stone steps of the temple – there was nary a breath while they waited to know what would happen. Sensing that the scene could get ugly, Jana moved to the edge of the crowd to readily flee. The silence was broken by the approach of a dozen city guards. Half went to the temple door and the other half began to try to round up the thieving children.

Kazrack had no luck with the barrister. The elderly gentleman, who never stopped writing while talking with the dwarf, suggested that a character witness who could testify that he was not “of age” in dwarven terms (which was a lie) could be helpful in avoiding conscription along with a defense based on Kazrack being the only son. However, the fact that Kazrack was both a dwarf and not of noble blood made such a defense unlikely to garner much sympathy. A third possibility the barrister suggested was that Kazrack could find employment in the war effort in another way and not be shipped off to the front. The lawyer said he had a friend in the Shipwrights’ Guild and perhaps he knew of work the dwarf could do.⁹ The idea of working on ships made the dwarf uncomfortable. The worst part was the barrister’s help would cost between seventy-five and ninety silver pieces, a fortune for a common worker.

On his way back from his disappointing meeting, Kazrack was walking past the gate to the temple district when the commotion began and went over to see what was happening. He arrived just in time to see a city guard brain a boy of no more than nine years old from behind. The guard made to move towards another of the young rascals, so Kazrack called him over with a deft ploy. “Help! I’ve been robbed!” The guard came over and Kazrack explained that a man of “vague description” had knocked him down and taken his money. The dwarf now accompanied the guard who pulled people from the crowd asking the dwarf if this or that person was the thief.

There was a commotion at the balcony in the tower of the Temple of the Red God of the West, and a figure stepped out holding something in his hand. He was dressed in crimson robes, had a shaven head and wore a ruby inset on a headband. He said, “Too long have the infidels and followers of false gods attacked us and dogged our progress towards Paradise at every turn. It ends today!” And with that he threw the paladin’s head into the horrified crowd. “This is war! Let our sacred grounds be anointed with the blood of infidels!” And the paladin’s body was tossed over the balcony. Its ankle was bound to a long silken sash secured in the tower, so the headless corpse hung with its blood pouring slowly down the white stone. The crowd cheered. And now city guards were trying to get inside the temple.

Other members of the city guard began to disperse the crowd. Jana decided this was a good time to secure herself a room and wandered into the Residential District to find an inn. Kazrack reported the guard’s striking the young thief

⁶ Horus is the hawk-headed god of justice and vengeance. Son of Isis and Osiris, brother of Anubis.

⁷ The followers of the Red God of the West are believers in a monotheistic faith that hold that the Red God is the only true god. They believe that all other gods are really diabolic or demonic forces (fallen angels) that seek to corrupt humans. They also believe that paradise is only for humans, non-humans being aberrations – redemption not being awarded them in death.

⁸ Anubis is the jackal-headed god of the dead.

⁹ The Kingdom of Herman Land is constitutional monarchy, with a parliament made up of representatives of the various guilds.

to a superior officer, who commanded the guard to bring the boy's broken form to the healing house of Fallon.¹⁰ The sergeant then turned to the dwarf and demanded his conscription papers. Explaining that he was given three days to report, Kazrack decided it would be a good time to head back home to his father's shop. Beorth collected the paladin's head to put in proper keeping in a crypt beneath the monastery until the rest of the body could be retrieved. Thinking aloud, he mused how he could get the body down. Hearing him as he turned to leave, Kazrack offered a suggestion (shooting a flaming arrow at night to burn through the sash). Beorth felt this would be too difficult. Kazrack mentioned the injured boy, so the two of them went to see if he still lived and found that the local Medicus of Fallon was already tending to him. The two new acquaintances bid each other adieu and went about their business.

As Beorth temporarily interred the paladin's head, Malcolm wandered the market asking people if they had seen his friend who had told him to look him up in Verdun sometime. After asking a handful of people, one of the rumor-mongers by the wall volunteered the information that he thought he had seen someone fitting that description at the Slim Stiletto Inn & Tavern. Getting directions, Malcolm headed there. In the meantime, Jana had secured a room at the Green Griffon, an inn located next to a chained off and apparently deserted plaza.

As Kazrack discussed his fears about conscription with his father—that he'd probably drown to death in a sinking ship before ever getting to see the Black Islands, how if he just fled his family would be exposed to danger from the local authorities, how his absence would leave his father one worker short at the forge—Beorth was getting a visit from the city guards himself.

The guards explained that despite his role as warden of the monastery, since paladins of Anubis are not officially recognized as part of a church hierarchy, that he must report to the Council of Conscription within three days. He tried to explain his duty to the following of Anubis, but the guards only insisted that he would have to discuss it with the priests of Ra who run the council. They also suggested that Beorth may be given an officer's rank in the army. Beorth went on to ask if maybe the priests of Ra could help him retrieve the paladin's body and give it a decent burial. The sergeant suggested that this was a bad idea due to the delicate nature of relations between the followers of the Red God and the rest of the temples. The Priests of Ra wanted to raze the Red God temple in retaliation. Only the reminder that the paladin had broken the law of the temple district in his attack had kept events from escalating. Beorth agreed and wished them a good day. Finishing the day's chores, he went to sleep, his troubles resting uneasily in his mind.

Malcolm found the Slim Stiletto to be filled with a group of men that seemed to be in their teens and early twenties. Despite it still being mid-afternoon they were doing nothing but eating, drinking, playing darts, and listening to a bard sing. Malcolm procured an ale for a discount price and arranged to play a tune of his own on his bag-pipes, which while well-received by some was hated by others. An older tall balding gentleman seemed very interested in the skald and buying Malcolm a drink, struck up a conversation. The man, Deet of Ptah¹¹, explained that all these young men were "*Crumb's Boys*" and had signed up with him to do some kind of job that got them out of the war. Deet suggested that Malcolm might sign up, as he thought the bag-pipe playing would be inspirational and helpful during "the long marches." Malcolm tried to get Deet to explain more, but Deet said it was not his place to do so, only being the boss' assistant, and that as soon as Crumb came back, he'd introduce them. While they waited, they listened to a bard sing a song about a man whose betrothed becomes a vampire. All the patrons seemed to love the song, but Malcolm found it too schmaltzy, preferring his epic tales of war and death – or mournful tales of love lost forever - like the traditional Wallbrookian song he performed later.

After securing her room and assuring the inn-keeper that even though she was from Westron she was of no relation to infamous murderer named Gwar who hailed from that city¹², he suggested that when she settled in for the night, she bolt her door and not come out no matter what she heard. Not cowed by this advice, Jana went back to the market in search of employment with an herbalist. She found what she was looking for in a twisted middle-aged

¹⁰ Fallon is the Goddess of Healing & Mercy. Once mortal, she ascended to godhood in the Third Age. Her priests are called Medicus, and wear white robes and red headbands to be readily identifiable. They are required to offer healing and mercy to all.

¹¹ Ptah is the god of Travel & Experience – Held to be the Creator of the Universe and the various planes.

¹² Gwar was once a common name in Herman Land. It is the name of a hero from before the monarchy's founding who might have been king if he had not died in the Battle of the Azmots. The standard foot is based on the length of his foot as he lay on his funeral pyre. The name has recently been disparaged by a murderer of women and children that continually eludes capture.

woman named Lalena, selling herbal remedies on a spread-out blanket. “My rheumatism makes digging around for some herbs hard, I could use some help,” she said. “Meet me at the new cemetery outside of the city at dawn tomorrow.” Jana agreed and returned to the Green Griffon to rest for the evening and get ready for her new job.

After discussions with his father, who assured him that he would spend the seventy-five to ninety silver pieces, if necessary, Kazrack walked back to the barrister’s office to discuss the chances of the defense working and see if his father’s money would be well spent. Kazrack seemed to feel that it would not be. The young dwarf’s suspicions about the qualifications of the barrister were furthered by the old man’s niece blurting out that he had no clients. The barrister did say that he had spoken to his friend in the Shipwrights’ Guild, and that Kazrack could get a job helping to guard the shipyards of Outretowne (where most of the ships for the war effort were being built) and be able to avoid war service. Of course, Outretowne was perhaps the place most likely to be the target of a Black Islander attack.¹³ Another option, was to commit a crime and be placed in the dungeons of the city. . . Except that certain criminals were being granted pardons to join the war effort.

Downcast, Kazrack left the office again and began to think that he would have to flee the country, and perhaps find a way to bribe officials to leave his family alone in his absence – as much as he was loathe to have to do it. Desperate, Kazrack went to the famed Dwarf Wall and had one of the rumor-mongers read to him some of the things on the wall, in hopes of hearing some news or tale that might help him. However, none of the news was helpful. Thinking aloud Kazrack said, “I wish I knew some way to get out of the war.”

“I know how,” the rumor-monger said, and pointed out a fat man with a handlebar mustache and thinning hair a little bit further down the wall. “That guy, Crumb! He stands there all day recruiting people for something that gets you out of the war.” The fat man noticed that he was being pointed out and walked over.

“Need a way out of the war, son?” he asked. “Well, you have come to the right man. Boris E. Crumb the Third is my name.” Boris went on to explain that he was hiring men of conscription age for a mission to help the Kingdom of Gothanuis and whomsoever signed up received a conscription deferment.

“Where is this place?” Kazrack asked.

“Gothanuis? It is one of the Little Kingdoms founded by deserters and the deserted, after the failed invasion of Derome-Delem by Herman Land in the fifth century. . .”¹⁴

“Derome-Delem?” Kazrack could not believe it. “You mean I get out of the war *and* I get to go to Derome-Delem? Derome-Delem?”

“And you’ll get paid. . .”

The dwarf was lost in his own thoughts. Excited to tell his father that he had found an alternative, he began to leave.

“Hey, don’t you want to know more?” Crumb called.

“I’ll be back,” Kazrack said.

“Meet me at the Slim Stiletto!” Crumb replied as the dwarf hurried off.

Kazrack joyfully gave the news to his father and aunt (who cried at the luck of Kazrack’s getting to go to Derome-Delem). He and his family went to the secret chapel of the dwarven gods to pray and give thanks.

Back at the Slim Stiletto, Malcolm was in the early stages of tying one on and met one of the other guys signed up to go with Crumb, a fellow Wallbrookian named Chance. Crumb walked in and there was a joyful cheer from all the lads. He ordered three pints of dark ale and sat with Malcolm and Deet, the latter introduced the skald to his future employer.

¹³ The Black Islands Barony is the protectorate with which Herman Land is embroiled in a civil war.

¹⁴ Derome-Delem is considered the homeland of the dwarves, Kazrack and his family are originally from there.

“So, gonna sign up with us?” Crumb asked.

“Whussis all about?” Malcolm asked through his thick brogue.

“I am hiring lads like yourself to help the Kingdom of Gothanius take care of a little bit of an infestation in an area they annexed for their kingdom. In return you get all your room and board and travel expenses paid for, citizenship in the kingdom and a parcel of land – and a chance at a five thousand silver piece reward.”

“Infestation? What kind of infestation?”

“Nothing big, just a little problem with a . . . {cough} . . dragon. . .”

“A dragon? You are brigga all these boys to go after a dragon! Ya jass briginit mah food!”

“Oh, only commoners and some drunk merchants have seen it. It probably isn’t even really a dragon, maybe just a fire-breathing cow or something.”

“Heh.”

“All you need to do is sign this contract,” Crumb said as Deet pulled out a scroll of paper. Malcolm looked it over and then asked Deet to read it to him.

“If you sign, while you are here you get a free place to stay, free food and drink,” Crumb added. Malcolm placed his ‘X’ on the contract and delivered his fate into the hands of Crumb.

Isilem, The 23rd of Keent - 564 H.E.

The next day had most everyone waking very early to get started on the things they wanted to get done.

Beorth attended the Dawn Ceremony at the temple of Ra as a good follower of the pantheon, hoping to visit the priests who made up the Council of Conscription afterwards.

Kazrack dressed up in his father’s finest clothes to go meet Boris E. Crumb at the Slim Stiletto.

Jana headed towards the Northeastern Gate out of the city to meet the herb woman at the cemetery.

Malcolm slept off his night of drinking.

The gate out of the city was clogged with peddlers and farmers bringing their wares to market. Ra’s Glory¹⁵ was barely up, but the guards picked people at random and looked through their carts and questioned them about their business.

As Jana went to step through one guard approached her and asked her business. The guard looked her up and down as she explained that she was going to meet her new employer and hunt for herbs.

“Well, we’ve had reports of young men dressing as women to avoid conscription. Are you sure you are a girl?”

“And I take it that you would like to check, huh?” Jana said winking, her light brown hair shining golden in the first lights of the day.

Suddenly embarrassment shaved years and authority from the guard’s now boyish face. He looked away from the petite girl and relented. “Well, I guess you’re too cute to be a boy. You can go on your way.”

¹⁵ The sun of Aquerra is called Ra's Glory after the god of the sun and the head of the Pantheon.

Jana went out to the new cemetery.¹⁶ She met up with the old lady (named Lalena) at the cemetery who explained that they would look for *Black Vein Mushrooms* which grew near fresh graves in the shade. Jana knew what they looked like, but never knew they had any medicinal value. She and the old lady split up to search.

Kazrack arrived at the Slim Stiletto to find it quiet and deserted except for the inn-keep who was cleaning up after the party that happened the night before.

“Everyone’s still sleeping,” the innkeeper said. Kazrack decided to have breakfast while waiting—eggs, thick day-old bread, blood pudding, and an ale.

After the Ceremony of the Dawn, Beorth was shown in to see the Council of Conscription ahead of all the commoners waiting to plead their cases. The paladin of Anubis tried to explain to the honored priests that his dedication to Anubis made it difficult to see a role for himself in the war. He explained that he felt it was his duty not only to ensure that the dead received proper burial, but that those caught between life and death, that is the undead, were freed of their suffering.

The priests responded that by taking part in the war effort Beorth could not only help to ensure that soldiers got proper burial, and that those he fought received quick and painless deaths – but that there were rumors that the Black Islanders, worshipers of Set, were using the undead as foot soldiers in the war.

Trying a new tack, Beorth added that he had been left behind by the Monks of Anubis to care for the monastery in their absence.¹⁷ But as ‘holy warriors’ of Anubis were not officially recognized as being part of the church hierarchy such a duty could not be taken into account. Sighing, Beorth was down to his last card in getting out of taking part in a war he was not sure was morally right. However, this last truth was a dangerous one to admit.

“I am a Black Islander,” the young paladin said. The priests stared blankly at him. “I was born there. My family was an important noble family there, but I was brought here as a child to be raised by the monks when my parents were killed.”

The priests silently sized him up and then—excusing themselves—conferred in harsh whispers for a few minutes. Finally, they returned to their table and the center priest addressed him again. “Upon conferring we have decided to let you know that we have heard that Crown plans to announce (with the Parliament’s blessing) that all Black Island nationals should report to their local garrison and might be detained for the remainder of the war. At best you can hope to be put under house arrest in the monastery but may end up in a special dungeon. Needless to say, we will make a note of your origins and excuse you from conscription but perhaps you may want to find a way out of the country if you want to continue with your duty to Anubis whilst the war does rage.”

Thanking the priests and praising Ra, Beorth left the temple and wondered what he was going to do about this new predicament.

Having collected a few dozen Black Vein Mushrooms, Jana decided to find the old woman and see what to do next, but she seemed to be nowhere around. So, the young girl began to wander the cemetery looking for her. After walking around the base of a hill she spotted the woman crouched behind a tree. The woman had both of her hands up to her mouth and seemed to be chewing. Jana froze, and then stepped behind some shrubbery to watch from a safe place. Placing something in her bag, the old woman got up and pulling out a spade to dig a small hole in a fresh grave. After not having to dig too deep, she pried a hole in a coffin with the spade’s point and pulled out the fleshed draped hand and forearm of a corpse. Jana had seen enough and fled the cemetery.

¹⁶ The New Cemetery of Verdun is located just outside of the city and was constructed when the one in the Noble District began to fill up about 75 years before this story takes place. Only the very rich are still buried in the old cemetery. The area around the new cemetery is a popular place for duels to be fought, lovers to meet, and shady-dealings to be done.

¹⁷ The Monks of Anubis were called away to convocation to discuss their order and its goals and methods. The convocation is happening in the Archduchy of Wallbrook in the month of Syet.

Finally, a very hungover Deet of Ptah awoke at the Slim Stiletto. And found Kazrack waiting in the common room. “Crumb said I should be expecting you. Oooh, my head hurts. But I thought it’d be last night.”

Kazrack began to try to haggle on the pay for the trip. Deet explained that he was in no position to haggle, and that everyone had to sign the same contract and agree to the same conditions and had the same basic role in the group.

“But as a smith I will be fixing people’s weapons and armor and perhaps other equipment,” Kazrack said.

“If it comes to that, you will simply do it as stipulated by the contract,” the old priest said, and remembering that he left the contract in his room he left to get it. Upon returning with the contract, he handed it to Kazrack who snatched it and said he’d be back.

“Hey, you have to sign that! You can’t take it! It has a royal stamp on it!” The dwarf was gone with a quick “You can trust me!” He ran towards the Temple District and the Dwarf Wall to have a rumor-monger read it to him.

As Jana came back through the city gate the guard that stopped her halted his search of a cart to come over and ask her if she were interested in meeting him for a drink later that night.

“Uh-huh,” Jana said, skeptically.

“Meet me at the Slim Stiletto,” he said. “My name is Arnold.”

And with that Jana left the gate behind, with no intention to meet him anywhere. She decided that she needed to go to the monastery of Anubis and report that someone had been desecrating graves. She arrived at the Monastery just as Beorth returned from the Temple of Ra.

“I am here to see the monks,” she said.

“The monks are gone, but I am here in their stead, how can I help you?”

“I’d rather not say it out here on the street,” Jana answered. So, the young paladin led her inside where over tea she explained about the old woman and the digging in the grave.

“Can you show me where this was?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she answered.

“Wait while I retrieve my armor and weapons.”

Meanwhile Kazrack was having a surly rumor-monger read him the contract and seeing the young paladin and the girl walking past him, hailed them.

“Have any luck with getting that body down?” the dwarf asked.

The paladin simply pointed up to the body still hanging on the Red God Temple Tower.

“Oh yeah,” said Kazrack and then scratching his chin decided to ask. “Can you read?”

“Yes,” Beorth said.

“Will you read this to me?” the dwarf snatched the contract out of the rumor-monger’s hand.

“Hey, don’t trust him, he bares the mark of death!” the monger complained.

“Boo!” said Beorth with unusual playfulness, and the gossipier ran off.

“I would, but I have to help this young woman. It seems she has witnessed the desecration of graves in the New Cemetery.”

“How about I help you and then you read this to me later? I just have to stop home and get my weapon and armor.”

“Agreed,” said the holy warrior, and they entered the Residential District to do just that before heading towards the cemetery.

At the gate, the guards stopped the trio, asking where armed and armored men were going. Beorth explained and recognizing him as the Warden of the Monastery of Anubis the guard let them by. However, Jana noted how Arnold watched jealously as they left the city.

At the cemetery, the three of them looked around but did not see the old woman. Jana took the paladin and dwarf to the grave she saw the old woman pull the bone from, and they confirmed that it had been freshly disturbed. They looked around some more to no avail, but they did see a funeral going on and walked past quietly to be respectful. Kazrack suggested that from the vantage point of a nearby hill perhaps they could see the woman, or some other clue about flesh-eating people.

Looking for a while, Kazrack noted a broken gravestone, so the three of them went down to examine it – and Beorth in particular wanted to make note of it to make sure it was fixed.

At the grave, Beorth’s foot sunk into the earth and smashed right through into a coffin. It seems it was only buried a few inches deep. Beorth pulled his aching foot out and was puzzled that he did not feel any body within. He drew his sword and rattled it around in the hole. Still nothing. Finally, Kazrack put his head to the hole and looked in using his darkvision. It was empty.

The three new companions tried to figure out if the corpse had come out of its own accord or whether someone had taken it out and decided the latter was more likely. Beorth suggested they return to the funeral they saw, wait until it was over and talk to the gravediggers. The trio arrived in time to see the mourners and priest walk off and the men with shovels begin their work. The coffin was only a few inches below ground level!

Beorth of Anubis interrogated them, and quaking in fear they agreed that the graves they were digging were too shallow. Beorth was very diplomatic about it, saying he understood how things might slip and rules forgotten with the monks who usually made sure the traditions were followed being gone but that it was his duty to take up their role in their absence.

Meanwhile, Malcolm had just woken up and had a bleary-eyed breakfast with Chance and the rest of the boys...

End of Session #1

Session #2

As Jana, Kazrack and Beorth left the New Cemetery of Verdun, having not found the woman that they now referred to as “the witch,” Malcolm made ready to leave the Slim Stiletto. As he left, Deet of Ptah reminded him to visit the Council of Conscription at the Temple of Ra and get his conscription deferment stamped or else it would not be worth much. Annoyed at the bureaucracy of civilization, the bard of the Dubh Moors decided he had better get that done with before continuing his search for his friend.

He made his way through the crowded smelly streets of the Residential District towards the Temple District and the Temple of Ra, keeping an eye open for his friend Jeremy Northrop. Little did he know that he walked right past the place his Neergaardian friend was staying as he made his way up the street to the gate into the other district: The Green Griffon Inn & Tavern.

At the temple Malcolm waited for good long time, preferring the floor to the stone benches of the waiting room. He waited until it was about to be his turn and then took his spot next to the door the conscriptees were called into to meet the council.

“So, what post do you think you’ll get?” the young olive-skinned lad to his left asked him.¹⁸

“Ahm not goin’,” Malcolm said flatly.

“What do you mean, you’re not going?”

“Ahv found uh way out the bloody war. Ahm not goin’. Ahm goin’ on a special mission instead,” Malcolm said through his accent.

“A special mission? How?”

“Git yerself to the Slim Stiletto and find yerself this fat man that will getcha out of it to go clear some land and settle it. That way you don’t have to go to the war.”

The young man was astonished. “You get land and settle it and don’t have to go to the war? That’s great, I’m gonna tell my brother. We’re shepherds. We could go and settle some land and raise some goats and sheep. Thanks!”

With that the boy stood and ran out of the temple to secure his deferment before the day was over and he was required to report to the council. At that same moment Malcolm was called in to see the council, and in few minutes, he was walking back out into the Verdunian heat, with a stamped deferment, anxious to shove it in the face of the first guard that stopped him and asked to see his papers.

In the meantime, the others made their way into the market to see if the “witch” Lalena was selling her wares and could be confronted, but she was nowhere to be found. The trio asked around, but the seller of gnomish wares could not help them (though he offered good deals on gnomish torches which they refused). The basket-weaver could only tell them that the old woman did not come every day and that she lived in a shack in the Port District amid the warehouses.¹⁹ Jana, Kazrack and Beorth decided that they would search the Port District and made their way there but leaving the marketplace they were stopped by guards. They were questioned as to their business “running around the city with weapons drawn and heavily armored.” Beorth and the dwarf tried to explain, but the guard would have nothing to do with it, instead he sent them to see the Captain of the Guard at one of the gates to the Noble District.

The Captain was annoyed with the would-be do-gooders, but the presence of the Warden of the Monastery of Anubis made him more willing to be helpful.

¹⁸ The people of the Kingdom of Herman Land tend to be olive-skinned, with dark hair and either brown or green eyes.

¹⁹ The City of Verdun is made up of walls in nearly concentric circles that make up its various districts. These are: Port District, Residential District, Temple/Market District, Noble District and the Palace District (in the center).

“Well, I have to dedicate too many men to search out conscription-dodgers and don’t have time for something that would be the province of the Monks of Anubis anyway. I give you the authority to check it out, just don’t go running around the city with weapons drawn, and if you find this *witch* bring her in for questioning.”

“How do I sheathe a halberd?” the pole-arm wielding dwarf asked.

“Put a sack over the blade,” the Captain replied.

And so, the trio left once again on their interrupted investigation, pausing only to gain a hastily written note of authority from the Captain of the Guard and to stop in the market and buy a sack for the blade of Kazrack’s halberd.

Jeremy Northrop feeling his pouch of silver was a little light and realizing that five days was a little longer than the three days he was given to report for conscription tried to get back the rest of the money he paid for his inn stay up front. It was time to leave town.

“You paid the weekly rate. No refunds. Anyway, you’ve already stayed five days, so you come out ahead.”

Resigning himself to having lost out on a few coppers, and not being too confident in his ability to do math, he figured he’d check the Dwarf Wall for news that might lead to a way out of the “Heart of Aquerra.” At the gate into the Temple District, he was stopped by some guards.

“Conscription papers,” the guard asked.

“Um. . . I don’t have any. I just got into town,” Jeremy replied.

“Don’t you know you have three days to report to the Council of Conscription?”

“Three days? Thanks for letting me know. . .”

“When did you get in town?”

Jeremy paused, “Uh, a couple of days ago.”

“A couple of days, so you have to report by today.”

“Three days from when I was told?” Jeremy asked hopefully.

“Three days from when you arrive. I am in a generous mood, however,” the guard said. “You have until the end of today. If I were you, I’d go to the Temple of Ra right now.”

Now it was not only the heat of Keent that was making the Neergaardian sweat.

At that same moment, Malcolm arrived at the same gate on his way into the Residential District to search the inns and taverns of Verdun for his friend, who unbeknown to him was only a few feet away. Of course, the Wallbrookian bard was stopped as well and happily showed his deferment papers. The guard could not read and had to bring the papers over to his sergeant who was talking with Jeremy.

Jeremy had heard the familiar voice of his friend but made no move to get his attention. “What’s your name and where ya staying?” the guard asked the blonde-haired warrior.

“Uh, James Freebooter, and at the uh, Green Griffon,” Jeremy half-lied. “And I’m gonna go to the Temple of Ra right now and get this all taken care of.”

They were interrupted. “Oh, uh. . . It says he is exempt from the war because he is going on some mission.”

The guard returned Malcolm's papers to him and sent him on his way and Jeremy moved to follow his friend.

"The Temple of Ra is the other way," the guard said.

"Oh, uh... I forgot something at the inn I was staying at. My father's old ring. I really don't know how I forgot it, but it is really important to me, and I have to get it."

The guard eyed him suspiciously, but finally sighed and said, "Okay, go ahead. But you have 'til the end of the day. I have your name down and I know where you're staying."

Malcolm walked down the main thoroughfare out of the Temple District and decided to stop at every tavern he saw and ask for his friend. Coincidentally, the first tavern he happened upon was the Green Griffon.

Despite the fact that the inn-keep had had a conversation with Jeremy that very morning he maintained he had never seen the man Malcolm was describing. But while this conversation was happening, Jeremy stepped into the inn and attempted to sneak up behind his old friend. . . but the inn-keeper gave him away. The two would-be heroes greeted each other happily.

"What are you doing here?" Jeremy asked.

"Ya said if Ah was ever in Verdoon, Ah, should look ya up," Malcolm replied.

"Hmmm, I guess I did, but I only got here a few days ago myself and the guards won't stop harassing me. I overheard you at the gate say something about not having to go to the war. How is that?"

"Les have a drink and Ah'll explain is all to ya. . . "

Not all that too far away, Jana, Kazrack and Beorth were entering the Port District, but rather than being stopped by city guards as usual, it was they who stopped a guard and asked if he knew where Lalena the herb-woman lived. After the guard asked who they were and what they were doing and Beorth showing him the letter from the Captain of the Guard (and the guard pretending to read it), he directed them to a shack just beyond the Brine Plaza.²⁰ He also declined to accompany them saying that he was forbidden to leave his post at the gate.

The trio made their way to the Brine Plaza to find it overflowing with beggars and the infirmed, along with the stench and excrement of so many people cramped into such a small area and living in tents and shanties, if anything at all. A pair of guards stood at each end of the plaza, watching over the countless unfortunate souls.

"Alms for the poor," said some.

"Help me, I've got the Blue Wasting Disease," said others.

Taken aback by the overwhelming misery, the party trudged on at Jana's insistence.

"This is just like home," she said. "Don't give anything to any of them or we'll have to give something to each of them."

As they emerged from one end of the plaza, where the street formed a cul-de-sac, they found the dilapidated shack. Kazrack also found that a young bare-foot boy in barely more than rags had followed them out of the crowd and stood silently by them.

²⁰ All beggars were forced into the Brine Plaza soon after the conscription effort began, when it was discovered that young men were trying to hide among their ranks to get out of the war. Now the number of beggars allowed out of the Plaza is carefully monitored.

Beorth knocked on the door. The force of his knock alone made it swing open with a creak. There was only a small round window across from the door to light the cramped dusty shack. The place appeared empty, but a squawk and a flutter brought their attention to a crow sitting on a perch by an unlit lantern.

“Nobody’s home!” it chirped.

Jana and Beorth decided to search the place, while Kazrack remained outside to keep an eye out and watch the boy whom he was suspicious of.

On their way to the Slim Stiletto to have Jeremy sign up with Crumb, Malcolm told the tale of the thane of yore (when all the Equin people ²¹ lived as they should and as they still do in the Dubh Moors) who had to gather a band to slay a dragon with scales like platinum and that was as big as a mountain. It was such a rousing tale, that when they arrived Jeremy barely read the contract (since he could also barely read) before signing it. The old friends ate and drank some more and then headed back to the Temple District to get the Neergaardian’s deferment papers stamped by the Council of Conscription.

Jana and Beorth looked around the dark and dusty shack. They found a hanging piece of smoked ham and a mobile made of skulls—from a rat’s to a human’s. There was a large table with a variety of herbs and other ingredients one might find at a local healer or apothecary shop. There was also a large wooden chest and a metal footlocker along with a bunk. As Jana studied the table’s ingredients more closely, Beorth opened the footlocker and rummaged through it – finding nothing but some clothes and a blanket.

The paladin of Anubis moved on to the wooden chest at the foot of the bed, while Jana double-checked him at the footlocker. She found jewelry (a ring, a necklace and some earrings) amid the folds in the clothes, while in the chest Beorth found a smaller wooden box. Opening it, inside he found a set of what seemed to be finger bones. This unsettled the two of them. The crow fluttered around and squawked and repeated “Nobody’s Home” a few times.

Being unable to judge the value of the jewelry, Beorth brought it outside to Kazrack, who was getting nowhere trying to talk to the boy.

“Go away, boy,” the dwarf said as Beorth handed him the jewelry, but the boy simply stood just out of reach.

“This is pretty good quality. Not the best, but good for human craftsmanship,” Kazrack said after a few minutes. As he looked up from the jewelry, something caught his eye, and he looked across the plaza to the form of a haggard woman walking towards the shack. She saw the door was open and the dwarf and paladin standing there and ducked down a side-street.

Gaining the others’ attention, Kazrack explained what he saw. Jana and Beorth moved to go find her, and in that same instant the crow took flight and glided out of the door and out over the nearby buildings—roughly in the direction Kazrack had seen the woman go. Jana and Beorth hustled through the plaza, past the begging horde to find the old woman, leaving Kazrack behind to guard the hut.

They looked around and could not see her, so they wandered down the street. In a few minutes they saw two large men headed in their direction. Looking closely, the new acquaintances saw that the approaching men had cudgels.

“Have you seen Lalena?” asked Jana.

“Who wants to know?” one of them asked.

²¹ The people of Wallbrook, though part of the Kingdom of Herman Land, are ethnically different, called the Equin peoples. They tend to be tall and fair or red-haired and fair-skinned.

“Well, we are looking to find her because we think she might be desecrating graves and eating the flesh of the departed,” Beorth said, with the straight-face of a man with nothing to hide.

The men looked taken aback for a second, but soon regained their composure.

“We don’t know or care about any of that, but anyone that messes with Lalena, messes with us.” And with that they approached aggressively.

Malcolm and Jeremy happily left the Temple of Ra and went back into the Residential District.

“Let’s go somewhere and celebrate!” said Jeremy, “We’re gonna fight a dragon!”

“Well, between you and me, if thar’s really a dragon there, ah’m running,” Malcolm replied. “Anyway, let’s go back to the Slim Stiletto, it’s free.”

“I want to try somewhere different,” said Jeremy, and so with that the two friends wandered until they found the ‘The Cockatrice Tavern’.

The place smelled of brine and was packed with swarthy Herman-lander sailor types drinking hard liquor and swearing like the sailors they were.

The friends debated for a second on what to order.

“Get us a bottle,” Malcolm said, Jeremy asked the barkeep for a bottle of wine. The barkeep smirked and pulled out a bottle of something he called “Verdun’s Piss,” a sparkling golden-yellow wine.

“Piss?” asked Jeremy.

“Yah, Verdun’s Piss. The best we got. What, not pansy enough for you?” the barkeep asked. “That’ll be eight copper pieces.”

“What’s taking you so long? Malcolm asked looking for an empty table.

“The only wine they got is called ‘Piss’,” Jeremy said, paying the coins and grabbing the bottle.

“Well, who told ya ta get wine?”

“You did.”

“Ah said, ‘Get us a bottle.’ It coulda been anything.”

“The two of you sound like an old married couple,” a fellow in a stained sailcloth shirt at a nearby table said.

Malcolm turned.

“I wonder which one is the wife,” the man said standing. “Oh, it must be you since you’re the one wearing a skirt.” He pointed at the bard’s kilt. The tavern erupted in laughter.

“Oh, yeah, well ya wanna be doing something about it ya bloody git?”

“A girl in a skirt is gonna fight me?” the man asked motioning to Malcolm and winking at his friends at the table.

“Are ya daft, man? Look at these!” Malcolm flexed the biceps of his well-muscled arms.

“Hey, fellas. There is no reason to fight. Let’s just have a drink and enjoy ourselves,” Jeremy interjected.

“Ach, Ah dun wanna fight.”

Malcolm made as if to turn away but turned back around suddenly slamming his fist into the sailor’s chin.

The tavern was filled with the sound of men yelling and the scraping of chairs being pushed back, and soon Jeremy was pulled into the fray, smashing the full bottle of Verdun’s Piss over someone’s head. In less than a minute, the original aggressor and his two friends lie unconscious on the tavern floor, and beer and wine was spilled all about. Jeremy faced off against a stringy fellow who had pulled a knife, and Malcolm was turned to help him. Suddenly, a sharp whistle from the barkeep got everyone’s attention.

Sagrow the barkeep was leaning across the bar with a cocked heavy crossbow.

“Everybody calm down,” he said. “Anyone moves to keep fighting and I start shooting, and I don’t take sides, so you can consider yourselves all dead.”

The knife-toting sailor backed off and raised his hands up in a gesture of peace.

“Now, you two,” the barkeep said, referring to Malcolm and Jeremy. “You ain’t got no friends here, so if I were you, I’d get the hell out.”

“Ah thought ya said you don’t take sides. . .” Malcolm protested.

“I’m not taking sides. I’m just telling it like it is. Now leave.”

As the two companions moved to leave Jeremy turned to the barkeep, “About the bottle of Piss, since we did not get to drink it, you think perhaps we could...”

“No refunds! Get out!” Sagrow roared.

With looks of disgust, they took their leave and decided to go back to the Slim Stiletto.

“Ahv ah toldja how much ah hate this place?” Malcolm asked.

The two thugs came forward. One of them immediately grabbing Jana and putting her into a neck twisting headlock. Beorth defended himself with his quarterstaff but took a bad blow to the head. Hoping to avoid injuring the thug too badly, he tried to trip him again and again, but the deft thug kept leaping to avoid the ankle-aimed blows or would catch his balance even when the staff caught his foot. Jana pulled away from her foe, who took a swing at her with his club and missed. Chanting arcane words, she motioned at him with her hands and a look of great fear came over him and he fled.

Beorth and the other continued to struggle, Beorth getting the bad end of the deal, as he tried hard to not hurt his attacker. Jana attempted her spell twice more, but the thug’s will was too strong. Finally, fearing for his own life, Beorth let loose with a resounding crack across the foe’s chin. There was a sickening snap and the man fell, his head twisted at an odd angle.

“I have to help him,” said a slightly shocked Beorth.

Jana pulled on his arm. “We are obviously on someone’s turf. We need to get out of here!” she said.

“He’s hurt,” the paladin said leaning forward.

“He’s dead, and we will be too if we stay here too long.” She began to run back to the shack.

“Anubis guard your soul,” Beorth said to the fallen man, and took off after the young woman.

Going back through the plaza, the beggars kept back from the bloody and grim-faced holy warrior. At the shack, Jana and Beorth explained to Kazrack what had happened. The girl continued to insist that they leave this place as soon as possible. She was highly perturbed and restless. So, they left. Kazrack grabbed the voiceless young boy by the arm and pulled him along. The boy’s whimper was the first sound he made.

They stopped by one of the guards at the entrance to the plaza and explained about “the witch” and asked that they keep an eye out for her.

“Oh, and this kid is some beggar or works for her or something,” Kazrack said to the guard showing him the boy.

The guard cuffed the boy, “Get back in there.” The boy ran back into the crowded plaza.

While the dwarf talked with the guard both Beorth and Jana noticed a crow perched up on a roof, cocking its head and looking down at them.

“Let’s go,” Jana repeated nervously.

As they made their way back to the Monastery of Anubis, Kazrack explained a little to the other two about the contract, Crumb, and the trip to Derome-Delem.

At the Slim Stiletto, Malcolm and Jeremy were eating and drinking even more. The other members of “Crumb’s Boys” were now awake and enjoying the free food and drink. The young man that Malcolm had met at the Council of Conscription approached.

“Hey, how are you doing?” he said. “I just wanted to thank you again, and I did not catch your name...”

And so, Malcolm and Jeremy met Frank and his brother Gwar, two shepherd’s sons from the vicinity of Zootsburg.²² Jeremy soon met Chance as well and the two of them began a dangerous dart game with shots of Foul Spirits for whoever failed to hit a required mark.

After some time, Jana, Kazrack and Beorth arrived at the Slim Stiletto as well. At the monastery, Beorth had called for Anubis’ aid and partially healed himself of the club wounds. Afterwards, he had read the contract aloud to Kazrack, while Kazrack quickly copied a version into the runic script of dwarves. Jana also seemed strangely interested in the deal, despite not needing any excuse to not go to war aside from her gender.

Jeremy already had his head leaning on the table from too much drink and not being so great at darts, despite natural skill, when compared to Chance’s incredible luck.

“You have to thank Bes is all,” said Chance.²³

Kazrack immediately laid into Deet with a bunch of questions, but Deet refused to answer saying that Crumb would be back for lunch soon enough and would answer any.

And soon enough, Crumb did arrive to a loud “It’s Crumb!” and hoots and cheers by the now nearly one score young men hanging out in the inn’s common room. Crumb ordered three pints of dark ale, and ordered one for Kazrack as well, as he sat down with his priestly assistant, the dwarf and the dwarf’s two new companions.

²² Zootsburg is an agricultural center in the western part of Herman Land that faces the “Inner Ways” (the waterways between the kingdom’s many small islands).

²³ Bes is the god of luck.

"I see, my dear dwarf that you have brought a friend with you to sign up," Boris E. Crumb III began.

"Four copper pieces a day is not enough to risk your life for," the dwarf began.

"That is just for personal expenses. All travel, room and board will be covered for the entirety of the trip," the fat man said pounding down a pint in two gulps.

"Very well. The contract says a land grant. How much land is this exactly?"

"It says it depends on your skills," Crumb shoved a piece of food into his mouth.

"Who will determine what skills I have, you? And how?" the dwarf asked.

"The Crown of Gothanius will determine, not I. And based on what you tell them, of course."

"Very well. I will sign up with you," Kazrack concluded.

"Are you sure it is a good idea to sign up a dwarf, sir?" Deet of Ptah interjected.

"Oh, Deet, it won't be a problem," Crumb replied.

"But don't you think – I mean, aren't you afraid. . ."

"I said, it won't be a problem, Deet," Crumb said curtly.

Kazrack turned to Deet. "Why do you think it might be a problem for a dwarf to come along?"

Crumb answered for the priest. "Oh, he is just worried that once you get to your homeland and see your kin, you'll forget the contract and abandon us. However, I know that the dwarves are honorable people and would not give their word lightly and would be bound by a contract. Right, Deet?"

"Yes," the priest answered.

"Yes, that is true," The dwarf signed the contract.

"And how about you, my dear sir? Need a way out of the war?" Crumb asked Beorth.

"I already have one," he said, but added with a mumble – "but I need a way out of the country. And am worried that such a contract might interfere with my duties to Anubis."

"I can assure you that Derome-Delem is crawling with the animated corpses of soldiers whose only spark is the foul desire for vengeance upon the living. There would be plenty of opportunity to accomplish both this mission and your duty to your god."

"But what about the land grant? How would the people of Gothanius feel about my wanting to establish a monastery there?"

"The people of Gothanius are descendants of Herman-landers and as such are as Ra-fearing folk as you and I. I am sure they would love for such a monastery to be established and it would do them much honor," the fat man slurped down another thick dark ale and reached for the third.

"That is well and good, but I must think on this action. I must pray and reflect," Beorth said in his typical quiet manner.

“Well, do not take too long. There are only three spots left before we have twenty-five, and when we do, we will be leaving soon after.”

“Actually, I was wondering if you had a healer for this mission,” Jana quietly asked.

Crumb acted as if this were the first time he saw her.

“Oh, my dear lady. Why, do you know of one?”

“I am a healer,” she said.

“My dear young lady, a young woman such as yourself traveling with two dozen young men? It would not be right! Plus think of the logistical problems. But then again, I could use someone to assist Deet if things get difficult on the road. Hmmmm...”

“I will guard and watch her,” Kazrack said. “I am a dwarf and have no puerile interest in a human girl.”

“Well, it is another warm body and fulfills the quota. Deet, another contract!”

And with that Jana signed on as well.

“Only two spaces left, my friend,” Crumb said, picking at the meat on his plate. “At this rate they’ll be gone by the end of the day and then where will you be?”

The paladin of Anubis sighed, and as he reached for a contract to sign, the door to the inn burst open.

Meanwhile, Malcolm had been carrying the drunken and unconscious Jeremy upstairs over his shoulder. Halfway up, he met a doughy pale young man with sandy brown hair and bad skin, who offered to help him. “Folks call me Kamir. I help out around here,” he said. “You going to go fight the dragon? Me too. If you need anything at all let me know.”

The two of them got Jeremy out of his clothes and into a bed.

“Ha Ha!” said the man who tumbled deftly into the common room of the Slim Stiletto. He wore a puffy-collared shirt, deep blue pantaloons, a large hat with a long feather, and had a well-groomed goatee; a rapier hung loosely from his belt, which also had a basket-hilted main-gauche tucked into it.

“Is this the place that is contracting for heroes?” the man said in a thickly accented voice. “I have come to prove my mettle! For I, Garcon, am the greatest swordsman and hero, let none say otherwise or fear my wrath and my blade.”

He took long strides into the tavern. “Where do I sign? Ah!” He snatched a pen and contract from Deet and quickly scrawled his name without even looking. “I only regret that I shall outshine you all and you will have no chance to prove your own heroism, however little it may be.”

He sat at the table with Crumb and the others and clapped his hands. “Barkeep, some wine, and please Mr. Dwarf,” he looked at Kazrack. “Please bathe, your odor offends the senses.” Pulling a bottle of perfume, he sprayed some in the dwarf’s general direction.

The fop looked at Jana, “Ah, and such a lovely young woman. I pledge my sword and honor to guard this precious flower.”

“Uh, yeah...” Jana said.

“You sure do talk a lot,” Kazrack said.

“When you are as great as I, you must speak often for what other voice is so pleasing to an ear as delicate as mine?”

“I wish you were great at being quiet,” the dwarf added.

“Quiet? My good sir, I can be as silent as the hawk upon the wing, gliding down for the kill. So silent, so unnoticed, that even the sun forgets to cast my shadow.”

“Prove it.”

And with that the flowery man closed his mouth but sprayed some more perfume Kazrack’s way for good measure.

Eventually, Garcon moved along to prove his skill at darts, and Deet and Crumb left the table to discuss business. The three companions were left alone to discuss what to do about “the witch” and considered waiting for her that night to return to the cemetery and perhaps catch her in the act of digging up graves.

By this time Malcolm had come back downstairs and overheard what they were talking about.

“Witch? Yuh hunting a witch? That’s dangerous. Need someone to come with ya?”

In a few moments it was agreed that they would meet at the Monastery of Anubis at sundown and then walk from there out to the new cemetery together. Malcolm would be coming with them. “Witches cavort with demons and the like, you’ll be needing someone with a sword.”

It was then that Crumb made his announcement.

“As you all know, the twenty-fifth of our number signed on today and so will be leaving for Derome-Delem and Gothanius soon. We are going on a good and sturdy cog called the Sea Cow and will be going by a western route to avoid the Black Sea and the Black Island Navy.²⁴ We’ll be making one stop on our way out of Herman Land, and after that it is about a six-day journey over the open sea to Derome-Delem. I am going to make the final arrangements now, and we will be most likely be leaving the morning after tomorrow but be ready to leave soon. Thank you all for joining up with me and you will not soon regret it when you are enjoying the fruits of the labors before you.”

The young men applauded, and Deet and Crumb left.

In the meantime, Kazrack went to tell his father and family what had happened. And Beorth returned to the monastery. Jana remained behind at the inn, where Kamir showed her to her room. Soon after, Malcolm had Kamir draw him a bath, shave his beard and cut his hair. Kamir was happy to help.

At sundown, the four met up and got to the gate only to find out that once they left, they would not be allowed back into the city until the gates re-opened at just before dawn, and that anyone without a conscription deferment was no longer being allowed to leave the city. Unfortunately, Kazrack had forgotten to get his papers stamped.

The four rushed to the temple of Ra to find it closed. After knocking, and getting the public contact, they had to explain the danger of the witch and what she was doing. The young priest, Briar Tulp, promised them they could return in the morning before services, and he would get an elder priest to stamp it. He also implied that perhaps the Church of Ra should become involved in the investigation since the monks of Anubis were absent.

Beorth returned to the Monastery to continue with his preparations to leave, but Jana, Malcolm and Kazrack returned to the Slim Stiletto to talk and have another drink.

²⁴ The Black Navy is widely regarded as the best and most dangerous, next to the elven naval forces of Tempestas.

At the tavern only the barkeep and three dark-haired figures were awake. Of the three, two talked softly, but the tallest and broadest of them was loud and a bit foul-mouthed.

The three companions ignored them and sat to tell each other a bit about themselves.

Malcolm ordered a round of ales and some shots of foul spirits. Just as Malcolm was to raise his mug to say a word, Kazrack threw back his shot and followed up with a chase of dark ale.

“Ah guess that dwarves don’t toast,” Malcolm said with annoyance.

Kazrack hemmed and hawed, realizing his faux pax.

“Thas okay, Ah’m used to people being rude,” the skald added. “To new adventures!”

He clinked his mug against Jana’s.

“To hunting dragons... or whatever,” she said.

“Do you think there is really a dragon?” Kazrack asked, trying to get into the conversation.

“Ahv said it before an Ah’ll say it again, if ah see uh dragon, Ah’m running,” Malcolm said.

“I know I can’t move all that quickly, but dragons can probably move pretty fast,” Kazrack said.

“Ah don’t have ta run faster than the dragon, Ah just ave to run faster than you!” Malcolm laughed, and Jana joined him, but Kazrack did not quite see the humor.

They were interrupted by Boris E. Crumb. He returned to the tavern and told them that the Sea Cow would be leaving earlier than expected—the next afternoon. He planned to make the official announcement in the morning but figured that he might as well tell them now.

Upon hearing this, Kazrack excused himself for the night, and Malcolm asked the innkeeper, where Kamir stayed.

“In a shack out by the outhouse,” the old man answered.

The barbaric bard found him out there sleeping and woke him.

“Kamir! I need you to wake me up two hours before dawn. Can you do that?”

“Um, sure,” the doughy-boy answered bleary-eyed. “I guess I’m gonna have to stay up all night to do it though.”

“Okay,” said Malcolm, not giving it a second thought.

“Do you have anything for me to do in the meantime, to help me stay awake?” Kamir asked.

“Sure, oil this for me,” Malcolm handed the boy his bastard sword and went off to bed.

At the Delver home, Kazrack’s father was still awake. He sat in the common area reading quietly from a stone tablet.

“What are you doing up so late father?” Kazrack asked.

“Oh, just going over a prayer for travelers.”

“Thank you, father. It turns out I will be leaving earlier than expected. Tomorrow afternoon. I have business to take care of in the morning and might be gone all day so I’m not sure if I’ll see you.”

“Then I’m glad I saw you. Here are the papers of introduction your uncle drafted to seek trade opportunities with our kin when you get a chance. And also,” his father paused. “I wanted to give you this.”

He pulled a fine gold chain upon which was a simple gold band.

“This is the ring I gave your mother when we were married. I want you to have it to use when you find the woman who will be your wife.”

Kazrack was speechless with emotion. They hugged and then adjourned to bed.

Osilem, 24th of Keent - 564 H.E.

Malcolm was awakened by a sleepy Kamir while darkness still lurked outside. The barbarian-bard got up quickly and thanking the lackey, walked down the hall naked as the day he was born to wake up his friend Jeremy. He knocked loudly, but there was no answer, so he let himself in and his friend looked at him in bleary-eyed amazement.

“What time is it? What are you doing?” the taste of his own putrefying vomit coated the inside of his mouth, and he smacked his lips a few times. A poorly cleaned up puddle of vomit was still on the floor next to the bed and stained the sheets of his bunk.

“We’re goin’ ta hunt a witch,” Malcolm said and walked back down the hall to his room to dress and get his weapons and armor.

Jeremy flopped back down in bed.

After a few minutes Malcolm came back.

“Come on! Get up! There be a foul witch that summons demons, terrorizing young women, We ave to go,” he said.

“Okay, okay, I’m getting up. Young women did you say?” He grabbed his chain shirt and began to expertly strap it on.

“Well, one girl, anyway,” Malcolm replied. He left and headed down to the common room.

“Is she cute?” Jeremy hopped after him slipping one hip boot on and then the other. He stopped and ran back into his room to grab his short sword and long sword.

The noise in the hallway awoke Jana in her own room, so she dressed and came downstairs as well.

The three of them had a quick bite (prepared by Kamir who then trudged off to get some sleep before everyone else woke up and had him do stuff), and then made their way to the Monastery of Anubis to meet Kazrack and Beorth. It was still dark.

“So, what did she do that was so bad? Is this woman really a witch?” Jeremy asked along the way.

“Aye, she be a foul witch that endangers the lives of children and women,” Malcolm said. “An’ she attacked this young girl.” He gestured to Jana.

“She attacked you?” Jeremy asked her.

“Aye, didn’t ya hear me man? She’s lucky to be alive, Ah tell ya,” Malcolm said.

“Well, she didn’t attack me but if she had seen me watching her dig into graves and rip out pieces of the corpses from within, she probably would have,” Jana corrected.

“Oh!” Jeremy said disturbed by the image. “I guess you are lucky to be alive. Someone like that needs to be caught.”

Meeting up with the others, they went to the Temple of Ra and got Kazrack’s conscription papers hastily stamped.

“The Church of Ra may have to look into this matter of grave desecration for ourselves,” the elder priest said, and then went off to perform the morning ceremonies.

Passing the Temple of the Red God, Malcolm looked up at the body and wondered how to get it down. He noticed that heavily armored temple guards now flanked the doors to the place.

The now five companions left the outer wall of the city, flashing their stamped conscription papers and failing to avoid Arnold the guard, who once again asked Jana to join him for a drink.

“Sure, sure. I’ll meet you at the Slim Stiletto at sundown,” she told him, knowing full well that she’d be long gone by then.

The “party” entered the cemetery and after some time wandering looking for the “witch” decided to climb a hill and get the best vantage point they could.

They spread out on the hill looking in all directions (except for Malcolm, who impatiently shifted his weight from one foot to the other). Eventually, Ra’s Glory began to rise in the east, spreading light across the cemetery. Standing and waiting in the rising heat, wearing armor, and clutching weapons, the group became more and more restless.

In time they saw a group of grave-diggers arrive and begin to dig. When it seemed they would not dig very deep, their foreman yelled at them, and they grudgingly dug deeper in the growing heat.

And still, the group waited... Looking the cemetery over, they were alert for any suspicious sign. Except for Malcolm, who eyed the size of nearby rocks.

End of Session #2

Session #3

Osilem, 24th of Keent - 564 H.E.

As Beorth watched a group of mourners shed their requisite and duly paid for tears at the graves of the rich, Malcolm pulled out his dirk to work a good-sized stone out of the ground.

He rested the stone by his foot, pulled off his studded leather armor, and hefted the stone again.

“Ach, let’s see how far I can throw this,” and with that he charged forward and tossed the rock. It landed only a foot or two from the base of the hill.

“Ya think ya can throw a rock further than that?” Malcolm asked Kazrack.

“Perhaps,” answered the dwarf, “But for it to be fair I have to use the same rock.”

He walked down the hill to retrieve it.

At that moment, Jeremy began to dig for his own rock with his short sword.

“I need a smaller rock, I’m not as strong as you guys,” Jeremy said.

“Ach, ya need to use the same stone to be fair. The dwarf said it,” said Malcolm, his brogue turning “stone” to “stun” and “fair” to “far.”

Kazrack handed the stone to Jeremy, “Here ya go.”

Jeremy hefted the stone and then ran forward launching it. It landed at least eight or nine feet further than Malcolm’s throw.

“Ach, pretty good. Lemme get it so Kazrack can try,” Malcolm went to retrieve the stone.

“What time of the day was it when you came here with Lalena?” Beorth asked Jana, not getting distracted.

“Definitely later than it is right now,” she replied.

Malcolm passed the stone to the dwarf, who tossed it hard over his head. It landed a foot further than Jeremy’s throw. Malcolm looked annoyed.

“This is a place of rest and respect for the dead. You should not be throwing stones and playing games,” Beorth said.

“Ach, they’re dead, what do they care?” Malcolm called back from on his way to get the stone.

“Respect for the dead is as much for the living as it is for the dead themselves,” the paladin replied.

The skald returned with the stone.

“Well, I guess we are done here. The woman knows we are on to her, and I guess it was not very likely that she’d return,” Kazrack said. “I have other things I’d like to do before we leave.”

“Yes, as do I,” Beorth said. “I guess we must leave this in the hands of the city guard.”

He noticed Malcolm hefting the rock again.

“Malcolm, I said that this is not the place for such games. I would prefer if you did not do that.”

“Aye, noted.” And with that he threw the rock with all his strength, and it landed a good foot further than Kazrack’s toss.

Beorth sighed as the others laughed.

The group decided to disperse and do the all the things they wanted to do before leaving aboard the Sea Cow that afternoon.

Malcolm took off with blazing speed calling for Jeremy to follow him, which the young Neergaardian did. However, at the gate to the city they were separated by the mob of peddlers entering the city, and Malcolm lost sight of his friend.

“Meet me at the marketplace!” he called out and continued there in a steady jog.

Meanwhile, as Beorth also returned to the Temple District, Jana and Kazrack returned to the Slim Stiletto, so that the dwarf could drop off his equipment.

The only person that seemed to be awake was an older man with graying dark brown hair and a bushy mustache. He did not reply to the two companions’ greeting.

“Excuse me, do you know where Deet or the innkeeper are?” Kazrack asked the man, who was tying up a large pack. He wore a long sword, and had a short spear strapped lengthwise to his bag.

The man did not answer. Kazrack stepped closer.

“Excuse me,” he said again.

The man did not even turn to face the dwarf, “Hell if I know. Probably sleeping.”

“You may leave your stuff in my room,” Jana offered, and up the stairs they went. As they walked past one open door, they heard a very loud snoring. Kazrack looked into to see a chain shirt tossed casually on the floor, along with a belt holding a short and long sword. Jeremy’s sleeping form was face down on the bed, drooling on his pillow. Kazrack collected the blonde Neergaardian’s belongings and placed them neatly on the table and closed the door for him.

After dropping his stuff off in Jana’s room, Kazrack returned to his father’s smithy to do one last morning’s worth of work with them before leaving, perhaps forever. Meanwhile, Jana closed the door to her room, and did not re-emerge for several hours.

After spending some time looking for Jeremy, even returning to the city gate to do so, Malcolm returned to the Slim Stiletto to find his friend asleep. He woke him to borrow some money and then went off to purchase a goat from a peddler he had run into while looking for his friend.

Malcolm returned with the purchased goat, to arrange a feast for him and his friends. He awoke poor Kamir and then, after having clubbed the goat to stun it before breaking its neck, he hung it up for Kamir to gut and clean. Half-asleep and mumbling, the chubby boy complied.

The skald then impatiently waited for his friend Jeremy to awaken.

“Come on, Ah got something for us to do,” he said to the groggy warrior.

“What is it?” Jeremy asked, eating some of the goat the inn-keep had prepared for them.

“Have ya gotta bow?”

“I have a crossbow,” Jeremy answered. “What is this all about?”

“Maybe we can borrow a bow,” Malcolm replied. “I want to shoot down the body hanging in the Temple District.”

And so, they made their way there.

“Don’t ya think it’ll be dangerous?” Jeremy asked.

“Nah,” Malcolm replied. “We’re providing a service.”

Meanwhile, Beorth was composing a letter to Oneus the head monk of the monastery for which he currently served as warden, explaining why he had to leave.

Brother Oneus,

I fear that I have brought dishonor upon myself and have failed in my obligations to you and to this monastery. I have done my best to care for this place in your stead but due to political events I am no longer able to remain and protect the monastery.

As you must know, King Herman XVI of the Kingdom of Herman Land has enacted conscription laws demanding all able-bodied men without over-riding duties to fight the Black Islanders. Shortly after you and the other monks left, I was called before the Council of Conscription at the Temple of Ra. I pled my case before the council, explaining my duties to Anubis and the monastery. These duties were not deemed “sacred” enough to keep me outside the wave of conscription.

Since my religious duties were not enough, I simply stated to the council that I am by birth a Black Islander. Though my confession seemed wise as I uttered it, it was in effect the wrong choice. The council did not want me to join the army, but simply stated that all Black Islanders would soon be jailed until after the war.

It is for this reason that I must leave the city and leave the monastery unattended. I cannot work to honor Anubis or the souls of the dead while imprisoned. I hope that He will grant me his grace and forgive my failure in this.

While you were gone, I also noticed many irregularities in the New Cemetery. Graves are not being properly dug; the sacred ceremonies are not being performed for all the bodies, and a number of graves have been desecrated. I have tried to bring one of the alleged perpetrators to justice, a certain herbalist named Lalena, but was unsuccessful.

I have not the authority or the standing with the temples or the town guard to attend to this matter myself. I trust that you will deal with these matters upon your return.

Though I am forced to leave, I will continue to serve Anubis, and will never forget the teachings you have given me.

Peace be with you in Life, as in Death.

Beorth

After writing the letter, Beorth then went to the Library of Thoth to say goodbye to his only real friend in the city: Levekt, an elderly priest of the knowledge god.²⁵

²⁵ Thoth is the God of Knowledge, Law, and Magic.

Beorth was allowed in and told where his elderly friend could be found arranging the herbology section. The holy warrior walked past shelves and shelves of books, knowing he was forbidden to touch even one.²⁶

“Father, I have come to tell you that I must leave the city,” Beorth said in his normal quiet manner that need not be toned down one bit for the quiet expected in the library.

The old man was stooped and struggled with the large and dusty books.

“Why is this?” he rasped.

“It is either stay and be imprisoned for being a Black Islander or go to war, neither of which I want to do, or would be allowed to do because I am a Black Islander. It is time for me to seek my fortune elsewhere and fulfill the will of Anubis wherever that might take me.”

“Aye, well, there comes a time that every boy becomes a man and must strike out on his own, and your path is a worthy one. Just remember one thing, lad. . . “

“What is that?”

“Write everything down!”

Beorth allowed himself a chuckle and smile.

“There are great experiences to be had out in the world and things to be learned that many can profit from if it is recorded,” the old man said with coughing glee.

“I will bring back a book for you,” Beorth said, not sure if he meant it or was being polite.

“I wish I had some gift to give you, something to help you on your way.”

“Your good wishes are enough, father.”

“I will go to the Wayhouse of Ptah and give an offering in your name for safe journey.”

“Thank you, Levekt.” They quickly shook hands; the old man never being one to show emotion.

“Good luck, and be careful,” the old man said, and Beorth returned to the monastery.

The holy warrior went over his list of things left to do in his mind and was so deep in thought he did not notice the body was being removed from the tower of the Red God of the West’s temple. Instead, he went inside and after a mid-day prayer decided to inter the paladin’s head, even if he had to accept failure at retrieving the body. However, before he could do that, he heard the bell at the monastery gate.

Washing his hands quickly, the young warrior hurried upstairs to the gate to find four guards bearing a litter covered in a white sheet. A young woman with black hair, in a red headband and white robes, stood before them at the gate.

“Beorth, is it?” the woman asked. Beorth recognized her as one of the local Medicus of Fallon.

He nodded his head.

“I think we have met briefly before. I am Marta of Fallon. I was hoping you could help us,” the woman said gesturing to the guards holding the litter and sweating profusely in the late summer heat.

²⁶ Research at a Library of Thoth costs upwards of 300 silver pieces per day.

“You have a body for me to inter?” Beorth asked.

“Yes, the Horus-Son that was left to rot against the Temple of the Red God the West. We were able to negotiate a compromise with them. They realize that their continued survival in this city and nation requires that they cooperate at least in part to keep the peace even with those that feel serve demons.”

“You negotiated with them to retrieve the body?” Beorth gave a thin-lipped smile. “That is good news. Of course, I will attend to the body. Thank you. Thank you. Anubis and Fallon both be praised.”

Beorth opened the gates to allow the Medicus and guards into the monastery grounds.

“It is fortuitous that you came now, for I will be leaving this very day,” Beorth said to Marta.

“Are you going to war?” she asked.

“No, to Derome-Delem.”

“I am the only one of my brethren of the temple who has remained behind. The rest have gone to heal the wounded on the field of battle,” Marta said, with only a hint of envy.

“We all must do our duty where it lies, my lady,” Beorth said.

“Call me Marta.”

At that moment Malcolm and Jeremy arrived at the Temple District to find the body had been removed. Malcolm frowned with disappointment.

After interring the body in the lower crypts of the monastery, Beorth walked over to the headquarters of City Guard by the gate to the noble district to see Captain Runwick.

The captain was busy with a great deal of paperwork.

“I just wanted to inform you Captain, that we were unable to discover the herb woman, Lalena, the alleged desecrator of graves,” Beorth said calmly.

“Uh, okay,” the Captain said, looking up from his papers. “Well, we have her name and where she lives, we can bring her in for questioning and pressure some answers out of her.”

“Um, okay,” Beorth said, nervously.

Runwick continued looking through his papers, “Your name’s Beorth, right?”

“Yes,” the paladin answered.

“Hmm, I could have sworn I saw your name around here somewhere. Something about questioning you for something.”

Beorth felt a fat drop of sweat pour down his face.

“Detaining? Questioning? Something? What was it? Maybe I’m wrong...” “He looked through his papers for a proper clue.

“Well, if you need me, you know where I’ll be,” Beorth said.

“Yes, I’m sure it is not so important,” the Captain of the Guard said looking the young paladin straight in the eye.

With that, the young holy warrior returned to the monastery to retrieve his gear and meet the group of would-be dragon-slayers at the Slim Stiletto.

At the inn that served as Crumb’s headquarters of recruitment, the boys were having their last meal in Verdun. As Chance played a last game of darts against some of the others (losing as badly as he had won the day before), Jeremy, Kazrack, Malcolm and Jana enjoyed some of the goat Malcolm had purchased. Of course, a severely fatigued Kamir was busy running about bringing people’s packs downstairs for them (after having helped to pack them) and serving them their lunch.

As Kamir served a tray full of bowls of stew to one table, he passed by the table where the three fellows who had been up late the night before sat. There was the tall, broad and “loud” one, the medium-build “handsome” one and the short skinny, kind of ugly, “quiet” one. Kamir walked past and the tall one blatantly set out his foot, sending Kamir flying face first to the floor, hot stew and shards of ceramic bowls accompanying him.

“Watch it ya clumsy idiot,” the tall, loud one said. “Ya touched my foot!” He guffawed. The place erupted in laughter.

Kamir began to clean up the pieces of bowl place them on the tray, still down on all fours. He began to apologize profusely, his words garbled by the lump in his throat.

Kazrack came over and began to help him clean it up.

“That is awfully big of you, picking on someone weaker and smaller than you are to puff yourself up,” the dwarf said looking up at the tall man.

“Well, from your height everyone must look pretty big. Huh, stumpy?”

Kazrack paused and glared.

“It’s okay Mr. Dwarf, it was my fault,” said Kamir. “Really, I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

“You can’t let other people push you around, Kamir,” Kazrack said to the boy.

“I hope that by coming along I can help to slay the dragon and become brave like you guys, and maybe a hero, too,” the pathetic lad added. This also gave Kazrack pause.

“Ha! Cowardly little one has nothing to say,” the tall one said loudly.

Malcolm walked over and stood behind Kazrack, who stood and faced the man, who also stood. He towered over both the dwarf and the skald.

“Looks like another little one has come to join the fray,” the man said referring to Malcolm.

“Listen to me,” Kazrack said calmly. “I know you won’t do anything because we are contracted to not brawl, and I won’t be baited into breaching the contract either. So why don’t you keep to yourself and shut up.”

The man leaned forward with a half-step, his fists clenched, and his chest puffed, his shirt rippling with his muscles beneath.

“Devon!” the medium-build man said sharply. “Leave it be. Sit down.”

And so, pausing to look back at the dwarf and the skald with a sneer, the man named Devon, sat down, and resumed his hushed conversation with his own companions.

“Thank you. Thank you for your help,” Kamir said. “But I got it, it’s okay. No problem.”

The dwarf placed the last bits of bowl he had scooped up and dropped them on the tray, as Kamir stood and ran back towards the kitchen.

“Kamir, hurry up with more stew!” another of Crumb’s boys yelled from across the common room.

“We’re gonna help that boy,” Kazrack said to himself.

And so, the time came for Crumb and his boys to set off. Beorth finally arrived, and Jana emerged from her room.

Boris E. Crumb III gathered the boys together in the common room and said, “We’re going to leaving here as a group to pier thirty-four where the Sea Cow is waiting to bring us to Derome-Delem. Gather your things, and you will notice that you have each been given a standard issue pack, put that with your stuff. At the dock is a number of supplies that need to be loaded on to the ship, as you go aboard, please grab a crate or sack and bring it up to the deck, you will be instructed where to put it.”

And with that, the group headed out and walked to the Port District and the Sea Cow.

Kazrack dropped his pack upon the deck of the ship and went back down to help with carrying the supplies aboard. Jeremy and Chance grabbed a large box together, and Malcolm grabbed as big as he could manage by himself. Of the rest of the group, some did their share of the hauling; others took as little as they could get away with. Kamir ran back and forth four times carrying all he could each time.

The Sea Cow’s warped timbers creaked loudly with every step the new passengers made. Kazrack nervously noted the lack of a life-rail, and the small puddles of water on the bowed deck.

Deet and Crumb gathered the boys together.

Crumb started, “The Captain of this fine vessel is Captain Reginald Corr. Do not speak to him. Do not bother him. He is a busy man and generous enough to transport this rowdy lot for cheap. If you have any questions about your lodgings (which you will be soon shown) or provisions or anything about the ship, ask the boatswain, Kristian Lavar. He is also a very busy man so do not bother him too much, and do not get in the way of any of the sailors. Now, let us join hands and bow our heads so that Deet may lead us in a prayer.”

Deet’s voice raised his head after a moment of silence and then spoke in full baritone, “Oh, Ptah! Opener of Ways. If it is your divine will allow us to safely journey over Tefnut’s seas and arrive in Derome-Delem so that we may see the splendors of its mountains and vales and experience the wonders while helping the people of Gothanius. But . . . If it should pass that we do not make it, if this ship is sucked down by a maelstrom or attacked by a monstrous sea beast, let those of us that survive learn well from the experience and become better from it. Ptah bless this journey and Tefnut allow it.”

Silence hung in the air with a weighty presence, until Kazrack cracked it in half with a question. “How come that didn’t make me feel any better?”

As the boatswain explained to the passengers where they could find their quarters, Malcolm took to the bow of the ship and began to play his bagpipes as the ship pulled out of dock. The sudden lurch of the ship and the sound of the lapping water immediately made Kazrack’s stomach churn. Beorth stood nearby and listened to Malcolm’s stunningly beautiful, yet haunting, music. Meanwhile Jana was led to her tiny private cabin by the boatswain.

The ship moved slowly through the harbor, and immediately the breeze of movement cooled off the deck much to everyone's delight, except Kazrack. He stumbled below deck trying to find somewhere he could be comfortable but failed. The cabins held six passengers each and had hammocks stacked two high. The floor of the lower decks was swollen and warped and an inch of bilge covered everything. Looking and feeling green, the dwarf found Jeremy losing most of his money to Chance in a dice game. When one of the dice fell into the bilge, the dwarf noticed what he had been too sick to before—the water!

"The ship is sinking! The ship is sinking!" he cried running all the way back up the broken stair and through the hatch. "There is a leak! The ship is sinking!"

He caught the attention of a few sailors and of those of Crumb's boys who had not found their way below deck yet. Among them, the boatswain.

"What are ya talking about?" he asked the dwarf.

Kazrack explained with a look of horror.

"That is the bilge. All ships have it. Just some water that soaks through; nothing to be done about it and nothing to worry about. But if you run around screaming such a thing again, I'll toss ye overboard meself!"

"Uh, okay." Kazrack calmed down, but his stomach and head did not. Feeling woozy, he threw himself down near the middle of the deck and moaned.

By this time, Malcolm's own nausea was overcoming his ability to play his pipes, and he ended his song with a crescendo. Then, tucking his bagpipes beneath his arm, he walked to find his quarters, stumbling from left to right like a drunkard, tasting his bile in the back of his throat.

The first room he found was full. As he passed the second, he saw only Devon and his two companions in there. Devon sneered as the "short ugly one" closed the door. Further down the narrow corridor, he found a room holding the tall quiet older man and a few of the younger ones. Not being able to hold it in anymore, he dropped his goat lunch. Greenish muck now floated in the room's bilge. He stumbled away, and one of the young men followed him.

"Hey, you gotta clean that up, that's disgusting!" the young man said, following Malcolm into the room he would share with Jeremy and the others.

Jeremy was just finishing a story, ". . . and then the fire started to get out of control, so I tried to use the left-over fat in the pan to smother it and it blazed up singing my eyebrows. It took months for them to grow back."

"That naught very lucky," Chance said, his brogue nearly as thick as Malcolm's.

Malcolm moaned.

"Hey, you gotta clean up your puke in our room. It smells and it is just gonna float around and around in there," the young man said, tapping Malcolm on the shoulder.

"Shut the bloody hell up!" Malcolm said, bile flicking from his frothing lips.

"I'm not gonna shut up until you clean it up. And I mean, now."

Malcolm placed the palm of his hairy hand full on the boy's face and pushed him roughly away, "If ya don't leave me alone Ahm gonna break yer puny neck, ya hear me?" Anger shone through the dizziness in the bard's eyes.

"You can't do that. We're contracted not to brawl. You can't intimidate me. I know my rights. I'm gonna tell Deet," And with that he took off for above deck.

Malcolm dropped his stuff in a hammock and hung there for a second. Then, feeling another convulsion ran back above deck. There he was stopped by the young man and Deet.

“Guisel here tells me you messed his room a bit and he would like you to clean it,” Deet said.

Malcolm tried to glare at Guisel but could only find a greenish countenance.

“Ahm sick. If ah try to clean it up now, I’ll get sick again and it’ll become an endless cycle of me puking and cleaning, cleaning and puking. It would never end an’ would not be a pleasant room to live in. I’ll clean it when ah feel better.”

Deet turned to Guisel. “You see, I told you he would be reasonable. You can’t expect a sick man to clean his own mess while still sick, can you?”

And at that moment, Malcolm ran to the edge of the deck and shot another helping of hot goat off the side of the ship. Seeing him run, and hearing the loud wretch, Kazrack’s own iron stomach could not hold it anymore and he ran to edge as well, stopping a good five feet from it (fearing tumbling in) and tried to aim his own projectile vomiting over the side. Just missing. He collapsed on the deck, as did Malcolm who lay there with his head hanging over the side.

There they remained as the Sea Cow sailed past the many isles of the Kingdom of Herman Land. Of the new friends only Beorth was above deck and in any condition to enjoy the sights. Finally, Ra’s Glory sunk behind an island directly ahead of them and they all found their ways to their respective hammocks.

The next two days passed without incident. Each morning, Kazrack awoke before the sun to ask the navigator which direction was north to that he could place his prayer stone properly. He would spend the rest of the day ill. Jana spent most of her time in her cabin, while Malcolm wandered around annoying the boatswain for permission to climb to the top of the crow’s nest, and never getting it. Jeremy lost even more money to Chance, and Beorth remained above deck in contemplation of the passing scenery and staying out of people’s way, when not practicing with his quarterstaff.

Somewhere in there, Guisel thanked Malcolm for cleaning his mess. Of course, it hadn’t been Malcolm that had done it. It was Kamir, but Malcolm took credit anyway.

Teflem, 27th of Keent - 564 H.E.

The Sea Cow pulled into dock in the tiny hamlet of Weevon in the mid-afternoon. Crumb’s boys were given shore leave until sundown, as the ship would leave for Derome-Delem at dawn.

Crumb reminded them all about the rules against brawling and the requirement to follow all local laws and customs. He also asked each of them to grab a crate or box of stuff that needed to be dropped off here as they left, and to stop and see Deet for their eight copper pieces for their two days of travel.

Most of the “boys” took the opportunity to get off the ship, except for Kamir who remained behind to pump out as much of the bilge as possible to make everyone more comfortable.

Weevon was no bigger than about a dozen buildings with thatched roofs. The group headed over to the only tavern in an unruly mob, overjoyed to be off the leaky creaky ship, soon driving out the regulars.

Crumb’s boys spread out among all the tables and chairs of the small place and Malcolm performed “*The Wind that Shakes the Barley*,” which did not leave a dry eye in the place and got him a few free drinks.

With an ale in his two days of dry-heaving empty stomach, Malcolm felt a little adventurous and tried to get Jeremy to go hunting with him.

"But we don't know this area, or what game there is to be found," Jeremy said.

"Ach! We'll find a squirrel or something small," Malcolm said.

"Can't we just relax? We've been on a ship for three days. I just want to drink and eat and have a good time," Jeremy whined a bit.

"Ach! But hunting *IS* a good time. . ."

"I'll go hunting with you," Kazrack said, overhearing. "Just let me get my crossbow from the ship."

As the dwarf did just that, Malcolm went to scout ahead and see what the local terrain was like beyond the veil of trees that seemed to pen in the village.

West of the trees was rolling farmland, just occasionally broken up by very small copse. It did not appear like land that was good for hunting. Malcolm could see a shepherd and his flock atop a hill at some distance and could hear chickens clucking in the yard of a nearby farmhouse. He walked back towards the village proper to meet Kazrack and then led him into the treeline.

"Ah don't think the hunt's gonna be too good here," Malcolm told Kazrack. "Want to wrestle instead?"

"Why would I want to wrestle?" the dwarf asked with some confusion.

"Why not? It's fun," Malcolm replied. When the dwarf seemed unconvinced, the bard's shoulders sagged. "Fine, we'll climb a tree instead."

And with that Malcolm dropped his pack (which he insisted on carrying everywhere) and climbed a large tree.

He let himself down. "Now you try," he said to the dwarf.

Kazrack climbed the tree deftly and settled down between two branches to look out over the landscape.

Malcolm climbed back up and joined him. The skald and the dwarven warrior sat up in the tree talking a bit about what brought them to their current situation and their pasts. Malcolm began to describe the beauty of his homeland, the Dubh Moors.

Kazrack interrupted. "If it is so beautiful there, why did you leave?" the dwarf asked.

"Ah had no choice," Malcolm answered.

"How's that?"

"Ah was exiled by my clan."

"Why?" the dwarf asked, his curiosity growing.

"Ah killed a man from a powerful family," Malcolm answered in a quieter voice than was usual for the boisterous moorsman.

"I'm sure this thing will blow over. You will go back eventually, won't you?"

"Aye, when Ah'm old and don't care about dyin' no more. Ah'll return to my clan, to die fightin', bleedin' out on the land of my birth."

"What did this man do?" Kazrack asked, realizing he was going to have offer many prompts to get the full story.

"He attacked my cousin. No one believed her, but Ah did."

"And then?"

"Ah befriended 'im, went hunting with 'im... got 'im drunk..." Malcolm answered with the look of a man reliving a memory not far enough away yet.

"How did you kill him?"

"Ah knocked over our lantern at our campsite and when he went to pick it up, Ah brained 'im, and then cut him to pieces with me sword."

"Oh," Kazrack said, hiding his disapproval. "I would have challenged him to a duel if it were me."

"He was a better fighter than Ah am," Malcolm said simply.

"I see," managed Kazrack.

"Sometimes ya have do whatcha have ta do."

Meanwhile, Jana, Beorth and Jeremy were still at the village tavern with Chance and the others. Jeremy, never tiring of losing his money to Chance, got up for another game of darts. Soon after Devon and his two companions walked into the tavern, ordered a tankard or three of ale and walked over to a table that was already occupied by three of Crumb's boys.

"That's our table. Move on!" Devon said to them.

Guisel who was among them, hesitated, but thinking again, he got up, leaving the table to the three brooding fellows. Beorth and Jana called the three young ones over to their table.

"Thanks," Guisel said. "Those guys are jerks."

"Yes, well, not everyone learns their manners," Beorth replied. "I am Beorth, and this is Jana."

"I am Guisel," Guisel said. "And this is John and Carlos." He gestured to his companion on the left and right. John was tall and skinny, with messy brown hair and green eyes. He, like Guisel and most of the others, and the olive skin-tone of a Herman-Lander, Carlos was shorter and of medium build, with short thick black hair, darker brown skin, and brown eyes.

Beorth recognized Carlos as someone who had been watching his quarterstaff training on the ship.

"I hear we're gonna be broken up into groups when we get to Gothanius. You guys hear anything about that?" Guisel asked.

Beorth was surprised. "Broken up into groups? How do you mean?"

"Like to go after the dragon...in groups," John said.

"I guess that makes sense. We could cover more ground that way," the paladin mused.

"You guys have anyone you'd be in a group with yet?" Guisel asked.

"Well, we just found out about the groups, didn't we?" Jana said. "How big are the groups going to be?"

"I don't know, five or six people each maybe."

"That makes sense, they put us six to a cabin, maybe those are our groups," Beorth said.

"Ugh, I hope not. I'm rooming with that old guy who never talks, even when you talk to him. Won't even introduce himself!" Guisel said with some disgust.

The group drank silently for a moment that was only interrupted by Chance's cry of "And *ANOTHER* bull's-eye!" from over by the dart board.

"Well, I noticed you have weapons and armor and stuff, and you seem like a nice guy, so if you need a group, the three of us will be glad to have you," John said to Beorth.

"Don't you have weapons?" Beorth asked. "I mean, aren't you warriors?"

"I know a little bit with the sword," Guisel said. "And from what I can gather Carlos is an okay warrior. John doesn't know anything."

"Hey!" said John.

"You know what I mean, John."

"This is going to be a bloodbath," Jana said under her breath.

"*Si, yo puedo peliar con el baston,*" Carlos said.

"What did he say?" Beorth asked.

"I'm not sure. He's okay. But he's from some faraway place I never heard of," Guisel explained.

"*Si, muy muy* far," Carlos said, with a smile.

Beorth smiled and nodded.

"Well, I could show you guys some basic moves with the sword, if you want," Beorth offered.

"Really? Wow. That'd be great," Guisel said.

"We can do it right now," Beorth said, and led them to the grass by a grove of trees. He then fetched his sword and quarterstaff from the ship.

The paladin handed the quarterstaff to Carlos, who smiled and brandished it with some competence. He handed his longsword to Guisel, who held it limp-wristed in his right hand.

"No, like this," Beorth said attempting to explain the proper way to hold a sword.

Meanwhile, Malcolm was growing tired of sitting and talking in a tree. Restless, he moved out to hang from a bough and do pull-ups. Unfortunately, the branch was not strong enough to hold his weight and with a loud crack, the squat bard came tumbling to the earth.

Kazrack looked down, "Are you okay?"

"Aye, just got the wind knocked out of me is all."

And with that Kazrack began to laugh and laugh. Annoyed, Malcolm got up, picked up a fist-sized rock and threw it hitting the dwarf, who losing his balance also tumbled out of the tree, landing right on his stomach. Before he could get his wind, Malcolm plopped down on his back, grabbed his leg, and twisted his foot.

“Ow, Ow! What are you doing?” Kazrack asked through rasping breaths.

“Do ya give? Say ya give?” Malcolm asked playfully.

“I give! I give!” Malcolm got up, and in a moment helped the dwarf to his feet.

“We should be heading back,” Kazrack said, so the two of them made their way back to the village.

In the grove of trees, Jana watched as Beorth made little headway with Guisel and John. Carlos on the other hand was a quick study. He seemed very dexterous and reasonably strong.

As they continued, Devon and his two companions came out of the tavern and walked over to watch for a minute.

“Hey look, they’re learning how to use a sword. Isn’t that cute?” Devon said. “Don’t waste your time kids. You could practice all you want and someone like me could come along and make you eat that sword.”

Devon laughed loudly; his companions remained quiet. He then looked over at Jana.

“Hey sweet thing,” he called. “Why are you hanging with these losers when you could be with me?” Devon cocked an eyebrow and flashed a lascivious smile.

“That’s okay, I’m fine where I am,” Jana responded.

“Okay, but when you get tired of these wet-behind-the-ear babies, you can come to me and I’ll show you what a real man is,” Devon laughed loudly again.

“Hopefully, you’ll get tired of yourself first and do us all a favor,” she replied.

Guisel, John and the others laughed, including the Devon’s ‘handsome’ companion.

“What?” Devon said, looking confused.

“I think she just insulted you, Devon,” the handsome one said through a smile he gave the young girl. “Maybe if you work it out halfway, I’ll explain the rest on the ship. Let’s go.” They walked off.

By this time Kazrack emerged from the trees and turned to see that Malcolm was no longer with him. More interested in what Beorth was doing than what trouble Malcolm might be up to, he went over to the paladin.

Malcolm was creeping up on some chickens in a nearby farmyard. Stringing his shortbow he fired once and then twice, killing the bird in a flurry of feathers. As he grabbed the dead bird an angry farmer emerged from his home.

“Whaddya doing? You can’t just kill my chickens. Bandit! Thief!”

With a twirl of his hand and a melodic word, Malcolm pulled a strand of wool from his kilt, hoping to dazzle the farmer with a simple bardic spell. The farmer merely shook his head as if to clear it and said, ‘Whaddya doing?!?’

“I was going to knock on your door and pay for this,” Malcolm gestured towards the dead chicken in his hand. He still held his bow in the other. “I’m sorry how much?”

“Three pieces of copper. And next time, ask first.”

Malcolm paid the man and turned back to towards the village.

Guisel and John grew bored of training and wandered away. Carlos shrugged his shoulders and joined them.

Kazrack decided that training the rest of Crumb’s boys was a good idea and gathered about a dozen sword-length sticks to bring aboard for training. They all ate of the chicken that Malcolm had bought, which the tavern-keeper prepared. The bard also earned a free drink for performing another song.

As the sun went down, they all returned to the ship. The boatswain stopped Kazrack. “Where are you going with all that wood?”

“I planned to train some of the boys in fighting, if I could get a spot on the deck,” Kazrack explained.

“No way. Impossible,” Kristian replied. “You’ll get in the way of the crew.”

“But we need something to pass the time and these boys are in desperate need of some training,” the dwarf pleaded.

“Hmm. Okay, only two people at a time and only during mealtimes,” the boatswain compromised.

“How will we eat then?”

“That is for you to figure out.”

Crumb’s Boys collapsed into their hammocks, and in the morning, the Sea Cow left the dock to head westward round the Kingdom of Herman Land’s northernmost islands and then turning towards the eastern coast of Derome-Delem.

“There is no reason for goats to bleat backwards, mommy. I told you I didn’t. . . “

“Ya not makin’ any sense, man,” Malcolm said. Through his accent, when he said the word, “man,” it sounded like “mun.”

“I wasn’t throwing eggs at the knights, I swear. . . “

Jana felt the Jeremy’s forehead. The young Neergaardian was looking pale, and his glands were so swollen his neck looked as thick as Devon’s.

“He’s burning up. He’s got the bog flu,” the herbalist concluded.²⁷

The second day of the northward journey was dampened by this news, and by the fact that the boatswain would not provide a separate room for the sick passenger despite Jana’s declaration that it was contagious. Instead, Kristian suggested that the whole group quarantine themselves in their cabin. No one else agreed of course.

²⁷ The causes of “bog flu” are unclear. However, it manifests itself in terms of great fatigue, fever, aching and occasional delirium. Coincidentally, bog flu often coincides with a character’s player missing a session. Chronic bog flu has been known to lead to premature retirement or even death.

The training did not go very well either. While Carlos continued to prove his proficiency with the quarterstaff, John, Guisel, and some others seemed easily bored, while others still did not even want to try for whatever reason. Kazrack and Beorth found it very disconcerting.

Kamir helped Jana to care for Jeremy.

Things got worse on the fourth day, when way out of sight of land the Sea Cow was hit by a sudden squall, which left everyone below deck sweating and feeling as sick as Jeremy. Kazrack clutched his prayer stone the whole time and mumbled pleas to the dwarven gods to deliver him from such a hellish place.

The storm lasted an entire evening and most of a day, but on the sixth day they were in sight of land, seeing an armored horseman galloping northward along a rocky beach. And by early the next morning they passed cliffs that lined the shore and came to the port of Cutter Jack's.²⁸ The estimated six-day journey had taken seven.

Teflem, 6th of Ese – 562 H.E.

As Crumb's boys disembarked from the Sea Cow, Deet ordered them to get into groups of four to collect their tents as the group would be camping out. Jana was given her own one-person tent. They were all also give their twenty-eight pieces of copper for their seven days of travel.

Kazrack already had his own larger tent that he and Beorth decided to share, and on Malcolm's orders Kamir grabbed a tent for him and Jeremy and Chance.

The town of Cutter Jack's was distinctly larger than Weevon, made up of several score white-washed brick builds and some wooden ones. The port looked as if it could hold a dozen or more ships, but part of it seemed as if it had been recently burned and was still in disrepair.

The town was flanked to the north and south by woodlands, and earthen ramparts were built up to defend the approach from the west. In the far distance, Kazrack could see the mist-shrouded mountains, whose peaks were lost in the clouds—mountains as far as the eye could see. The dwarf's heart swelled with pride.

The band marched through the town towards the southern woods. Malcolm and Chance helping Jeremy to walk. The Neergaardian was a bit more clear-headed, but still felt weak.

As they passed one small white building, Kazrack noticed a red dwarf come out, tie a message to a *Faultless* and send it off. Kazrack saluted the dwarf, who waved back.²⁹

Crumb and Deet led the boys to a clearing southwest of the town, just beyond one of the earthen walls. The grass was short and a nearby stream provided water. Everyone began to set up their tents, though Kamir seemed to be doing most of the work. Kazrack and the others put their tents near the center of the clearing, not far from where Crumb had his large pavilion-style tent set-up.

Gathering everyone together, Crumb assigned everyone's tasks before giving them leave to explore the town or do whatever they like.

"There will some basic chores I will have you all take turns doing to keep our camp running efficiently, so when this meeting is over, I will be sending some of you off to do things. However, before we do that, I want to remind you all to obey local laws and stay out of trouble. We will be here for three or four days while I arrange for wagons that will bring us as far, we can go into the mountains until we have to go by foot. Gothanius is about a fortnight's journey

²⁸ Cutter Jack's is one of Derome-Delem's "Freetowns," which were founded by deserters or those left behind after the failed invasion of Derome-Delem by the Kingdom of Herman Land in 409 H.E. This town was named after its current lord who was a commoner who saved the town from a curse by retrieving the legendary "Sacred Rose of Osiris".

²⁹ The *Faultless* are birds with large wings that are impressed with two sites that they can fly between and faultlessly deliver messages—thus their names. By riding high altitude air currents, they can travel over one hundred miles a day.

away. Okay, now... You, you and you, collect rocks for the central fire pit, and clear an area for it. And you and you, go get firewood."

With that, Crumb ended the meeting. Kazrack and Jana were chosen to collect rocks along with the short ugly companion of Devon's, while Malcolm and Beorth were sent off for firewood.

Beorth and Malcolm wandered down a nearby ridge picking up the dry wood of fallen trees, Beorth made neat piles to pick up as they headed back, while Malcolm just had a huge bundle tucked under one arm.

As they collected wood from a particularly ample spot, a frightened doe broke through the brush and running past them, disappeared into more brush to their left. Malcolm immediately dropped his pile of wood, pulled out his bow, and chased after the deer.

"Malcolm! Where are you going?" Beorth called.

At that same moment Beorth heard the sound of movement behind him and turned to see two young men with bows come through the brush. Both were of medium build with longish brown hair and light skin, dressed in the greens and browns of hunters.

"Goodness! I thought you were a goblin," one of them said, clearly startled.

"A goblin?" Beorth said surprised.

"Did you see a deer come through here?" the other asked.

"Um, yes. My companion went after it," Beorth explained, pointing to the brush.

"Come on, Andre!" the second said and he and his friend ran off in the same direction that Malcolm and the deer had.

Meanwhile, Malcolm had caught up to the deer by a stream and had sunk an arrow into its rear flank. The deer struggled up the bank and disappeared over the ridge. Malcolm took off after it again, when the two hunters came bursting from the brush.

"That's our deer!" said Andre.

"The 'ell it is," Malcolm replied. From the top of the ridge, Malcolm fired another arrow that missed, but one of the hunters' aim was true and the deer collapsed and feebly tried to get away. The three of them ran down towards the deer.

"Git the hell away from my deer!" Malcolm cried out. One of the hunters was beginning to pull ahead, so Malcolm tried to trip him up and succeeded in slowing him down, but he slowed down himself allowing the other to get to the deer, pull out a knife and slit its throat.

"That was my deer!" Malcolm said, "Ya best back away from it."

"It is our deer. We have been tracking it for hours," the hunter closer to Malcolm said.

"It's not my fault ya could'nt catch it."

"Actually, we were about to snag it when you and your companion started breaking wood and spooked it," the hunter explained.

"Yeah, we thought you were goblins," the other hunter said.

Malcolm paused.

“It doesn’t matter. Ah hit it with my arrow.”

“So, did we. Why don’t we just split it? We really want the hide and antlers. So, we’ll take that and one third of the meat, and you can have the other two-thirds,” one of the hunters suggested.

Malcolm thought it over. “Fine,” he gave in.

As they cleaned and prepared the deer, the hunters introduced themselves as David and Andre.

“Well, you seem like a pretty good hunter. If you’ll be around for a while you can come by our cabin and we’ll show you where the best game is. You can even trap beaver and stuff further up the crick,” David explained.

“Aye.”

“You talk funny. Where are you from anyway?” Andre asked.

“The Dubh Moors. I’m here with a band that is going to help some kingdom further in-land.”

“You are gonna help a dwarven kingdom?” David asked incredulously.

“It is a human kingdom,” Malcolm replied.

“Human kingdom?” asked David. “What is it called?”

“Gothanius.”

“Never heard of it. As far as I know there are no human kingdoms in Derome-Delem. Are you sure it’s a kingdom? Do you mean the Far Shore League?”³⁰

“No, I don’t.”

“I think someone is pulling the wool over your eyes,” Andre said.

Malcolm shrugged his shoulders. “Didja say something 'bout goblins, before?”

“Yeah, we thought you and your friends were goblins, that is why we hesitated to come through the brush,” David explained.

“Are there a lot of goblins around here?” Malcolm asked.

“Not so close to town, usually, but ya never know. They kind of come and go. There is a standing bounty on them of one piece of silver per goblin ear. Left ear only,” said David. “It used ta just be ears, but people tried to double their money by bringing in two ears.”

“The bounty’s been around since our dads’ time,” said Andre. “But be careful, these goblins, the Na-Sor Tribe, are crafty and are likely to set an ambush.”

The three men spilt the deer and Malcolm returned to where he’d left Beorth.

³⁰ The Far Shore League is a loose confederation of towns on the western coast of Derome-Delem founded in 562 H.E.

Beorth got back to the camp just as Kazrack and Jana were placing the last rock in the fire circle. Devon's short companion had placed about two rocks and had left the work to the others. Beorth dropped his armful of wood, and Crumb said, "That isn't enough. You better go get more." The paladin immediately turned around and complied.

Beorth ran into Malcolm who was on his way back with deer meat over one shoulder and wood tucked under one arm. Beorth grabbed more wood.

Upon returning to camp, Crumb stopped Malcolm.

"When I ask you to do something for the group, I expect for it to be done right away," he said sternly. "That is not the share of wood you could carry, and you took way too long to do it."

Malcolm stared back at him, fuming.

"But you did bring back a deer, which is good of you. The men will appreciate some good venison after the ship's seven days of gruel."

Malcolm grunted and walked past Crumb, putting the deer down inside his tent, next to the resting Jeremy.

"Make sure nobody touches my deer," he said to Kamir.

"Okay, Malcolm. Whatever you want."

At dinner, Crumb's boys noticed that Crumb had hired on two cook/assistants who served the food and helped to keep the camp clean.

Malcolm, Chance, Beorth, Kazrack and Jana gathered together to eat.

"Ah met these hunters an' they said thar is a bounty on goblins 'round here," Malcolm told them. It sounded like he said "hoonters."

"Goblins?" Kazrack growled.

"They offer one piece of silver per goblin ear," Malcolm explained.

"Ah, we could be compensated for doing the world a service," said Kazrack.

"Do you think that would violate the terms of our contract?" Beorth asked.

"It says no brawling. We wouldn't be brawling,"

"And the local law is the one offering the bounty. We are well within the limits set by the contract. And goblins are a foul menace. We'd be helping the people of this town," Kazrack added.

"It's settled then," Malcolm said. "We'll hunt us some goblins tomorrow."

As Malcolm and Chance went to bed (Kamir was still stoking the central campfire and the smaller fires people had closer to their tents), Chance said, "Maybe you should give that deer for the camp to share like Crumb suggested." His version of Crumb's name sounded more like "Cram."

"Why should I?"

"To get in good with everyone `ere. Ya nevar know when ya might need some help, an' me dad always said, ya can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

Malcolm thought it over, and before retiring brought his venison over to the new cooks; making sure that they told everyone that he was the one who had caught it when it would be served for dinner the next day.

Anulem, 7th of Ese – 563 H.E.

Low grey clouds obscured Ra's Glory the next morning and the air had a refreshing edge of coolness to it.

Malcolm woke up as naked and stretching, walked over to the smoking remains of the campfire and relieved himself in the ashes. . . and then walking over to where the buckets of water were kept, dunked his head in one and flicked his hair back with a snap of his head.

He returned to his tent to get his kilt, waking Kamir who immediately got up to light the campfires. Jeremy stirred.

"Oh, are we there yet?"

"We're in Derome-Delem," Malcolm answered.

"Good, let me know when we get to the dragon. The way I feel I want to be the first one eaten," Jeremy said weakly.

"That'll be a relief to the dwarf," Malcolm said with a smile.

The camp began to awaken. Kazrack, Jana and Beorth decided to explore the town a bit and see what they could find out about the goblins and perhaps get provisions. Malcolm decided to seek out Andre and David's cabin and get directions to a place where goblins could be found.

The original trio of companions that first walked together to find the witch in Verdun, found themselves in a town hundreds of miles away from their place of origin. The streets were of raked dirt, with a cobbled market square that was just filling with vendors. They walked past a boarded-up inn that looked as if it had been partially burned.

"Probably goblins," said Kazrack.

Walking further up the street they came to another tavern called "The Gleaming Star."

A hand-written sign declared "*No dogs or Black Islanders Allowed.*" But since of the three companions, only Beorth could read, he swallowed his pride and went in with the other two to ask some questions.

The sound of scurrying rats greeted them as they entered the filthy establishment. The barkeep greeted them. He shoos a rat off the bar, and picking up a mug, he spit into it and wiped out the contents with a rag, placing it upside down on a tray of "clean" cups.

The barkeep knew little of the goblins but directed them to the Safehouse of the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant's Consortium only a few blocks north.³¹

The trio walked to the Safehouse, which was built as a small fort of grey stone with a gatehouse and towers. Just within the gate stood a black bearded dwarf in plate mail with a battle axe. Sweat streamed down his face.

"Well met!" called Kazrack.

"Aye, well met," the dwarf replied in dwarven.

"I am Kazrack Delver."

³¹ The Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium is a league of dwarven merchants who facilitate trade among dwarves in Derome-Delem and, to a much lesser extent, other parts of Aquerra.

“I am Captain Nerelor Threnegar,” the dwarf said. “Where do you hail from?”

“Originally my family is from Derome-Delem, but most recently I have lived in Verdun.”

“Verdun? Heh,” the dwarf spit. “It is good that you have been able to come back here to our homeland.”

“Yes, it pleases me to be back. I have not seen these lands since when my beard first started to come in. I hope to see a lot of our people’s strongholds while I am here.”

“Are you looking for work?” Threnegar asked.

“Um, no. I am working with a group of humans who are going to Gothanius to clear the land of a dragon.”

The dwarven captain was taken aback. “A dragon? Well, be careful, there are many that would want to take advantage of our kin.”

“I am always cautious. But I was wondering. Do you know anything about the goblins in this area?” Kazrack asked.

“Goblins? I know there are some, I guess. But I don’t think they are too much trouble. I spend most of my time here helping to guard the safehouse, so I don’t know much about the town. I sometimes travel from here to various strongholds, but we have everything we need in here.”

“Okay, thank you. How about provisions? Tools, and such – where can we find those?”

“Try the market. Or there is a shop just off the square called ‘*Metalgoods*’, it is run by a fine dwarven couple,” Threnegar answered.

“Okay, thank you very much.”

“The reason I asked you if you were looking for a job is because the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium is always looking for dwarven caravan guards, and it is a good way to see various dwarven strongholds and how our people live,” Threnegar said.

“Thank you for the offer, but I have this other commitment, but perhaps one day I will be able to accept it,” Kazrack replied.

“Well, you are welcome to come back for dinner and religious services at the temple we have in here. You can learn more about the N.D.M.C.”

“Could my companions come as well?” Kazrack gestured to Jana and Beorth who were just standing there wondering what the two dwarves were jabbering about in their native tongue.

“Dwarves only,” said Threnegar simply.

“Okay,” said Kazrack with a shrug. “Natan-ahb guard you.”³²

The three friends walked back towards the market, running into Malcolm who had made his way there after gaining the location of the goblins from Andre and David.

“Ach, the hunters said that it is only a few miles south along the shore. They are oft near an old mine whose entrance is in a ravine,” the skald said. “But that we should be careful `cause they ambush people a lot.”

³² Natan-ahb is the head of the dwarven pantheon of gods. Father and forger.

As the party stood about discussing going down there, Malcolm heard: “Ah, what a quaint little village market! Perhaps there is some local craftsman whose day I can brighten by purchasing some of his trinkets. . .”

It was Garcon.

“Who ya talkin’ to?” Malcolm asked.

“Ah, well when one speaks as sweetly as I, and has an adventurous life as I, there is required a bit of narration,” Garcon explained.

“You are daft!”

“So, you say. . . But I do note that one of these common peddlers is selling phials of fine smelling cologne. Excuse me, I must investigate and perhaps gain a new shirt made from that fine bolt of silk over there.”

He wandered off. The group walked back to the camp to collect their weapons and equipment to hunt the goblins. Realizing that they did not remember having seen Garcon once during the sea journey.

The four companions stopped at the camp where Kazrack went over his equipment carefully to make sure he had everything he could possibly need or want from his impossibly full pack. Chance joined them to bring them “a little luck and watch over the lass,” and off they marched into the dimly grey afternoon.

Malcolm took point to watch for ambush. Kazrack and Beorth followed at a distance of sixty feet and directly behind them were Chance and Jana.

“Now dontcha worry, lassie. If there’s trouble, I’ll handle it. Ya just stay by me, okay?” Chance said to Jana with a wink.

“Uh-huh,” was Jana’s only reply.

The party climbed a ridge to a grassy plateau that over-looked the grayness of the sea to their left. The place was wide open, and they cautiously crossed, remaining alert to the possibility of ambush. Coming down the other side of the hill Malcolm spotted the ravine that the hunters must have been talking about. The group walked into the brush that obscured the edge of it. And Malcolm volunteered to go ahead to see what he could.

The skald crept through the dry foliage to the edge of the ravine, keeping an arrow ready in his short bow.

The ravine floor was pebbly and could be accessed by means of a natural earthen ramp that ran parallel to the ravine and opened up just before where Malcolm crouched. Otherwise, it was a straight drop of about twenty-five feet. The opposite side of the ravine, which was covered in green thorny shrubs, had a less steep grade, but still seemed like a difficult climb.

On the ravine floor, Malcolm could see a strange ceremony in progress. Under the cloud cover that veiled the hated light of Ra’s Glory, there were a dozen or more short ugly brown-orange skinned creatures. All wore studded leather armor, except one who wore the furs of wolves and a necklace of small skulls around his neck. Goblins. Two were large for their kind, nearly five feet tall. They held spears and flanked a black slab of stone about two feet high. A small group of young goblins stood behind the stone and one at a time would step up onto it and kneel. Leaning forward, the goblin in the wolf’s fur would take the young goblin’s head in his hands and speak words in the foul goblin tongue. And then with a jerking motion, the young goblin’s head would be thrown back. Clutching the left side of his head, the young goblin would then step over to one of the flanking goblins take a spear and join a line of goblins that all looked just as dazed. They all held the left side of their heads, spears at their right side.

Malcolm slipped back to the group to tell them what he had seen. The party hesitated, not being sure how to approach the situation. Should they go down the ramp and risk getting picked off?

“Did they have missile weapons that you could see?” Kazrack asked.

“They had spears, but nothing else I could see,” Malcolm replied.

“Maybe we can get them to come charging up at us and mow them down when they get here. They’re goblins, they aren’t too smart,” Kazrack suggested.

“But they haven’t done anything yet,” Beorth interjected.

Kazrack turned about to explain the deep-seated evil that goblins represented when Jana spoke up.

“I think we have been spotted.”

The party turned to their left to see something moving through the branches of the foliage towards the ravine. It was a black bird of some kind.

“What should we do?” asked Beorth.

“Maybe we should run away,” suggested Chance.

Malcolm headed back into the brush, and Kazrack and Beorth followed, fanning out to the skald’s left. They got to the ravine edge to find two goblin warriors charging up the ramp at them. The five with spears, remained in a line looking dazed and clutching the sides of their heads. The goblin in furs moved to the ravine wall to keep out of sight of missile fire, while Malcolm shot arrows at the two charging goblins that passed by where he stood above them in the brush. They charged to meet Kazrack and Beorth in melee. One of the arrows nicked a goblin, but it did not break its charge.

The remaining young goblins that had been waiting their turn at the black stone fled, beginning to climb up the other side of the ravine. With a cry in the goblin tongue from the leader, the dazed goblins—having completed the ceremony of adulthood—dropped their hands from the sides of their heads and clutching their spears moved with incredible speed in an attempt to surround the would-be heroes.

The goblin leader spoke a word and pointed at Malcolm. The skald’s mind was momentarily clouded, allowing the young goblins to easily get around him.

Jana moved in behind Malcolm, who dropped his bow to pull his club and meet the goblins in close quarters.

“Wait, where are ya goin’? It isn’t safe,” Chance said, hesitantly following the young girl closer to the battle.

Kazrack and Beorth continued fighting the two more experienced goblin warriors who were being supported by the fresher recruits when they noticed an odd thing. The older goblins had a dry and ugly scar where their left ear should be, but the younger goblins had a fresh and still bleeding wound in the same spot.

“They cut off their own ears!” Kazrack cried.

The goblin in wolf skins stepped up to fill in behind the ranks of goblins that were surrounding Malcolm and stabbing furiously with their spears. He spoke three guttural words and pulling a skin from his belt took a deep swig. He leaned forward and spit a stream of acid onto Malcolm’s face and shoulders. The barbarian cried out in pain, as his skin burned and hissed. Droplets flicked off on contact and struck the nearby goblins as well and they cried out but did not stop trying to bring down the stocky moorsman.³³

³³ **DM’s Note:** This spell, *Acid Spittle*, can be found in *Sword & Sorcery’s Relics & Rituals*.

As Chance tried to convince Jana that they should step back into the thicker brush between hasty prayers to his god, the young Westronian, spoke her arcane words and flicked her hand in the direction of the obvious goblin spell-caster. However, he shrugged off the spell.

Malcolm dropped a goblin, and Kazrack and Beorth made quick work of those near them and moved to help their companions.

The tide of the battle was turning. The goblins who had fled made their way up the other side of the ravine and disappeared into the brush. Jana cast her spell again, and this time the goblin-sorcerer turned and fled. Malcolm and Beorth chopped down the last two goblins and took off after him. They caught up to him at the base of the other side of the ravine, but he turned and fled again. Malcolm took a swing at him, clipping him in the back, and Beorth tried for a blow to the head and missed. Barely slowed, the goblin leader took off for the cave entrance at the far end of the ravine. Again, Beorth and Malcolm took off after him, and Kazrack came barreling down the ramp to take to the chase as well, but his diminutive legs and heavy equipment slowed him.

Jana also started to make her way over there by running, but Chance only hustled, crouching behind the black stone altar-thing to watch the action.

Malcolm and Beorth wanted to stop the remaining goblin before he made it into the darkness of the cave but failed. They slowed down and entered more cautiously.

The dim light of the cloudy day only did so much to illuminate the inner portion of the cave, only revealing that about twenty feet in the cave widened to the left and right.

“And when the thegn stepped into the darkness of the shadow of the dragon, his shield did cast the shadow aside!” Malcolm intoned— and suddenly his club shone with a *light* that revealed even more of the cave. When he spoke, “stepped” sounded more like “steeped.”

Malcolm and Beorth crept into the gloom and suddenly the goblin leapt out surprising them and striking Malcolm with his club. Beorth moved in to take a swing with his quarterstaff, but the goblin took another swig from his wineskin and spit a stream of acid at the paladin. Beorth was able to turn away so that his armor took most of the spittle, but a drop landed on Malcolm as well.

There was a furious exchange of blows but the goblin in wolf skins was too quick to be hit. Still moving with unexpected deftness, he suddenly *disappeared*.³⁴ Beorth, having been trained to battle the undead within the darkness of crypts stopped to listen, but Malcolm swung wildly in the spot where the goblin had been a moment before. The skald screamed like a madman with the increasing rage of his people. The light that shone from his club made crazy shadows fly everywhere. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he did not feel his club connect with anything.

Kazrack ran into the cave, being able to move without fear because of his *darkvision*. He moved to his right and down the craggy corridor coming to a steep stairway going down. He paused there.

“Where did he go?” the dwarf asked.

“He disappeared,” Beorth replied.

Kazrack turned. Everyone paused, not sure of what to do next. Jana stepped into the cave and Chance followed saying, “Don’t go in there, Jana. It could be dangerous.” He stood just within the mouth of the cave.

Fortunately for the companions, years on the rough streets of Westron’s Thieves’ Quarter made Jana’s ears sharp and hearing a footfall pass her on the right she moved in that direction, hands forward. She felt herself bump up against someone she could not see and then felt the painful blow of a club, as the goblin-sorcerer came into view.

³⁴ **DM’s Note:** This spell *Disappear*, can be found in *Sword & Sorcery’s Relics & Rituals*.

The goblin tried to run back out of the cave, but Chance stepped in his way and took a wild stab with his dagger, which missed, but delayed the creature enough for Malcolm and Beorth to step up and finish it with a sickening crack from the skald's club.

As Kazrack began to search the body, taking a gold ring from the goblin's finger, Malcolm drew his bastard sword and placing its edge in the goblin's neck stepped on the blade to remove its head. Blood poured wildly from the neck stump.

"What are you doing?" Beorth cried.

Kazrack saw that the skull necklace had been cut loose by the barbarian's blade and lifted it up.

"Anyone want this?"

Jana took it without a word.

"Ahm taking the head as a trophy," Malcolm explained to Beorth.

"No, you are not. You cannot desecrate the dead that way," Beorth said.

"Wait, but they are just goblins," Kazrack said, joining the debate.

"It matters not. They were alive and now they are dead. Anubis would have it no other way," Beorth said. "Since we cannot easily bury them all, we must gather their corpses and create a pyre."

"What about taking their stuff? I mean this studded leather they wear is small but might have some value to us," Kazrack said, clutching the bag of fresh ears he found on the shaman as if they had already transmogrified into the silver coins they were worth.

"Wait, I don't care if he's the bloody High Priest of Ra, if he's dead he don't need his stuff an Ahm takin' it," Malcolm complained.

"You don't wanna make Anubis angry do you?" Chance asked.

"What about my ancestors? They'll laugh at me if I don't take a trophy," Malcolm said.

"I will not tolerate the dead being desecrated, but these goblins have not been interred yet, so their possessions are spoils of war, not part of their funerary accoutrements, so to take them is not to violate their graves," the follower of Anubis explained.³⁵

"This also applies to the ears, since they were taken before the goblins died and by their own hands. However, I do believe that we should take a portion of whatever spoils we gain and donate it either to a local temple or to the town's effort to defend itself from the goblin menace."

Malcolm began to gather the goblin bodies in a pile on the ravine floor to burn but searched each quickly and as inconspicuously as possible for whatever treasure they might have. He found none.

"I will agree, but if I were someone else, I would say that you should make the donation out of your own share," Kazrack said to Beorth.

"I already plan to make a donation over and above whatever we agree on."

Malcolm and Kazrack each took a sample of the goblin studded leather, which amazed Kazrack in its quality.

³⁵ Believers in Ra's Pantheon hold those interred with personal effects have spiritual equivalents of those things with them in the afterlife, and to disturb the things in this world is to disturb their rest.

“Goblins cannot make such things, they must have bought it or traded for it. Do you think they could have chopped their own ears off to pay for their armor?” Kazrack mused.

No one seemed willing to follow up on this speculation. Jana picked up the goblin leader’s club for herself and after setting fire to the goblin bodies (sending a column of smoke way up into the dark clouds) the five companions headed back to camp, Malcolm wondering aloud what would be found in the cave when they came back to explore it.

End of Session #3

AQUERRA

Session #4

As the five companions walked back to camp the dark clouds let loose with a soft constant rain that increased in strength the closer they got to shelter.

“Today is Remembrance Day,”³⁶ said Beorth. “I am going to go to the temple of Anhur when we get to town to give respects for brave warriors who have fallen in battle.”

Most of the rest of the group were more concerned with cashing in on the goblin ears, though Kazrack wanted to warn the town guard about the goblins’ resources—their ability to make or trade for armor of excellent quality. So as Beorth went off to pay his respects, Kazrack, Malcolm and Jana went to the local guard house. Chance went back to the camp to look in on Jeremy.

At the guardhouse, the companions were informed that the bounty was only six pieces of copper per ear. The one silver piece bounty was only during times of emergency, when goblins were a serious problem, which was not the case.

“What about this?” Kazrack said, showing them the studded leather armor, obviously good craftsmanship.

“I am not in a position to determine that this an emergency, but I will express your concern to my lord, and it is in his power to do so. May I take this armor as evidence?” the captain asked.

“Will we get the difference in the cost of the bounty if the lord declares an emergency?” Kazrack asked.

“That is doubtful, since the state of emergency had not been declared when the ears were collected,” the guard explained.

“But it is in his power to change that. He can do it according to his discretion?” Kazrack said, pushing.

“Yes, I will mention it to him. Jack is a fair man, and he will give it serious thought, though I cannot promise anything.”

“I will give you the armor for twenty pieces of silver,” Kazrack offered.

“We do not wish to buy the armor. It will be returned to you once the Lord has examined it,” the captain explained.

Kazrack harrumphed and handed over the bag of ears and placed the armor on the desk. The captain looked in the bag and with a look of disgust tossed the bag to his assistant, “That’s really disgusting! Get rid of those!”

Malcolm took the copper and divided it among the three of them, giving Beorth and Chance’s share to Kazrack to hold when the dwarf insisted.

“Actually, I’m surprised that you got any ears at all. Everyone around here knows that for generations the Na-Sor Goblins chop off their own ears in defiance of the bounty. Sometimes the locals trick foreigners to go hunting for the ears for laughs,” the captain said, trying to hold back a snicker.

“Well, you should stop them from doing that. Someone could get hurt,” Kazrack said, offended.

“Technically, they are not breaking the law, and no one forces people to go hunt goblins. They choose to.”

Kazrack harrumphed again, “I’ll be back to find out what your Lord said.”

³⁶ Remembrance Day is a holiday in honor of Anhur (God of Honor & Battle). This day is spent mourning over fallen heroes and soldiers and honoring the memory of worthy opponents.

Outside the rain showed no signs of stopping, making the streets of Cutter Jack's a muddy mess. The trio walked down the main street and passed by a place called the White Flag. It was packed with sailors, and they recognized two members of the Sea Cow's crew standing in the shelter of the doorway smoking pipes. Jana decided she was too cold and wet to continue and wanted to stop in for a warm meal and a mead. The other two continued on their way, heading to the '*Metalgoods*' shop to get supplies to repair their armor.

Jana shook off her wet cloak and could feel the eyes of many sailors on her as she walked over to an empty spot at the bar. All the tables were full, and men whooped and hollered and sang and gave toasts. The barkeep brought Jana her mead and a plate full of steamed crabs, which she happily cracked open and ate with relish. Crabs are a favorite food in Westron, and she had never had any quite like these.

From one crowded corner, Jana could hear men cheering especially loudly after occasional quiet, this rhythm broken up by grunting and jeers. She turned to look and saw a bunch of men crowded around one table. From within the ring, Devon emerged, his sweaty muscled arms above his head in triumph. "I win again!" he cried. Jana noticed that Devon's handsome companion was standing by, watching the arm-wrestling from the ring of men, while the short ugly one sat by himself, quietly, in another corner.

She turned back to her food and drink. As she placed the last husk of a crab on her plate, she heard a voice to her right.

"Mind if I join you for a minute?" the voice said. She turned to see Devon's handsome companion, sitting in the stool beside her.

"No one is sitting there," she said rather curtly.

"Thank you," he said in a polite tone. "May I buy you a drink?"

"I'm fine," Jana replied, gesturing to her mug.

He ordered an ale, and taking a big swig and sighing, he turned to the pretty young girl again.

"I wanted to apologize to you if you were offended by anything my companion, Devon, said or did," the man said. "He kind of thinks with his mouth instead of his head. I try to keep him in line, sometimes I feel like his bloody mother."

Jana smiled at this, and he returned her smile.

"I can see how you would have your work cut out for you," Jana said. He laughed.

"I'm Markle, by the way. I don't think we've been properly introduced," he put out his hand to shake and Jana obliged him.

"I'm Jana."

"Lovely name," he took another sip of ale. "I was wondering what a girl like you was doing here with us? Going to Gothanius... It is not as if you had to escape conscription."

"I just was tired of Herman Land. I wanted to see a little of the world."

"Where in Herman Land are you from?"

"Westron."

"Oh," Markle paused, as if deep in thought.

"It is just that... well, I know you've signed a contract and all, but some of these small backwards kingdoms aren't as cosmopolitan as Westron or Verdun. They don't see women as being worthy of being treated with respect like I do." He smiled, sipped, and continued. "You may be promised something, but I would not be surprised if they tried to deprive you of it."

"I had thought of that possibility," Jana said, sipping her mead slowly.

"Well, my friends and I know that seemingly limited opportunities like this might lead to more opportunities and so we keep our eyes open. And I think," He paused "That there might be room for you to take advantage of these opportunities as well."

Jana took it in but did not reply.

"I just don't want you to be left out. Your chosen friends might mean well, but they are little naïve. Their antics are only going to get them into trouble. Hunting goblins? Seems like fun until someone ends up dead. Too high a risk for too little profit if you ask me. You'll do well to stay away from such endeavors."

"I was thinking that as I sat here and ate," Jana replied.

"Well, I don't want to bother you too much, so I'll let you go, but if there is any way I can help you let me know," Markle said, placing some coins on the bar. "Barkeep! Her next drink is one me!"

He made to walk off, and Jana said to him, "If I can help you with one of these opportunities, please let me know."

Markle smiled and nodded and returned to his companions.

"I win again!" cried Devon. "Come on! Come on! Who's next? I'll beat anybody!"

Jana finished her drink and slipped the coins Markle left on the bar into the folds of her skirt, slipping back through the rain to the camp.

Chance got back to the tent to find a wakeful and confused Jeremy.

"Where have you all been?" Jeremy asked groggily.

"We went ahuntin' goblins," Chance said.

"Goblins? Are they nearby?" Jeremy asked.

"No, we had to walk miles to find them in this ravine and there were dozens of them all over the place, but I fought off a bunch wit' me daggers, shifting back and forth, protecting the lass and making them fear me blade. The others did okay, too. Ya shoulda seen me face off the goblin warlock! I kept him from escaping even though he was using his foul magicks."

"Where is everybody else?" Jeremy asked.

"In town collecting the reward. Ya hungry? I'm hungry. We missed dinner."

Chance stuck his head out of the tent flap. "Kamir! Fetch us some stew or something. A bowl for me and a bowl for me sick friend here."

"Right away, Chance!" Kamir said, dropping his endless task of keeping the fires burning despite the rain.

Malcolm and Kazrack returned from haggling with Oleg the dwarf at the Metalgoods shop for some supplies, and Kazrack immediately retired to his tent to work on his armor.

Malcolm entered the tent he shared with Chance, Kamir and Jeremy.

“Jeremy! Yer awake man! Good to see it!” Malcolm cried. “Where’d ya get the food?”

“Kamir brought it to us,” Chance said.

Malcolm stuck his head outside of the tent flap, “Kamir! Get me some stew! And a piece of bread! And something to drink!”

“Okay,” said Kamir with a lack of energy. He had just been on his way back to the tent to get some sleep.

Malcolm turned back to his friends, ‘That’s a good lad.’

“So, what’s this about goblins?” Jeremy asked his barbaric friend.

“Aye, we fought goblins an’ there was eh foul witch of a goblin, but we killed them all. An’ we’re gonna go back tomorrow to hunt some more!”

“We are?” Chance asked.

“Of course we are. Ya feelin’ well enough to come with us?” Malcolm asked Jeremy. When he said, “course” it came out like “karss.”

“I guess I will go. Someone has to watch your back,” the blonde Neergaardian said.

“That’s the spirit!” Malcolm said.

Kamir entered the tent spreading mud all around making it difficult to feel comfortable in the already damp and cramped tent. Malcolm took off all his clothes and slept on his folded kilt, naked as the day he was born, his feet resting near Kamir’s head. Chance and Jeremy slept close together to one side trying to stay as far away from Malcolm as possible.

Outside the rain increased and decreased in intensity in soothing waves broken only by intermittent thunder – but it never stopped.

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The sound of thunder cracking open the still dark grey sky awoke everyone to the realization that the rain still showed no sign of stopping. Jeremy and Chance awoke in cold puddles of rain that had run down the sides of their leaky tent and collected beneath their bodies. Malcolm did not seem to either mind or notice, waking with a sudden stretch and stepping outside naked as he always did, to greet the day.

Malcolm retrieved some drinking water and splashed some on the ‘important spots’ on his body, and then walked over to Jana’s tent to wake her to get ready for some more goblin hunting.

“Jana! Wake up! Time to go a huntin’ again!” he cried at the entrance to her tent.

The young girl looked outside to find the bare barbarian standing in the rain. She looked him up and down, taking in his hairy and stocky form, not shying away for one second—then she met his eyes unashamedly.

“There is no reason to go back. No more ears, no more reward,” the girl explained.

“Thar’s a whole lair of ‘em there to be explored,” Malcolm explained.

“There is no way you’re gonna convince me to go into a goblin lair. I do not have a death wish,” Jana said.

“But the goblins be a danger to everyone in this. We have to do something,” Malcolm tried, changing tactics.

“I don’t see that at all. *We* had to go find *them*,” Jana said. “I am not going. There is no reason for us to risk our lives and definitely no reason for me to risk *my* life.”

Malcolm gave up and walked (still naked) across the muddy space between their tents to awaken Kazrack. The dwarf was already up and getting his things ready.

“Jana doesn’t want to come,” Malcolm told him.

Kazrack shook his head, more at Malcolm’s nudity than his news. “Go get dressed, I’ll convince her,” he said.

The dwarf walked over to the human girl’s tent.

“Jana, Malcolm said you do not want to accompany us to hunt more goblins,” he told her.

“Yep,” she said shortly.

“But the goblins are a danger to the town and the people here,” the dwarf said.

“Maybe they are, maybe they aren’t. Still no reason to risk my life going into a goblin lair.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, there is no way you can convince me,” she came out of her tent to get ready for breakfast. “And if you ask me, you all shouldn’t go either.”

By this time Chance and Jeremy had exited their tent, and Malcolm followed draping his kilt over his hairy body. The rain had become an annoying and obscuring mist that made them blink a lot.

“Jana isn’t going?” Jeremy asked.

“No, I’m not,” she said.

“Well, if she’s not goin’, Ahm not goin’” Chance said matter-of-factly.

“Why?” asked Jeremy.

“‘Cause I’d only be going to protect her, and if she’s not goin’ I have to stay here to watch over her.”

Jana smirked.

“What do we need for her to come for anyway? She’s just a girl. What can she do?” Jeremy said.

“She’s a wizard,” Kazrack replied.

“I am?” Jana said.

“She is?” Malcolm and Jeremy both said at once with great surprise.

“I am *not* a wizard,” Jana insisted.

“Of course ya not. Wizards use foul spells ta make people do things they don’t want to do and summon up demons an’ such. Ya don’t do that eh girl?” Malcolm said.

“I am not a wizard. I don’t know where he got this idea,” she pointed at Kazrack.

“Of course, she isn’t a wizard. Women can’t be wizards, they can only be wit...” Chance swallowed his last words but looked sharply at Jana.

She returned his gaze without wavering.

“What did ya say?” Malcolm asked his countryman.

“Nuthin’,” Chance replied.

“Well, then if she is not a wizard, she shouldn’t come. She’ll just be in danger and get in the way,” Jeremy concluded.

“That is fine, because I am not going. I am not so greedy and blood-thirsty to risk my life for what? The chance that they might have some treasure in their lair?” Jana said.

“We’re not goin’ into the lair!” Malcolm said vehemently.

“We’re not?” Jeremy said.

“Of course not!” Malcolm elbowed Jeremy. “We have no intention of doin’ so. We’re just gonna look around an’ see if there be more scarin’ up trouble.”

“I’m still not going,” Jana said stubbornly. “And I’ll say again, I don’t think you should go.”

“We have to go,” Kazrack said. “What about the armor the goblins had? Someone or something is supplying them. We need to investigate it for the good of this town.”

“How does the good of this town concern me?” and with that she slipped, annoyed, back into her tent.

“Well, I’d love to go with ya, but if she’s nut goin’, I can’t go,” Chance said.

“Whatever, Chance, we don’t care if you come,” Kazrack said.

“Okay, okay. . . I’ll try and convince her,” Chance slipped into Jana’s tent.

Inside, Jana was getting her issued bowl and spoon together, since the breakfast bell would be rung soon.

“Listen, I just wanted to tell ya that I think it’s a good idea that yer not goin’ huntin’ goblins,” Chance told her softly. “They’re crazy ta wanna go, it’ll be dangerous.”

“Yes, Chance I know,” Jana said, exasperated.

“Well, then...” Chance spoke more loudly now to be heard outside of the tent. “If that’s yer final answer I understand.”

He came back outside.

“Nope, I cannot convince her,” he said.

“Fine,” Kazrack said. “Let’s go find Beorth.”

The three of them walked towards town.

“And we need to buy a lantern,” Malcolm said.

“For what?” asked Jeremy.

“Far when we go into the lair, of course.”

Malcolm, Jeremy and Kazrack found Beorth at the temple of Anhur. They walked through the open courtyard of clay,³⁷ passing the statue of the great bald and spear-toting god, and they knocked on the door. The priest there, Greglon, showed them into a finely appointed wood-paneled parlor, where Beorth was enjoying a breakfast of fluffy biscuits with jam, eggs with sausage, and tea.

“I see you’ve had a better breakfast than we have,” Jeremy said, stomach rumbling.

“I’m sorry. Greglon and I were talking way into the night, exchanging stories about brave warriors who honorably fought their way into Anubis’ Realm and finally it just made sense for me to stay the night here.”

“We came to get you because we are going after the goblins again,” Kazrack said.

“We are?” Beorth was puzzled. “Why?”

“They are a danger to the town, and it is our duty to do something about it,” Kazrack continued.

“Well, shouldn’t the authorities be alerted?” the paladin asked getting up.

“They have been, but the lousy bastards won’t do nothing ‘bout it yet,” Malcolm interjected.

“I’m not sure this is the best course of action, but if you are going then I’m afraid I must go as well to ensure that no bodies are defiled.” Beorth shot a glance at Malcolm. “And to help ensure that you do not go to meet my master too quickly.”

Beorth began to gather his things. “Will Jana be joining us?”

“She doesn’t want to come for some reason,” Kazrack said.

“Who cares? She’s a girl. But since she’s not coming Chance isn’t coming,” Jeremy said.

“Well, Chance...” Beorth sighed as if to say, *‘what difference does that make?’* He continued, “But perhaps I can convince her to come with us when we stop at camp. Her healing skills might come in necessary if the tide of battle turns against us. Speaking of which...”

Beorth looked at both Kazrack and Malcolm. Seeing that Malcolm was still slightly wounded from the previous day’s engagement. He said, “Malcolm, bow your head.”

The skald obliged him, and Beorth placed his hands upon his head.

“Anubis, please strengthen this man’s corporeal form so that he may not come to meet you before his appointed time.”

³⁷ Temples of Anhur often have open clay courtyards for daily martial practice and sparring.

Malcolm felt the sudden discomfort of some of his wounds healing quickly and stretched to get out the sudden kinks in his muscles. "Thank Anubis," he said with a smirk.

The four of them headed back to camp, stopping only to buy a lantern, which Kazrack added to the collection of things he would keep on his overfilled pack.

Meanwhile, Jana was waiting in line to get the hard biscuits and watery gravy that was being served for breakfast at the camp, when she overheard two of Crumb's boys talking ahead of her.

"I'm telling you Finn, they left very early this morning, before dawn," the one closer to Jana said.

"Hunting goblins?" the one named Finn asked, he had black hair and that permanent tan of a sailor. "Are they stupid or something? They'll get themselves killed!"

"Well, they heard some other guys did it. You know, Malcolm and those guys? And they thought, they could do it too."

"I hope for their sake they don't run into any goblins. This is bad," and they got their gravy and biscuits.

Jana wondered who else would be stupid enough to go after goblins as well, as she walked back to her tent in the misty rain, her plate sopping with biscuits drowned in gravy. Instinctively, she looked around to see if anyone she recognized was missing.

At that moment, Chance came running up to her. Gravy stained his chin.

"Jah-na! Jah-na! Did ya here? It is all over the camp. Some of the others went out to hunt the goblins!"

"I know, I heard," Jana said.

"What are we gonna do? They could be in danger," Chance said betraying his obvious anxiety.

"Well, the others have already left, so maybe they'll catch up to them and send them back," Jana reasoned.

"Ah hope so, but they said they left very early," Chance said. "Maybe we should go after them to warn them."

"I think the smartest thing is to just wait. It is best that we don't wander around by ourselves."

"Ah hope you're right."

The others returned with Beorth and collected their things. Beorth sought out the young girl from Westron. And he was having little luck convincing her to come along as well.

"Honestly, Beorth I am surprised you are going with them. It only encourages them," Jana said, not caring that the others were there to hear her.

"I must go to ensure that both justice and my god's will are served," Beorth replied.

"And he's got to help the others that went ahead," Chance interjected.

"What others?" asked Kazrack.

"It turns out some of the others decided to hunt some goblins for themselves," Jana explained.

"Oh no, they could be in danger," Beorth said.

“We’ll find them and send them back,” Kazrack said.

“Ya know, Jana, maybe we *should* go. If someone is hurt, they might need your skills,” Chance said quietly to the girl. “We both know those kids could get slaughtered by those goblins.”

Jana sighed, and finally relented, “If and when we find them, we come right back, okay?”

Most of the group agreed, though Malcolm’s agreement was muffled.

As they began to retrace their steps of the previous day, thunder exploded, and the rain picked up strength once more.

The group fell into what now seemed like normal marching order. Malcolm was out in front scouting, while Jeremy walked alone between Beorth and Kazrack. Jana and Chance took up the rear.

The rain kept coming down. Malcolm crept ahead towards the high clearing where he should have been able to see the ocean to his left, but he saw nothing but a blurred grey with no differentiation that could be called a horizon.

Up ahead, he saw the lump of a tarp of some kind; figures were cowering beneath. Malcolm waved his companions forward and stepped up to the tarp.

“Who’s there?” a frightened voice called out.

“Malcolm,” the skald said, and he tried to pull off the tarp, but whoever was below held on too tightly.

John and Guisel looked up meekly from beneath the tarp. Carlos was tucked in behind them. Kazrack and the others approached.

“Oh, Malcolm! Thank Ra you found us! There were goblins everywhere it was terrible,” John said.

“Yeah, we thought a couple of goblins would be no trouble. We’re going to find a dragon, aren’t we? But oh, it was worse than terrible. They came out of everywhere,” Guisel added.

“Where was this?” Kazrack asked.

“By a ravine not far from here,” Guisel said. “We thought we’d split up to find them easy and then they started shooting arrows at us!”

“*Si! Si! Era horrible! Empesaron a venir de cada lado. Cúcos! Cúcos!*” Carlos cried in his native tongue.

Malcolm tried yanking the tarp off again and failed.

“Do you want to come back with us?” Kazrack asked.

“No!” said Guisel. “There are still two of us back there though.”

“Dunkle and Doris,” added John.

“When the goblins came out, they were at the bottom of the ravine and we were forced to leave without them,” Guisel explained.

“You left without them?!” Beorth said, trying to hide his disdain.

Jana smirked.

“What else could we do?” John pleaded.

Malcolm tried to pull the tarp off of them again, and yet still failed.

“Get up!” he roared. “Git back to the camp!”

The three got up with a start and started moving back towards the direction of the camp. Kazrack stopped Carlos.

“Do you want to come with us? You can fight,” the dwarf asked.

Carlos just shook his head in fear and jogged to catch up to the shelter of the tarp his friends still held.

“What a fine lot of heroes Crumb has collected himself, huh?” Kazrack said more to himself than the others. “We had best hurry. The others might be dead already.”

With that the six of them began to hustle towards the ravine. Moving down the ridge, they could see the mist-shrouded rocky out-cropping that stood above the gully and cave entrance. Kazrack called the group to stop, but Jeremy kept on going eager to find out what had happened to the others.

“Somebody stop him,” the dwarf hissed. “They could be waiting in ambush for us. We should go around the back side of the hill and try to get high ground.”

“I’ll go,” Beorth offered.

“No, let Malcolm go, he runs faster,” Kazrack said, and with that the skald took off telling the others he’d meet them at the other side of the rocky hill.

Malcolm poured on the speed trying to trip Jeremy once and failing, and finally grabbing hold of his shoulder and spinning him around, not far from where the party had fought their battle on the previous day.

“Ya bloody git! Whadya doin’? Ya can’t be running off by yourself that way,” Malcolm said.

“Where is everyone else?” Jeremy asked.

“They went around the other way. Ya woulda known that if ya’d listened.”

“Oh, I . . .”

And with that a rain of arrows came flying through the misty air at the two companions. The rain and fog made it hard to see the exact direction they came from, but it was somewhere to the right. Jeremy dropped prone, while Malcolm ran behind a nearby tree to attempt to get cover, but it was too late they both felt the sting of arrows and already their blood was flowing, however lightly.

“Get back here, ya bloody git!” Malcolm cried to his friend.

Jeremy began to crawl on his stomach into the cover of the brush. He could feel arrows bite at his feet as he did so; more arrows thunked into the trunk of the tree Malcolm was standing beside. Not satisfied with his progress, Jeremy got up and dove into the brush beneath Malcolm. While they knew the general area that the arrows were coming from, the mist obscured the exact spot.

“They’re shooting arrows at us!” cried Malcolm hoping his friends would hear, but unfortunately, they did not.

Kazrack and Beorth began to climb the rocky hill from the other side, with Jana and Chance behind them. This side of the barren hill was a series of small plateaus at varying heights, and mist clung all around it, obscuring vision. They had made their way halfway up when arrows began to fall among them as well.

Kazrack tried to find a way to get to where the arrows came from, fanning to the right. Beorth, Chance and Jana continued straight on, and the gambler paid the price for this wager. In a second, Chance cried out and dropped to the ground, the bite of two arrows drawing blood. He placed his back to a plateau wall to stay out of their sight.

“Ah’m gravely wounded!” he cried out.

Kazrack began to supply cover fire with his crossbow from his vantage point, while Beorth and Jana climbed up to the very top of the hill, above the goblins that were firing at them. Unfortunately, when they stepped up there, looking to see how to get down to where the goblins were, there were two things they did not expect. The first was another rank of goblins behind those that were firing. These goblins turned from where they were firing at Jeremy and Malcolm and fired point blank at the two of them, injuring them. In addition, at that moment a second volley of arrows came from another direction, somewhere across the ravine, and more blood flowed. Disabled, Jana dropped to the rocky ground.

Jeremy and Malcolm had been looking out from behind their cover, trying to determine where the arrows had been coming from to no avail. However, they could see Beorth standing above the mist on the highest plateau and the direction he was looking, so they had an idea of where the goblins might be. Malcolm decided to take his chance and drawing his bastard sword ran full speed towards the top of the hill. Suddenly, another rain of arrows came out of the mist from another direction, peppering him, but he did not stop until he had leapt from plateau to plateau and stood among the three original goblins. One had been killed by a crossbow bolt from Kazrack. The goblins dropped their bows and pulled clubs.

Chance poked his head up over the edge of the plateau having heard Jana cry out and seeing her on the ground, climbed up and shielded her body with his.

“Don’t move,” he said to her, but she had no intention of moving, the slightest strain would aggravate her wounds, and she would most likely bleed to death.³⁸ “Sometimes, when you’re lucky, what seems like a bad wound can turn out to really just be a scratch.” Jana felt Chance’s touch grow warm and her wounds began to close. She looked at the gambler through narrowed eyes.

Kazrack leapt down to the ground level, thinking he’d find another way around and up at the goblins, but he twisted his ankle and fell to one knee. Jeremy followed Malcolm but was also shot by arrows that came out of the mist. The Neergaardian drew his long sword and short sword and arrived beside his companion. Now, he and the skald and the Ghost-hunter of Anubis surrounded the three goblins. However, Kazrack could see four more goblins with bows emerging from the brush near where Jeremy and Malcolm had been hiding. Stepping into the brush on his own right, he leaned his halberd against a tree, fell to one knee and began to fire his crossbow at them. They fired as well, but the arrows got caught up in the brush, and failed to hit him. Kazrack’s aim was true and one of the goblins dropped with a single shot.

Atop the rocky hill, the three companions were having a hard time with the three goblins. Jeremy and Beorth were both trying fancy double blows from their weapons and failing to make contact. One of the goblins dealt a heavy blow to Malcolm’s brow, drawing blood.

Jana pushed Chance off of her and rolled over to the edge of the plateau to see what was happening in the battle. She mumbled her arcane words, but none of the goblins seemed to take notice.

Finally, the three warriors were able to fell the three goblins. Beorth immediately charged down the hill, leaping and bounding to support Kazrack, thinking that the danger was over at the top of the hill.

But the follower of the Jackal god was wrong, for in that same moment Chance began a stuttered cry...

³⁸ **DM’s Note:** Jana was *disabled*, at 0 hit points.

“There’s more coming!”

Jana turned to look. Four more goblins armed with bows were hustling up the south side of the hill. These must have been the source of the second flight of arrows.

Malcolm climbed up to where Jana and Chance were, but Chance in fear for his life dropped down, getting in the way of Jeremy who was trying to find a way up. Before they knew it, the goblins were upon Malcolm and Jana. Jana had her club at the ready and smacked one hard, knocking it down, but it got up rather quickly returning the blow. Malcolm fought fiercely, swinging his bastard sword wildly, but not to much effect. Jeremy finally began to climb up to them, when a goblin struck a lucky blow against Malcolm’s jaw, sending him reeling backward. The back of the barbarian’s head slammed against the stone with a crunch, and blood erupted from his brow wound. He lay still, and the goblin that dealt the blow stepped over him towards Jeremy who came up onto the plateau.

Meanwhile, Kazrack had rushed out his hiding place in the brush to charge a goblin with his halberd, shoving the broad blade deep into the creature and flinging it up and over his head like a rag doll. Now he and Beorth were fighting side by side against the two remaining goblins that were down there with them.

Jana and Jeremy continued to fight two goblins, one of the other two waited to move into the action, but the fourth still had his bow out and as Beorth dropped the last goblin before him, he felt the bite of a goblin arrow. Reaching pathetically for the arrow in his back he slowly turned and dropped, disabled, to the ground.

“No!” cried Kazrack, and pulling his crossbow began to fire bolts up at the goblin.

Jeremy sliced deeply across one goblin’s belly with his long sword, and another stepped up, striking a firm blow to the warrior’s hip. Keeping his balance Jeremy swung again, but the blow was parried.

Jana crushed the skull of her opponent and moved to tend to Malcolm’s wounds. All this time Chance was trying to climb back up to offer help once he heard Malcolm fall, but the slippery stone and constant rain conspired against his efforts.

One of Kazrack’s bolts found its target and another goblin dropped. The remaining goblin turned and ran, but passing Jana she quickly swung out her club, crushing its kneecap and knocking it face first into the stone, where it lay motionless.

“Quick, do something. Help Malcolm!” Jeremy cried. He kneeled on the other side of his friend and tried to help the young healer, but his lack of knowledge was obvious.

“Stop!” Jana said to him. “If I need your help, I’ll ask for it.”

The blood kept on pouring out, blue, black and red. The skald’s eye was scarred, his breath a thin wisp of steam in the cold air.

Kazrack knelt beside Beorth. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll be okay. I just need some help to move,” the paladin said, trying to get up.

“Just sit still,” the dwarf said.

“Chance,” Kazrack cried up. “Come help me with Beorth!”

Chance obeyed and came down the hill towards the dwarf.

Jana’s attempts to aid Malcolm became more frantic. She pressed an absorbent herbal leaf on the wound. Smearred it with a poultice made of berries meant to help coagulation. But more blood began to pour from the skald’s nose, and then he coughed a bubble of bright red blood. Malcolm’s face looked like one enormous bruise.

And with one last raspy breath, he stopped breathing all together.

Jana and Jeremy just stopped and looked down at their former friend. Kazrack and Chance walked up, carrying Beorth between them.

“How is Malcolm?” Kazrack asked.

There was a long silent pause, the constant rain was the only sound as it fell into Malcolm’s still open and now lifeless eyes.

“He’s dead,” Jana said quietly.

“Whut? No...” Chance said, and helping Beorth to sit, he sat down as well and buried his face in hands, saying it again. “No.”

“Are you sure?” Kazrack asked. “Isn’t there anything you can do?”

“I have done all I can. The bleeding was mostly internal. There is little to be done about such things.”

Suddenly, Jeremy leapt up from where he sat.

“He can’t be dead! He can’t be dead! I was supposed to watch his back. Do something!” he grabbed Malcolm’s corpse and shook it. Tears flowing down his now ruddy cheeks, his blonde hair plastered to his forehead by the rain.

“Jeremy, stop. It’s over,” Jana said, placing her hand on his arm.

Jeremy roared in frustration. He grabbed one of the goblin corpses and made to toss it off the side of the hill in anger. Beorth moved to stop him, running to tackle the young Neergaardian, but the sudden action aggravated his wounds. The paladin wrapped his arms around Jeremy only to collapse. Blood billowed from the wound in his back, and Jeremy paused to look down at the crumpled form, however, even as Jana ran over to bind Beorth’s wounds before he bled to death, Jeremy tossed the body over the side and pulling his sword, sunk it repeatedly and violently into all the bodies of the goblins that were about. After a moment or two of this he collapsed as well, dropping his sword and burying his face in one hand.

Kazrack decided that he would gather the goblin bodies in order to burn them, so that Beorth would not see their desecration if he were to awaken. After making a pile not far from where Jana tended to Beorth, the dwarf walked down towards the ravine floor to retrieve the body Jeremy had tossed. He was surprised to find a human corpse beside the altar stone the goblins had used in the previous day’s rite of passage. Kazrack recognized it as one of Crumb’s boys, perforated by many arrows. He shook his head.

“Hello?” he heard a voice call out from the entrance to the cave where they had fought the goblin warlock. The dwarf hefted his halberd and walked closer to investigate.

“Someone there?” the dwarf called.

“Kazrack?” said an unfamiliar voice, and another of Crumb’s boys emerged from the cave mouth’s darkness. Kazrack recognized the boy’s face but knew not his name.

“Are there any more goblins out there?” the boy asked.

“They are all gone for now. My companions and I killed them. What are you doing?” Kazrack asked.

“I was hiding from the goblins. They came out of nowhere...everywhere and this seemed like shelter, so I came in here. Have you seen Dunkle? The last I knew he was crouched behind that square black stone.”

“He is dead,” Kazrack said simply.

The boy cringed backward toward the cave mouth. “What? No! Oh, no! Not Dunkle! No,” was all he could say.

“Where are you going?” Kazrack asked.

“I’ve gotta hide. There could be more goblins around. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die!” the boy became hysterical and sobbed, crouching back to the cave.

Kazrack stepped forward and grabbing the boy, shook him. “Listen. What’s your name?” he demanded.

“Doris.”

“Listen Doris, pull yourself together. There is no time for this. We have to get out of here. We have lost a friend as well.”

“Who?”

“Malcolm.”

“Oh, sweet Ra! Malcolm’s dead, too?” Doris sobbed.

“Come help me with your friend’s body. We need to get him out of here.”

“Leave the body. Let’s go. Let’s hurry up. I don’t want to die too.”

“No. Come help me,” the dwarf said.

In time, a stretcher was fashioned for Beorth to be carried back to camp without further harming him. Malcolm’s body was stripped, and Jeremy hefted his dead friend over one shoulder. Chance grabbed the skald’s bastard sword. Chance helped Kazrack with the stretcher, and Jana and Doris carried Dunkle’s body between them.

The walk back was long and hard, and the companions had to stop often in the rain to rest. Eventually, they made it back.

Among the first people they saw was Boris E. Crumb who happened to be returning to camp at the same time.

“What is going on?” the fat man asked in his basso voice.

“Goblins,” said Kazrack. “Beorth is injured and Malcolm and Dunkle are dead.”

“What!?” Crumb sighed “What in Set’s Realm were people doing wandering around after goblins for?”

“I don’t know. We went after them, but were too late to save Dunkle,” Kazrack tried.

“After you went off to hunt some goblins yourself, I’m sure. I know how it is. Well, this can’t be tolerated,” Crumb grunted, angrily. “Well take care of your injured friend and do something about the bodies. I’m gonna have to hold a meeting about this tomorrow. I can’t be letting my investments get killed on wild goose chases.”

He was already turning and walking away and mumbling as he finished.

Dunkle’s body was left at the camp, but Malcolm’s corpse and Beorth were brought into town to the temple of Anhur. There, Greglon of Anhur, showed them a room where Beorth could be laid in a bunk, and another where Malcolm’s body could be placed (after asking several questions about whether Malcolm had died as a brave

warrior). The militant of Anhur then went into the room with Beorth, asking the others to wait outside. In a few minutes he returned.^{39v}

“Beorth has been healed, but he needs his rest. He asked to speak with you, but keep in mind what I told you. I will give you a few minutes alone, but then I will ask you to leave,” Greglon said.

“Of course,” Kazrack agreed.

In the room Beorth tried to sit up, but failing merely turned his head and said weakly, “Malcolm is dead? I’m not sure of the last thing I remember.”

“Yes, he is dead. His body is here in the temple to be taken care of,” Kazrack said.

“We must burn him in a pyre as is the custom of his people,” Beorth said.⁴⁰

“Yes, that is what he would have wanted. Shall we try to arrange to send his stuff back to his kin?” the dwarf asked.

“I don’t think that it would matter even if we could,” Jeremy said. “He was exiled.”

“Then we will put his things to the fire as well,” Beorth said.

“Except his bastard sword. I’m keeping that,” Chance said.

And it was agreed. Chance, Jana and Beorth returned to camp, but Jeremy asked for and received permission to stay at the temple with Beorth, not wanting to be far from the body of his companion who he had loved.

At the camp, Kazrack found Kamir digging Dunkle's grave all by himself, the rain making the sides of the hole erode, even as he shoveled out the dirt. So, the dwarf helped.

End of Session #4

³⁹ Anhur’s priests are called Militants. They are fierce warriors known to go into a holy rage in battle.

⁴⁰ Monks and Paladins of Anubis study the funerary habits of many cultures.

Session #5

Isilem, the 9th of Ese – 564 H.E.

Shu did not seem to care that this was the day of a funeral, for he continued to send his rains down upon Aquerra mercilessly.⁴¹ Kazrack awoke and sighed, the memory of Malcolm's death re-entering his mind with his day's first breath. He got up and got dressed. He walked into town to find Beorth and see what help was needed with the funeral preparations. The camp was quiet.

At the Temple of Anhur, Beorth awoke to find Jeremy still sleeping, rolled into a ball in a bunk across the wood paneled room. He got down on his knees to pray, and then wrote of a list of things he needed for the funeral. As he was doing this, Kazrack arrived, shown in by Greglon of Anhur.

"We need to build a pyre for Malcolm," Beorth told his dwarven companion.

"I will help in any way I can," Kazrack said.

Jeremy awoke and sat up stretching.

"Good morning, Jeremy," said Kazrack.

"Oh, it is a beautiful day," Jeremy said through a yawn.

"It is still raining. The skies still cry for our fallen friend," Beorth said.

"No, it is a beautiful day. The sun feels warm," Jeremy insisted.

Kazrack looked at Beorth with a puzzled look and then back at the blonde Neergaardian.

"I'm hungry," Jeremy said, patting his stomach. "Malcolm is hungry too. I have to get him some food."

"What do you mean, Malcolm's hungry? Is that some kind of expression?" Kazrack turned to Beorth.

"Is that some kind of expression?" the dwarf asked again, this time of the paladin. The paladin shrugged his shoulders.

"He's hungry. I'm his friend, and I should get him something to eat. I'm gonna get him some him some haggis."

"Um. . . Jeremy? I'm sorry to tell you this, but don't you remember? Malcolm passed on yesterday," Kazrack said gently.

Jeremy stood. "Is there food here? I have to go to the inn to get him some food. He's really hungry."

"Oh, no. He's gone crazy. He's gonna try to eat rocks or something," Kazrack said to Beorth.⁴²

"Different people react to death differently. Often such a shock passes. Let's hope that is the case with our companion. You watch him and make sure he doesn't hurt himself. I have to prepare the body."

"Yes, I'll make sure he doesn't eat rocks or anything," Kazrack said, following Jeremy out.

Outside, Jeremy walked in his shirtsleeves in the cool rain, oblivious to it.

⁴¹ Shu is the god of Birds & Sky of Ra's Pantheon – twin to Tefnut (Goddess of Oceans). He is one of the five elemental gods of the pantheon.

⁴² "Eating rocks" is a dwarven expression meaning having lost your mind.

“It is a beautiful day. I hope they have something Malcolm likes at the inn. I don’t want him to be disappointed.”

“Is this some kind of custom of his people? Do you bury him with his favorite food for the trip to the afterlife or something?” Kazrack asked, nervously looking for any explanation of Jeremy’s behavior.

Jeremy stopped and looked at Kazrack, “Malcolm’s hungry. He wants to eat. I’m getting him food.” He continued to walk.

“Malcolm told you this?”

“Of course. Stop being stupid.”

Jeremy wandered in the rain for some more time, followed closely by Kazrack, and eventually made his way back to the temple, where he climbed back into his cot soaking wet and closing his eyes fell back to sleep.

Beorth emerged from preparing the corpse, dressing it properly, wrapping it in a death shroud. He explained to Kazrack what the pyre should be like: one pile of wood for each compass direction and one large one in the center to rest Malcolm’s body upon.

Kazrack went back to the camp and found Kamir. He explained to him what needed to be done, and the eager young lad began to gather wood from under the tarps where it was kept dry. Chance volunteered to help as well, and Jana went to the temple to watch over Jeremy and keep him out of trouble when he woke up. The rain let up slightly, allowing Kazrack and friends to set up the pyre without fear that the wood would get too wet.

When they were done, Kazrack and Chance went back to the Temple of Anhur. They found Beorth and Jana eating biscuits and jam and drinking tea, waiting for them.

Jeremy woke up, “Morning, still raining, huh?”

“Is Malcolm still hungry?” Kazrack asked Jeremy hesitantly.

“That’s not funny,” Jeremy said in a voice of anger.

“Huh?” Kazrack was dumb founded. “Don’t you remember getting up before? Walking around to get Malcolm something to eat?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Jeremy insisted.

“You must have been walking in your sleep,” Beorth said.

“I don’t do that.”

“Well, anyway, it is time for the funeral,” Beorth said, and with that they placed Malcolm’s body in a wheelbarrow and rolled it over to the camp where the funeral would take place.

All of Crumb’s boys gathered around the pyre, which was right beside Dunkle’s grave. Deet and Crumb stood to the side and behind the crowd a bit, as did Devon, Markle and their companion (on the opposite side).

Beorth whispered a short prayer over the powdered incense that he held in his hand and moved from the south (at Malcolm’s head) to the north and then from the east to the west. He placed a small pile of incense at each of the four directions. Silently, he lit each pile and within moments the camp filled with the thick scent of incense.

Beorth stepped to the head of the pyre and extended his hands in supplication to the Gods.

“Anubis, I am no priest, but I stand before You as Your servant and ask You to grant me this favor. Today I am sending you the soul of Malcolm Mac Duligh. I beg You to greet his soul when it arrives and to allow him entry into

Your realm. Watch over him while his soul experiences the Duat and until the time comes when Your Father calls upon his heart to be weighed and his soul is judged.”

Beorth plucked the torch he used to light the incense from the ground where he had ensconced it and placed it into the wood piled near Malcolm’s head. The flames fought the droplets of water falling from the sky, but eventually the fire began to grow.

Moving clockwise around the pyre, Beorth came to stand at its northern point. His voice rose over the crackle of the growing flames.

“Father Osiris, Judge of the Dead, today the soul of Malcolm Mac Duligh will arrive at the gates of Anubis’ Realm. In life, he fought honorably and bravely in the name of good. When the time comes to weigh his heart, I pray that You will find it as light as a feather and the You will speed his soul onward to whatever is planned for it.”

Beorth plunged the torch into the pyre at Malcolm’s feet and watched as the flames spread around Malcolm’s ankles. He trod the distance to the eastern point of the pyre in silence. After glancing into the sky where Shu’s tears still obscured Ra’s Glory, Beorth addressed his words to the King of the Gods.

“All powerful Grandfather Ra, God of the Sun, an honorable and just warrior has fallen in battle and his soul now travels to Anubis’ Realm. I ask that You make room in Your celestial barge for Malcolm’s soul and transport him safely to my Father who will be waiting. His soul merits your attention and deserves this honor.”

After igniting the pyre along the eastern side, Beorth came to rest at the West.

“O Great God Ptah, Creator of All, the soul of Malcolm Mac Duligh has left this world and has begun its journey to Anubis. I ask You to protect Malcolm’s soul on this journey and bring him safely into the care of Anubis.”

"When we left on our journey many days ago, we prayed for Your assistance and I pray now that You will continue to watch over us so that we, like Malcolm, may safely reach the end of our path."

Beorth knelt and lit the wood in front of him. As he walked to stand again near Malcolm’s head, he felt the heat from the fire grow and through the smoke, he could see the flames consume Malcolm’s body.

“Father, today You will receive another soul into Your care. Welcome him and keep him safe.”

In a whisper few could hear, Beorth added, “Peace be with you, Malcolm, in death, as it never was in Life.”

And with that Beorth cast the torch into the center of the pyre and watched to ensure that Anubis’ will was done.

All bowed their heads as the flames licked upward towards the grey sky, which still squeezed out some last drops of moisture. Beorth walked over and said some words over Dunkle’s grave as well.

As the pyre burned down and Crumb’s boys (and Crumb himself) began to wander over towards the mess tent, the companions noticed that standing back a respectful distance from the funeral were a group of armed and armored men. There were a dozen in studded leather, with helmets, holding spears and having short swords and maces at their belts; a handful had crossbows. Kazrack recognized the Captain of the Guard among them. The dwarf also noticed three men standing beyond this group. Two held halberds and wore rose-colored tabards, and they flanked the third who wore a chain shirt and seemed middle-aged. He had a bushy mustache and bright friendly grey eyes.

Kazrack walked over to the Captain of the Guard.

“Captain.”

“Kazrack, right?” the man asked. “I wanted to say that I was sorry for the loss of your companion, and to tell you that the Lord decided to investigate these goblins himself. He wants to talk to you and your companions before you leave.”

“Of course,” Kazrack said respectfully, and gathered his companions. The captain brought them over to the man flanked by the two others with halberds.

“My Lord, this is Kazrack and his companions that I told you about,” the captain looked at the young adventurers. “This is Cutter Jack, Lord of Cutter Jack’s.”

They nodded their heads.

The lord spoke in a pronouncedly “unlordly” way, “I just wanted to give my condolences for the loss of your companion and to thank you for your help with the goblin problem and bringing it to our attention. I am convinced that goblins alone could not create such fine armor, so we are going to investigate this. However, before I do, I wanted to reward you for your efforts.”

The lord gestured to one of his men, who pulled a fat pouch of coins and handed it to Kazrack who passed it to Beorth.

“I know no amount will repay the loss of your friend, but I hope this does give you some small comfort,” He looked up. “It looks as if the rain was only taking a respite. We need to be going on our way. If your journeys ever bring you back to Cutter Jack’s, you must come by the house for dinner. Okay?”

“Um, okay... Thank you,” the friends all mumbled, and with that the Lord marched off accompanied by his men.

“Pleasant chap,” Chance said.

“I think we should donate this money in Malcolm’s name, in his honor,” Beorth said.

“Sounds like a good idea,” Kazrack said.

“I think we should count it first,” Jana said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jeremy said, sullenly.

“Aye, we should count it, for certain. No need to be givin’ away too much now,” Chance added.

“Exactly,” said Jana.

“It matters not. Malcolm paid his life for this money. We should do something worthwhile with it,” Beorth insisted.

“Ah think we should use it to buy the best bottle of booze we can find and get smoshed,” Chance said.

“That sounds good, too,” Jeremy said with only slightly more enthusiasm.

“Is that what Malcolm would want?” Beorth asked.

“Of course,” said Chance, eyes gleaming.

“Yes,” said both Jana and Jeremy.

“I think so, too,” said Kazrack.

“Here is five silver pieces, Chance. Go buy something,” Beorth offered.

“Five pieces of silver! Loosen yer pockets, man! Malcolm was worth more than that,” Chance said.

“That is all you are getting.”

“Fine, I guess I’ll have ta gamble it fer more.”

However, before Chance could take off. The lunch bell was rung, and they were all reminded of the meeting Crumb had called, and the friends gathered with the others, where Crumb stood beneath an umbrella Deet held over their employer’s head. He spoke in his deep baritone, “As you all know, we lost two of our number yesterday and that is very sad, but it is also a waste. There is no need to go running off hunting goblins or anything similar when you have much more important things to be doing in Gothanius. I have a great deal of time and money invested in you boys and there is a such thing as ‘the spirit of the contract.’ In Gothanius, you will be equipped and there will be some training. Why risk yourselves now when you are unprepared? As an incentive I plan to up your daily travel pay to five pieces of copper...”

Kamir let out a quiet cheer, and Crumb continued, “Luckily for you there are *some* people here who care enough to go after those who would so easily risk their lives. They wouldn’t go off by themselves to hunt goblins but would risk themselves to return those who would. I think that if you get a chance, you should thank those people for nipping this thing in the bud before a few people inspired others to go do the same. No need to mention names. We all know who they are.”

Kazrack, Jana, and the others could sense the subtle sarcasm in Crumb’s voice. Everyone knew who they were, and everyone also knew that they were the first to go out there looking for goblins, and they were the ones who had tried to train some of them to fight.

“Regardless of this, Deet and I have secured wagons and oxen, and we will be leaving tomorrow, through Bountiful to Stonebridge and north along the Tall Twin River from there. Because of all the supplies we need to bring, you will have to switch off riding in the wagons every day. Half of you walking half of you riding. Except for the dwarf, he will get to ride all the time as to not slow us down. I will be driving the first wagon with Kinney and Deet will be in the rear one with Horung.⁴³ So, get your rest, and we’ll be off in the morning!”

The group dispersed, and Chance ran into town returning with a hand keg and a few bottles of wine and a bottle of Dwarven Spirits.

Jana, Chance, Kazrack and Jeremy sat in the dwarf’s tent and drank away the night, toasting to Malcolm and laughing a lot. Beorth was nowhere to be found, preferring quiet contemplation to revelry.

When the inebriation had really set in, Chance stood up and sang a song about being the “Son of Whore.”

“Ya know me mum whas a hooer. That’s right,” Chance said in his drunken slur. “Me Da’ said she’d do anythin’ for a copper; for tha promise of a copper even.”

“Did you like your mother?” Jana asked.

“Ah never met her,” Chance replied. “Ah’d come back ta Verdun to see her, but Ah found she had died. Me Da’ brought me up in Wallbrook. He said, there’s lots of suckers. . . I mean, money to be won in Wallbrook.”

Everyone laughed. “Hold on. I got something fer ya, Jeremy.”

Chance ran back to his tent and returned with a sword wrapped in a cloth, “It’s Malcolm’s bastard sword. I figured ya’d want it.”

Jeremy was silent for a moment and then finally spoke, “I don’t know. He always told me I should use a bigger sword, but it really isn’t my style. I guess, I’ll take it, but I doubt I’ll use it.”

⁴³ Kinney and Horung are the assistants Crumb hired to help him and Deet manage the trip overland to the Kingdom of Gothanius.

“You know there is a custom among my people, where we re-forged an item that belonged to a loved one that has passed away so that it can be used in their memory,” Kazrack noted. “If we get to a forge I can use, I could do that with the sword.”

“That sounds nice; maybe some rings we could all wear,” Jeremy smiled.

“I’ll carry it for now,” Chance said.

“Well, we know you won’t use it,” Kazrack said.

“Now, what da hell is that supposed to mean?!” Chance said, with the sudden anger of a drunk.

“I just meant that you aren’t exactly the bravest person around,” the dwarf said, a bit of ale and spirits loosening his tongue as well.

“How da hell wouldja know? Ya busy runnin’ around killin’ goblins with ya big pole-axe or whateva’ da hell it is. Ah do my part. Ya know, a real hero doesn’t haveta explain himself, but lucky for me, Ah’m not a real hero! Ah sheltered Jana with me own body when gravely wounded, an’ there were arrows flyin’ all about.”

“That’s true, he did,” Jana confirmed.

“An’ when the goblin warlock tried ta git away, who blocked his path? Ah did!”

“Chance has his uses,” Jana said.

“Ya damn, right!” Chance said, standing.

“I’m sorry, Chance. I guess I misjudged you,” Kazrack admitted.

“Ya damn, right ya misjudged me, and Ah’ll tell ya another thing…” And with that he passed out.

Kazrack let him sleep there. Jana returned to her tent, and Jeremy stumbled back to his as well. Beorth returned from whatever he had been doing and went to sleep as well.

Tomorrow they would all be deeper in Derome-Delem.

Osilem, 10th of Ese – 564 H.E.

It was morning again, and there was still no sign of the rain stopping for good. The field was a muddy mess, and Crumb’s boys (and one girl) took down their tents with little enthusiasm. Even Kamir seemed sluggish in his frantic running about to help everyone pack up their tents into the easiest shape for stowing and/or carrying.

Everyone got into the assigned wagons, Kazrack and his friends were in the rear one, along with the older quiet man, who seemed to re-materialize whenever it was time to leave. He spoke no word, but simply sat near the edge of the covered wagon. Devon, Markle and their friend were among those who would walk the first day. Kamir, of course, walked as well.

Kazrack took note as he helped to load one wagon with supplies that these wagons were in particularly bad shape. They groaned and creaked as the supplies were stowed and as the boys climbed on, and when the oxen were finally whipped and pulled with their great strength, it seemed only with great hesitation that the wagons moved from their muddy spots on the field.

The two wagons crawled through the misty rain, breaching the comfort of the nearby road’s wheel ruts, because of the great softening of the earth. They traveled through woods most of the day, but before lunch the rear wagon’s

wheels sunk into a deep patch of mud and even oxen strength was not enough to pull it out. Those who walked were told push, and Devon put his all into it. His head hanging into the wagon as he and the others pushed.

“Get the hell off the wagon and help push,” Devon said, the others who were pushing concurred. The dwarf and the others hopped off to help.

“Come on, Devon,” Kazrack taunted. “Push! What’s a matter, are you as soft? Can’t push a little wagon?”

“Listen, Stumpy, shut the hell up and push, before I push your teeth through your head with my fist,” Devon said.

“Tough words from someone whining for help,” Kazrack said, getting his shoulder into it.

The wagon rocked three times and then was free. Those riding in the back climbed back in, covered in mud.

“You’re welcome,” Kazrack said, sitting with his legs dangling from the back of the wagon. “If you are too weak to do anything else, let me know if I can help.

“You are pretty witty for a dwarf,” Devon said. “Perhaps, if you weren’t so busy being witty and could actually fight, Malcolm would still be here to hear you be witty now.

Kazrack opened and then closed his mouth, having nothing to say. He was quiet for the rest of the day.

After a long day where they only stopped for lunch and to water the oxen, evening fell as Crumb’s Boys emerged at the foot of some hills. The encroaching darkness became too much to risk traveling in. Fires were built despite the rain and camp was made in the grassy place between the rockier hills and the forest.

Tholem, 11th of Ese – 564 H.E.

Another day and still more rain, now rumbling in and out of a roar of polyrhythmic anger and joy. A cold wind, smelling of the frost of the obscured mountains to the north and west, shook the canvas covers of the wagons, and helped drops of water find their way through small tears in the covering, to leak annoyingly on those trying to remain dry inside. Now they journeyed along a mud track flanked by grassy foothills on right, and gradual decline to a rolling plain to the left.⁴⁴ The going was even slower now. The road was a soup of mud and loose stones. The front wagon became stuck and had to be pushed free twice before lunch, and as evening came close for a second slow and miserable day on the road, the rear wagon again would not move.

Again, everyone helped to push the trapped wagon (except Crumb and Deet who stood watching, the latter covering the former with his gnomish rain-shield—aka an umbrella). They pushed the wagon and rocked it, and Kinney whipped the oxen as Horung pulled on their horns and chastised them, but to no avail. They gave it one final heave, and there was a loud cracking sound as the whole top of the wagon came free of the chassis and the covering toppled over, sending crates scattering into the mud.

Crumb’s boys gathered the boxes, as Horung calmed the startled oxen. Crumb and Deet began to talk quietly together, both obviously upset by the occurrence. Kazrack was already thinking of how to put all the supplies in the first wagon and have everyone walk, when Kinney shouted there was a huge crack in one of the front wagon’s wheels and that it would not be going much further either.

Crumb called everyone off of the first wagon and then he and Deet went into it and talked for a long while. The rain was cold and unceasing, and trickled down the hillside in torrents that made huge puddles in the road.

After a time, Crumb called for Beorth and Kazrack to join them in the wagon. The dwarf and the paladin found the expedition’s leader hunched over a map that was spread out on the top of crate.

⁴⁴ This road is called *The Mountain Door* and runs from Cutter Jack’s to the *One Road* which connects many of the Free Towns of central Derome-Delem, and both are used by the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium.

Crumb addressed them in his deep voice, fingering his damp mustache.

“As you know we’re not going to be getting very far without the services of a wainwright,” Crumb said. “Fortunately, there is a mining town less than half a day’s travel north of here called Tallow’s Post.”

He paused.

“As you have proven both your willingness to be helpful to the group and your trustworthiness to not just wander off, we’re sending you there to find a wainwright to return with you and do the needed repairs.”

Deet handed Kazrack a pouch of coins. “Here are thirty-five pieces of silver. This should suffice to pay the wainwright. You only need to go over the ridge to our right and keep the cliffs in sight to your left and you will eventually see the village, according to the map. The place is only recently established, so I don’t know too much about it. We are lucky it is on the map at all.”

“Can we bring anyone else?” Kazrack asked.

“Yes, bring your friends along. There is safety in numbers,” Crumb said. “We will wait three or four days for you and then we’ll have to figure out some other plan.”

Kazrack and Beorth agreed and gathered Jeremy, Jana, and Chance.

“Do you want to come?” Kazrack asked.

“Anything is better than staying stuck here,” Jana said.

“Well, if she goes then I go,” Chance said.

“Whatever,” said Jeremy.

The five companions gathered their soaked packs and clambered over the ridge and headed north, gradually rising in elevation towards the mining town.

The rain was lightening into a constantly circulating mist, only obscuring vision; ceasing to cut down to the bone. The surrounding landscape was shrouded, and only the looming shadows of cliff faces on either side and in the distance could be made out.

The five companions marched upon the tall, yellowed grass that bowed low with the weight of water. But all halted when they saw the silhouette of a large hulking figure in the mist. It stooped and swung its arms back and forth, and shifted from foot to foot, waiting.

Kazrack and Jeremy pulled out their crossbows and readied quarrels. Chance and Jana hung back, and Beorth held his quarterstaff at the ready.

“We’ll cover you, while you go ahead and see what it is,” Kazrack said to Beorth.

“Alone?” the paladin asked, wearily.

“You do not have a ranged weapon,” Kazrack said. “Don’t worry, we got you covered.”

“I am not worried,” Beorth said, with a hint of annoyance and crept forward towards the figure in the mist coming around it from the right.

It seemed to lurch forward in his direction, and he paused, and then took three quick steps forward, just as the wind dispersed just enough mist to see that it was a large weeping willow swaying in the wind.

“It’s an ogre!” Beorth cried, and both Kazrack and Jeremy fired. Beorth began to hustle back, while Jeremy reloaded, but Kazrack dropped his crossbow, and wielding his halberd went charging through the mist at the figure.

The dwarf paused as he drew closer to it. “It is only a tree!” Jeremy fired another crossbow bolt just as the dwarf said this.

Beorth laughed, as did Chance and Jana.

After their encounter with the ferocious tree, the companions continued moving northward, finding that the willow was just the first of many more trees that made up a sparse forest set between two tall cliff faces, that loomed like stone giants on their flanks. A swollen stream flowed back past them to the south. The mist became thinner as well, but swirled madly and thickly above their heads, obscuring the tops of the nearby hills and mountains. The wind they walked into was cold and damp, but at least the rain had stopped.

They marched on for another hour among the low and sparse trees; Kazrack and Beorth in front, followed by Jeremy, with Chance and Jana taking up the rear. It was then that they noticed a tall figure come running out of the mist ahead of them.

The man was over six feet tall and had shoulders as broad as Chance’s if they were tripled. He wore the hood of his fur cloak pulled over his face, but his jutting jaw protruding from the cowl’s shadow. He held a quarterstaff in one hand and had a quiver of javelins bouncing against his left hip. He wore deer hide pants and a fur shirt, that lifted occasionally to reveal a chain shirt underneath; a bow stuck out from the top of his pack.

The party stopped. Kazrack called. “Who are you?”

“Get back-to-back!” The man replied. The group became immediately aware of what he meant. Behind him came running a scrawny grey and black wolf, that leapt at him, tearing a piece off the man’s pants as it bit deep into his thigh, making the man stagger forward and spin around to face his attacker.

Jeremy charged forward to help the man, but three more wolves emerged from the mist, coming at the group. Jeremy changed his course to meet one wolf, as Beorth went forward to take on another. The fourth wolf seemed to be coming towards Kazrack, who waiting to meet its charge, but moving at incredible speed, it ran past him, biting deeply into Chance’s chest, knocking the rogue over. Chance began to cry out as his blood spurted everywhere. The wolf that Beorth faced off against grabbed his pant leg and pulled the warrior off his feet as well. Chance managed to pull off the wolf and climb to his feet as Jana spoke her arcane words and tried to place a deep fear into it, however the wolf was too intent on its prey. Kazrack ran over and slashed the beast with his halberd, created a deep wound in its flank. For a moment it looked as if it might flee but it just growled and attacked. Jana and Kazrack both noticed the foam flicking off the creature’s mouth—thick and white and bubbling. The wolves’ faces were white with the dried slaver.

Chance moved away, gravely wounded. Jeremy finished the wolf he faced with two blows of his long sword, and then ran over to stand beside the stranger whose own wolf seemed to be giving him trouble.

“Stand aside, I’ll help you,” Jeremy said to the man who was nearly a full head taller than the Neergaardian. Jeremy looked up at the man at his side and saw a long scar that seemed to bisect his left cheek. It was deep in his ruddy, almost umber skin, and ran all the way up to his eye. The two of them made short work of the wolf, as Kazrack took a last swipe at one that fled in fear from an application of Jana’s spell. Beorth was finally able to get to his feet and crush the skull of the wolf attacking him. It died with a whimper, even as he noted the foaming flecks on the creature’s muzzle as well.

“I never knew wolves would attack people that way,” Jeremy said.

“These wolves are diseased,” said the tall stranger, as he began to pull the corpses of the wolves into a pile.

"I noticed," Kazrack said, walking over. "Was anyone bit?"

"I am gravely wounded," Chance said, from where he was lying on the cold ground. Jana tended to his wound.

"I was bit," said Jeremy. "Do you think we can be infected?"

"It is possible," said the dwarf.

"Come here, let me clean out and dress your wounds," Jana said.

"Looks like you were bitten, too," Jeremy said to Beorth as he walked over to Jana. "Don't you want Jana to clean your wounds?"

"Anubis provides. I will be fine," the paladin said, turning to the new stranger, who Kazrack was now approaching as well.

"Who are you? What are you doing out here alone?" Kazrack asked the stranger.

"I am called Ratchis," the man said, in a raspy voice. "I was traveling hoping to find a caravan I had heard of going to Gothanius and came across these diseased wolves. I decided I needed to try to destroy them before they spread the disease, and so they would not suffer unduly, and of course, to keep them from attacking others. Unfortunately, there were more of them than I could handle alone and had to flee."

"It is a good thing you came upon us then," Beorth said.

"How do you know about the caravan to Gothanius?" Kazrack asked.

"I simply had heard that the place was looking for settlers and warriors in its time of need, and that a caravan of such would be heading there. I wanted to join," the stranger answered. "You know of it?"

"Yes, we are part of it, but our wagons broke down and we are going to Tallow's Post in search of the services of a wainwright. Do you know the town?"

"Yes, I passed by it on my way here. I can lead you to it, if perhaps you will help me with the plague of wolves."

"Well, we have kind of a time limit to get back to the caravan," Kazrack said.

"But if the wolves pose a danger to the people of this area, we should help," Beorth said.

"Well, there are more wolves in the woods to the north of here, so either way, I have to go towards Tallow's Post, so I will lead you there and perhaps you will change your mind," Ratchis said.

"Sounds good," Kazrack said.

The group gathered together and continued their march.

Chance leaned in close to Jana and whispered in her ear, "I trust this man, looks to me like he led the wolves to us. He could be in league with them."

"Chance, he was bitten too, and was being chased," Jana explained.

"It could all be a ruse, I say," Chance insisted. "I will keep an eye on him."

"You do that."

Now being led by the mysterious tall man in the fur cloak, they marched on for a little less than an hour. The cliff face on the right, receded into the distance, but the one on the left was taller and steeper. Eventually they came to a small village of white stone houses with thatched roofs set upon a low plateau in the cliff face. At the edge of the plateau, where a stream ran down the crumbled cliffside, was the tarped-over foundation of some sort of mill that seemed under construction.

The party walked up the short flight of wide steps up to the village.⁴⁵ A broad street led to a small village square with a well, where an inn and a general store were situated among the houses. They followed the sounds of voices and the soft glow of a warm hearth into “The Silver Vein Inn.” In the distance they could see another building under construction. This one was of stone and was built on its own plateau just a little above the rest of the town.

The inn’s common room was very dim, and the tables were full of men dressed in dark woolen clothes, and black leather hats. They had dirty face and hands, and they had the smell of earth on them, which hung on the damp air. The warmth of the hearth came over the travelers, and they felt the exhaustion of the day’s travel and the damp that had worked its way down to the bone.

The six of them took a table, as the miner patrons looked at them strangely for a moment and then went back to their own meals and conversations. A young boy of about twelve years old with dirty blonde hair and fat chipmunk cheeks came over to take their order.

“I’m Nicholas,” the boy said. “Whaddya want?”

“What do you have?” Kazrack asked.

“Food. What the heck do ya think we got?” the boy said in a shrill voice. “Hey! You’re a dwarf like René is!”

“Who is René?” Kazrack asked.

The boy sighed as if this were common knowledge. “She’s the priest of Thor here in town.”

“A dwarven priest of...” Kazrack coughed. “Thor? I had heard of such things, and it saddens me.”⁴⁶

“Whatever,” said the boy.

“Well, I will have an ale and some mutton. Have you got mutton?”

“Yes, of course we have mutton. What do we look like? And potatoes?” The boy did not wait for the dwarf to answer. “Good, potatoes it is.”

The boy came back with a tray full of plates and mugs.

“No one else said what they wanted, so I brought the same thing for everyone,” Nicholas said.

“Well, you didn’t ask us,” Jeremy said.

“Mister, if ya wanna be heard in this world, ya gotta speak up, or so my dad always says.”

He served the food and left.

“Sharp-tongued kid,” Jeremy observed.

⁴⁵ Tallow’s Post was established to support the silver mine, *Tallow’s Deep*, both of which are run by Burgomaster Grundle Tallow.

⁴⁶ In Aquerra, Thor is a member of the Kalevalan Pantheon of northern gods, and is god of Thunder and Mountains, and often a patron of dwarves in those realms. The worship of a human god by dwarves is looked down upon by most members of traditional dwarven communities.

As the group ate, Kazrack and Beorth overheard some miners talking about the wolf attacks at a table behind them. It seemed that the number of wolves had increased, and that they were endangering the local shepherds' flocks of sheep and goats. Jeremy, Jana and Ratchis overheard some other miners saying how they thought the plague of wolves was a curse brought down by the goblins that had been "forced out of the mine" a year or so before, and that travel into and out of the town had become too dangerous to risk for most people.

"Looks like we might have to help out with the wolf problem," Kazrack said.

"Why do you say that?" Jeremy inquired.

"Well, if no one can leave the town, we can't get a wainwright to come with us," said the dwarf.

"He'd be traveling with us. He'd be fine," Jeremy said.

"But still, we should help these people," Beorth said.

"That is what I plan to do," Ratchis said. "I need to take care of this wolf problem, with or without your help; though I'd prefer if I had it."

"You are all just incredible. Didn't the incident with the goblins teach you anything? Why go after these wolves if we don't have to?" said Jana.

"Well, I have no problem with going after the wolves, but let's see if we can gain something for doing it. We could all use some extra coinage," said Jeremy.

"Coinage is good, but Ah'm not so sure about going after wolves. Ah was gravely wounded in that last encounter," said Chance.

Ratchis grunted.

"Well, I'd like to help these people," said Kazrack. "But our first commitment is to the caravan and the contract we signed, but again, I think we're going to have to end up doing it anyway."

Ratchis looked at the dwarf.

The young boy, Nicholas, came back. "Ya want more ta drink?"

"Yes," said Kazrack. "Another ale for each of us."

"Okay, well that will be eighteen pieces of copper up front and ya better give me a good tip, too."

"Nickie! Go get a bucket of fresh water from the well!" the innkeeper called.

"Dad! Don't call me Nickie! And I'll go in a second after I bring these weirdoes some drinks!"

His father laughed at his son's cheekiness, but Kazrack sneered. The boy retrieved their drinks and then went out to the well.

"Well, first thing's first, we need to find a wainwright," Kazrack said.

"Did you say, wainwright?" the innkeeper asked, as he had overheard as he walked by.

"Yes."

"He's sitting right over there," the innkeeper said pointing to a man sitting a table with two other men.

Kazrack went over and was discussing terms with the man (who insisted he would not leave town while the danger of wolves existed), when there was a ruckus of screaming from outside.

Ratchis immediately ran to the door, followed by Jeremy and Kazrack.

“I hope that isn’t Nicholas,” Beorth said.

From the door, Jeremy, Ratchis and Kazrack saw three townspeople being chased down by wolves. Little Nicholas stood frozen in fear by the well. Ratchis ran out after one wolf, while Jeremy moved towards another. Kazrack moved to block the path of one wolf heading toward Nicolas, but it out maneuvered him, as two other wolves knocked down townsfolk. Beorth stepped up to one just in time to see it pull the throat out of a man, sending a shower of blood in all directions. Jeremy pulled his short sword and long sword and engaged another wolf, as Kazrack decided it made more sense to go after the boy than the wolf. The boy panicked and ran, but the dwarf tackled him and shielded him with his own body, which allowed the wolf to grab a big chunk of the dwarf’s hindquarters in his teeth and start biting through the dwarf’s scale mail.

Ratchis finished a wolf with one mighty blow and ran over and began to swing his quarterstaff at the one atop Kazrack. Jeremy finished one wolf and went for another. Beorth was pulled off his feet in the muddy and bloody earth and struggled to get back up to keep from being killed. He finally crushed the skull of the wolf he was fighting. As Jeremy and Ratchis tried to finish that last wolf that was determined to rip a hole in the dwarf who shielded the squirming kid, a ray of sickly green light flashed from behind them striking the wolf. They did not see where it came from, but the animal’s bite became less effective, and they skewered it.

Yet, even as the party gained their breath from the battle, a howl caught their attention, and looking towards the top of the street they saw what appeared to be a very large and shaggy white wolf, that beheld them with intelligent ice blue eyes. They felt the blood in their veins freeze, as it cocked its head, taking them in, and then just as suddenly as it appeared, the mist rolled in across its position and when it cleared the white wolf was gone.

“Didja see that?!” Chance exclaimed and then hushed his voice. “T’was a devil-wolf. Oh, Bes protect us!”

“Yes, I did see it. What was that?” Jana asked.

“I didn’t see anything,” Jeremy said.

“Nicholas! Nicholas!” the innkeeper came running out of the Silver Vein Inn and embraced his son, who Kazrack was just helping to get up off the ground. “How many times have I told you not to go out alone at night?” He turned to Kazrack. “You saved my son. You all did. Drinks are on me, and you may stay in the common room of the inn for free tonight.”

“These men are dead,” Beorth said, examining the townsfolk ravaged by the wolves. “Someone needs to notify their families.”

“Someone help me with these,” Ratchis said, beginning to drag the wolf bodies into a pile to burn.

“You cannot burn those here. They need to be dragged to the edge of town,” said a man who walked out of one of the dark streets. He wore a chain shirt and held a loaded crossbow. “I am Sergeant Fnord, constable of Tallow’s Post.”

He looked over at the dead men and clucked his tongue. “That is a shame. Thank you for your help, generally wolves would not attack the town itself. It must be the disease. People on the outskirts of town have been reporting wolf attacks.” He paused. “And you six are?”

“I am Kazrack Delver,” the dwarf said. “My companions and I are here to acquire the services of a wainwright, but it looks like the wolves are getting in our way. We were thinking that perhaps we might help to take care of the problem.”

“Well, the town would really appreciate it, and perhaps I could even get the burgomaster to offer some compensation,” Fnord said.

“What shall I do with the bodies of these men? Shall we bring them to their families?” asked Beorth.

“No, it would be better if their families did not see them like this without knowing what happened first. I will go and inform them, if you will do me the favor of bringing their bodies to my office.”

“Of course,” Beorth said.

So, Jeremy, Kazrack, Chance, Beorth and Jana brought the bodies to the constable’s office, while Ratchis remained behind to burn the wolves and watch for more. The tall woodsman went into the inn (which had cleared out after the wolf fight) and pulled a bench to the shuttered window. He strung his bow and leaned his quiver of javelins against the wall and laid his quarterstaff on the floor below him. The warmth of the hearth was getting to be too much, so he pulled off his fur cloak.

Meanwhile, the others had to wait a while for Sergeant Fnord to return.

“I’m sorry I took so long, but it would have been rude of me to give the families such news and then simply leave,” he said.

“We understand,” said Beorth.

The constable showed them inside his office.

“I will not be able to speak to the Burgomaster until the morning, but like I said any help would be appreciated.”

“Well, it looks like we don’t have much of a choice but to do something about the wolves,” Kazrack said.

Jana and Chance looked at each other.

“As the wainwright won’t leave town with the wolves running around,’ the dwarf added. “But why don’t you and your guards take care of it?”

“There is only me and two deputies. We do not have the manpower for such a project. Normally, René would help us, but she is away on church business in Rockmar,” Fnord said.

“René is the priestess of Thor?” Kazrack asked.

“Yes. She helped to get rid of the goblins that took over our mines just over a year ago, and as payment the burgomaster agreed to pay for half of the building a temple of Thor in the town.”

“We heard that the wolf infestation might be some sort of revenge by the goblins,” Beorth said. “A curse?”

“Unlikely,” concluded Fnord. “The adventuring party that cleared the mine, called the Oath,⁴⁷ collapsed the tunnel to a goblin city in the Plutonic Realms and we haven’t had trouble with the goblins since.⁴⁸ And from what I can remember, these goblins used worgs, which are intelligent, not normal wolves.”

“Well, we should return to the inn and rest, since we will probably head out in the morning,” said Kazrack.

⁴⁷ *The Oath* this adventuring band is best known for the infiltration and razing of the slaver city, High Port in the Schrab Hills of western Thracia. (This Aquerra campaign ran from fall 1996 to winter 1999).

⁴⁸ *The Plutonic Realms* are the expansive caverns and tunnels that exist beneath Aquerra, from the near-surface strongholds of black dwarves to the deepest colonies of illithids. At one time all the different pockets of these realms were connected by the tunnels of the Undersea, but many have been lost or collapsed since the height of the long ago fallen Second Dwarven Kingdom that fell in the Second Age.

“I will come by in the morning after I speak to the burgomaster,” said the sergeant.

At the Silver Vein Inn, they found Ratchis still waiting, and despite the dimness they could now see what their new companion looked like. The scar that Jeremy had noted before ran from above the stranger’s left eye down his cheek. When he blinked, they could see that the scratch was on his eyelid as well. Despite his broad shoulders, his head seemed disproportionately large. He had a large protruding jaw, with teeth that peeked out in a pronounced underbite from behind his swollen lower lip. Ratchis’ complexion was mottled, with lighter yellow splotches on his face and chest, but darker on the neck and sides of his head, and his flat broad nose and cheeks were awash in a myriad of freckles. His eyes were brown with hints of red flecks, set into narrow slits beneath his nearly ridged brow; his hair was shoulder length nappy bunches of fiery copper, dulled by dirt and grime. He wore it tied back. About Ratchis’ neck was the dark shadow of a serpentine indigo tattoo, which looked like it probably reached beneath his clothing.

“Damn, he’s ugly,” Chance said under his breath.

The companions called for a nightcap and the innkeeper happily obliged.

“Here ya go,” the old man said. “You know I was thinking, I bet the old hermit has something to do with whole wolf thing.”

“Hermit?” asked Beorth.

“Yes, some solitary man that lives in the woods north of here, where the wolves were seen coming from. People say he has dealings with goblins and might be a warlock of some kind.”

“Perhaps he’d be worth asking about this whole thing,” Kazrack said. “We’ll see in the morning.”

“Well, Ah’ll tellya one thing, if he’s got dealings wit’ the devil wolf we saw, he has ta be a warlock,” said Chance.

The five companions and their guide found spots on the floor by the hearth and went to sleep to dream about hunting wolves or being hunted by them.

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The warmth that had evaded the companions’ journey for so long now, found them asleep on the common room floor. Birds chirped, and sunlight crept along the floor to itch their noses and makes them squirm to find comfort on the hard wood.

They awoke to the innkeeper’s call for breakfast: hard-boiled eggs, and butter on yesterday’s toasted bread. As they ate, the constable arrived with a hunched over elderly woman in tow.

“Good morning,” Fnord said. “This woman lives on one of the outlying farms, and she came to me this morning to report what she had seen two nights ago, and I thought you might find it interesting. Go ahead, Grandmother, tell them what you saw.”

The old woman sat at the table and in a voice that creaked like a ship at sea she spoke, “It was two nights ago, as I closed up the house to go to sleep. I heard a howling and looked out from behind my shutters to see...” She coughed and clutched her shawl closer around her shoulders. “. . . a white ghostly wolf. . . It seemed to be almost floating over the ground, and it led a pack of other wolves that were trailing behind it.”

The old woman wiped her rheumy eyes. “And then, just when I thought they were all gone, there comes another pale white ghostly form of a girl or something trailing them. It also seemed like it was floating above the ground.”

“Ah knew it was a devil-wolf,” said Chance.

“Grandmother, where was it going?” Kazrack asked.

“In the direction of here, the town. I live alone, so it took me time to get things in order to get here as soon as I did.”

“She has family in town that she is going to stay with,” Fnord said.

“Will everyone from outlying farms be evacuated to town?” Kazrack asked.

“Well, I am sure they know about the wolf plague by now. If they wanted to come into town they would, I cannot make them do so,” Fnord answered. “However, I did speak with Tallow the burgomaster, and he is willing to pay for the services of the wainwright to fix your wagon if you help with the wolf problem.”

“That sounds acceptable,” said Jeremy, thinking of the money Crumb had given them to purchase the services.

“Yes, that will be okay. . . Especially since we will have to get rid of the wolves to get the wainwright down to where the wagons are,” said Kazrack. “Where are the farms? We should go to where the wolves were last seen and track them from there.”

“They were last seen here in town,” Jana said.

“Too many people have probably walked around by now for the trail to be any good,” Ratchis said in his raspy voice from a dark corner.

“Well, you can try anyway,” said Kazrack.

“Yes, I can.”

“The innkeeper mentioned an old hermit in the woods north of here,” Kazrack said, turning back to Fnord. “Said he works with goblins or something; do you know anything about this?”

“I have heard of the old hermit; an herbalist of some kind, but I know nothing of him and goblins. I don’t think he’s been around long, but I hear tell he lives in a shack almost a full day north of here, past the farms on the banks of the river. If you keep the water to your right, you should eventually get to it.”

As Ratchis had expected the chance of finding a track at the entrance to town was scuffed away by the passing feet of villagers. So, the five travelers and their new companion, back in his fur cloak despite the growing heat of what looked like it just might be the coming of elfin summer, marched north by northeast towards where Fnord had said the farms were.⁴⁹

Eventually they came to a tall embankment that looked down upon the farmsteads, and they could see a large number of dead sheep scattered before the closest one.

“I’m going to go down there and look for tracks,” Ratchis said.

“Shall we all come down?” asked Jeremy.

“No, just keep a lookout, I’ll be back,” said the tall fur-clad man heading towards the steep incline. However, the woodsman miscalculated his decent and ended up tumbling down head over feet thirty feet to a hard wind-knocking landing.

“Are you okay?” Jeremy called down, his voice echoing across the landscape.

⁴⁹ This is the common name for a brief period of near-summer-like conditions in the mid-Autumn after the first frost. Often harvests of autumn foods like apples and pumpkins are occur during this time.

Ratchis waved him off and walked towards the closest farmstead. He found a mess of dead sheep, their entrails trailing around the farmyard, and large bites ripped from their throats and flanks. He also noticed that while many sheep were killed only few were eaten and that there were a lot of regurgitated remains as well. The wolf spoor was two days old at the oldest.

Ratchis searched around for a time and found a set of tracks that matched several wolves and followed it up where the embankment turned northward and was less steep. He then went to retrieve the party.

The others had begun to wonder where Ratchis had disappeared to when he emerged beside them.

“Come, I have found tracks that go to the east and north,” was all he said and turned to walk back the way he came. Kazrack, Beorth, Jeremy, Jana and Chance followed.

They marched on with Ratchis trying to sustain a substantial lead to look for unspoiled tracks, but the party kept walking at the same pace and thus catching up with him, much to his annoyance. Also, as they marched, they all talked, Chance with Jana, Jeremy with Kazrack, Kazrack with Jana, Chance with Jeremy; talking about the wolves, the caravan, the hermit, Ratchis, and whatever else came to mind. Ratchis just kept looking back at them with a frustrated glare, to him it was a cacophony of monkeys. He had never heard people talk so much. Eventually, he walked back to them and said, “First, keep it quiet back here, you can be heard for miles. Second, slow your pace to be equal to mine.”

They all looked at each other wondering where he got the idea they talked so much. They had hardly talked at all, or so they thought.

The group continued with some better progress. They stopped bumping into Ratchis as he kneeled to check for wolf signs, but still chattered too much for the tracker’s tastes.

While looking, Ratchis found a new set of tracks, a bit fresher than those of the wolves, and they seemed to run parallel to them. They were small, booted footprints of perhaps a woman or child. It seemed like it might be of just one figure.

“Goblin?” he wondered. He walked back to the rest of the group. “Be wary of ambush, it seems like there are things other than wolves in these woods.”

The companions continued northward, running roughly parallel with the river, which they could hear gurgling to their right. They heard birds chirping in delight at the return of the sun and warmth, but not much else, as they still talked among themselves quite a bit. After another twenty minutes of marching, Ratchis had lost the tracks, but continued to move in the same general northward direction, coming to a clearing that caught his eye. He motioned for the others to stop and peered into what seemed to have been a campsite. The charred remains of a small fire lay beside a fallen log, the woodsman crept along the perimeter of the clearing avoiding the center.

However, a foaming-mouthed wolf emerged from the underbrush and took a bite of the tracker’s calf, trying to pull the huge man to the ground. The woodsman was able to pull free and keep his feet by pure strength alone. Ratchis called out, and faced off against the wolf, but did not see a second wolf creeping from behind and it pulled him from his feet, with another bite and yank. Jeremy ran out to aid Ratchis, but a third wolf emerged from the right to attack him, and when Beorth entered the clearing, yet another wolf emerged to attack the paladin. Kazrack entered the fray himself, heading towards Jeremy’s wolf, only to have yet another emerge.

Ratchis found his feet and turned to brandish his staff against both wolves at once. He slammed them with all his might on the snout, but they did not flee. They growled, blood mixing with the white foam that bearded their faces. Jana and Chance stepped into the clearing, and the young girl tried to cause a wolf to flee, but it refused to give into the chill of arcane fear and continued its assault.

Ratchis was having a hard time handling two wolves at once, blood pouring profusely from his leg wounds, but finding an opening to withdraw from the beasts, he mumbled words and laid his hand upon his wounds healing some

of his injuries. None of the others noticed. The wolves closed in once more. Kazrack made short work of his wolf, and was moving to aid Jeremy, when Jana and Chance gasped. At the north entrance to the clearing, they noticed the intelligent ice blue eyes of the white wolf, its shoulders a tangle of thick fur, its white muzzle making the foam that dripped from its gums difficult to see.

Ratchis was able to dispose of one wolf, but the other seemed stronger, if not just as violent and diseased, and it bit him again. Beorth finished his and ran to meet the great white wolf as it bounded towards Kazrack. The dwarf thrust forward with his halberd, but the creature side stepped, and Beorth saw his opening. The beast moved in such a way to leave itself perfectly open, and the paladin's muscles tensed for the impact of what was bound to be a skull-splitting blow... but the blow did not connect! Beorth looked again, and it seemed as if the blow had gone straight through the creature. The dwarf and the paladin prepared another strike, but then the white wolf was gone!

Jana cried out as she felt an immense pain in her thigh. She turned, wrenching her leg to see the white wolf standing behind her. Jeremy finished his combatant and began to run over to help with the white wolf, but it avoided a flurry of blows by the companions who attempted to surround it and disappeared again. This time it re-appeared behind Jeremy, biting him as well. Ratchis finished the last wolf and ran to join the fray. Jeremy landed a glancing blow with his short sword, but before any more damage could be dealt it, it disappeared again and was nowhere in sight.

"Didja see that? Didja see what it did?" Chance said in a voice cloaked in fear.

"What? I didn't see anything," said Jeremy. "Though the white one did seem to move kind of fast. Where did it go?"

"It just disappeared," said Kazrack.

"Back ta hell where it probably came from!" said Chance.

"Calm down, Chance," said Beorth. "We don't know what it was. Though my blow seemed to go right through it."

"I was able to injure it slightly," said Jeremy.

As Ratchis stepped up to join the conversation, he paused and tilted his head.

"You heard that, too?" Kazrack asked him. It was the sound of someone or something moving quickly through the foliage between the campsite and the river. The sound stopped and then immediately seemed to move in the opposite direction. Kazrack and Ratchis charged after it, followed by Beorth. Jeremy decided that it might be best to "cut off" what it was and began to take a circuitous route towards whatever it was. Jana began to make her way in that direction more cautiously, with Chance following close behind her.

Kazrack and Ratchis stopped and listened again, and that was when Kazrack spotted a figure crouched behind a tree.

"There!" he pointed with his halberd and ran in that direction. Whatever it was dashed into the undergrowth and kept going. Ratchis quickly passed the slower dwarf and came around a large oak to be face to face with what they were chasing, and with a whispered breath, the huge woodsman toppled over into an unnatural slumber.

Kazrack's tumbled companion cleared the dwarf's view of a slender, androgynous figure, with long golden hair, large blue eyes, pale white skin, and tapered ears. She wore a near-transparent wrap and long hip-high boots. In a flash of sunlight, she turned and ran again, but Beorth who had not slowed down caught up to her as she tried to maneuver about another tree. She turned quickly and, in a flash, drew her short sword, holding the other hand up, in a unique fighting stance.

End of Session #5

Session #6

“Stand away! I mean you no harm,” the elf said in a soft voice like a morning bird.

“What did you do to our friend?” Kazrack asked stepping up brandishing his halberd. The elven figure stepped backwards and crouched reflexively towards the dwarf.

“He is unharmed. He but sleeps and will awaken soon enough,” she said in her liltingly accented voice.

“Why are you here?” the dwarf asked.

“I am hunting my former companion. He is ill and not acting as himself, and may even be dying,” she said in an even tone. “I saw you fighting him and the other wolves.”

“You mean the great white wolf?” asked Beorth.

“He is not a wolf,” she said.

At that moment Chance and Jana came up behind their two companions.

“Oh me loving Bes! It’s an elf!” Chance said and covered his mouth. “I can’t believe it!”⁵⁰

Jana shushed him.

“What is he then?” Kazrack asked.

“He is what humans would call a ‘blink dog.’ He is as intelligent and sentient as you or I,” she smirked with the word “you.” “If not more so... He has just been infected by the same disease that is infecting the wolves and he is no longer himself.”

“You were attacked by the wolves,” Beorth said noticing, a healing wound on the elven woman’s calf.

“Yes, and Janx, was bitten badly. A few days later his behavior became erratic and then a day later he attacked me and ran off into the woods. I have been following him since and caught up once or twice. He seemed to almost know me sometimes, but then would run off. The last I knew he was near the settlement, but I could not follow him there. The last thing I need is for superstitious humans throwing stones at me.”

“What are you doing here at all? I have never known of elves in Derome-Delem,” said Kazrack.

She paused. “I am traveling abroad to learn of elves outside of our homeland,” she said. “But now must help my companion. I need to find a way to heal him.”

Kazrack lowered his guard, but the elven woman did not. By this time Jeremy came walking up and gasped at the woman’s alien beauty.

“We are hunting the wolves to put them out of their misery,” said Beorth. “But perhaps we can help you with your friend. How do you plan to heal him?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. “I overheard some trappers speaking of an old healer in the woods north of here. I was thinking of seeking him out, but even if he can help, applying any kind of treatment to Janx will be difficult if he does not want to be caught.”

⁵⁰ Elves are a rare sight in Aquerra, preferring their Kingdom of Tempestas or isolated communities in various forests in Aquerra. While it is probable to see elves in more cosmopolitan places like Verdun, Haffar’s Port, or the cities of Thricia, most people have never seen one, let alone spoken to one.

“Do you mean the old hermit? We heard he consorts with goblins,” said Kazrack.

“Well, if that is the case, we should seek him out nonetheless, for such a thing should not be allowed,” the elven woman said.

“Well, your companion is a danger, so one way or another we need to take care of him. I hope you realize that if no cure can be found for him, he is going to have to be killed, for his own good and for the good of the town,” said Kazrack.

“It will not come to that, but if it does, I am prepared to do what I must do. What are your names?”

The party introduced themselves, including Ratchis, who Chance had gone back to and awakened.

“Have you seen any goblins?” Ratchis asked.

“No,” she said.

“What is your name?” asked Kazrack.

She paused. “I am called Tirhas Tesfay,” the elven woman said, sheathing her short sword.

“Well, we will help you to help your friend, if we can,” said Kazrack. “If you help us with the rest of the wolves.”

“Agreed,” Tirhas said.

“One question, however,” the dwarf added. “Why didn’t you help us when your companion and the wolves attacked us?”

“I did not know who you were, or what your attitude might be. I wanted to observe you first,” she replied.

Now accompanied by the elven woman, the companions began to move northward. There was a bit of discussion on how the blink dog might be captured, with little decided upon. Tirhas informed the party that Janx could “blink” at will and did not tire from doing it; also, no net could hold him. The best course of action would probably be trying to subdue the dog with non-lethal blows. However, they also considered perhaps trying to drug the blink dog by giving him food.

And so, they marched on, Ratchis leading the way, followed by Beorth and Kazrack and then by Jana and Chance. Jeremy slowed his pace to match that of the elf in order to walk alongside her. She seemed annoyed by him.

Chance leaned in close to Jana and whispered, “Ah’ve heard that elves have the power to charm men with a look. So, if ya see me acting funny ya have to do something.”

“Yes, of course she’d choose you to charm,” Jana said sarcastically.

“Why wouldn’t she?” Chance asked, offended.

Jana smiled.

Meanwhile, as Ratchis continued to look back and glare occasionally because the group’s chatter would not stop. Jeremy tried hard to get through to Tirhas.

“So, you are a long way from home,” he said.

She did not respond.

“So how did you become friends with Janx?”

She did not respond.

“How does he do that disappearing stuff?”

“You would call it magic,” she finally said, with a flat tone that might have betrayed annoyance to anyone but Jeremy.

“It must be neat to travel around with a dog like that,” he said.

She did not respond.

“You have such lovely golden hair; did you know that?”

She did not respond.

“Are all elves as pretty as you are?”

She did not respond.

And so, they continued onward for over an hour, moving what was basically northward as they followed the sound of the river, still to their right.

After a time Ratchis lost the track of the wolves again but continued to move in the same general direction that they had been moving. It was then that he heard the sharp high-pitched voices ahead of the group. Holding a hand up so that the others would wait, the tall outdoorsman crept forward to see an unusual sight just beyond the brush. A group of brown-orange-skinned goblins were marching in the party’s same general direction. There were over a dozen goblins carrying what appeared to be wounded on litters. They were led by a tall goblin in a helmet and a chain shirt.

Ratchis crept back to the group and told them what he saw.

“We should take advantage of their weakness and slay them all,” said Tirhas.

“Wait. They’re just going along their way, not bothering anyone, can’t we just let them go?” said Jeremy.

“But they’re goblins!” said Kazrack.

“Exactly,” said the elfin woman.

“But I am in no shape to take on that number of goblins,” said Kazrack said, placing a hand to his chest.

“But they are injured and unaware. We should be able to take them. We should be able to kill half of them before they even get a chance to react,” said Tirhas.

“This is the kind of foolishness that led to Malcolm’s death,” said Jana with a sigh.

“Yeah,” agreed Chance.

“They are vermin to be wiped out,” said Tirhas.

“But they may also lead us to the hermit, if he truly works with goblins, or may shed some light on the problem with the wolves. Better we follow them and learn what we can. They might even lead us to a goblin lair that might be a greater danger to the area,” said Ratchis.

“You speak wisely,” said Tirhas. “We shall follow then.”

It was agreed, and Ratchis took his place back at point, keeping a good distance between himself and the goblins. The rest of the group, led by Kazrack, followed with the woodsman at the end of the dwarf's vision.

The group had been following the goblins for another twenty-five minutes, when their quarry suddenly turned away from the river rather sharply. Ratchis stopped to wait for the others to direct them correctly, but they took longer than he expected having been momentarily confused when losing sight of Ratchis. When he finally saw them, he waved them in the right direction and continued to follow, coming to the edge of a huge clearing.

The clearing was at the base of a black stony hill and covered with thigh-high tall grass. The river was visible against a muddy bank that led all the way up to a wooden fort that the goblins were jogging into. The fort's walls were twelve feet tall and did not seem to have any apparent towers or ramparts. The entrance was a double door made of logs, with a sign of some kind over them. Ratchis could see some kind of letters or symbol above the door, but since it was eighty yards away could not make out the details.

The tall goblin was the last in and the doors closed. Ratchis crept back to the others and told them what he saw.

"What does the sign say?" asked Beorth.

"I do not know. I do not know my letters," said Ratchis.

"What are we going to do?" asked Kazrack. "There is no way we can attack a fort of goblins and hope to win."

"This could be the hermit's place," said Jeremy.

"Why would a hermit live in a fort?" asked Kazrack.

"We should watch and see what happens. Perhaps there will be more goblins coming and going," said Ratchis. "I will make my way around the clearing and see what I can see."

"I'll come with you," said Jeremy.

Ratchis sneered, "Make sure you are quiet."

"I can be quiet when I want to be," said the Neergaardian.

"In the meantime, we'll make a camp," said Beorth.

"And I'll watch the front of the fort," said Kazrack.

Ratchis and Jeremy crept through the tall grass around the west side of the fort but could see no distinguishing features about it. So, they continued up the steep rocky hill behind it, risking being spotted despite being crouched low, to get a perspective from higher ground. From there they could see a wooden building with a slanted slate roof within, and what looked like small garden plots before it, with trees and other plants. The small dark figures of goblins could be seen moving about occasionally. Unfortunately, the east side of the fort was obscured by the building itself. The way was too steep to easily traverse all the way around, so they climbed back down and crept back to their companions to report what they saw.

Ratchis took Kazrack's place watching the front of the fort for any change or occurrence, while the others settled into camp; by this time Ra's Glory was making its way towards its nightly rest in Anubis' Realm.

"I don't see how we are going to be able to do anything about this," said Jeremy to Chance before wandering down to the river to wash up.

"Aye," said Chance turning to Jana. "No way we can handle a hole fort full of goblins."

"But what if this is where the hermit lives?" asked Kazrack.

“If he can help Janx I must find a way to contact him,” said Tirhas softly.

“If he is in league with the goblins, I don’t see how we can get him to help. We may be forced to slay him,” said Beorth, with distaste.

“Or, he could be their prisoner, in which case we have to go in there and save him,” said Kazrack.

“We do?” asked Chance. Jana smiled, but the dwarf frowned.

“Of course, we do. We cannot allow someone to suffer such a horrible fate, even if we had to die trying to save him.”

“Ah guess yer right,” Chance acquiesced.

“Heh,” was all Jana had to say about that.

“But we don’t know if that is the case, and how will we determine if it is?” asked Beorth.

“We can wait until morning and see if goblins come or go or if anything changes and then make a plan,” said the dwarf.

Meanwhile, their scout was doing his own thing...

Ratchis waited for the sun to go down and then crawled through the tall grass. He was convinced there was something strange about this fort. It was well maintained and yet seemed poorly guarded; it just did not add up to the woodsman. He stared at the wooden walls for what seemed an hour and then finally decided to move forward out of his hidden position to get a closer look.

Ratchis moved out into the open and quickly crossed the ground between the brush and the fort. He attempted to peer between the logs of the fort but could not, the spaces between logs being filled with mud and tree sap. The inability to look out between the logs of the fort as well as the absence of a watchtower only further fed the woodsman’s speculation that this was no ordinary military fort. With no other way to see inside, Ratchis climbed up a corner wall and peered inside. From this angle he saw goblins camping out among carefully plotted gardens. There were crates and barrels against the inner wall and a low building occupying about half of the space inside the fort. Ratchis climbed down and crept to the next corner of the fort, this one at its rear where the ground was rockier and began to rise into hills. Here, he saw little of interest besides more goblins moving about, bows in hand. However, he could hear one loud high-pitched goblin voice conversing with another that was deeper and had a strange accent to it.

At the third corner of the fort, Ratchis observed a strange scene. Two goblins chattered to each other in their guttural tongue, near a small shack. One pointed to the shack and their voices grew louder and sharper. The goblin closest to the shack opened the door and entered, the scent of the place revealing it to be an outhouse.

This side of the fort sat in mud near the river. Ratchis came to the fourth corner and climbed the wall. As he peered over, the chatter of goblins became high-pitched and alarmed, as arrows began to bite into the fort wall near Ratchis. He waited a long moment to see if their reaction would reveal anything else about what the woodsman knew was not a normal circumstance, but only more arrows answered his mental query. Finally, he half-climbed/half-jumped into the mud below and began to wade out into the river to misdirect pursuit when suddenly the fort was illuminated in a light as bright as a bonfire.

A voice boomed out, “This is a healing house of Fallon and you will be given aid if you need it. Do not force me to spill blood in this sacred place if you come as an enemy!”⁵¹

⁵¹ Fallon is the Goddess of Healing & Mercy.

Ratchis saw a tall figure upon the wall, holding a weapon that gave off a bright light. The shadowed faces of goblins, peered along the wall as well, stretching out on either flank of the man.

Ratchis yelled back, "I am with a group that comes in peace."

"It is not very peaceful to skulk about my post," the voice replied.

"I did not know what to expect with goblins about," the woodsman answered.

"I promise you sanctuary if you and your companions enter my home in peace."

"Come to the front of the fort with your holy symbol visible and in the name of Nephthys, we shall enter in peace," Ratchis bellowed.

"So, it will be done," said the man. "I swear by Fallon."

Ratchis returned to his post to find Kazrack there, standing in horror at the appearance of the light and fearing the worst.

"What have you done?" the dwarf asked sternly.

"I went scouting around the fort to see what I could about it and was spotted," said Ratchis.

"What?!?" the dwarf cried,

Ratchis ignored the dwarf's outrage, "Get the others. The place is a temple of Fallon. The priest has promised us sanctuary."

"What?!?" Kazrack said again.

"Fine. *I* will get the group," the tall woodsman walked back to the camp, awaking the others. Tirhas merely stood against a tree, her ice blue eyes wide open and unblinking.

"The fort is a temple of Fallon. It is safe and we are offered sanctuary," said Ratchis.

"But there are goblins there!" said Chance.

"Fallon takes all and turns none away," said Beorth calmly. "It makes sense now. That is why the goblins were carrying their wounded. They were probably attacked by the wolves as well."

Kazrack was dumb founded. "But the place has goblins! Goblins! We cannot trust that man or this place."

"I will take the word of a Fallonite," said Beorth, simply.

"He said he would meet us at the front of the fort. He is making himself vulnerable as well. It is the best chance we have," said Ratchis.

"We are likely walking into a trap," said Tirhas. "But since it is the only chance to save Janx I will risk it."

"Well, if it's a Fallonite, it should be okay," said Jeremy.

Kazrack sighed knowing he was defeated. He looked to Jana.

"It looks as if we have little choice," she said.

The group marched out to the fort. They could see the doors were open, and goblin faces peered over the wall. As they approached, they could see that the symbol above the doors was a silver ankh within a red circle. Standing before the open doors was a man of less than six feet in height. He had sandy brown hair held out of his eyes by a blood red headband⁵², and despite the fact that he did not appear to be beyond halfway through his twenties, he had deep lines of care and worry carved into his face. He wore a chain shirt and woolen pants with a leather skirt peeking out from beneath. In his right hand was a small silver shield in the shape of a tree's leaf, complete with stem that curved stylistically from the top – in the right hand he held a mace, about its head burned a bright fire that had apparently caused the light upon the walls. About the man's neck was a holy symbol that matched that above the doors.

"Well met," he said. "I am Escher of Fallon. This is Fallon's Post."

"Why are there goblins here?" Kazrack asked brusquely.

"All who come in peace are welcome here. All are worthy of mercy and healing in the eyes of my goddess," Escher said in an even tone. "Follow me."

The party followed him in. Tirhas Tesfay hung back a bit, but as she entered, the Fallonite stepped past the group and closed the fort doors, sealing them with a simple log bolt.

The goblins turned and looked down from their perches on the wall ramparts, which only faced front. The large goblin in the chain shirt cried something in the goblin tongue, gesturing to the group, but Escher turned and replied in an equally rough tone in the same language. The goblin leader was silent for a moment and then called to his followers, who climbed down from their perches and returned to their tiny flea-ridden bedrolls scattered across the courtyard. They shot suspicious and angry glances at both Kazrack and Tirhas as they passed.

Kazrack returned the goblins angry, nervous looks with similar glaring. The rest of the party were bewildered by the scene, and at being so close to goblins and not be embroiled in melee. Among them only Ratchis seemed at ease, or at least as at ease as he ever seemed.

"And now, who are you and what brings you so far into the wilderness?" the priest asked.

The group introduced themselves and explained about the wolves and the foaming mouth disease.

"Luckily, it cannot be passed to humans or demi-humans, though it drives the wolves to be aggressive. These goblins here, they were attacked by diseased wolves as well. They brought their wounded here to be tended to," Escher said.

"Why tend to goblins?" asked Kazrack.

"All deserve mercy and a chance to do good in the world, even goblins," the man said. "When my companions, The Oath, left Tallow's Post, I remained behind, seeing that I could fill a need here: to help the goblins and lead them to a life where they could at least co-exist peacefully with other peoples."⁵³

Kazrack harrumphed.

"That is a very honorable goal," said Beorth.

"At first, I was attacked often, as I tried to build this place. I would have to defeat the goblins and then heal them and release them. Then they would come when wounded and I would heal them and once healed would attack me,

⁵² Fallonites wear white robes and red headbands to be easily identifiable in battles, so the wounded know who to come to and in places where her worship is respected both sides know not to attack the priest.

⁵³ The Oath is an adventuring party of small repute that cleared the mines of Tallow's Port in summer of 563 H.E. and went on to retrieve the infamous *Crown of Llywellyn* and return it to the king of Neergaard. They were also PCs who ran through an Aquerra campaign from fall 1996 to winter 2000.

so I was forced to deal with them and then heal them again. Unfortunately, I had to kill a few during this process and the weight is heavy on my heart, but now the local tribes know I mean them no harm and have nothing to give them except healing. They come and I tend to them and hope that this repeated mercy will soften their hearts in time, and they will be filled with the loving light of Fallon.”

Kazrack harrumphed.

“Rasty!” called Escher towards the building. “Rastfar!”⁵⁴

From the temple proper emerged a young goblin dressed in the white robe of a priest.

“Yesh?” he said, looking at the party wide-eyed.

“Rastfar, prepare some beds for our guests and pull out the extra bedrolls, we’ll need them.”

“Okay,” the little goblin said, and ran back into the building.

“I rescued Rasty. He was a goblin runt and was beaten and abandoned in the woods. I found him out there and nursed him back to health. I named him after a former companion of mine. He will be full-grown soon and then can decide what he wants to do with his life. He is kind-hearted and loyal. I hope he chooses to remain here,” said Escher. “Come into the temple. It is late and we should all rest. We can talk about why you have come here in the morning, with clear heads and rested bodies.”

The Medicus led them into the simple log building. The crackle and glow of a fire greeted them. The far wall was a shrine to Fallon, with a pedestal with a basin of holy oil and a large bronze ankh in a red painted circle. Cots were set up lining the walls, and the four cots on the right were filled with wounded goblins. Just within the threshold was a rail, stopping there Escher removed his chain shirt and hung it up alongside his mace and leaf-shield.

Hanging on the wall was also a net and pole arm of some sort that had clasping arms for grabbing a victim about the waist or neck.

“No weapons may pass the rail. Please hang your weapons and armor here,” Escher said gesturing to the open pegs on the wall.

Beorth immediately complied, as did Jana who leaned her club against the wall. Ratchis removed his many weapons as well, and Jeremy followed suit; both Kazrack and Tirhas hesitated.

Noticing their hesitation, Escher spoke, “This is a show of trust to honor Fallon. No harm befalls anyone here.”

“This is only a hunting knife, not a weapon,” said Ratchis pointed to a long and wicked blade on his side. “Need I remove it?”

“It is a sign of deference to Fallon,” Escher said simply.

Kazrack and Tirhas finally removed their gear, and Ratchis placed his knife with the other weapons.

After a moment’s confusion, Jeremy, Jana and Tirhas took cots, while Chance, Kazrack, Ratchis and Beorth spread out on bedrolls on the floor.

“Before you retire for the night, I see that you are wounded. Allow me as Fallon’s vessel to tend to your wounds,” said Escher.

⁵⁴ “Rastfar” is a dwarvish name of the northern black dwarvish dialect.

He laid his hand upon Ratchis' beefy shoulder, "Fallon, please aid this honorable follower of Nephthys, so that he may continue to help others find freedom and peace."⁵⁵ And many of the wounds on Ratchis' body began to slowly heal and scab over.

The priest repeated the process on all the others, saying similar words.

"Goodnight," said Escher, retiring into what appeared to be a small bedroom behind the altar. "May Fallon bless your sleep."

After Escher left the room, Kazrack turned to Ratchis, "Listen, this whole thing worked out, but you need to realize that when you go off alone and act without consulting the group you endanger all of our lives. Don't do it again."

Ratchis breathed deeply, "First, I am not a part of this group to have to answer to it. Second, when all everyone does is talk endlessly about nonsense, other than acting, someone needs to do something, and finally, when you all learn the danger of making a beastly amount of noise as we march through dangerous territory and how that endangers all our lives too, maybe I'll consider taking the wishes of the group into account."

"You may not be part of our group, but you travel with us for now and it is in all our best interests to communicate our plans. Even if you don't want to discuss them with everyone, at least tell me so I know what you are doing," Kazrack retorted.

"No offense, Kazrack," Chance interjected. "But who made you the leader? I mean, if you want to be leader that is fine, but I don't remember anyone saying you could tell people what to do."

"I never said I was the leader," Kazrack said, exasperated.

"Fine. I will keep what you have said in mind for the rest of our time traveling together," Ratchis said and laid down on his bed roll.

After, a few minutes of silence, as the party's breathing grew deeper and regular, "If we get killed by goblins in our sleep it will serve us right," Kazrack said.

A snore from Chance was the only reply.

Teflem, 13th of Ese – 564 H.E.

They were awakened by the sound of steady rhythmic hammering outside. The goblins in the other cots were gone, and the cot that had held Tirhas was empty. Kazrack, Beorth, Ratchis, Chance, Jeremy and Jana walked out into the courtyard.

There was no sign of the goblins, and Tirhas was sitting beneath a tree in one of the small gardens, studying from a large book. Escher stood shirtless, his tanned skin sweaty and gleaming in the bright sun of another elfin summer morning. He hammered sheets of scored and lacquered wood into place around the inner side of the fort wall, to decorate the sanctuary of his goddess. Escher's back was marred by the countless serpentine scars of repeated whiplashings and branded into his right shoulder were the numbers "4-12". Several more planks of the wood waited in pile on the ground, half covered by a tarp.

Rasty was stirring something in a pot over a fire next to the well in the center of the courtyard, and he looked up and smiled at the group.

"Good morning," the little goblin said in his high raspy voice.

⁵⁵ Nephthys is Goddess of Freedom & Bravery. Escher noticed Ratchis' belt of scored and twisted chain links with broken ends, which is the symbol of this goddess.

All but Kazrack returned the greeting. The dwarf only grunted, and seeing that all the other goblins were gone, returned back into the temple proper to perform his morning prayers.

“Good morning,” said Escher, taking a nail from his mouth. “Would you like some breakfast? Rastfar isn’t half a bad cook, better than me anyway. I used to travel with an excellent cook, in my old adventuring group. I wish, now that I have to cook for myself most of the time, that I had paid more attention to what he did. I bet wherever he is now that he’s still making his crazy concoctions.”⁵⁶

For a moment Escher had a look of nostalgia on his face. He walked over to where Rastfar was serving stew into bowls and popping biscuits on top. The group passed the bowls among themselves, but Tirhas did not have any. Instead, she unwrapped some light-colored bread from some leaves she kept in her satchel and munched on that.

“What’s that?” Jeremy asked her.

“It is elven waybread,” she answered.⁵⁷

“It doesn’t look like much to eat, no wonder you’re so skinny. You need to put some meat on your bones,” the Neergaardian said, perhaps thinking of the many tall muscular women warriors of his nation.

“It is all I need,” the elf woman said. “It is filling and among the more satisfying things to eat.”

“Can I try some?”

Tirhas broke off a small piece and handed it to Jeremy. He ate it hungrily.

“Wow!” he said. “That stuff is great! Could do with a little jam though.”

As the group was having seconds (except Ratchis who was having thirds), Kazrack emerged from the temple. Rastfar ran over to him, “Ya want some stew?” the little goblin asked him.

The dwarf bit back a snarl, “No...” he paused. “Thank you.”

Kazrack joined his companions who were sitting in a patch of grass.

Escher addressed them: “Well, I spoke with Tirhas early this morning while the rest of you slept, and she explained more in detail about her blink dog companion. She told me also of the difficulties of catching him. If it were easy, I would say to return him here for me to heal, but that might not be possible. I will meditate on the problem and hope to have an answer by mid-day.”

“What about the wolves?” asked Ratchis.

“The foaming mouth disease kills most animals quickly, making them more aggressive, but increasingly weak. It rarely lasts more than a fortnight. There were never so many wolves around here, so my guess is they were driven here from somewhere else and thus have been sick for some time. I remember seeing a sick one nearly ten days ago. They will not last much longer. I think it can be safe to assume that in a few days (if not sooner) the wolf problem will be no more.”

“What about the goblins?” asked Kazrack.

“What about them?” asked the Medicus.

⁵⁶ This is a reference to Fitch Harper, another member of the Oath. Unknown to Escher, Fitch was killed soon after the Fallonite left the group, during an adventure in Neergaard.

⁵⁷ The secret of making this bread is known only to the elven people but it is filling and nutritious, and delightfully sweet and flaky.

“Where did they go? What will happen to them?”

“They will return to their tribe most likely and continue whatever it is they do. Hopefully, their heart lightened by the healing power and love of Fallon and remembering the kindness of my goddess when next they have a choice between kindness and cruelty.”

“But won’t they just go and raid and kill more people, after you’ve healed them?” Jeremy asked.

“I hope not, though it is a distinct possibility but as Ratchis I’m sure would agree, sometimes for freedom and goodness to prevail people must be allowed to make the wrong choice,” said Escher thoughtfully.

“Feh!” said Kazrack, munching on cold iron rations.

“Since the Oath and I cleared Tallow’s Deep, the goblins have remained in the wilds above this hill behind us, and none have bothered the town. We closed off the tunnel to a great goblin city in the Plutonic Realms and so they have gotten no reinforcements.”

“So, you were part of the group that saved the mines of Tallow’s Post from the goblins?” asked Beorth.

“Aye, they were led by a huge goblin, nearly six feet tall, called Mog-Grishog. We defeated them, with the help of René, who was a friend of Rastfar’s, a dwarven priestess of Thor. When the group moved on, I remained behind, and René established a temple of Thor in the town. Actually, I am surprised she is not with you to deal with the wolf problem.”

“They said she was away on some business,” said Kazrack.

“Well, probably for the best. She is eager to fight evil, but a little too eager in my opinion. To be honest, I do not like her very much,” said Escher.

“You know the people of Tallow’s Post think of you as an old hermit,” said Beorth.

“Really?” Escher pondered. “That is odd. I do return to the town every few months for supplies, but then again, the people barely remember me as being a member of the Oath. People have infamously short memories, and what little there is often faulty, but I do what good I can not to be remembered, but for its own sake. And with that, I will retire into the temple and pray to Fallon for guidance on the matter of the white wo. . .I mean, blink dog.”

While Escher prayed undisturbed, Ratchis went down to the river where he prayed as well and removed his clothes to bathe. Jeremy, Beorth and Kazrack sparred, the dwarf trying out his maneuver designed to trip people with his halberd and then attack them while they were down. He had not quite gotten the hang of it yet.⁵⁸

Tirhas practiced her own strange dance-like fighting style with her short sword, performing elaborate moves—one hand pointed outward at all times, occasionally twiddling her fingers in precise repetitive movements.

Chance and Jana sat alternately chatting and napping beneath a tree.

In time, Ratchis returned from the river, carrying his shirt and gear over his shoulder. The others could now see that the tattoo on his neck twined like an indigo snake up and down both arms, and it appeared as if smaller figures were worked into the scale design of the creature, but the details could not be ascertained. They could also see that his back in addition to having a strange inhuman ridge for a backbone, was also horribly burned with what appeared to be bits of what was once molten metal still wrapped in the warped flesh.

Jeremy gagged and looked away. Jana, Beorth and Kazrack also pried their vision from the horrid sight. Chance however could not bring himself to look away, agog with horror. “Put ya shirt on, man,” he said. “That’s disgusting!”

⁵⁸ **DM’s Note:** Kazrack’s player hoped to have him gain the Improved Trip feat at third level.

Ratchis sneered at him and then complied.

Finally, Escher emerged from the temple.

The group gathered together to listen to what he had to say.

“Upon reflection I have decided there is little I can do beside offer you this,” he said, holding aloft a glass vial full of clear liquid. “This is a potion that should heal any disease or malady that ails the dog. It was a Festival of Isis gift from my former traveling companion.⁵⁹ I have always saved it for an emergency, and I guess this qualifies. All you need to do is subdue him or trick him into drinking it somehow.”

“Would it work if we poured it into some food and tricked him into eating it?” asked Kazrack.

“That is doubtful,” said Escher. “I am sorry that I could not be more help.”

“It is a great help. Thank you,” said Tirhas, betraying her first hint of genuine emotion since the group had met up with her. “I guess we shall be forced to subdue Janx somehow...”

“Jana, you know about herbs and such perhaps you can find something that if Janx eats will put him to sleep,” Kazrack said to the young girl.

“Perhaps,” she replied. “But it is unlikely, I do not think what I need grows around here, but I can look while we search for the dog.”

“Well, let me just say now, that if this plan does not work and it comes down to having to kill the dog or letting it go,” Kazrack said, pausing. “I will kill it.”

Tirhas sighed and then with a sad, yet determined look said, “If it comes to that, I hope you will let me do it myself.”

The group grimly agreed.

They all set to packing up their gear, and head back southward to search for Janx.

“Thank you again for all your help,” said Beorth, emerging from the temple where he had entered to leave a donation for the sanctuary.

“You are all welcome back anytime and tell any you meet in the wilderness who require aid or healing that they may seek this place out. And I do ask that if you ever hear news of or happen to meet my former companions, The Oath, please tell them that you have met me, and I that am well and hope that they will find time out of their adventures sometime to visit me.”⁶⁰

“We will,” said Ratchis. “Thank you, and may Nephthys keep you free.”

And with that they left Fallon’s Post to search for Janx, Escher and Rasty waving goodbye to them from the gate.

“Anyone know what today is?” Chance asked as they made their way southward again. Jana was giving a cursory look for the black berries she needed to try to make a sleeping concoction but knew that the group would move too fast for an effective search.

⁵⁹ The Festival of Isis is a celebration of the New Year and of the Goddess of Motherhood and Magic – gifts are often exchanged between friends and family members.

⁶⁰ Unbeknownst to Escher, the entirety of the Oath (as he knew it) was killed in an ill-fated mission to the Hellish Seas.

“I think it is Teflem,” said Beorth.

“Ah mean the date,” said Chance. “Is it the thirteenth?”

“I think it is the fourteenth,” said Jana.

“No, the thirteenth,” confirmed Beorth.

“Today is the Day of Bes!” cried Chance with glee. “Me favorite holiday. Today Ah leave all in the hands of luck. And if I were you all, I’d do the same, or else BAD luck will get you.”

“We’ll see about that,” said Kazrack.

“I hope not,” said Jeremy. “Not that I need luck. Not with my great skill as a swordsman.”

Jana smirked.

The group marched on in their usual order. Ratchis took the lead, followed by Beorth and Kazrack. Jeremy followed them, closely followed by Jana and Chance; Tirhas took up the rear.

The day continued the warming trend, and the grass was a last burst of brilliant green, in defiance of the dulled colors of the winter to come. The pines bowed slightly in the cool breeze, like old men tipping their hats, while deciduous trees shook in their new bright-colored garb.

They had traveled for three or four hours when the attack came.

Wolves emerged from the brush. They appeared sluggish, and the white foam on their muzzles was flecked with blood; their skin hung loosely from their bodies, and large patches of fur were missing from their dull coats; their eyes were yellowed and sunken, but still they felt driven to attack.

The three wolves came at the party from two sides: one at Ratchis, one at Beorth and the last at Kazrack. In the distraction of the attack, the great albino dog appeared amid the group and bit Jeremy with great strength, though looking more bedraggled and a bit thinner, it was obvious he was doing a better job fighting off the disease’s effects.

Janx disappeared and reappeared behind Beorth, even as the paladin smashed the skull of his wolf opponent. The weakness of these poor beasts made over-coming them a matter of single hard blows, for Ratchis and Kazrack were able to finish theirs as well. Jeremy loaded his crossbow and fired a quarrel into the flank of the blink dog, it yelped and growled and disappeared as Tirhas cried out, “What are you doing?!? Subdue him! Subdue him!”

Janx appeared beside his old friend, and she turned to him. “Janx, it is me. Don’t you remember me?” She held out her hand to the dog, who paused and cocked his head as if in a moment of confusion or debate, and then with a loud chomp bit down on her hand sending blood flying in all directions. She cried out and pulled away, but Ratchis had the chance to run over and tackle the dog, wrapping his thick arms around its neck and squeezing. After a moment’s choking noise, Janx disappeared again and the tall woodsman fell to the ground. The dog appeared beside Jana, biting her flank, Kazrack and Beorth began to run over, but the dog was already gone, and reappeared behind Beorth biting him.

Chaos then ensued.

Ratchis continued running at Janx and attempting to grab him and choke him into unconsciousness, but mostly just ran through the dog, only accomplishing the task of throwing himself on the ground repeatedly. Chance, leaving his fate in the hands of Bes, mimicked the big man, and punched and kicked and grappled at the dog, having much the same result.

During this time, Jeremy, Beorth and Kazrack ran back and forth wherever Janx appeared and used the flat of their blades, or Beorth would strike for non-vital spots with the end of his quarterstaff. However, Janx’s ability to

constantly phase in and out and blink around, made the combat more comical than effective; well, comical if the bloody bite wounds he was dealing could be counted as funny.

Flexing her hands painfully, Tirhas spoke an arcane word, as Janx appeared near her in an attempt to bite Jeremy and the dog seemed dazed and unsure what to do. Jeremy and Kazrack were both able to get in good blows with the flat of their blades, and this time Ratchis grabbed hold of the dog extra tightly, twisting its neck slightly to constrict airflow, but gasping, the dog disappeared yet again, re-appeared near Beorth and bit the holy warrior.

Tirhas cast her spell again, and again Janx was stunned, allowing another round of hits, including a green ray of energy from Jana's finger that few saw her accomplish in the chaos of the moment.

Finally, Kazrack was able to grab hold of Janx and before the blink dog could disappear again, Ratchis kicked the beast with all his might, as Jeremy slapped it across the head with the flat of his short sword. The dog shuddered and passed out.

Kazrack gently let go of Janx and Tirhas ran over cradling her companion's head in her lap and petting him. They could see the shine of a tear on her usually emotionless face.

She then pulled out the vial that Escher had given the group and gently opening the blink dog's mouth, she poured the clear liquid down its throat, massaging its neck to allow it to go down.

The others stood silently and watched. Kazrack gripped his halberd nervously, wary of Janx waking up and not having been cured.

After what seemed like an eternity, Janx began to stir. The blink dog opened his mouth and closed it again, and then struggled as if to get up, but settled back down with a shudder. Tirhas stroked her companion's fur some more and brought her mouth down to his ear making indecipherable sounds. Janx made faint howling-type noises, and then Tirhas stood, lying Janx's head gently on the ground.

"He will be okay," the elf-maiden said. "I have spoken to him, and he seems himself again. However, he is weak and will need time to recover."

"Well, as long as the rest of the wolves die off soon, which from the look of those others looks like it will happen, this whole situation should be taken care of," said Kazrack.

"Yes, it does seem so," said Tirhas, and then paused. "I want to thank you for helping me and Janx. I would not have been able to help him without you. I do not have much in the way of a way to repay you, but..."

"Do not thank us," said Kazrack brusquely. "We did what we were going to have to do one way or another. We were able to accomplish it without killing the dog, but we would have done it the other way if we had to."

Tirhas' face hardened again, her subtle smile of gratitude shifting back into those long high cheeks, her eyes becoming steady and cold again.

"I will be staying here with Janx until he is well enough to move," the elf said.

"I guess we will be going back to town to tell them that the wolf-menace is no longer a problem and to bring the wainwright back to the wagons," said Kazrack.

"Are you sure you don't want to come back to town with us where it is safer?" asked Jeremy.

"I do not think I would be very welcome there, and I cannot move Janx," Tirhas said.

"I can only imagine how the townspeople would react if the 'white wolf' came strolling into town," said Jana.

"Though your lives are short, perhaps we will meet again," said Tirhas, returning to her usual clipped tone.

The group began to walk back towards Tallow's Post, leaving Tirhas stroking Janx's fur, her golden hair shining in the dying light of the sun.

"Uh, guh-bye!" called Chance, looking back to the elf, and waving.

"Maybe we should have stayed the night with her to make sure she remained safe," said Beorth.

"She will be fine," said Kazrack.

"Well, in the future when someone wants to thank us and maybe give us a gift, just accept it okay?" said Jeremy to Kazrack with a tone of annoyance. "We cannot afford to be giving up whatever we can get."

Kazrack harrumphed.

"Ratchis, what will you be doing now?" asked Beorth asked their guide.

"I was hoping to return with you to this caravan you spoke of," he said in his raspy voice. "I had heard of it before and need a way to get to Gothanius myself."

"Ya'll hafta sign a contract," said Chance.

"That's fine," Ratchis replied.

"Well, it'll be good ta have him 'round," Chance said to Jana. "Finally, they'll be someone bigger than Devon."

"Who is Devon?" Ratchis asked.

"You'll see," Kazrack replied.

Beorth, Chance, Jana, Jeremy, Kazrack and Ratchis walked down out of the wood toward the plateau where Tallow's Post was located.

It was already dusk by the time they arrived at the Silver Vein Inn. Sergeant Fnord happened to be there, and they explained how the wolf menace was taken care of, and how the "old hermit" was really Escher of the Oath.

"Oh, I knew he had stayed around, but I never made the connection, that is good to know," Fnord said. "And what of the white wolf?"

"He won't be bothering anyone ever again," said Jana.

No one mentioned Tirhas or Janx to the constable.

Nicholas, the inn-keep, offered the party a free hot meal, but said he would have to charge for rooms.

"I will sleep in the common room, if you don't mind," said Ratchis.

"Um, if ya wont we could, um... share a room..." Chance said to Jana. "I mean it would be cheaper that way... Uh, I mean, it would be okay, I wouldn't try nothing."

Jana smiled. "Thanks for the offer, but I was thinking I would get my own room," she said.

"I'll share a room with you," Jeremy said to Chance.

"Yeah, okay," said the Wallbrookian.

Kazrack and Beorth shared another room, and they all (except Ratchis) got to sleep in beds (unless you counted Escher's cots) for the first time in weeks.

Anulem, 14th of Ese – 564 H.E.

Cold air pressed down on the hills as Kazrack, Jana, Jeremy, Chance and Beorth led Ratchis and Warren the wainwright down to the Mountain Door Road where the wagons had broken down. The air still had a dampness to it that made it easier for the cold to find its way down to the bone. Only Ratchis in his long coat of beaver fur, and Kazrack from pure dwarven stubbornness were not shivering.

Even before they saw the road, they could smell the cooking fire. They came over the hill crest to see that the wagons had been dragged off the road to a grassy spot just south of it. The tents of Crumb's boys were haphazardly scattered on the muddy field, and campfires were burning here and there; the boys huddled over them wrapped in blankets to stay warm.

Kamir came up the road lugging a bucket of water, a blanket tied around him as a makeshift toga, his brown hair plastered to his forehead by sweat, despite the cold, and the roundness of his face beginning to dwindle from the sparse meals.

"Hey!" he cried. "You guys made it back! I'll go tell Crumb!"

He ran off, the bucket banging against his leg, spilling a trail of water behind him.

The party met up with Crumb outside of his large tent.

"I see you have succeeded. I was worried maybe you'd deserted," Crumb laughed and elbowed Kazrack with forced playfulness. "We already had one person run off."

They introduced Warren to Crumb and the leader had Deet show the man the wagons and what needed to be done.

"Well, how much did he need as a deposit?" Crumb asked Kazrack. "Is there any of my money left?"

"Actually, the burgomaster paid for the wainwright in return for some help we gave their town with a wolf problem, so we did not have to use any of the money you gave us," Kazrack replied.

Jeremy sighed loudly and walked off.

"Well, that's great. Let's have it," Crumb said.

Kazrack gave him the pouch of coins. "However, I was thinking that you might share some this saved money with us as we did do this favor for you and the caravan by retrieving the wainwright and risking ourselves to help the town of Tallow's Post in order to help you."

"Well, the contract does state that you must be willing to do anything within reasonable means to help the group arrive in Gothanius. You were only doing what you agree to do by signing the contract," Crumb replied in his deep voice, combing his mustache with a finger.

"Well, what we had to do was a little more than reasonable, I think," Kazrack said with obvious frustration.

"But you did do it, that is all that matters, and you have not only my appreciation, but that of all these boys. They all look up to you and your companions. Money cannot buy that kind of reward," Crumb said.

"But if we had gone strictly by the contract and considered what we had to do unreasonable we would have just come back and then what?" Kazrack's voice grew louder. "Without incentive to do more than the bare minimum why should we do more?"

Crumb's voice grew even deeper, and an undertone of anger and exhaustion came into it. "Listen, Kazrack, you do what you want to do. You want to do the bare minimum, then do it. You decide what you want to do, and you live with the consequences. If you had just come back without the wainwright, we would have figured something out, probably marched hungry and without supplies to the next town or wherever we could purchase new wagons but that'd be on your head."

"It would be on yours," said the dwarf.

"Would it?" Crumb said, paused, and then he lowered his voice back down. "I run my operation the way I see best. If you don't like it... well, you signed the contract and that is that."

"So, you are saying you'd rather I do the bare minimum," Kazrack asked.

"No, *you* are saying that," the fat man paused. "Is there anything else?"

"I guess not," said the dwarf.

"Then I will take what you said under advisement and that will be the end of this topic," Crumb's vision fell on Ratchis who was standing a bit behind the companions.

"And who do we have here?" asked Crumb, putting his smile and good humor back on.

Ratchis stepped forward.

"I met up with Kazrack and the others near Tallow's Post and I wanted to join your group that is going to Gothanius," the tall woodsman said.

Crumb looked him up and down, "Heh, well do you know what you're getting into? You know what we're supposed to be doing?"

"Yes, helping Gothanius with a problem with a dragon or something," said Ratchis.

"That's right," he paused. "Well, we could always use another warm body. Deet! Bring us a contract!"

Ratchis was handed a contract. He looked it over and then made a swiggle with the quill he was handed.

"Please make an X," said Deet. Ratchis complied.

"Now remember, this thing says you won't brawl with anyone, and will obey all the laws of the places we pass through, or you will be left behind," said Crumb.

"Okay," said Ratchis.

"Kamir!" called Crumb, but it was as if the boy were already standing beside him waiting for orders.

"Find uh..."

"Ratchis."

"Yes, Ratchis... Find him a place in one of the tents and tell him about meals and such," Crumb told Kamir, who nodded his head with great enthusiasm.

Kamir led Ratchis towards the tents.

“Let’s see who I should put you with?” said Kamir thinking aloud. “I guess I could put you with Markle and Devon and the other guy. There are only three to their tent, and the tents can hold five in a pinch. Maybe you wouldn’t like them...”

Kamir looked at Ratchis, “They aren’t very nice people, especially Devon. By the way, I’m Kamir. I help out around here, but I’m going to go fight the dragon too, and if you need anything at all don’t hesitate to ask.”

They came to the tent where Devon and his short ugly companion sat on a log by their campfire.

Meanwhile the rest of the companions had returned to where they found Kamir had set up their tents in anticipation of their return. Kazrack removed his armor and began to inspect it for broken scales and other weak points, finding a few broken wolf teeth wedged in it. Chance crawled into the tent he shared with Kamir and Jeremy and went to sleep.

As Jana was walking to her own tent, she was approached by Markle, “Do you mind if we speak in private for a minute?” He gestured towards her tent.

“Not at all,” she said and let him go in first and followed.

“Hey look,” said Jeremy to Beorth, seeing this happen. “I wonder what they are doing. Let’s go have a listen.”

“It is none of our business,” said Beorth, walking off to go pray.

“Of course, it isn’t,” said the blonde Neergaardian, as he began to creep towards her tent. However, as he approached, he stepped on a stick which made a loud crack and stumbled falling against the side of the tent with a yelp and the loud panting of someone who almost fell on their face.

“Who is out there?” Markle said within the tent.

“I think I know who it is,” said Jana. “Jeremy!”

“Uh, nope, it’s uh, me Chance,” said Jeremy in a horrible imitation of the Wallbrookian’s accent. “Ah was juss walkin’ by. Ah, uh, Ah’ll see ya later.”

Jeremy ran back to his tent, leaving Markle and Jana to whatever secrets they might be discussing.

“What in the name of Set’s Realm is that ugly thing?” Devon declared looking up at Ratchis.

“Uh, this is Ratchis. He’s new and is gonna be sharing your tent with you,” said Kamir nervously.

“I have said it before, and I’ll say it again, only three people in this tent—no more,” Devon stood, and stepped over to Kamir, towering over him. “Especially not some ugly piece of walking rotten meat that looks like some dog dragged him through the streets as a child.”

Ratchis just watched the loud tall man with a stony glare of anger but said nothing.

“You had better find this pig-piss freak somewhere else to sleep. Try something with a trough, I’ve seen more human looking turds than this guy,” said Devon, speaking to Kamir, but returning Ratchis’ look.

Kamir turned to Ratchis, “I’m sorry. You probably don’t want to stay here. I’ll go see if I can find you another spot, maybe Doris’s old spot.”

Kamir ran off.

“You do that, you worthless bag of bird-droppings,” said Devon. Ratchis growled softly.

“You don’t even talk, do you?” Devon said, looking back to the woodsman. “They expect me to share a tent with an animal, you probably will mark your scent in the corner of the tent, you friggin’ mottled son of a beast.”

Devon sat back down and tossed a stick into the fire.

After a few moments Kamir returned.

“Okay, Ratchis, I found you another place to stay, in Doris’ old place with Finn and Gwar and Frank,” said the doughy boy.

“Thank Ra,” Devon said. “I can smell that maggot-infested chunk from here. He smells like something born from the bloody ass of a sailor’s dog.”

Devon laughed, but his short dark companion remained impassive, just watching the action. The tall man stood and stepped over to Kamir.

“Get him out of here you worthless bloated sack of pig fat, and then come back and clean my boots,” Devon said to Kamir, and smacked the boy in the back of the head.

Without warning Ratchis threw his backpack with all his strength at Devon, who was able to cushion the blow with his arm and an “oof!” The bag fell at the tall man’s feet.

“What the hell you do that for, you stupid ugly cow bladder?” Devon cried. “Oh, well. I guess it’s mine now. What do we have in here?”

Devon began to open the backpack and pull things out, when Ratchis charged him. But Devon was in a fighting stance with a speed obviously borne of many a brawl, and before the woodsman could get his hands on him, an uppercut landed on Ratchis’ jaw.

Ratchis ignored the pain of the blow, and pulled Devon to the ground, but Devon twisted and grabbed the big man’s arm and head into a lock, holding him in place.

“Stop it now! I’ll pop your head off!” Devon said to Ratchis, sweat beading on his brow as he strained to hold him.

Kamir began to yell, “Stop fighting! You’ll get in trouble. Stop fighting!” As the two brutish men did not stop, Kamir ran to get Kazrack.

Meanwhile, his upper body held motionless by Devon, Ratchis’ fighting instinct kicked in and he threw his feet out from under him, causing his opponent to fall forward with the sudden weight and loosen his grip a bit. Ratchis was able to break free and spin around grabbing the broad man from behind, squeezing his torso and arms in a tight pincer that made Devon roar. Ratchis squeezed and squeezed again, but finally Devon broke free with brute strength and pulled away, taking a swing that missed. Ratchis charged again and they both fell down, and switched places many times, pinning each other’s arms, locking each other’s heads, breaking free, squeezing, and clawing at each other wildly in a wrestling frenzy.

Kamir returned with Kazrack. “Stop it!” He yelled.

The two did not stop. Devon broke free again and scored a punch against Ratchis, making his lip swell up. Ratchis grappled again.

Kazrack grabbed a nearby bucket and filled it full of mud. When the grappling pair rolled over, Devon gaining dominance, Kazrack flung the mud at him, but the mud splattered on the two combatants.

“Don’t do that,” Devon yelled, as Ratchis pulled away from him, receiving a hard yank on his head that sent jolts of pain down his neck. Devon followed this with his own tackle, which sent the two combatants tumbling one over the other.

Kazrack scooped up another bucket of mud and flung it right on Devon’s chest as he tried to extricate himself from Ratchis once more, but the woodsman twisted the tall man’s legs in a painful knot. Devon spun around and hammered his knotted fists into the woodsman’s back. Devon turned to avoid the blow of Ratchis’ headbutt which he aimed toward the other man’s face. He looked up at Kazrack, who was readying another bucket of mud.

“Don’t you throw that,” Devon tried to say, but the moment he opened his mouth, Kazrack let loose a highly accurate blast of mud that hit him right in the face and went into his mouth.

Devon spat and coughed, and Ratchis took the opportunity to shove the man’s face into the ground and bang the back of his head with the butt of his calloused hand. Kazrack laughed and laughed.

“Kazrack, you have to stop them. They’ll get kicked out,” said Kamir anxiously. Kazrack did not answer.

With a burst of rage, Devon broke free of Ratchis’ grip and turning, slammed the woodsman three times with the back of his hand. Roaring, he grabbed the broader man around the torso and lifted him up, squeezing with all his might. Ratchis let out a gasp and pried loose of Devon’s grip. Grasping the belt of chain links around his waist, Ratchis placed his hand on his heart and began to call to his goddess, “Neph. . .” But a quick punch from Devon ended it and down tumbled Ratchis into unconsciousness.

Devon spit on him, his face was a raw dark red, and a small amount of blood dripped from the corner of his mouth, his face was covered in mud, and his clothes were caked in dirt.

“Eh, take that ya smelly pork rind,” Devon said as he caught his breath,

“Looks like you had a little trouble there,” said Kazrack.

“Shut up, Stumpy or I’ll do the same to you,” Devon, wiping the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

“You ever toss mud at me again, you are gonna wish you were in the same shape as your friend here in comparison. I can make sure you see your friend Malcolm real soon.”

Kazrack stooped to scoop up more mud, and Devon stepped forward fists clenched.

At that moment, Markle walked over, having finished his conversation with Jana.

“Devon!” he said. “Stop right now! What the hell are you doing?”

“That big ugly guy attacked me,” said Devon, his attitude changing immediately as he pointed to Ratchis’ unconscious form.

“You know you can’t brawl! What have I told you? Do you want to ruin everything we have been working for?”

“That’s what I tried to tell him, but he just kept on fighting, Markle. I mean...”

“Get in the tent,” Markle said pointing to the shelter. “I want to talk to you in private.”

“But Markle...”

“In!”

Kazrack laughed as Devon followed Markle in their tent with his bruised face scrunched up in an angry frown.

Jeremy came over. “What happened?”

“He fought with Devon and lost,” said Kazrack, pointing to Ratchis “Help me bring him to his tent.”

“I’ll help,” said Kamir. “He’s staying in the tent with Finn Fisher and Frank and Gwar... This way.”

They brought Ratchis to his tent, where Kamir remained behind to tend to his wounds.

As they walked back to their tents, Kazrack said to Jeremy, “We need to do something about Devon.”

“I think you are right,” the Neergaardian replied.

End of Session #6



Session #7

Ralem, 15th of Ese – 564 H.E.

Ratchis awoke with a raw and tender face. One eye was almost sealed shut, and his lower lip was even larger and puffier than usual. Achingly, he got up and got dressed, finding his tent-mates (whom he had not even met yet) were already up and gone. Outside, Crumb's boys lined up for the small breakfast that Kinney and Horung served, while Kamir was busy packing supplies into the newly repaired wagons. Warren the Wainwright had worked through the night and had already headed back over the hills to the north.

Ratchis hobbled over to the chow line and took his place.

"Ratchis, right?" said one young man with black hair and a sailor's permanent tan. He had the place right in front of the woodsman in line.

"Yes."

"I'm Finn, Finn Fisher. We're tent-mates, along with Frank and Gwar, here." He pointed to the two shepherd brothers ahead of him. They looked at Ratchis with weak smiles and turned back around.

"You know what I hate Square?" a familiar gravelly voice said from behind them. "Pig-fuckers."⁶¹

Ratchis and Finn looked to see Devon, looking a bit weary, but not nearly in as bad of shape as Ratchis, waiting for food a few people back. He stood with his short ugly friend.

"I mean, the thought of some human lying with one of those porkish bastards is so disgusting, I don't know if I can even eat my breakfast."

Ratchis did not respond but turned back around to grab a bowl and have the steaming porridge poured into it.

"Some of them may look more human than others, but even if they don't have tusks like some people around here, they are still stinking sons of pig-fuckers!"

Ratchis walked away with Devon's braying laughter echoing in his ears.

Later, as he packed his equipment onto the front wagon, where he'd be riding, Crumb approached him.

"The word around the camp is that you and Devon were fighting last night," said Crumb. "Now, I already talked to Devon, and he assured me there was no brawling. What do you say?"

"There was no brawling," said Ratchis in his raspy voice, his lip stinging where it was swollen.

"Well, that's good," said the portly man, looking into Ratchis' puffy eye. "I'd hate to think that someone I allowed to join this expedition would violate the conditions of its contract within moments of agreeing to them. I would hate to have to pursue something like that to the extent of law for breach of contract, but I *would* do it, if you understand me. But that really shouldn't apply to you, since you aren't going to be doing any fighting, right?"

"Right."

The two wagons continued to make their way westward, stopping only for short rests, meals, and for the night.

⁶¹ "Pig-Fucker" and "Son of a Pig-fucker" are both common insults for those of orcish lineage.

That long day found the wagons moving through rolling plains with very little tree cover. The land looked like it might make for good farming but was undeveloped. Late in the afternoon, they came to a wide river crossed by a wooden bridge. It was guarded by men in ring mail armor and leather helms, wielding long spears. Boris E. Crumb disembarked from his wagon and spoke with the men and in a few moments the wagons creaked over the bridge and headed to a copse of trees where camp was set up. A tower could be seen peeking from above the trees, perhaps a half-mile away.

“This is the town of Bountiful,” he said. “A trade center for local farms, not very big, but we will be stopping here for a day or so, to re-supply and re-gather our energies. There should be a market day tomorrow, and I encourage you all to explore, but please remember the terms of the contract you signed. Obey all local laws and no brawling. And please do not do anything to upset the Watch-Mage here.”⁶²

Crumb’s boys spent what was left of the light gathering firewood, clearing areas for their campfires and swimming in the nearby cold river.

Isilem, 16th of Ese – 564 H.E.

It felt like it could be the last warm day of the year. The sunlight was streaming down on the young men, stretching, and rubbing their eyes, lining up to get their eggs and bacon (quite a treat compared to the cold jerky and stale biscuits they had gotten once the porridge had run out). There was also a resounding cheer when Crumb announced that Horung and Kinney would be getting a good fat sheep to roast for dinner.

They could hear the market coming together in the village proper. The sound of animals being herded, hammers on wood as stalls were put up, and bright voices calling “good morning” drifted towards the camp.

“I was thinking that we should get Kamir some kind of gift,” said Kazrack.

“What kind of gift?” asked Jeremy.

“I was thinking a set of cooking gear as a way to say thank you for everything he does for us,” said the dwarf.

“Why not get him a gift that is more just for him?” asked Jeremy.

“Maybe.”

“Ah say we git him a woman,” said Chance, nonchalantly.

“What?” asked Kazrack.

“Uh woman, ta sleep with, ya know. . . *a woman*,” repeated Chance, he waggled his eyebrows. “We can all chip in and get him a good one for a night.”

“I want no part of this,” said Beorth walking away.

“It is not a bad idea,” said Jana, and her companions looked at her with some shock. “It might do someone like him some good.”

“I’d have no idea where to arrange for such a thing,” said Kazrack. “Would a little town like this have such... women?”

“*Every* town has such women,” said Jeremy with a sly smile.

⁶² Watch-Mages are graduates of the Academy of Wizardry, who are assigned to guide and watch over specific towns and areas. The local government of Thracia is based solely on the power of the Watch-Mage.

“Leave it ta me,” said Chance. “Ah’ll handle the whole thing. Ah’m gonna go to some cockfights. Ah can find out there.”

“Cockfights?” Kazrack was puzzled.

“Oh, towns like this always have whores an’ cockfights, trust me. Ah just need ten pieces of silver. Hand it over.”

“Ten silvers!” Kazrack exclaimed.

“That is only three each,” Chance said.

“You mean two, right?” Jana said with a smirk.

“Yeah, two.”

“Why so much?” Jeremy asked.

“Ah don’t know what kinda women ya be getting’ with, but the more ya pay da better ya get,” answered Chance. He turned to Jana, smiling. “Not that Ah know from personal experience, of course.”

“No, of course not,” Jana replied, moving her smirk over to the opposite corner of her mouth.

Chance collected what coins he could from his friends, and they all went to the market.

Meanwhile, Ratchis was eating his second helping of breakfast and talking with one of his tent-mates.

“You said your family name was Fisher. Is that what you do?” Ratchis asked the dark-haired fellow.

“Yes. I am. . . Uh, was a fisherman, like my father and his father and my uncles. I really miss it actually. Out on the water, wind in the hair, Ra’s Glory warm on your skin. The pull of weight in your nets...”

Finn had a distant look on his face for a moment, and then remembered himself. “You ever fish?” he asked Ratchis.

“Yes, but using a spear, never off a boat... Just in streams and rivers,” the large man replied, wondering what any period of time on a ship might be like.

“So, uh,” Ratchis gulped back his usual inclination to not speak much. “What brings you here?”

“To Derome-Delem? Bad luck,” Finn laughed. “The war, I guess...”

“What war?” asked Ratchis.

“You don’t know about the civil war between Herman Land and the Black Islands? It has been going on for over a year!” Finn said with disbelief.

“I am from Derome-Delem. I didn’t know,” said Ratchis, meekly.

“Oh, well. Yeah, they are conscripting like mad down there. The village of Corbay, which is where I am from, just outside of Verdun, was doing a pretty good job of hiding all its men to keep them from being conscripted, but I had to enter the city and got caught. It was either this or war. But maybe war would have been better, I would have died at sea most likely, as opposed to this hellhole. No offense.”

“Why would your village do that? Do they not feel any loyalty to Herman Land?” Ratchis asked, puzzled.

“Well, a village needs its men, and when it comes down to it, are the Black Islands worth keeping? No one likes them anyway, and people say they even worship...Set” he whispered the last word. “I’m just saying that no one likes them anyway, so why not let them go their own way?”

Ratchis did not reply but went outside to practice with his quarterstaff. After a few minutes of practiced dodging, feigning, thrusting, parrying, blocking, spinning, Ratchis noticed one of Crumb’s boys watching him eagerly. He had dark skin, and short black curly hair.

Ratchis stopped and said, “Do you know how to use one?” He offered the staff.

Carlos took the staff saying, “*Puedo luchar con el palillo grueso también.*”

Ratchis looked puzzled but motioned that Carlos should try out the staff.

“I am named Carlos,” the young man said, in a thick accent and with a smile. He entered a defensive stance and twirled the staff once, taking a few practice swings.

“I am Ratchis. Want to spar?”

It was Carlos’ turn to look confused, but he smiled and practiced a parry. Ratchis pulled out his short sword and stepped forward. Carlos dropped the quarterstaff with a frightened look and stepped away.

Ratchis sighed. “No,” he said, and motioned for Carlos to pick up the staff. Carlos did so hesitantly.

Ratchis stepped forward and gently hit his sword against one end of the staff. Hesitantly, Carlos brought the other end of the staff around and Ratchis slowly ducked, but in a few moments the two of them were exchanging hurried but careful blows, stopping to show each other what he had just done and in general having a good time.

Sweating and out of breath, they slapped each other on the back.

“Gracias, um... Thank you,” said Carlos, handing back the staff. “*Podemos hacerlo otravez otro dia?*”

Ratchis shook his head, not understanding.

“Again?” Carlos said gesturing.

“Sure, another time,” said Ratchis.

The outdoorsman went down to the river and washed up a bit, and then headed to the town market where the others had already been for a while.

Beorth, Kazrack, Jeremy, Jana and Chance went up to the market, and then quickly split up to check different sights. They bought pieces of grilled mutton on a stick, covered in a very spicy sauce. The people of Bountiful did not seem overly friendly. They greeted each other warmly but ignored the companions as they walked between the stalls. Kazrack went to look at bows, taking a few shots on the practice range that had been set up. Beorth went with the dwarf, not having anything to do. Chance, who had bought a cock before anyone knew what was happening, went off to find some fights and look into acquiring a woman for Kamir. Jana went to purchase some salt and other herbs and spices, while Jeremy went to find the smith and get his armor repaired some.

Kazrack and Beorth moved on to where the livestock was kept, as the dwarf was interested in getting a mule or pony for the trip.

Meanwhile, at the provisioner’s stall Jana was having a strange encounter: The young girl asked the elderly couple for salt.

“How much do you need?” the kindly old man asked.

“A half-pound,” Jana replied.

“Ya know, if you wanna salt meat for preserving you are going to need more than that,” the man said.

“No, it is just for my own consumption. I like my food very salty.”

“Funny, you are the second person in two days to say the exact same thing,” the old man said, casually.

Intrigued, Jana raised an eyebrow, “Really? Who was it?”

“Oh, just some other stranger to town. It was a thin and dark-haired man,” the old man replied.

Jana scrunched up her pretty face in apprehension. She paid for the package of salt, and then walked towards the herbalist’s table, looking around her carefully, through the crowd of farmers and vendors.

The herbalist was a middle-aged man with dark hair and a care-worn face. He sat smashing some herbs in a mortar and pestle. Jana looked over his goods, tucking her sun-tinted brown hair behind her ear, but found little that that could help her.

“Do you have essence of narcissus flower?” Jana asked

The man looked up, his face was a web of lines and creases, and his eyes were dark. He cocked his head when he saw the young girl.

“I may have some, let me look in my satchel,” he said. He bent behind the stall and began to rummage in a bag but did not take his eyes off Jana.

“Never seen you around before, where are you from?” he asked.

“Herman Land,” Jana replied, noticing some ginger root, which was supposed to help ease upset stomach. She placed some aside, along with willow bark.

“Um, Westron?” the man asked coming up with the ingredient she asked for.

Jana was taken aback by the question.

“How did you know?” she asked with building suspicion.

“Oh, just a guess,” the man said nervously. He picked up what she had picked out and began to wrap it up.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

Jana handed over her few copper coins for the goods and then hesitantly said, “Jana.”

The man took the money and then said, ‘Thank you. Uh, I have to go,’ and leaving his table unattended began to walk off.

Jana had hoped this might be the result and followed at a safe distance.

The man made his way through the market throng—past the jugglers and a fire-eater and the old woman selling clay pots stylized with cats in a myriad of poses—to the local inn. He slipped in the front door and disappeared.

Jana waited a moment, unsure of what to do, but with a mental command, her unseen companion slipped down from her usual perch under the girl's cloak, out underneath her skirt and skittered across the path and beneath the crack of the door.

She heard the soft hissing voice in her head whisper, "Man go up," and Jana decided to call her little friend back rather than risk her going into possible danger.

Alert, Jana went back into the market to meet up with her companions.

Meanwhile, Kazrack had not found any of the animals to be to his liking or in his price range, so he wandered off to the smithy to offer his services for the day and earn some extra coin.

By this time Ratchis had entered town and wandered into the market. The people of Bountiful looked fearfully at the tall and scarred man and gave him a wide berth. He stood nearly a full head above most people here. He bought two sticks of the roasted mutton and devoured them hungrily. He then stood in line by the keg someone was selling flagons of mead from and getting the first he immediately returned to line to drink as he waited for a second.

He had just gotten his second flagon, when the others caught up to him. Jana, Beorth and Chance gathered together with the newest companion. Ratchis had not been able resist the charming effects of the smell of fresh-baked pies and had purchased an entire pumpkin pie. He shared a piece with Beorth and one with Jeremy. Jana refused the last quarter, so Ratchis ate it hungrily.

It was then that they noticed a tall woman, walking in their direction. She was lithe and pale, with her long light brown hair in a single thick braid that fell down her back. She had a freckled face that was just barely on the pretty side of plain. She wore robes of various shades of light purple and carried a staff. Everyone seemed to know her, and she seemed to know everyone. She greeted them by name as they waved to her.

"Good day, Alexandra!" they called to her.

The woman walked past the four companions and smiled, nodding, but as she passed, she turned and looked at Ratchis and then her gaze fell on Jana and lingered there for a long moment, until she turned her head again to smile and wave at another villager.

"I wonder who *she* is?" wondered Jeremy, aloud.

Jana, Jeremy, Ratchis and Beorth walked over to a stall where knives were being sold and Jana bought one. And then decided to head back to camp.

"Hold on," said Beorth, and then walked back to get a candied apple. "I figured I'd give this to Kamir. He deserves a treat."

The four then walked back to camp and Beorth hunted down Kamir.

"Kamir, this is for you," Beorth said handing him the candied apple.

The permanent smile of the red-cheeked round-faced boy shrunk into one of astonishment; his mouth a perfect "O".

"Really? This is for me?" Kamir's smile returned.

"Yeah, sure, take it," Beorth said. Kamir took hold of the candied apple's stick.

"Um, no one has ever given me anything my whole life. Thank you. Thank you," a tear slipped down the boy's chubby cheek.

"Think nothing of it. I just thought you'd like a treat of some kind," Beorth said, awkwardly patting Kamir's shoulder.

Kamir licked the apple two or three times, and then took a very small nibble.

"I think I'll save more for later. I have to finish distributing the wood for the fires. This will be great for dessert." He stuck the candied apple stick into the ground in front of the tent he shared with Jeremy and Chance.

"Thanks again," he said to Beorth with a wave, and then ran off to finish his chores.

At that moment, throughout the camp there could be heard the sound of young voices. A few more than a dozen boys broke through the brush in a jog. They carried wooden sticks with a frame appended to one end with a net across it to create a pocket. They flung a leather ball between them as they ran.

"Hey, where are you going?" Jeremy asked a passing boy.

"We are going to play a game of bagataway," the boy said. "Wanna come? We are one man short."

"You'd have to teach me how to play," Jeremy said, trying to hide his excitement.

"Well, you are kind of big so you can be on our team. I'll get you an extra stick. I'll explain the rules as we head down to the field."

Jeremy joined the boys that ranged in age from thirteen to sixteen and fumbled the stick, trying to get the hang of "cradling" the ball in the net.

Jana and Beorth decided to follow and watch, along with a few others of Crumb's boys and a bunch of parents and younger siblings of the two teams of boys.

The boys had two large woven baskets weighed down with rocks set up as goals. Jeremy found the game fascinating, if not a bit painful, as he soon learned, "you may hit your opponent's stick with yours when he has the ball, and oh, your hands are considered part of the stick." It was interrupted by a lot by calling of "off-sides" and more than once Jeremy realized he was the one who made there be too many members of his team on the opponent's side of the field. They had him playing defense, but somehow, he found that he was taking most of the abuse and boys seemed to target him with their checking.

As Beorth and Jana watched and laughed (well, actually Jana did most of the laughing, Beorth smiled once or twice) a few more villagers arrived to watch the game. Among them was the woman they had seen earlier in the village, with her staff and lavender robes. She greeted several on-lookers and then began to walk over to Beorth and Jana. Jana walked away as the woman approached, making as if she were trying to watch the action by one goal a little closer.

"Good day and well met," the woman said, raising one hand.

"Well met," replied Beorth.

"I am Alexandra the Lavender, Watch-Mage of Bountiful," she said. "I take it you are here with the caravan of men going up to the Little Kingdoms."

"Gothanius, yes," said Beorth. "I am Beorth, servant of Anubis."

They shook hands.

"I noticed your companion, the girl. She is here with the group, too?"

"Um, yes. Why do you ask?" said Beorth with curiosity.

“Well, a man came through town only a day or two ago and was asking for a girl that fits her description. He was harassing some townsfolk, so I had to ask him to leave. He seemed very intent on finding her,” Alexandra explained.

“Really? Well, she has never mentioned anything like that to us,” Beorth said. “Come on, let’s ask her.”

He led the Watch-Mage over to Jana.

“Jana, this is the local Watch-Mage, Alexandra the Lavender,” Beorth introduced.

Jana met the tall woman’s eyes hesitantly. She felt as if Alexandra were looking right into her.

“Hello,” said Jana.

“Well met, Jana. I was just explaining to Beorth here, that a man came through town a couple of days ago and he was looking for someone that matches your description.”

“Really? Must be a coincidence. I don’t know of anyone that would be looking for me,” Jana said, innocently.

“Are you sure? It seems like a strange coincidence,” Alexandra said, skeptically. “He spoke with several people in town, and I later discovered that several of them were *charmed*. I needed to break the enchantments, but it was difficult in some cases. There may even be some people left under his spell, but I have not yet discovered them.”

“Well, I have no idea about it,” Jana said with a tone of annoyance.

“It is good that you were able to break these enchantments, but really, we have no idea who this man might be. And we haven’t heard anything about someone looking for Jana. It must be a coincidence,” said Beorth.

“I’m sorry if I seem intrusive, but as Watch-Mage of Bountiful it is my responsibility to investigate anyone or anything that might be a danger to it. Please enjoy your stay in Bountiful, and if I can help you somehow do not hesitate to find me. My tower can be seen from anywhere in town. And if you *do* learn anything about this man, please let me know. Good day!” Alexandra said pleasantly and walked off.

A young boy ran up to her as she walked away and she scooped him up into her arms, playfully tweaked his nose.

The game continued. Jeremy was moved to a mid-field position, and actually got a chance to score, but the abuse was laid upon him even more. Finally, the game was over, and Jeremy’s team did win, though he did not score even one goal. Happy, but aching, he walked back to camp with Beorth and Jana for supper. They ran into Ratchis, who had spent the afternoon hiking in small, wooded areas about Bountiful and feeding squirrels and groundhogs.

Everyone was waiting on the chow line when Kazrack returned from his day of work at the smithy. He ran into Kamir, who was bringing buckets of fresh water up from the river.

“Hey, Kamir! How’d ya like your gift?” Kazrack asked with a sly smile.

“My gift?” Kamir looked puzzled for a minute. “Oh, I loved it,” he said, remembering the candied apple with a broad smile. “It was the best gift I ever got!”

“Oh, good I am glad!” Kazrack said. “You had fun?”

“Yeah, it was nice. I had some and then I had some later. I shared some of it with a few of the other guys too.”

Kazrack was taken aback. “Oh, really? That is very generous of you.”

“Well, what good is a gift you can’t share it with others right?” Kamir said.

“I guess,” the dwarf replied.

“I have to go. These buckets are getting heavy. Thanks for asking!” Kamir said, as he clambered away.

Kazrack went to get some dinner before it was all gone, perplexed by the oddities of humans.

Late that night Jana slipped out of her tent and found a secluded spot in a clearing in the woods south of the camp. From her belt pouch she took a bone she had recovered from that night’s dinner and placed it on the ground. She took out the baby wolf skull necklace that she took from the goblin warlock and placed it a few feet in front of her. Jana then took out the knife she bought earlier that day and cut her palm, wincing. Dipping the bone in the seeping blood, she traced a circle in the dirt around the skull and began to murmur arcane words, her eyes rolling back into her head as she reached, reached, reached out to make contact.

But even as she felt her will reach out, she realized it was not working. The token was too foreign, its power too evasive. She would have to try again another time. Jana heard a footfall behind her. Coming out of her trance she turned, feeling dizzy.

“What are you doing?” said a barely recognizable voice.

Jana stumbled to her feet, grabbing the wolf skull, and then rubbing her eyes. She gained her sense of balance and looked. It was Alexandra the Lavender, a bright light shining from the end of her staff.

“What are you doing?” Alexandra asked again.

“Nothing,” replied Jana.

“That looks like a summoning circle,” Alexandra said, pointing to the circle of blood.

“It is not what you think it’s for,” Jana replied.

“I know good and well what it is, and nothing can be summoned in the lands under my vigilance without my leave,” the Watch-mage said angrily.

“I was not summoning anything to summon something, I mean. . .” Jana was flustered. “I was not doing this to summon and control anything. I...”

“I know what you were trying to do, *and* I know how easily a circle of summoning can go awry. I cannot allow such things to happen unsupervised in my domain of protection. I suggest that you go back to your camp and do not attempt such a thing again or I will be forced to take action.”

“You don’t know what you are talking about,” Jana insisted.

“I only have your word on that, and looking at this scene, your word means little to me at the moment. I am glad that you are only here until morning, and if ever you pass through Bountiful again, I hope that you will be careful what you do.”

“Fine,” said Jana in a huff, and stomped off back to camp and went to go to sleep, but her annoyance and anger kept her blood-boiling and her mind too alert for a long time before she could slip off.

Osilem, 17th of Ese

Day came from the east riding the rays of Ra’s Glory. In that first light, Chance crept into the tent he shared with Jeremy and Kamir. Kamir had already awakened to do his usual chores.

Jeremy woke up and turned to look at Chance who dropped into a pretend sleep as soon as he felt the Neergaardian stir.

“Chance, where have you been?” Jeremy asked groggily.

Chance gave a false snore.

“Chance, I know you just got in!” Jeremy said, angrily.

“Huh? Whut? Keep it downn Ahm tryin’ ta sleep,” Chance said, mimicking a groggy voice. When he said “down” it sounded like “dun.”

“You just got here,” Jeremy insisted.

“Will ya be quiet!” Chance rolled over. “Whatcha waking me fer, so early en tha marning?”

The waking breakfast bell rang. Chance sat up and rubbed his eyes, following this with an exaggerated stretch.

“Ach! Whut uh great night’s sleep that was!” He crawled out of the tent to join the others in packing for another portion of the journey to Gothanius.

The two creaky wagons rolled out of Bountiful, and once again Crumb’s boys broke into two groups, one that rode and one that walked. The rolling plains made brown by the recent harvest but speckled with the occasional orange and yellow of pumpkin and squash, passed them by, and by day’s end they had come upon the first of a series of hills that in the dying light seemed to go on forever in all directions. Here the road was made of a chalky gravel that kicked up large amounts of dust. They made camp in the nearby crabgrass and slept.

Tholem, 18th of Ese

The next day the wagons moved steadily over the hills for hours with no end. The ridge was dry crumbly stone, covered with a scrabble of low leafless brush in places, but with no trees to speak of and a cold wind that wound about the base of the hills and would swoop suddenly over the summit with a loud whoosh and a cruel slash across the face of those who walked.

Up and down. Up and down. Kazrack rode as he did every day, and he felt as if he were back on the ship, but in a dreadful slow motion. He longed to feel the hard packed earth of Derome-Delem under his dwarven feet, but he was not allowed to walk as he could not keep up and it pained his dwarven soul.

It was past mid-day and still they had not stopped for lunch, and Crumb’s boys began to mumble complaints, when from the top of one hill there could be seen a huge cloud of dust approaching from behind the next barren hill. Crumb called for the wagons to stop, and those that were walking could feel the ground begin to vibrate as the cloud approached. Whatever it was could not be seen but was moving at a steady pace nearly twice as fast as the oxen could pull the wagons. Ratchis stepped off the road and strained his eyes to see what it was.

Kazrack could now feel the rumbling and noticed that the wagons had stopped. He leaned out of the back and craned his neck around to look forward and see the approaching cloud. “What could that be?” he said.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” murmured Jeremy.

Crumb called for the wagons to continue, moving down to the narrow valley between the two hills.

“No,” said Kazrack. “If this presents a danger we should stay on high ground.” But his advice went unheeded, and the two wagons rolled down the hillside.

Those who walked followed hesitantly. Ratchis pulled his bow and left the road, coming down the hill through the scraggly brush. And now there could heard above the rumble the sound of many deep voices joined in song. At first it was barely discernible, but as the wagons came to a halt once again at the bottom of the hill, and Crumb called for them to be pulled off the road, the song became clear.

*Over Hill, Over Dale
We are Dwarves and we fight `til we fail!
We kill orcs and goblins, too.
Better watch out or we'll kill you.
We are Dwarves!
And we fight for what's right,
'Cause we're Dwarves!*

The cloud of dust overcame the would-be heroes and within it could be seen a great caravan of dwarves riding at a quick pace atop huge lizard that were lower than horses, but much longer. Two by two, they passed—taking no notice of the young men—the front ranks holding flags, followed by dwarves upon heavily laden reptilian mounts. The creatures' dull green scales were covered in the dust of the hills, and occasionally, their long dark tongues shot out to taste the air, dragging their heavy tails behind them.

There were several score of these lizard-mounted dwarves passing, and along their flanks came dwarven warriors in plate mail, and helms with visors to keep the dust from their eyes. Some bore spears and others held crossbows, and the lizards they rode were outfitted in chainmail barding. These guards moved faster than the caravan, moving up and down the line, keeping an eye open. One such warrior, rode by slowly sizing up Crumb and his boys, who were now all gathered in a group to watch the spectacle.

“Wow,” was all Kazrack could say.

“Ah cannot believe it,” Chance said, his jaw dropped way down.

“Where can I get one of those?” Jeremy asked aloud.

The dwarven rider's eyes caught those of Kazrack, and the dwarf who had long been in accidental exile raised his fist in a sign of greeting. The warrior reared his lizard and moved very quickly forward down the line, and at the end of his vision, Kazrack could see he had pulled alongside one of the others of the caravan. Now, another lizard left the line and came quickly back down the line towards where the wagons waited for the dwarves to pass.

Seemingly unimpressed, Crumb called out in a loud voice, “It may take some time for them to pass. Let's have our lunch break here.”

Some of Crumb's boys began to help Kinney and Horung with the provisions, but others simply watched in awe. Finally, the other lizard that had left the line reared by Kazrack, and he noticed that it had a double saddle. The dwarf who rode in the rear, dismounted, and stepped towards Kazrack. He struck a fist against his chest and then raised it in a sign of greeting that Kazrack copied. He then threw his open hand forward and he and the new dwarf grasped each other's wrists and shook. The rider brought his mount back into the line.

This dwarf had a thick black beard braided in three large braids that were entwined with a wire of pure gold. He was dressed in a shirt of mail and had a warhammer at his side. About his neck was a leather pouch full of what Kazrack knew to be runestones. This was a dwarven priest.⁶³

“I am Daerngar of Mnorntord-Wyrmraugh, which humans call Rockmar. This is the 137th regiment of the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium,” the dwarf gestured back to the lizards that still passed. “It is not often that I see one of our kin traveling among humans in this fashion, that is why I stopped.”

⁶³ Priests of the Dwarven Pantheon are called *Rune-Throwers* because they both hold the secret of the ancient dwarven runes which have power and because they use them to cast spells and divine the future.

"I am Kazrack Delver. While my family is originally from Derome-Delem, I have lived most of my life in Verdun, in the Kingdom of Herman Land, and have only just recently returned to our homeland."

"Hmmpf," said Daerngar grunted. "It is good that you have found your way back. A young dwarf as yourself should not have to live among humans and be separated from his people."

"Well, my father made sure I grew up learning the traditions and stories," said Kazrack.

"As any father should," replied Daerngar. "And why do you travel with humans now? Why do you not seek out the stronghold of your people?"

Kazrack paused, coughed, and explained, "In order to arrange for travel here I had to agree to help these humans of the Kingdom of Gothanious in a small endeavor."

"Gothanious? You know that is stolen land?" Daerngar asked, one black bushy eyebrow arching significantly.

"Aye, I do. But I have given my word," Kazrack replied.

"I see. And a dwarf's word should be as steady as the stone. But when you are done with this task you should travel and visit your brethren throughout Derome-Delem and see how it is that dwarves should live."

"I plan to as part of my search for the king who will unite all the dwarven people into one kingdom," Kazrack said gravely.⁶⁴

"Are we not all searching for such?" Daerngar said.

"We are?" Kazrack was puzzled.

"Aye, we all are, whether we know it or not. Whether one looks or not, one might still find something, sometimes even a king."

Daerngar was silent for a time, just looking at Kazrack. The sound of the passing train of laden lizards seemed distant in that moment, and then the rune-thrower spoke again.

"And what did your rune-thrower say before you came on this journey? Did you have your runes thrown?" he went on to ask.

Kazrack looked down and then away from Daerngar, trying not to look in his eye. Rubbing the back of his own neck, and clearing his throat, he replied, "We did not have a priest among my people. My father is wise and knows much, but he is not trained in the clergy."

"So, you have never had your runes thrown?" Daerngar asked with a hint of disbelief.

Kazrack shook his head.

"Come with me," Daerngar led Kazrack further away from the road and away from where Crumb's boys were having their lunch.

He brought the younger dwarf to a spot clear of foliage and traced a circle in the dirt with his finger and then squatted across from Kazrack on the other side of the circle.

"Every dwarf should have his runes read ere he go on any journey," Daerngar said, pulling the pouch of stones out from around his neck.

⁶⁴ There is a legend among most dwarven communities that a king will arise to unite all the dwarves of Aquerra into one empire as it was of old. The last time such a thing existed was in the 2nd Age, over 2000 years before present time.

“Give me your hand,” the rune-thrower said, and placed the pouch in Kazrack’s open palm and covered it with his own strong calloused hand.

“Lehrathonar, Keeper of the Secrets Under the Mountain, Carver of the Secret Ways Beneath the Sea, Scribe of Xoth both lost and rediscovered, reveal to me of the path of this young dwarf so he may play his part in the grand role of our kin.”^{65 66}

Daerngar then spilled the stones within the circle in the dirt and began to examine how they lay.

“HMMMMM,” said Daerngar. “It is as I thought, it is not mere coincidence that I was called to speak to you.”

“What. . . What do they say?” asked Kazrack hesitantly.

Daerngar looked directly into Kazrack’s eyes, “It is clear that you will make a choice or help to make a choice that will determine the future of Derome-Delem and thus the dwarven people and their kindred races.”

Kazrack seemed to stop breathing, and Daerngar continued.

“It is unclear what this choice shall be, but it is not far by dwarven standards, unless you have been infected by human impatience, and it may not appear to be as important or wide reaching as it truly is.”

Kazrack let out a long slow breath.

“The gods *do* watch you. You serve them already whether you know it or not. Remember, it is their will you perform when you act, and you will not fail them. Weigh all choices with the patience given our people.”

Daerngar stood, but Kazrack felt as if he could not stand with the weight of what he had just heard resting upon his lap. The rune-thrower placed one hand atop Kazrack’s head and spoke.

“Natan-ahb⁶⁷, watch over this wayward youth so that he may find his way back into the fold and be welcomed into the arms of the dwarven people. Hodenar,⁶⁸ watch over his journey, may he find aid where he needs it, and may his legs always have the strength to continue when the road becomes difficult. And Krauchaar,⁶⁹ please aid his skill with axe and hammer so he might overcome any dangers that require those harsh methods as he makes his way wherever he may need to go.”

“Thank you,” said Kazrack softly. Daerngar scooped up his runes and slid them into their pouch. He placed it back around his neck.

Daerngar placed two fingers in his mouth and issued a sharp whistle. In the distance, the rider who had dropped him off turned his mount back towards the dwarven priest.

“I must go, but remember what I have told you. Pray that Lehrathonar makes all clear for you in time,” Daerngar said. The two dwarves clutched wrists and shook. Daerngar mounted on the back of the lizard’s double saddle and raised a fist at head height. Kazrack returned the gesture.

Kazrack stood and watched the last of the great lizards pass, imagining riding such a beast into battle, while contemplating the words of the rune-thrower. Before he knew it, Crumb’s boys had eaten their meal and packed up again and it was time to continue the journey westward.

⁶⁵ *Lehrathonar* is the dwarven God of Secrets & Lore. Also called “The Silent God”.

⁶⁶ *Xoth* is the name for the secret runic language of dwarven priests which no one else may know or use.

⁶⁷ *Natan-ahb* is the head of the dwarven pantheon. He is the Soul-Forged.

⁶⁸ *Hodenar* is the dwarven god of trade and travel.

⁶⁹ *Krauchaar* is the dwarven god of battle.

Teflem, the 20th of Ese

The wooden wheels turned. The day was spent walking and riding westward, up and down hills, until finally a hill seemed to go up and never come back down, and forest filled the eyes in all directions. By mid-morning, the woods opened up to reveal a small town of log buildings along the side of wide river that cut a deep trench in the land. The trees of the forest still clung close to the edge of this pimple of civilization.

As the wagons turned southward, seeking out a place to make camp, Crumb's boys saw two men walking with a huge elk hanging from a stout stick they carried on their shoulders. They wore long coats of fur, leather work pants, and hats made of raccoon and beaver. Walking beside them was a young boy of about eight years, similarly attired, carrying the corpses of three rabbits tied to string. The town's one street was made of a dusty packed dirt, and a stone bridge could be seen at the end of it. The bridge with covered turrets facing to the north and south (as the river ran).

The wagons came to a clearing along the muddy riverbank, and Crumb's boys began to make camp, Kamir doing most of the work as usual. Even as they set their tent stakes into the ground and gathered what wood they could find, Crumb's boys noted an odd smell coming from the river. At first it was subtle, but as the wind changed to come from the northwest, it became almost too much to bear. Beorth recognized it immediately. It was the smell of death.

Beorth and Ratchis walked down to the river to find the source of the stench and when they arrived it was all too obvious. All along the riverbank, for about one hundred yards in each direction north and south, was a chaotic collection of wooden spikes and stakes pointing towards the river. The sharpened wood ranged from the size of a fence picket to thickness of a large tree branch but impaled on these were countless corpses in varying states of decay. The whole area was splattered with blood and gore and bits of cloth. Some of the bodies were nothing more than bleached bones, but others looked only a week or two old, their faces bloated and purple. Rats scurried about munching on their flesh, and crows and gulls hopped from corpse to corpse pecking out eyeballs and tugging on revealed entrails. The dead men were dressed in clothing one might expect of sailors, billowy sailcloth shirts, and short pants and kerchiefs. Broken spears and rusted sabers could be seen littered among the corpses.

Beorth stumbled backward, overwhelmed by the sight of so many bodies dishonored in such a way. He covered his face with one hand and let out a long breath. "Anubis, give me strength," he muttered, and the turning to Ratchis he said, "Something must be done about this."

The party gathered and discussed the situation. Beorth knew he could not let such an affront to Anubis pass, and yet he knew that the people of this town might not look kindly on his interference. They agreed to head into town after the mid-day meal and find someone in charge to talk to about the problem.

As Crumb's boys gathered to get their bowl full of stew, Crumb coughed to get their attention.

"Welcome to the town of Stonebridge," he said in his usual basso. "Let me tell you all, that this is kind of a rough place, and it is best if you boys stay away from town. We have traveled far but to be honest, the easiest part of our journey is behind us. When we leave here, after three or four days of rest, we will be traveling along narrow trails, up hills and into the mountains. While we are here, see Deet about getting a small stipend for buying some winter gear for the journey, and I will send Horung and Kinney to get some good food and drink so we can celebrate all we have accomplished so far."

"I wonder why he wants us to stay away from town," mused Kazrack aloud as he, Ratchis, Chance, Beorth, Jana and Jeremy did just the opposite.

"Isn't it obvious?" said Jeremy with exasperation. "The people here impale people on stakes by the river and let them rot!"

The six of them came to the town's one thoroughfare, lined with log houses on both sides. A building of white brick across from what was obviously a tavern was the lone exception. Above the tavern door hung a painted sign of a

dead pirate with six crows atop him pecking at his corpse. They avoided that place and went to the white brick building and knocked on the thick oaken door.

A middle-aged man, his hair already showing streaks of white answered the door. He looked the collection of people outside of his door up and down.

“Well met,” said Beorth.

“Well met,” said the man. “Are you looking for a room? We have vacancies.”

“Oh, this is an inn? No, we were just looking for who’s in charge around here. Who is your Lord?” Beorth asked.

“We don’t have a lord,” the man replied. He looked over Beorth’s shoulder at Ratchis and wiped a bit of spit from the corner of his mouth. He then glanced down at Kazrack. “We have a marshal that runs the place. But I’m not sure you want to talk to him.”

“Why not?” asked Beorth.

“He is not a very talkative fellow, but maybe Kennoch the priest of Ra could help you. His house, I mean, the temple is right next door.” The man pointed up the street.

“Thank you very much,” Beorth said.

“And if you do need rooms feel free to return,” the man said and closed the door.

They walked over to a smaller house nearby, made of logs, but with a slate roof, unlike the thatched or log and mud roofs of most of the buildings in town. Upon the door painted in gold, was the symbol of Ra. Again, Beorth knocked. There was no answer at first, so Beorth knocked again, this time louder.

The door swung open suddenly, and there was a man in his mid-twenties; his head was clean shaven, and he had a chain shirt hastily donned, in one hand he held a mace and had a shield strapped to his forearm.

“Are the pirates attacking?” he said, excitedly. He looked surprised to see Beorth and the others standing before his door.

“Um, no,” replied Beorth. “We have come to speak to you about the bodies on the riverbank.”

“Oh, you must excuse me. Few people come to see me unless we are under attack, which is a shame, but the reality of this harsh place,” the man said, his face relaxing into a smile, his face has the creases of one who had been chubby, but who had become lean in little time. They could hear the slightest hint of a Wallbrookian accent. “Come inside. I am Kennoch of Ra. This is my home, but it is also the house of Ra, all are welcome.”

Kennoch of Ra stepped inside and gestured for the others to follow. He slipped off his chain shirt and hung it on the wall with his mace. The far wall across from the door was a shrine dedicated to the Sun God, with a golden statue of the hawk-headed King of the Gods upon his barge. Two plain wooden benches lined the left and right walls, and a plain wooden door beside the altar led to a room behind. Kennoch went over to the hearth and tossed some sticks on the fire.

“Would anyone like tea?” he asked.

“I would be delighted,” said Beorth.

“Uh, okay,” said Jeremy.

Kennoch hung a teapot over the fire and turned to the group. “So, what are your names and what are you doing in Stone Bridge?”

The six companions introduced themselves and explained about the trip to Gothanius, and then Beorth asked, “You mentioned pirates; are those the bodies of pirates by the river?”

“Yes,” answered Kennoch. “The Tall Twin River Pirates are a foul and Set-lovin’ bunch who use the river for their smuggling and slaving operation. They are a constant thorn in the side of the people of Stonebridge, taking slaves, setting fire to the houses, stealing their hard-earned crops and furs. The people of Stonebridge hate them and rightly so. It is for that reason that the bodies are hung up on the riverbank to show all the pirates what happens to those who come here to pillage and kill. Every man, woman and child here can fight better than many warriors I have seen back in Wallbrook and Herman Land.”

“But this goes against our ways of burial and the treatment of the dead, no matter who they might have been in life, as set down by Anubis,” said Beorth, his voice soft and solemn.

“I know,” said Kennoch, pouring tea into cups for his guests. “But these are a hard and proud people and only recently have I come to them with the word of Ra. It will take time before they learn how wrong their acts are. It is only by virtue of my being able to help defend the town that I have earned the respect of any of them.”

“You help them fight?” Beorth asked.

“Well, they *are* pirates and law-breakers, Setites, what else would I do?”

“Well, I don’t think I can let such a thing continue if I can help it,” said Beorth. “Do you know whom I might speak to in town to get permission to collect these bodies and lay them to rest?”

“Well, there is the Marshal Harrick Moonglum, but I do not think he would be much help. He is a man of few words and short temper - *Do not ever disturb him when he is drinking!* - He will not even talk to strangers, but I have been able to say a few things to him lately, perhaps I can speak on your behalf, and see if he will discuss the problem with you at least.”

“We would greatly appreciate that,” said Beorth.

“But I have to tell you again, the people of Stonebridge are proud and independent people. They even refused the offer of the dwarves of the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium to build the town walls to fend off the pirates.”

“They were offered dwarven walls and they refused?” Kazrack said in disbelief.

“Aye,” replied Kennoch. “The deal was for a safehouse to be built here, but the people of Stonebridge do not want interference from the dwarves.⁷⁰ They want to live free of all responsibilities to anyone but themselves. They suffer the pirates as the cost of their freedom.”

Ratchis shuffled restlessly in his seat.

“The marshal holds his title because he is the best fighter and smartest leader against the pirates, but if another came and could best or kill Harrick, he would become the marshal and the people would follow him until a stronger leader came along. These people have yet to learn some of Ra’s basic lessons,” Kennoch said. “I will go try to find him in his home in the woods north of here, but a half mile away. He is a furrier. If you like, wait for me at the Sign of the Six Crows and I will come and tell you what he said.”

⁷⁰ The Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium uses “safehouses” as places to store wares, rest caravans and give shelter to traveling dwarves.

So Beorth and the others went to the tavern across the way, as Kennoch took up his shield and mace again, and took a path out of the north side of the town's only street into the woods.

The Sign of the Six Crows was dark and had a floor of hard earth and long wooden tables and benches. There was however one small table with one chair in the center of the room. A grizzled man, looking old beyond his years and wearing a broad scar on his chin was cleaning the mugs.

"Eh? Well met," he croaked.

The party ordered some mead, and then the barkeep went out back "to tend to some business" and said he'd be right back.

A few minutes later, a tall man dressed in studded leather armor, with a brown bear fur cloak and a beard to match and having a hand axe and a long sword on his belt walked in the tavern. He had steel blue eyes, and while his shoulders were broad, the rest of his body was lithe and muscular. Without pausing he stepped behind the bar, grabbed a bottle of whiskey and a glass, and then took a seat at the lone table in the center. He filled the glass up to the top with the whiskey and downed it quickly, and then poured another. This one he sipped more slowly. Not once did he address or even acknowledge the presence of the party.

"I bet that's the marshal," Kazrack whispered to Jeremy.

The swinging doors creaked again, and this time the flamboyant form of Garcon came through.

"Oh, ho! Here are my stalwart companions and worthy friends, retiring to the comfort of the village tavern for a drink and a bite. I shall join them!"

Garcon walked over to the group, sitting next to Jana.

"Oh, such a vision of loveliness we have here that even this simple rustic tavern becomes beautiful in the light of her glow," Garcon said, taking her hand and planting a sloppy kiss as she pulled it away.

Chance growled softly.

"Oh, but yes," said Garcon, pulling out an atomizer and spraying himself with cologne. "We should not flaunt the connection we have; envious eyes turn cruel!" He put away his perfume and clapped his hands.

"Barkeep, please bring me your finest wine!"

The barkeep had just stepped back in, and Kazrack and Jeremy got up and moved away from Garcon, taking spots at the bar.

"We have mead," the barkeep said in a flat voice.

"Yes, well, that will have to do then," said Garcon. "What a simple people!"

"You have to come and get it!" the barkeep called.

"Yes, of course. How quaint. And of course, refill the drink of the lovely lady," Garcon said, getting up. He paused by Beorth.

"Excuse me dear fellow, I do seem to be a bit short, could you perhaps lend me a copper or two until the next time we stop somewhere?"

Beorth smirked and handed him a few coins.

“Thank you, my dear sir. You re truly blessed by the gods!”

“Excuse me,” Kazrack asked the barkeep. “But do you know who that is there?” The dwarf gestured to the guy drinking the whiskey by himself.

“That there’s the marshal, but do yourself and me a favor both, and don’t bother him when he’s drinking, he doesn’t like it,” the barkeep said.

“Okay, we just wanted to talk to him about giving the bodies by the river a decent burial,” said Kazrack.

“Why the hell wouldja wanna do something like that for?” the barkeep said with surprise. “Those pirate bastards deserve anything they get. They killed my sister, and I killed the one that done it, and I was happy to see the crows pecking out his eyes, I tell ya. That is how I got the name of me place!” He wiped a bit of spittle from the corner of his mouth, a fire seemed to blaze in his eyes. “Anyway, that kind of talk will only make the marshal real angry, and I’ve seen him take on and kill six men by himself, so I wouldn’t really wanna make him mad if I was you.”

“He killed six men by himself? At once?” Kazrack looked over his shoulder at the marshal.

“I’m sure he did,” said Jeremy. “Every town has one of those, some guy that no one else can beat and who can beat a handful of people without breaking a sweat. Back home, it’s old Greavey.”

The marshal drained the last of the whiskey and walked out.

“So, tell me about your grand adventures I have heard you have been having?” Garcon asked Jana. “Can you use a sword? We could be a heroic dueling couple who fight for justice and the oppressed! I could teach all the skills that I have mastered with my weapons. I can be shockingly violent, but do not be frightened for with you I would be a gentle as a lamb.” Garcon batted his eyelashes innocently.

Jana sighed.

Jeremy walked out of the tavern after the marshal. He waited in the cover of the doorway until he saw the tall man turn around the corner and then he crept after him. The marshal stepped into the thick woods behind the tavern, and Jeremy decided not to follow. He went back into tavern and had another drink.

Not too long after, Kennoch came walking in. He greeted the grunting barkeep and walked over to where Beorth was sitting.

“I could not find the marshal. He was not at his home, or nearby,” said the young priest of Ra.

“I think he was just here,” said Beorth. “But we were not sure and did not want to disturb him.”

“Good idea. It is best if you are introduced before you try to talk to him, otherwise it can only hurt your cause,” said Kennoch. “Why don’t you return to your camp. I will continue to look for him. Return in the morning for dawn prayer to Ra and I will tell you what he said then.”

It was agreed.

While Ratchis, Jana, Chance, Kazrack and Jeremy went back to camp, Beorth crossed the bridge and sat on the opposite riverbank. The paladin went without a meal and prayed for the souls those left out to rot, which is what filled his vision from where he sat. Kazrack brought him a bedroll, blanket, and a bite to eat, fearing that he might stay there all night in the cold.

The afternoon waned, and soon the sheep that Horung and Kinney had been slow roasting on a spit was ready to be eaten. A mash of cranberries was boiling over another fire, and finally Crumb and Deet arrived rolling kegs of ale for all the boys. A cheer went up. This would be the best meal they'd had in a long time.

The mood was one of gaiety and the smell of roast mutton and overflowing ale covered even the nearby stench of death (the fact that the wind had changed again also helped). Kazrack fetched his fiddle and began to play a tune and soon Chance had joined in on his harmonica and the boys were dancing happily in circles and clapping and singing. Finn Fisher stood by the Wallbrookian and the dwarf and stomped his foot and clapped his hands to keep time. The ale flowed freely, and between songs Kamir bought mugs of it to the musicians (and during songs he ran back and forth filling Devon's mug for him).

During this time Beorth simply sat on the opposite riverbank and prayed, but as it got dark, he crossed the bridge and came back to camp. The festivities he found did little to ease his troubled heart, but even as he headed to the tent, he and Kazrack shared, the song was interrupted.

Gwar came crashing out of the bushes, his shirt was torn, and blood poured down from a wound on his right shoulder.

"Somebody attacked me!" he cried.

Ratchis came running over, "What happened?"

"I was peeing, over in the bushes where we all do our business, and some guy comes tumbling out of the dark. He must be drunk because he was weaving here and there, and I look back up and he's right there and grabs me and bites me! He took a chunk out! Look!"

Jana came over to deal with Gwar's injury, but Ratchis just grabbed his staff and went running in the direction Gwar had indicated. Beorth followed, but still being in his armor, moved slower. Chance just kept playing harmonica, and Jeremy by this time was very drunk and crawling into his tent to get his sword, slipped down on his stomach, and passed out. Kazrack handed his fiddle to Finn and ran behind the two of them as well.

Ratchis crashed through the brush towards where the latrine had been dug and saw the outline of a stumbling figure. The man wore a white shirt, and short pants and seemed to be mumbling to himself. The figure moved closer with a sudden quickness and reached towards Ratchis. He could now see that the flesh of this person was a rotten blue and grey. The skin was bubbled and bloated, peeled back in places where insects crawled around on raw flesh. One eyeball was turned inward, and his skull bore the cleave of an axe. Ratchis readied his staff, as it lurched forward to grab him with its blackened fingernails.

End of Session #7

Session #8

The fight ended quickly.

Ratchis fended off the mindless undead with his quarterstaff, as Beorth came around to its flank and began to cut off chunks of dead flesh with his long sword.

Ratchis heard a resounding crack as he struck a hard blow against its skull with his staff, but the strength of the blow did not slow down the wild flailing of the creature's arms.

"Use slashing weapons," said Beorth through gritted teeth. "They work better against corporeal undead."⁷¹

Ratchis next blow knocked the thing down, and at the moment Kazrack ran in and jumped atop it, wrapping his burly arms around the stinking dead flesh. He rolled over, getting beneath the stubborn struggling mass of walking death, as Ratchis and Beorth finished it with a few blows; the animating force was driven away by the destruction of the body.

"See what comes of disgracing the dead, even of our enemies?" said Beorth cleaning his sword in the grass. "This must stop."

Ratchis dragged the corpse of the zombie back into camp for all to see. The festivities stopped and a Crumb's boys gasped collectively.

"I was bitten by that!" Gwar cried out, his voice breaking. "Oh holy Ra! Beorth, is something bad gonna happen to me?"

"No," Beorth said, calmly. "You should be fine."

Kazrack ran over to Crumb's tent. "Crumb, we have a problem!" the dwarf cried.

The portly man stumbled out of his tent, his face rosy from too much drink.

"Whut? What's going on? What happened to the music?" he said in his deep voice, slightly slurred now.

"Undead," said Kazrack. "Undead attacked Gwar, and the camp."

"Really?" said Crumb, his eyes opening widely. "Well, that is not good... Not at all. We should set up guards or something. Deet! See that guards are set up or something."

The fat man went back into his tent, Kazrack could hear him flop back onto his cushy bedroll. Deet went over to inspect the body. "Why did you bring one of those dead bodies into the camp?" he asked.

"It was animated," said Ratchis. "It attacked Gwar."

"It did?" Deet looked at Ratchis incredulously.

"Yes, what are you going to do about it?"

"Well, not much I can do. Set up guards I guess."

Ratchis sighed.

"At least do something to help Gwar's wound," said Kazrack.

⁷¹ **DM's Note:** Corporeal undead have DR 5/slashing

“I can’t do much about that either. I did not prepare for any spells of healing today,” said Deet.

Ratchis sighed again and made his way to Gwar who was on the verge of panic.

“Let me see your wound. Get down on your knees,” said the huge imposing and ugly frontiersman.

“Uh, why?” Gwar looked up at Ratchis with a frightened look.

“I am going to bless you with the divine energy of Nephthys to protect you from any harm to your soul that might come from that wound.”

“Nephthys?” Gwar stepped away. “No way! She’s a traitor goddess.”⁷²

Ratchis’ eyes narrowed. “Fine. I hope you do not awaken as a zombie in the morning.” He turned to walk off.

“Wait! Wait! Okay, you can do it. I guess Nephthys isn’t *that* bad.”

Gwar got down on his knees before Ratchis, who laid a big leathery hand upon the wound and channeled positive energy into the young man.

“Nephthys, please use your divine essence to cleanse this boy of any evil that might have entered him through his foul wound,” he said, softly.

“Uh, thank you,” said Gwar.

“Thank Nephthys,” said Ratchis.

“Uh, yeah, okay,” and Gwar stepped away to find his brother.

Ratchis and Beorth burned the remains of the zombie. Afterwards, everyone headed to their own tents, their spirits dampened by the event that ended the evening.

Guards were posted, but the rest of the night went by without event.

Anulem, 21st of Ese - 564 H.E.

The morning came with a snap of cold that left the grass hard and sharp. Beorth awakened and gathering the group together went into town to see Kennoch of Ra. They found the door open, and Kennoch was kneeling before the altar praying aloud to Ra. The companions let themselves in quietly and sat to join him in prayer or just wait in reverent silence for him to be done.

It was nearly forty-five minutes later that he finally stood and turned and addressed them.

“A fine morning, Ra’s Glory shines brightly to burn off the cold,” Kennoch said, brightly.

“Not all things are so bright, unfortunately,” replied Beorth. “For last night, our camp was attacked by the foul undead, and where there is one there will be more.”

“Oh, there will be more. Zombies, right?” said Kennoch, almost flippantly.

“What? You knew of this danger?” said Beorth, trying to hide his disbelief as to not be disrespectful.

⁷² Nephthys is not always a well-liked goddess because of the actions of her priesthood. Among them, working against the Kingdom of Herman Land in the Mountain Wars.

"Well, I knew some. The problem with the zombies is an intermittent one. Every few months there are some zombie attacks. They are destroyed or forced off and then forgotten. The people of Stonebridge don't do anything about it. The pirates are a much more immediate threat and I think they see the zombies as kind of a test for the people here. That is, if you can survive despite the zombies then you are strong enough to stick around and help fight the pirates. I think they think it toughens them up, and they don't even see it as a big problem."

The party did not know what to say about this, and all was silent for some time.

"But as a Priest of Ra, how do you feel about the zombies?" Beorth asked, cautiously.

"I hate them. They are a frightful aberration and if I could find the source and destroy them all, I would. But I do not have the time and I am only one man and cannot seek out the source to deal with it, and do not know if I could by myself even if I could get there."

"You know where the source is?" asked Kazrack.

"Not exactly," Kennoch said. "They say there is an old mortuary south of here somewhere that is cursed. And the zombies always seem to come from the south. The local herbalist, Cort might know more about it. He lives in a cottage about a half mile southeast of town, just take the trail behind my house into the wood. It will lead you to him."

"We will seek him out," said Beorth. "I am duty bound to put an end to this undead menace."

"Of course, and I would greatly appreciate if you did it. It might help me in my goal to turn the people of this troubled town to worship Ra," Kennoch said. "I can offer little help as I cannot go with you, but I can give you this..."

Kennoch went to the altar and took down three clay vials. "These are waters blessed by Ra," he said. "They may help to hurt undead, or to consecrate a place of evil."

He handed them to Beorth.

"Thank you," said Beorth. "We will use them in service of Ra and Anubis."

"Also, I spoke to the marshal, Harrick," added Kennoch. "He is a very obstinate man and would not listen to reason about the pirates' bodies. He said he felt that they deserved their fate in this world and the next and that *'strangers should mind their own business'*. I'm sorry. I'm not sure there is much we can do, without coming into conflict with the people of this town."

"I must meditate on this, but for now we have a more pressing goal, for the undead are ever the enemies of Anubis," replied Beorth.

"May Ra be with you on your journey, and good luck," Kennoch said, as they parted.

Beorth, Chance, Jana, Jeremy, Kazrack and Ratchis found the trail and followed it through the light wood.

They came to a clearing with a small log cabin with a thatched roof. The windows were nailed shut with boards, and some garden plots in front looked as if they had been stomped on. The whole front area was nicely paved with flat stones of different sizes, and a large heavy wooden bench and table, worn by years of weather was to the left of the door. Only the sound of birds could be heard.

Ratchis crept ahead of the group and signaled for them to wait. He examined the soft ground and found the tracks of several humanoids, some in boots and shoes other barefoot (one seemed to only have one shoe) dragging their feet in circles about the cabin.

"Zombies have been here," he said in his gravelly voice.

“Hello?” a voice called from the shadow of the cabin’s doorway.

“Hello! We come seeking Cort the herbalist!” cried Jeremy from where the rest of the group waited for Ratchis.

“Well, you have found him,” said a jovial voice, that capped the statement with a long roll of laughter. A hefty man of late middle age came out of the cabin. He had thinning black hair cut into a bowl and was dressed in quite the same utilitarian manner of the rest of the occupants of Stone Bridge.

Jeremy and the others walked up to Ratchis, and the herbalist walked up to them.

“Well, you have me at a disadvantage. You know my name, but I do not know yours,” said Cort, followed by another spout of wheezing laughter.

The companions introduced themselves and explained what they were looking for.

“The old mortuary, huh?” He laughed some more. “Tis a dark place. Cursed, I’m sure, and the dead just might be coming from there, or animated by some force originating there.”

Cort’s belly shook as he laughed some more.

“The place has been around since at least the Herman Land invasion, maybe longer. Some family started it to deal with all the dead from the war. No one remembers their name, however.”

“Do you know how to get there?” asked Jeremy.

“Yes, my search for roots and herbs takes me all over the area, though I avoid the mortuary specifically. All you need do is follow the river south for about a half-day until you come to a dried-up oxbow. There turn east until you come to a wild apple orchard. You will see tall hills to your south from there. Over the first or second hill, you should find the place.”

“Do the zombies come here often?” Ratchis asked, pointing to the boarded windows.

“Often enough lately. In the past it was only every few months, but there have been multiple sightings and at least five attacks in the last two months. They always appear from the south and retreat back in that direction. It must be the mortuary,” Cort laughed some more. His eyes shone with gaiety. “So, anyone need any herbs or poultices?”

“I need to replenish my healer’s kit,” said Ratchis, and he followed the still laughing chubby man into the cabin. The others came in as well.

The cabin was dark and warm, and infused with the smell of flowers and herbs mixed with a smoky flavor. There was table against the wall below the window that looked out on the front yard. It could be seen that a small space between the boards allowed one to spy out on the yard and shoot the heavy crossbow that was lying on the table. There was another table set up perpendicular to that table covered with bowls of herbs and roots, and further in the cabin could be seen wooden chairs covered in furs, a hearth, and cots.

Ratchis’ senses alerted him to another presence in the room, and the turn of his head drew everyone’s attention to a little girl hiding beneath one table. Her eyes met the huge ugly man’s, and she crawled back a bit more. Cort laughed. “That is my granddaughter, Frances. Tiny little fragile thing, kind of easily spooked.” The man laughed again, and the others found that his laughter was a bit infectious and could not help but smile themselves.

“Come on out, Frances. They are just customers,” Cort said to the girl. She just slid further into the shadows beneath the table. Cort turned and addressed the party, “Her parents were killed in a pirate attack, but she’s going to need some toughening up if she’s going to survive in a place like this.”

Ratchis replenished his needs, as did Jana, amid spontaneous laughter among all of them, but most especially Cort who seemed to have an indefatigable good humor.

Kazrack smiled and approached the little girl.

"Hello, Frances," he said in a friendly voice. "I am Kazrack."

She yelped and tried to slink further back, but there was nowhere left to go.

"Would you like some chalk? You can draw on stones with it," the dwarf said, offering a piece of the white stuff.

She looked at him with saucer eyes, and then at the chalk, and then looked to her grandfather.

"Go ahead and take it," Cort said to her.

She snatched it from Kazrack's hand and murmured a thank you.

They bid the herbalist adieu and stepped into the woods to plan their next step and immediately fell into arguing about it. While they all agreed that that should seek out the mortuary (well, except maybe for Chance), Kazrack felt they should go back to the camp and alert the others that they might be gone a day or two. The rest disagreed. Ratchis felt that could make better time cutting straight to the river. Beorth was in a hurry to deal with the undead menace. Jeremy and Jana felt that Crumb wouldn't care where they were and that it was pointless to tell him or anyone else.

"Well, Ah can tell him when ah go back to camp. Ahm not too sure I wanna go find this mortuary," said Chance. "Wanna come back wit' me, Jana?"

"I am going to go help with the undead menace. I have seen the harm they can do in my own home of Westron," the girl said with conviction.

"Well, if Jana is gooin' then ahm gooin'," Chance said with a sigh. "Someone needs to look after `er."

Overruled, Kazrack joined the others in following Ratchis westward, though the dwarf grumbled for most of the time. They walked through three-fourths of a mile of briars and another half-mile of peat bog, until they arrived at the river, well south of Crumb's camp.

This far south the dead bodies were left far behind and soon the scent of autumn flowers drifted on the air brought to them on the breeze off the river. They followed an easy and well-worn track southward than never left sight of the river, but they did occasionally wander up to high up on the bank, above the sandy shore.

They had traveled several hours already, and it was only about an hour after they had stopped to eat their rations, when Ratchis noted the smashed hull of a riverboat washed up against a large rock in the shallow water.

As they came closer, they could see the weathered bones of a sailor just beneath the surface of the water. Ratchis approached the smashed boat, and Beorth followed not too far behind, while the others walked behind hesitantly. As the tall woodsman came within reach of the skeleton, the companions felt a chilling breeze cut to their bone and the skeleton rose creepily, holding a rusted cutlass in one hand, still having ripped remains of clothing draped over its bones. Jeremy called out as five more skeletons rose from the sand and the boat's remains. A wave of fear flowed over the party.⁷³

Jana found that she could not move or even speak. The fear knotted her muscles into paralysis, but everyone else shook it off and moved to deal with the undead menace. The skeletons moved with unnatural quickness, despite the awkward movement of their fleshless limbs. Ratchis immediately smashed through one with his great strength

⁷³ **DM's Note:** When first encountering undead in some situations I will call for a 'fear check'. Basically, a Will save versus fear (DC 10 + Undead HD + Any turn resistance)

behind his quarterstaff, and Beorth took on two by himself, driving them back with a fury born of his hatred of their kind. Kazrack and Jeremy were having trouble with the skeletons they were facing, as their halberd and sword respectively were having trouble smashing the bones into uselessness. Chance stood back, blocking Jana with his body, and keeping his short sword drawn, but not joining the fray.

Beorth knocked down one of the skeletons he was fighting and smashed the other into a hail of bones. Jeremy stepped forward grimacing with the cut of a cutlass slash to his side and crossing both his swords in front of him, sending another storm of bone fragments thundering like summer rain against the river. Kazrack was able to knock the leg off of one and then smash its skull as it fell. Ratchis stepped towards another skeleton that was moving to attack Kazrack, and smashed it into nothingness with one hard blow, which was echoed by Beorth finishing the last one.

"I fear this curse is growing in magnitude," said Beorth, wiping his brow of sweat.

"Really? What gave you that idea?" said Jeremy sarcastically, sheathing his long and short swords.

"Look!" said Kazrack, pointing into the water. "Something is shining in the water. It looks like gold!"

Ratchis waded out into the water and lifted a small black metal chest from among the boat's wreckage. As he lifted, gold coins washed over the side and plopped into the water. Jeremy slipped off his chain shirt and dove in after them, surfacing with a handful of gold coins, his wet hair glistening like the coins in his hands.

Ratchis placed the chest on the riverbank, and ran his hand through the coins, that while mixed gold and silver, was mostly the latter. He also found that right on the top was a metal collar inset with tiny rubies all around and a ring for a chain or leash. He held it up for the others to see.

"Is that an animal collar?" asked Kazrack. "It seems rather extravagant for that."

"I think it is a slave collar," said Ratchis, softly.

"It is too fancy to be a slave collar," said Kazrack.

"A slaver might cherish a slave the way he'd cherish any other item of his property, it does not make the act any less heinous. I think it was meant for a slave as well," said Beorth.

"Wow!" Chance was breathless. "Look at those rubies! We'll fetch a good price from that thing."

"We will not profit from an item that represents all that my goddess stands against," said Ratchis, he raised the collar over his head to throw it into the river.

"Wait! We're not going to use it on a slave. We could use the money to help ourselves do some good," said Jeremy.

"Aye, less keep it," said Chance.

"Kazrack, may I borrow your flail?" Ratchis asked the dwarf.

"Um, sure," he replied.

Ratchis placed the collar on a rock, and taking the flail, smashed it with the flail three times, bending the collar into a twisted version of what it once was. As he picked it back up, the small rubies fell around the rock and Chance leapt and scooped them up, mimicked by Kazrack who reacted slightly slower. The dwarf only got one ruby.

"Remember, those are for all of us," said Kazrack to Chance.

"Avarice!" said Chance, slipping the rubies into a pouch and winking at Jana.

Ratchis spoke a word to Nephthys and tossed the collar into the deep part of the river, a few rubies still clung to the metal. He then poured the chest of coins into a sack and tied them to his pack.

Jeremy, Chance, Jana, Beorth, Ratchis and Kazrack continued marching south by southwest along the river. An hour after they battle with the skeletons, Ratchis said, "We should be seeing the oxbow soon."

"What *is* an oxbow?" asked Kazrack.

"I was wondering the same thing," said Jeremy.

"It is when a river or stream loops back on itself, and then the loop gets closed off from the river and starts to dry up," Ratchis explained, and as if to exemplify the point, the oxbow came into view.

As they turned eastward at the oxbow as the herbalist had directed, a dark front of clouds rolled in from the west with frightening speed. A cold howling wind pushed at their backs, and they held their cloaks tight around their shoulders. Thunder broke above them and suddenly an intense rain came down in a torrent. The already setting sun was obscured by a deep grayness in all directions.

The party was immediately soaked and shivering, and visibility was obscured to just a dozen feet or so.

They continued onward in what they hoped was a straight line, led by Ratchis, and looking for the wild apple orchard that marked where they should turn southward again.

They bumped in the darkness and rain for an hour, when Jeremy felt something crunch beneath his boot. Looking down he saw it was a small apple. He looked around and wiped the rain from his eyes and then shielded them.

"I think this is the orchard," Jeremy said, pointing to the small trees around them, and now the rotting apples underfoot.

"Yes," agreed Ratchis. "I believe south is this way." The tall man pointed what he hoped was southward, and from the mist in that direction emerged several figures. They shambled forward, in a line of about half a dozen. The rain pelted their blind eyes, and their flesh was rotten and covered in the tattered rags that were once sailor's clothing. One had a rusted sabre through his gut, but still it walked forward, moaning softly. They came with outstretched arms and blackened claw-like nails, knowing nothing but the desire to eat all flesh, to quench all life.

The companions prepared to meet them in battle, and suddenly realized, as even more appeared in the mist: They were outnumbered.

The zombies lurched forward through the rain, breaking up the party line into two groups, with Ratchis, Beorth and Kazrack in front and Jana, Jeremy, and Chance in the rear.

The zombies grabbed at them with the stubborn and unyielding strength of death, to rend the flesh from their limbs. The stench of putrescence came off them in waves despite the torrential rain. Now that they were fighting for their very lives, pushing off the groping limbs, they could see that four of the zombies were not dressed as sailors like the others. Three were dressed in frock coats with tall collars, with rotted flowers in their lapels. The flesh of their faces shriveled up in a permanent grimace, like a rich man recoiling from a beggar. The fourth of this group, was a woman in life, in a high collar dress with a many layered petticoat, high-heeled boots and her remaining wiry hair pulled back in a tight iron-colored bun.

Ratchis fought with his long-bladed hunting knife, cutting chunks of dead flesh off the sailor zombies, while Beorth did the same with his long sword. Kazrack, swung his halberd in wide arcs, cutting at zombies to keep them at bay, but they ignored the danger of the pole-axe's broad blade and walked towards him, spurting a strange bluish liquid from their wounds. Jeremy was having a harder time, stumbling from blow after blow of the gnarled fists of the undead, as Chance hesitated behind him, and Jana swung her club ineffectively.

Standing back, Ratchis slipped the knotted and worn chain of cracked links from around his waist and began to swing it over his head.

“Nephthys, please send down your divine grace so that these poor slaves’ bodies could be put to rest and not made to toil in death as they did in life,” the tall woodsman cried, and two of the zombies turned and fled in the face of that divine power.

Beorth hacked one of the sailor zombies down and turned to help Kazrack who was fending off two, while Ratchis charged after one of the fleeing ones. He sliced open the back of one revealing its spine and as it turned, he sliced again sending its right hand flying off in a random direction. The blue foul-smelling liquid in their bodies spurted from the wounds all over his face and chest.

Meanwhile, Jeremy was having trouble, Jana and Chance retreated from the repeated blows they suffered, but Jeremy stood his ground, and soon his blood was flowing to mix with the zombie gore flying about. Beorth helped Kazrack finish another and looked up to see a faint glowing green light in the woods. It pulsed twice and disappeared. Ratchis charged towards the two zombies Jeremy was still fighting. The Neergaardian managed to fell one, but Ratchis arrived too late. Jeremy fell from a harsh blow to the neck, dropping his swords in the muck developing beneath their feet. Ratchis stepped between the lurching zombie and Jeremy’s fallen form, as Chance and Jana crouched over the fallen companion.

With a wide swing Ratchis removed another hand at the wrist. Beorth tried to finish another zombie as it began to turn and move away from him, but it took one last swing at the paladin knocking him down into the mud. It shambled away. By the time the paladin stood and Ratchis and Kazrack finished their zombie, both it and the one Ratchis had turned had disappeared into the night.

“How is Jeremy?” Ratchis asked in his gravelly voice.

Jana looked up from the injured Neergaardian, “He is stable.” And she looked at Chance, who nodded.

“Stay here and guard him. I am going to look for shelter. We need a place to rest for the night,” Ratchis said.

“Don’t you think we should find the mortuary?” asked Kazrack.

“Not in this condition, and not if we have to carry Jeremy,” said the woodsman and he was off. He returned a few moments later, and said he found a spot where two trees had fallen to create a natural shelter, where they might be out of the majority of the rain.

“Moving Jeremy will be difficult. He is stable, but still unconscious,” said Jana.

Ratchis knelt down on knee beside Jeremy and putting his hand over one of the now bandaged wounds spoke aloud, “Nephthys, may your compassionate light heal his body and spirit so that he may fight to end the bondage of these undead abominations.”

And with that the wound closed some, and Jeremy’s eyes blinked.

“Ugh, I’m alive?” Jeremy croaked. “Ow, everything hurts.”

He was helped up and Beorth and Chance helped him hobble along to the shelter Ratchis had found.

They settled down for the night, and Chance fell immediately to sleep, while the others discussed a fire and who would take watch.

“We should not light a fire,” said Kazrack, squeezing the water from his beard.

“It is cold and wet, and it may help Jeremy be more comfortable and thus recover easier,” said Ratchis.

“But some of the undead things escaped us, and the fire might draw them back,” said Kazrack.

“I do not think it would matter. I think it was the glowing green light that called them away, and regardless, undead can sense life and hate it. It matters not if we have a fire, at least in terms of the zombies,” said Beorth without emotion.

“Glowing green light?” asked Kazrack.

“Yes, it pulsed twice in the wood south of us as we fought. It was then that the zombies began to turn away from the battle.

“Chance was in a position to see it as well, though I do not know if he did,” Beorth replied.

Chance snorted in his sleep as if in reply.

“Well, there may be other things about. I am taking first watch. I think we can live for a few hours before dawn without a fire, and I do not need the light of the fire to see by,” said Kazrack.

“Fine by me,” said Ratchis, unrolling a fur blanket and falling immediately to sleep.

Jana checked Jeremy’s bandages, and then followed suit. Beorth watched with Kazrack briefly, and then he slipped off his armor and slept as well.

The night waned and the harsh rain mellowed to a trickle and then stopped all together, leaving only the sound of the droplets dripping from the apple littered trees around them.

The first lights were visible when Chance awoke to find Kazrack’s head bobbing in an effort to fight off sleep.

“Kazrack,” Chance said, it sounded like “Go ta sleep, man. Ahm awake now and will watch.”

Kazrack grudgingly agreed and went to sleep.

Ralem, 22nd of Ese - 564 H.E.

Ratchis awoke hours later. The light of Ra’s Glory was reflected in each drop of rain clinging to the autumnal leaves giving the morning an unreal sheer. For a moment it made him feel as if he might still be dreaming. Everyone else still slept. Chance snored lightly in a sitting position drooped over a log on his left. Pausing to breath in the chilly morning air, the large man got up to his knees and began to pray to his goddess. In time the rhythmic murmuring awoke Beorth, who stood and stretched. He began to gather some nearby wood for a fire. Suddenly, they heard the not-too-distant sound of animal’s cry.

“Did you hear that?” said Beorth, his arms holding a few sticks of wet wood.

Ratchis stood and cocked his head. The cry came again, high-pitched and full of agony. Grabbing his staff, and not bothering to put on his armor, Ratchis ran in the direction of the sound.

Beorth dropped the wood and looking around for a moment grabbed his sword. He took off after Ratchis, who had already disappeared among the apple trees, leaving behind the others in ignorant sleep.

Ratchis came over a low ridge to see a huge animal sprawled out in a clearing. It was greater than six feet long and its body was covered in a thick, grizzled dark brown fur, and its face was lined and crowned with white. Its front

legs were short and muscular and ended with long clawed paws, but as it dragged itself forward the woodsman could tell that its rear leg was caught in a powerful metal trap, and blood oozed outward, matting its fur.

As Ratchis slowly approached it, he could see it was weak and he halted one fearful moment as it began to yank at its trap wildly, convulsing in unfocused rage, screeching, foam flicking off its muzzle. After a few moments, it settled back to trying to drag itself slowly along again but could not gain ground. Its breathing was heavy and labored.

Ratchis walked slowly around to its front and as soon as it sensed him it began its wild frenzy of movement again. This time it lasted much longer, crying out again and again in frustration, anger, and agony.

After a few moments Beorth approached.

“What is it?” the paladin of Anubis asked.

“It is a badger, but I’ve never seen one this big before,” his gravelly voice was filled with pity for the creature’s suffering.

“Can you heal it?” Beorth asked, inwardly wondering if death might not be a better choice for the creature.

“If I got too close it’d likely rip my arm off. In my experience, once a creature of this kind enters a rage it will not stop until it or all around it are dead. Since we have no way to subdue it, I guess I will have to put it out of its misery. It is almost dead anyway.”

Ratchis stood at the very edge that his quarterstaff could reach and taking one end in both hands swung hard and high over his head, striking the huge badger on top of the head with a sickening crunch. It let out a final blast of breath and ceased to move, blood seeping slowly from its mouth and nose.

Ratchis and Beorth looked at the creature silently, when suddenly they heard a grizzled voice call out, “That there’s my kill, boys. Ya best stand away!”

Meanwhile, Kazrack awoke with a start and the feeling that he had overslept. He stood up and saw Chance where he was slouched over, drooling. With a grunt he looked and saw Beorth and Ratchis were gone, and he kicked Chance awake. In the distance he heard the cry of the huge badger, though he did not know what it was.

“Huh? Wha?” Chance said groggily, putting his arms up reflexively.

“Where are Ratchis and Beorth?” Kazrack asked roughly.

“How should I know? I was sleepin’!” Chance said, annoyed.

“And you were supposed to be watching!” Kazrack yelled in something close to a fatherly tone.

“Well, ah was tired, ‘n it was light out. Ah figured we were safe for a while.”

“Well come on, let’s find them,” commanded Kazrack.

“What about Jana and Jeremy?” Chance asked.

“I’m awake. You think I could sleep with Kazrack’s bellowing? Go ahead and go find them. I’ll watch Jeremy,” said Jana groggily.

Kazrack took up his halberd and took off in the direction of the animal sounds. Chance followed behind.

“Bad enough I’m wounded,” said Jeremy rolling over. “I think I have a headache now.”

A tall and broad man stepped out of the trees. He had an unkempt hickory beard, saucer-like eyes, long brown hair and wore a long thick coat of bear fur over his leather armor. He also wore a fur hat and carried a spear.

"That there little badger is mine," he said in a gruff voice, smiling. "That's my trap. It was my bait."

"That's fine," replied Ratchis. "We had no intent on taking it."

"Yeah, well that's good. We don't look kindly on poachers around here."

"We are hunting zombies, not badgers," said Beorth.

"Zombies?" the man spit and looked at Beorth in the eye. "Whatcha be wantin' them fer? Ya can't eat them and they got no coat to speak of."

"We need to destroy the menace," said Beorth.

"Well, a menace they are, but they ain't too bad. If there's only one or two ya can get rid of them purty easily, and if they're more, you can always outrun 'em," the hunter said.

"I am Beorth, servant of Anubis," the paladin said. "And this is Ratchis."

The hunter looked Ratchis up and down and grunted. "They call me Jack-Knife Hawkins," he said.

"Do you run into the zombies a lot?" Beorth asked.

"Well, I be seeing these past relations every couple of fortnights, been kinda more regular-like lately though," Jack-Knife said.

At this time, Kazrack and Chance came walking up towards them.

"Heh, don't see many Stonefolk around here," Jack-Knife said, turning to begin cleaning the badger body.

"Do you know where the zombies come from?" Beorth asked.

"Probably the ole crypt over yonder hill," he gestured to the south. "Now, if you all will excuse me, I gotta clean and skin this beastie, and that'll take the better part of the day."

"Ratchis?" Kazrack said.

"The sound was just this animal caught in that trap," Ratchis said.

"It doesn't matter what it was," Kazrack said. "You should not have left without telling anyone. It is not safe."

"Beorth knew I left," Ratchis said simply. He began to walk towards camp.

"But Beorth came with you," Kazrack said.

"I could not let him go into possible danger alone," Beorth said in his normal quiet tone.

"But you left us alone and asleep," said Kazrack.

"We did not go far," said Ratchis. "It worked out fine."

"But it might not have," Kazrack insisted.

“But it did,” Ratchis said, flatly.

They returned to camp, where Jeremy achingly awakened to join the group in a meager morning meal and receive healing from Ratchis by the grace of Nephthys.

They then headed out across the orchard, past Jack-Knife Hawkins (who was still dealing with his kill) and over a hill and up another until they came to an incredible sight.

Beyond the second hill, buried in a huge pile of rubble stood what seemed to be a mastaba;⁷⁴ only the very top (and possible entrance) was visible, along with the slightest hint of stone steps that led down into the rubble. Statues that must have been at least twenty feet tall flanked the doors to the tomb atop the oblong base. Only their torsos and above were visible above the rubble. While both statues were of black stone and jackal headed, the one on the doors’ left had a solemn countenance and medium build. It had its arms folded across its chest, hands near its shoulders, the right holding a crook,⁷⁵ the left an ankh. The right-hand statue had a face with a fierce and snarling countenance. It was broadly built, and its right hand pointed forward, a serpent entwined about the forearm. Its left hand was held at its waist, below the line of the rubble.

They could also see a small shack to the right of the structure. It looked dilapidated and old and was set among tall harsh grasses. Behind the mastaba peeked the remains of what appeared to have once been an exceptionally large mansion long ago burned down to the foundation.

“How did that thing get covered in rubble? There are no nearby cliff faces or mountains or even hills close enough for an avalanche or earthquake to cause such a thing,” observed Kazrack. The rest wondered silently.

“Well, at least some of the answers to our questions will be found here,” said Beorth. “Let us go down to the shack and see what we can find out about this place. The statue on the right is Anubis in the traditional stance of guardianship, while the one on the left is Set the Tyrant.”

Beorth, Chance, Jana, Jeremy, Kazrack and Ratchis made their way down to the old shack. In the front of the shack had a boarded window, and a slab of off-white stone about seven feet long and three feet wide lay in the yard.

Ratchis stepped up to the door and knocked loudly with his big ham-fist.

Kazrack called out, “Hello?”

Ratchis knocked again, more loudly.

“Go away! There’s no one here,” cried someone inside. It was a man’s voice, but it was made high-pitched by anxiety.

“We’ve come to see about the zombies that trouble this area,” called Beorth through the door.

“Go away,” the voice called again. “Leave us alone. They haven’t hurt anybody!”

The party paused and all looked at each other.

“How do you live out here by yourself?” Kazrack asked.

“Go away,” the frantic voice cracked. “Leave us alone. I haven’t done anything to anybody. I won’t let you hurt them. People always want to hurt them!”

⁷⁴ Mastaba: An ancient Egyptian tomb with a rectangular base, sloping sides, and a flat roof.

⁷⁵ The crook is a scepter-like badge of station wielded by the gods of Ra’s Pantheon and the pharaoh-kings of old. It appears as a short cane with a rounded end.

At this Ratchis threw all his weight against the door. It shuddered but held. A high-pitched scream of fear came from inside.

“Go away! Go away! You aren’t allowed in here! Go!”

Ratchis slammed against the door again and it swung open violently. The large man stumbled with his unexpected success but could see the pudgy form of the occupant shuffling madly away from the door as he screamed.

“Get out of my house! You aren’t invited! Go out! Ah! Ah! Don’t hurt me! I won’t let you hurt them!” he cried over and over.

Regaining his balance, Ratchis charged into the shack and tackled the man who struggled pathetically, his weak blows and loose fists ineffectively trying to keep the brawny woodsman from grabbing him and dragging him outside.

“Get off of me!” the man screamed. “Let me go! You’ll never get me to let you hurt them! Leave me alone!”

Ratchis dropped the man on the ground. He wore simple woolen pants, worn leather shoes, a vest, and his thinning hair was plastered to his pimply scalp. The man got up awkwardly and tried to run away, but Jeremy blocked his way, and Ratchis pushed the man back to the ground.

“Stop!” said Ratchis roughly. “We are not here to hurt you or anyone else.”

The man looked up expectantly at Ratchis. “What are you here for then?” the man asked meekly.

“We are here to destroy the zombie threat,” said Ratchis.

“There are no zombies!” the man screamed, and tried to get up, but Ratchis placed a knee in the man’s back, keeping him down. “That’s my family. I have to protect them! Don’t hurt them! Don’t hurt them!”

He began to sob uncontrollably. “Why do you want to hurt my family? Why? Why?”

“Your family?” Jeremy asked, stepping closer. “You do know they are all dead, right?”

“They are not dead! I’m supposed to take care of them! Why are you so evil? Just leave us alone!”

Meanwhile, Beorth and Jana looked around the shack. The two windows were nailed shut, and the little light in there came through cracks in the boards and shutters. There was a simple cot in one corner, and a pot-bellied stove in another. A crate held a collection of shovels, brooms, mops, and a crowbar. The most obvious feature of the shack was a strange stone cap in the floor. It was round and fit perfectly into a hole; a metal ring was in its center. Above it hung a thick metal hook connected to a chain, which was run through a pulley to a wheel on the wall by the door.

Outside, the shack’s former occupant continued to cry, now having been bound by Ratchis. His face turned a bright red, and his voice was a constant shriek of consternation and lamentation.

“Go away! Go away! Leave us alone!” he cried over and over again.

“We are trying to help you,” Jeremy said, in his best attempt to be soothing.

“I hate you! I hate you!” the man said through his madness. “Set curse you! Set curse you!”

Jeremy stepped away from the man in fear, “Whoa!”

“Set curse—”

He did not get to continue his curses. Kazrack stepped up and with a well-placed punch to the temple knocked the poor man out with one blow.

Everyone looked at the man's crumpled form and shook their heads.

"He's crazy," said Chance.

"He was calling down Set to curse us," Jeremy said quietly and with some fear.

"He thinks those zombies are his family," said Kazrack. "How does someone become like that?"

"Living among the dead for years, I would guess," said Ratchis.

Ratchis lifted the now unconscious man and placed him on the cot. He searched the man and took the only two things the man had. They were a simple gold ring with an inset ruby and a pendant on a leather thong. The pendant curved like a green fang and was made of malachite. It was about two and half inches long. He gave the items to Beorth to hold.

In the meantime, everyone looked around, but could find no clue as to what was creating the zombies. The only thing left to do was to use the hook and chain to lift the stone cap and explore the area beneath the shack.

Beorth placed the hook in the ring and then turned the rusty wheel and was able to lift the stone cap out and swing it over and place it on the ground beside the dark gaping hole.

Ratchis stood by the hole and listened. The sound of soft shuffling reached them from below.

"Kazrack, cover me I'm going in," Ratchis said.

"Wait, it's dark in there! How will you see?" Jeremy called.

But it was too late, Ratchis leapt down into the darkness, but to his trained and inhuman eyes, the room was a world of reversed shades of gray. He landed on a slab of stone not unlike the one that they had seen in front of the shack but was off-balance for a second as the small form of a boy that must have been no older than eleven years in life came at him.

"Eng! Eng!" was all the boy could say, dressed in a fine quilted jacket of molding velvet. The boy's face was powdered with make-up, but in places where it was faded the chilling sight of bluish pallor could be seen. His teeth were blackened, and one eye was so swollen as to be out of proportion with the rest of his face.

The little boy zombie grabbed at Ratchis, but despite being off balance, the woodsman was able to move out of the way and place a hard kick to the boy's head knocking him backward.

"What's going on down there?" Kazrack called, sticking his head down the hole, using his dwarfish vision to see Ratchis pull out his long hunting knife and dive at a foe that was out of his arc of sight.

Ratchis leapt towards the zombie with a wide cut that punctured the swollen eye, causing stale blood, pus, and that strange blue liquid to come bursting out in a spray. Ratchis put one hand up, and the zombie undaunted, seeming to still possess the undying enthusiasm of a child, lurched forward and grabbed the large man's off-hand arm and yanked hard, sending pain shooting through Ratchis' shoulder. He pulled his arm back and swung again, and this time the former little boy's head plopped over, still attached to the neck by a patch of skin and some sinew, sending another burst of ichor into the air. The zombie toppled over, motionless.

Kazrack dropped down through the hole, using the lowered hook and chain to guide him, just as Ratchis stepped off the stone slab. The slab was about seven feet long and three and a half feet wide and made of an off-white stone that was stained with splotches of something rust-colored in some spots and brown in others. Blood. There were also stains of unidentifiable blue stuff and green stuff. The slab was up against the western wall.

In the northwest corner, a coffin was propped up, and in the northeast corner was a rack of priestly garments and funeral clothes. The southern wall held a stone sideboard covered in bottles and jars of unidentifiable stuff (at least not while using darkvision).⁷⁶ In the east wall was a set of narrow double doors, that plated with what appeared to be pure beaten gold, sculpted to depict a jackal-headed man standing before gates. Behind the gates were countless figures looking out beyond them into the room.⁷⁷

Eventually, the rest of the party followed into the small room, bringing a lantern down with them. The still unconscious form of the caretaker (or whatever he was) was lowered down as well and laid down beside the sideboard.

Ratchis and Kazrack debated placing the caretaker into the coffin to keep him out of trouble if he woke up. Ratchis was against it, fearing that if the party did not return from what was beyond those doors the man would die a horrible death, but if merely left tied up there was a good chance he could eventually wriggle out of it. Kazrack grudgingly agreed.

Meanwhile, Beorth examined the bottles and jars on the sidebar and found that among them were the familiar tools of a mortician. The jars held embalming fluid and the preserved bits of the dead, like hearts, a brain, eyeballs, and a tongue. He then walked over to the golden doors and examined the bas-relief in detail.

“Wow, that’s a lotta gold,” Chance said quietly to Jeremy. “Ah wonder how heavy it is.”

“Probably very heavy, but not impossible to get off and out of here with some determination,” said Jeremy, eying the gold greedily as well.

“Whaddya say we try ta git these off later?” Chance said, trying to be quiet.

“Hey,” admonished Jana, overhearing. “I think that is a very bad idea.”

“Av carse,” said Chance, looking at the young girl. “We was just kiddin’. Weren’t we Jeremy?”

“Of course,” the Neergaardian replied.

Jana rolled her eyes and stepped over to look at the stuff on the sidebar for herself.

Chance elbowed Jeremy and winked. Jeremy nodded.

“A tomb lies beyond here,” Beorth announced. “We shall enter, for Anubis does grant permission for those that work in his name to enter these forbidden and sacred places for the purpose of destroying the evil that does desecrate it.

Ratchis and Kazrack pulled open the doors, and beyond was a small alcove, beyond which was a very narrow passageway that went onward into pitch darkness. It was barely six feet high, and Ratchis groaned realizing how difficult passing through such a space was going to be for him.

It was agreed that Kazrack, being the shortest would lead the way, with the rest following in this order: Jeremy, Beorth, Jana, Chance and Ratchis taking up the rear.

They crept along the passageway of loose brick and packed dirt, coming to wooden supports every dozen or so feet, which caused them to duck their heads even further. Ratchis was particularly cramped, dragging his quarterstaff along behind him. Jeremy held the lantern. He knew that if they were attacked by something while in this passage, he would be particularly vulnerable, and Ratchis would block the escape of the others. It was too late to do anything about it now.

⁷⁶ Darkvision cannot be used to identify small details like writing or determine color.

⁷⁷ These are a depiction of the gates to Anubis’ Realm.

The passage had the slightest upward grade, which Kazrack immediately noticed. A cool breeze carried a fetid smell coming from the direction the party headed. They walked and walked, the cramped conditions giving them the impression that they had been marching along for hours with no change, except the deepening of their breaths.

Eventually, Kazrack heard a crunch beneath his feet and felt some small thing landing on him from above. At first, he thought that the ceiling of the passage was crumbling but looking closely it appeared as if the passageway walls, floor and ceiling were moving—squirming was an even better word—and now he could see thousands upon thousands of insects crawling about the passage, in and out of cracks in the walls. Kazrack took another step forward and could feel the bugs crawling up his body, down his neck beneath his armor and within his beard. He could hear their carapaces clinking off his helm.

“What is this stuff?” Jeremy said, stepping into the infested area.

“Bugs,” said Kazrack, but he should not have opened his mouth, because the moment he did a large waterbug popped right in. He spat it out disgusted. He continued and the party followed, filled with loathing for the predicament they found themselves in.

They could hear the chittering of the many legs and mandibles, and the crunching beneath their feet and along the walls as they smeared the countless bugs. Jeremy looked and bugs had even crawled within the lantern, some smoking in the flame, others floating dead in the oil. Ratchis held the hood of his cloak over his head and crouched down lower, trying to shield himself, and Jana kept her mouth tightly shut and covered her ears with her hands. Beneath her cloak she could hear her little friend happily chopping down bugs.

“Yum, yum! Good bugs! Bugs good!” it said to her in her mind.

Chance merely shrieked every time he felt a large bug under his clothes and would smash it with an open hand. Beorth walked stoically through the infestation without reaction.

The narrow passageway had gone about two hundred feet or more when it came to a simple wooden door that Kazrack pushed open. The light from the lantern spilled out into the space beyond. They broke through cobwebs into a tall crypt. It had a sandstone floor, and the ceiling was lost in the darkness above. Wooden stairs lined the walls going up and around, held in place by tall wooden supports. The walls of the chamber were brick and mortar. The right-hand wall held five long tapestries, some of which were in tatters.

A large sarcophagus made of gold and bronze dominated the crypt. It sat upon a stone bier and was decorated with the bas-relief of a woman’s figure, arms crossed upon her chest. All around the sides of the sarcophagus were etched figures paying homage to gods. Two tall torch sconces that were unlit flanked it. Just a little behind the large sarcophagus were two more sarcophagi perpendicular to the first one. They were both made of fine lacquered wood, one red and one blue.

“This place has been defiled,” Beorth said softly. “Whatever evil lingers here shall be destroyed in the name of Anubis!”

The party spread out, Beorth examined the large sarcophagus, as Jeremy and Chance went over to the tapestries and began to push them aside to look for other entrances/exits. Ratchis went and stood by the stairs, while Kazrack looked at the red and blue sarcophagi, without touching them.

Jana merely stood and observed, and then asked suddenly, “Do you hear that?”

Everyone stopped and listened. The wooden stairs were creaking with the movement of many feet. They could hear the now familiar “eng” sound as a half dozen or more zombies slowly descending.

Ratchis, Beorth and Kazrack moved to the stairs to intercept the zombies. Kazrack took the very bottom of the stairs, while Beorth and Ratchis set themselves up along the stairs so that they could attack the zombies’ legs when they

came into reach. Jeremy got his crossbow ready, while Jana stood by one of the sarcophagi and lit the sconce near it. Chance moved into a far corner, as far away from zombies as he could get.

The zombies hobbled awkwardly down the stairs. Ratchis slammed one with his quarterstaff, knocking it into Beorth's waiting sword. The zombie unphased by pain and tendons hanging loose from its legs, continued walking right into the blade of Kazrack's halberd, even as it tried to reach for the dwarf. It was the same zombie in the high collared velvet frock coat that they had fought before, but his hat was now askew, and drooping from rainwater. It continued to try to reach him, as more zombies piled in from behind, not heeding the danger. Ratchis and Beorth struck fiercely at two more, as the line of undead became jammed on the narrow steps. The zombies cared nothing for the height and began to simply walk off the edge of the steps plummeting atop Beorth and Ratchis.

The two warriors quickly made it to their feet, but not before the zombies had ripped some the skin from their flesh with their hardened hands and nails. The zombies clambered to their feet as well, but Beorth and Ratchis struck quickly. Ratchis smashed one enough for it to stop moving, but another fell off the steps to take its place. Meanwhile, even more zombies made their way down the stairs, nearly overwhelming Kazrack. But the dwarf rallied, as more zombies toppled over to get at the paladin and the follower of Nephthys. The dwarf cut a swath through the zombies remaining on the stairs and ran up to meet more coming down. However, at that moment, Jana gasped and Chance's voice was heard above the cacophony to cry, "Whut in the name of Bes is that?!?" Through his accent his last two words sounded like "izzot."

An incorporeal hand bathed in green light, floated up behind Beorth. The paladin moved to get out of the way, but the zombie to his side made it difficult to dodge, and he felt the hand's icy touch. It left a painful chill down to his bones. He shook off the cold, but he felt worn down. Jana came up behind one of the zombies attacking Ratchis and gave it a hard blow with her club, knocking it down. Meanwhile, Jeremy had been taking pot-shots at the zombies on the stairs, but even the bolts that hit did not slow them down at all. Now only two zombies remained, but the ghostly hand attacked Beorth twice more and twice more he felt the bitter cold that wounded him deeply. He swung at the hand, and the blade of his sword went right through it with no effect. Beorth felt undead zombie hands grab him from behind, and he almost fell off his feet as he painfully tore himself out of the creature's grasp and stepped away to swing a deathly blow with his long sword, cleaving deeply into the thing's skull. Grey matter and blue embalming fluid erupted from the wound splattering on Ratchis, Jana and other zombies. Beorth turned back around in time to see Jeremy take a running leap up and over the large sarcophagus and go for stairs to aid Kazrack, but he also saw another more terrifying sight.

The hand had disappeared, but the lid of the blue lacquered sarcophagus burst open and from it emerged a tall figure wrapped in the stained white strips of a mummified corpse. Its eyes were deep set as if the flesh of its face had desiccated leaving only a graying skull, but red eyes burning with hatred glimmered there.

"Bes protect us!" Chance cried.

"I will feast on your souls and your bodies will remain behind to serve me," the mummy-thing said.

"Gods! It can talk!" cried Jeremy from where he spotted it on the stairs, but he continued towards where Kazrack was stepping over the body of zombie the dwarf had torn in half with his halberd.

Beorth walked towards the mummy with his sword raised, while Ratchis finished off his last zombie. He turned to see the creature pummel Beorth with its bandaged hands knotted in a double fist. Beorth stumbled backward, as Kazrack appeared on the steps above and behind the mummy-thing. It seemed to sense him and stepped back beneath the steps. Ratchis let loose with a bottle of the holy water but misjudged and the bottle shattered open in the sarcophagus the creature emerged from.

"Well, at least I sanctified his home, so maybe he can't go back in there," Ratchis said, with optimism.

"You will pay for that sacrilege," the mummy-thing said, its voice seemed distant and scratchy as if spoken through great constant pain.

Above, Jeremy passed Kazrack and positioned himself for a shot at the thing with his crossbow, while the dwarf pulled out a bottle of oil and readied it. Ratchis tried a javelin, which the thing deftly dodged. Jana came over from behind Ratchis and around Beorth and with a word of magic pointed finger at the thing and a ray of green light struck it directly in the chest.

It merely looked at her and spoke in that unnerving voice that tapped each rib as if they were exposed, “Is that the best you have?” And with that, it fired the same exact kind of ray at Beorth. The laughter that followed was chilling, but fortunately, Beorth was able to shake off the debilitating effect. Kazrack seized his chance and smashed the ceramic oil flask over the mummy-thing’s head and shoulder, causing oil to spill down its arm and chest.

The creature roared as Ratchis let loose with another javelin. Beorth pulled out his bottle of holy water and passed it to Jana, as Ratchis charged the mummy thing.

“*Corvosa!*” the thing said as it pointed at Ratchis, and for a second the half-orc felt a cloud come over his mind, but the aura of courage and free-will that surrounded him by the grace of Nephthys allowed him to shake it off, and his attack was not interrupted.⁷⁸

Kazrack dropped a torch upon the mummy and a curtain of flame exploded from it. The scream it let loose sent a near-paralyzing fear through the party, but Kazrack began to run down the stairs to join the fray. Ratchis took a swipe with his large hunting knife, feeling the blow of the mummy’s strength, as a burning arm came crashing down on his shoulder. The flames burned the tall woodsman, but he did not retreat, instead he swung again and the mummy-thing’s hand at the forearm came flying off, sending a spray of ichor around the room.

Beorth teetered on the edge of unconsciousness from his wounds, while Jana stepped forward to get line of sight to fling the holy water. Suddenly Chance charged the mummy from the corner with an attempted blow from his short sword into the creature’s back. Chance’s own enthusiasm worked against him, as he overshot his target, and the thing turned quickly striking the gambler with a single heavy blow which sent the red-headed young man tumbling away and gasping for breath.

It seemed that the flames would not spread and began to die down, leaving a blackened stain around the creature’s neck and chest. Kazrack made it down the steps and Jana let loose with the holy water vial. The glass smashed on the creature’s head, and where the water touched him, steam rose and again it cried out. It charged right for Jana. A single blow and she was on the ground, bleeding to death. Kazrack came around the mummy-thing, flanking it with Ratchis’ help, but suffered the blow of the thing’s stump as he got into position, groaning loudly as the weight came down on him.

Chance crawled over to Jana and began to try to bind her wounds, and Jeremy came bounding down the stairs. Ratchis and Kazrack traded blows with the thing, and twice more it struck Kazrack with all its undead might, until the dwarf’s face was bruised, and he looked like he could barely stand.

Ratchis stood back and called to his goddess, “Nephthys, please fill me with your healing light so that I may triumph over this being of evil!” But even as his wounds began to close of their own accord, Kazrack shoved his halberd blade into the mummy-thing’s chest, and with a fierce jerking motion to the left and then right, the coils of cloth began to fall away with the weight of absorbed ichor. The mummy stumbled, and fell to its knees, and as Kazrack lifted his polearm for its killing blow it said, “I may fall, but fear followers of Anubis. Fear! For the Serpent’s Son will rise and all righteousness shall go astray!”

And with that it crumbled into a pile of bandages and dust.

The chamber was silent, but the party was still filled with the terror of the creature’s presence.

End of Session #8

⁷⁸ **DM’s Note:** Friars of Nephthys are surrounded by an aura which grants a +2 resistance bonus to mind-affecting spells and effects.

Session #9

“Father Anubis, please grant your stay of death upon this young girl so that she may continue to help to do your work in this mortal realm,” Beorth said, laying his hands upon Jana’s head. She stirred and her eyes fluttered. “Rest, Jana, you will be alright now.”

The girl slowly sat up and leaned her back against the crypt wall.

“What do you think that thing meant by, ‘the son will rise’?” asked Jeremy.

“Did he say, ‘the’ or ‘my’?” asked Kazrack.

“He said, ‘the’,” replied Beorth.

“Well, I think we should search this place a bit more,” said Kazrack.

Kazrack spent the next few hours carefully searching the southern wall behind the tapestries, while Beorth examined the etchings on the golden sarcophagus for clues and Jana rested. Chance sat beside Jana, trying to comfort her. Ratchis, convinced that the wooden stairs must go along the inside of the rubble-covered structure they had seen outside, made his way up the stairs, being careful to step lightly. Jeremy followed, but the loud creaking of his boots on the steps cancelled any attempt Ratchis made to remain quiet.

Ratchis made his way up to where the stairs came up through a floor to a narrow corridor. Worried about going too far without aid, he made his way back down. Jeremy’s torch had flickered out and he was startled by Ratchis coming by him in the dark.

“How do you see in the dark like that?” Jeremy asked.

“It runs in my family,” Ratchis said, by way of explanation.

Kazrack’s dwarf sense of stone and structure could find no anomalies in the stonework, and Beorth found no particular significance to the hieroglyphics around the golden casket.⁷⁹

Deciding they needed to rest after such a grueling combat and before exploring the upper chamber, the party made their way back down the narrow tunnel, through the countless bugs and back into the room for the embalming of the dead. Here they found the caretaker had awakened and was wiggling his way up onto the bier and towards the chain that hung through the trap door. The man began to scream as soon as he heard the party approach.

“Let me go! Let me go!” he cried. “I hate you. You evil bastards! You killed Cousin Ernie. You killed him! You killed him.”

“He was already dead,” said Kazrack.

“Anubis wanted your family to rest,” said Beorth.

Tears began to stream down the pathetic man’s face, “Why’d you kill my family? Why? Why? Why are you so terrible? He was just a little boy! A little boy! Set curse you! Set. . . “

Kazrack knocked him out with one punch again.

⁷⁹ Hieroglyphics are used to mark tombs, crypts, and sacred places. They are less and less often used form of communication, which was formed to give two different messages at once: the obvious message depicted by the characters and a secret message to those familiar with the specific hieroglyphic form that the figures represent, spelling out words.

“He is scary when he starts to say that,” Jeremy commented. The party climbed up the chain and handed the insane caretaker up through it. They replaced the stone cap and then went outside to camp a few score yards from the shack bringing the man with them.

The night passed without event.

Isilem, 23rd of Ese – 564 H.E.

Morning found Ratchis climbing up the rubble that had the mastaba mostly buried. The steep pile was loose in many places, so he was slow and careful in his ascent. He then began to noisily pry the wooden boards that were nailed into the soft stone around the doors to the tomb on top.

“Ratchis! What are you doing?” Kazrack called up. The tall woodsman did not reply. Thinking that he had not heard, Jeremy made the perilous climb after him.

“Jeremy! Where are you going?” Kazrack called.

Jeremy looked back down, “I’m going to tell him that I don’t think everyone can make this climb.”

At the top Jeremy informed Ratchis of this, and after a few moments of judging the distance and lowering a rope, Ratchis agreed that climbing up would likely be too tough for Jana and Chance.

Ratchis climbed back down followed by Jeremy.

“Why did you pry those boards off?” Kazrack asked in his usual parental tone when someone has done something he disapproved of.

“I figured that if we end up in that chamber, we might need a quick way out,” Ratchis said.

“Why do you insist on doing things on your own all the time without consulting anyone else?” Kazrack said with frustration.

“It only makes sense. I thought we might explore from that direction but even though we cannot do that it is best that we keep an extra way out,” Ratchis explained with much effort.

“Fine,” the dwarf replied.

The party began to pack their belongings and prepared to enter the area beneath the shack once again. As they were about to enter the shack, Ratchis sighed and looked at Kazrack.

“Do you have a hammer?” he asked.

“Yes,” the dwarf replied.

“Can I borrow it?”

With Kazrack’s hammer tucked in his belt, Ratchis made the slow climb back up the rubble to the tomb doors.

“What in the name of hell are you doing now?” Kazrack called.

Chance and Jana laughed, while everyone watched Ratchis hammer the boards back in place. Eventually, he climbed back down.

“What did you do that for?” Kazrack asked, his mouth agape at the odd behavior of his traveling companion.

"I realized that those boards were keeping something in. I was afraid something would come out and get away or cut us off if we left the boards off," Ratchis explained.

Kazrack growled, and Beorth was his usual impassive self, but Jana, Chance and Jeremy found their companions hilarious. Beorth and Jeremy removed the stone cap again and this time the bound and gagged caretaker was tied to his bed. They all went down and braved the endless bugs again and came back to the chamber where they had fought the mummy and made their way up the creaky wooden steps.

As they began the ascent, Beorth groaned, still feeling the effects of the previous day's battle. Chance who was walking up behind him, laid a hand on his shoulder and whispered, "I know your wounds ail you, but perhaps with a little bit of luck you'll be feeling better soon."

Suddenly, the aching of Beorth's wound lessened and he could feel them closing some. He looked to Chance, who put a finger to his lips and smiled.

The last set of steps opened at one end of a narrow hall. They walked down the hall past a series of bas relief engravings of heroes of some kind fighting a mummy creature, being killed, and animated to serve as guardians and servants. Beorth looked at them closely for clues, worried that the heroes in the carvings might be images of the party made by some form of magic, but that was not the case.

At the other end of the hall was a stone door, with a hinge mechanism that made it seem that from the other side it must appear like a bare stone wall. Beorth stepped forward to examine the door with Ratchis, and Chance stepped up to look as well, Kazrack now stood between them.

"We need better light," said Beorth. "Ratchis and Kazrack may be able to see, but the rest of us are going to be in trouble."

"*Elochem*," said Kazrack, the dwarven word for light, and suddenly the end of Beorth's staff glow with a bright light in a twenty-foot radius. Everyone turned and looked at Kazrack, whose mouth was wide open in amazement.

"How'd I do that?" Kazrack asked.

"What did you say?" said Beorth.

"I said the word for light in dwarven and suddenly, poof!" Kazrack was amazed. He looked at his halberd and said the word again, but nothing happened.

"I definitely hear, shuffling of some kind on the other side of this door. Get ready!" Ratchis said.

Ratchis and Kazrack pushed the stone door slowly open, and immediately heard the shambling of zombies behind it. They dug in and pushed harder catching two zombies between the door and a perpendicular wall. The zombies pushed back. The bones of the inner one started crunching and embalming fluid pooled beneath the dwarf and the half-orc's feet.

Pressing their backs against the door, they could see they were in a short and narrow corridor or alcove that opened into a much larger vaulted chamber. The room had a statue of a snarling jackal-headed figure against the wall to their left which seemed to continue onward to another hallway across the chamber. More zombies moved slowly towards them, but Jeremy and Beorth came forward to stop their progress and pushed the zombies back into the larger chamber. Jana and Chance followed, and after one last hard push to finish off the crunching zombie, Ratchis moved forward to join them, leaving Kazrack to finish the other by himself.

The vaulted chamber was definitely the inside of the tomb they had seen atop the mastaba. The walls were lined with two rows of vaults for the dead, one row above the other, with a narrow space above them. A few of the stone seals were smashed open. At the front of the tomb two large columns flanked the double doors.

Jeremy and Ratchis took on two zombies immediately around the corner, while Beorth stepped beside the statue to face another. Jana and Chance hung back, to move in if someone needed help. Another zombie was crawling out of one of the broken seals. These zombies were all dressed in fine velvet clothes stained with embalming fluid and grave dirt.

Ratchis quickly dispatched his opponent, and left the other for Jeremy to finish, going over to face an approaching zombie that looked like it might flank Beorth. The paladin noticed a few nearly invisible strands stretched out across the chamber but thought perhaps it was a trick of the eye, as the zombies seemed to be able to walk through them as if they did not exist. However, when Ratchis stepped over, he felt his movement arrested by something, and looking down finally noticed the fine threads; but too late! Ratchis jerked and raised his arms and felt one of the ultra-fine threads snag his arm as well, and before he knew it several of these very sticky lines were holding him hopelessly in place. Two zombies moved towards him, as if these threads did not exist to them.

Meanwhile, Kazrack was having trouble keeping the door open, so he let go suddenly leaping back into the hall the party had emerged from. The zombie shambled forth past the door towards Chance who yelped and turned brandishing his short sword. The red head stabbed forward sinking the blade deep into the dead flesh, but while the piercing weapon did not seem to do much, Kazrack's halberd blade did. The dwarf opened the door and stepped out flanking the undead monstrosity and cleaving deeply into its hip, sent it down. It immediately began to try to get back up.

As Ratchis struggled with the threads, the two zombies that flanked him, began to rip violently into his flesh. The large man grunted in pain and continued to try to break free. Beorth stepped up and sliced deeply into one and it turned towards him. Jeremy still struggled against his one foe. And then, the thread became easier to see as it quivered all about. It stretched from the statue of Set, across to the columns, and from one set of vaults to another. And from atop the crypts to the left of the statue, emerged a horrific creature.

It was some kind of spider, bone white and hairless, its body a good foot across, its legs twice as long. It crawled towards Ratchis, and one zombie moved away from him towards Beorth. The spider walked lightly on its near invisible webs until its deep green fangs were right in the woodsman's face. He could see that one fang was broken at about the half-way mark, but as the maw came closer, he turned his head, and felt the deep and painful bite puncture the flesh of his neck and shoulder. Something like liquid heat flashed through his veins, and he felt his muscles begin to harden and become immovable.

Beorth chopped a zombie deeply, and it folded in half and tumbled, its entrails snaking out on the marble floor. Jeremy finished the zombie he was fighting and moved to attack one that was still on Ratchis, it turned to face him, and the Neergaardian hesitated, feeling weak from his loss of blood, the repeated blows of zombies having taken their toll. Chance squeezed past him and chopped at the webs holding Ratchis, and Jeremy backed him up, holding off the zombie that had been beating on the half-orc. The bone spider turned away from the now paralyzed Ratchis and climbed up on the statue of Set, hanging over Beorth. It sunk its fangs deep in the paladin's side, and he felt the liquid fire tighten his muscles in place. And soon, he could not move either.

Kazrack finished the zombie that Chance left him with and came rushing out to the main chamber, in time to see Jeremy finish the last zombie, and the spider climb over the frozen Beorth and bite Jana. In a moment, she was paralyzed as well.

The bone spider came bearing down on them; the webs allowing it to go anywhere it wanted. Chance withdrew back into the hallway, as did a severely injured Jeremy. This left Kazrack alone to deal with the spider. He struck a heavy blow from over his head onto the spider's body, causing a puncture that squirted blue liquid, like the embalming fluid they had seen before. It got past his defense, and bit quickly, and retreated waiting for the poison to come into effect. Kazrack gritted his teeth through the pain, but the poison could not overcome his dwarven constitution.

Meanwhile Chance and Jeremy talked:

"Git back out there, Jeremy!" Chance said, pushing his companion back towards the main chamber.

“Yeah, I know. I’m just hurt really bad. I need to catch my breath,” Jeremy said, and readying himself to join Kazrack.

“Wait,” called Chance and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Bes, bless this brave warrior. Give him a chance fer his luck ta change.”

And suddenly Jeremy felt his wounds begin to close, and the warmth of divine healing power. His eyes widened as he turned and stared at Chance.

“Wha. . .?”

“Just go!” Chance said, pushing Jeremy back in the room. Jeremy confidently strode forward, long sword in one hand and short sword in the other.

He stepped beside Kazrack, in time to see the spider bite the dwarf deeply again. The blue venom dripped from the large punctures in the dwarf’s scale mail, but still Kazrack fought on. The only two of companions left fighting, Kazrack and Jeremy struck the bone spider over and over, small cracks appearing in its exoskeleton. The creature bit the dwarf a third time, and when that failed to work, yet again, it bit Jeremy, but by now the swordsman’s adrenalin was pumping, and the venom did not take hold.

Kazrack struck another devastating blow to the creature, and it clambered away, climbing back up to where it came from atop the crypt vaults. Jeremy and Kazrack could not see where it went because it climbed back too far into the shadows.

“We ahve ta get the others outta here,” Chance said, chopping at the webs about Ratchis.

Jeremy walked over to help move Jana and Beorth, but Kazrack climbed atop the crypts across from where the spider had fled. He left his halberd leaning on the wall, and unslung his crossbow, taking aim at the now visible spider, cowering against the far wall.

He fired, and the sound of the bolt bouncing against the exoskeleton echoed in the tomb. Kazrack reloaded and as he fired again, the creature came scrambling out of its hiding spot towards him. The bolt hit it near one of its eight empty eye-sockets, and more ichor splattered. But the bone spider did not slow down. It climbed down the web and back up at Kazrack biting at him, but the dwarf turned and put his foot in the creature’s face, to give it less of a target. The dwarf slid off the crypt onto the floor and reached for his halberd. The creature followed and bit the dwarf again. Another deep puncture had the dwarf reeling, and blood stained his clothes, but he did not stagger. He brandished his halberd and turned.

Sighing, Jeremy ran back over to help with the spider. He slammed it hard with his long sword, causing a large crack to appear in the outer casing and more of the blue liquid to gush forward. It tried to retreat again, but Kazrack did not give it a chance, slamming down his halberd axe blade where the thorax met the top of the creature. There was a sickening pop and the creature stopped moving.

Weakened and near death themselves, Jeremy and Kazrack let out long slow breathes, and the only sound was that of Chance still chopping at the threads around Ratchis.

What seemed like an unreasonably long period of time passed, but finally Ratchis began to stir. The venom, however, left him with a weakened constitution. Jana also felt the strain of the venom and lowered herself to sit on the floor with her back to the wall. Only Beorth seemed unaffected by the venom when he regained control of his movements again.

Kazrack searched the other alcove looking for a secret door that matched the one the party came through, but after twenty minutes of searching decided there wasn’t one there.

Still aching after calling the power of his goddess down to heal him, Ratchis asked Beorth for the pendant with the malachite stone back. He compared the curved green “stone” to the tooth in the spider’s maw, and then measured it against where the broken one was. If not for the clasp on the pendant it looked like it would be a perfect fit.

“This pendant was made from this spider’s tooth,” Ratchis said, handing it back to Beorth. “Hold it out.”

Ratchis prayed for the vision that allowed him to see magical auras and the pendant shone brightly.

“Necromancy,” he said. He looked about some more, but nothing else in the room shone. Beorth put the pendant away.

It was then decided they’d burn the webs away. Ratchis lit a torch and set them ablaze, and the party retreated back through the door and down to the lower level to rest and wait out the flames and smoke.

After waiting a good three hours, they climbed back up the stairs and opened the door to allow the smoke to clear. Except for Ratchis, who went outside, pried the boards off the doors and came in through the front.

“This place must be destroyed,” Beorth said. “It is a place of evil and goes against the will of Anubis. Having no means of consecrating and warding it, it must be destroyed.

Kazrack slipped into the space between the statue of Set and the wall and pushed, and the rest of the party used a rope to topple it. The heavy black stone slammed into the marble floor, and there was a frightening echo of a sound, followed by a loud cracking of stone. A fissure appeared and widened where the head had struck. The statue was still in one piece, but the floor below them did not seem to be holding up too well.

“I think there is a shaft of some kind below us,” said Kazrack, wiping the sweat from his brow.

“Maybe we can collapse this whole place,” Ratchis suggested.

Kazrack examined the two columns in the front of the chamber and noticed that large wooden blocks were used to help support the columns.

“If we can knock out or burn the supports, this whole place should come down,” Kazrack observed.

The plan was put into action: Kazrack, Beorth, Jana and Chance went back down the stairs and through the bug-infested corridor and up into the shack, where they dragged the caretaker outside.

Meanwhile, Jeremy climbed up on Ratchis’ shoulders and shoved rags covered in oil among the column supports and in the spaces between the supports and the stone itself. He then lit one and then the other, leaving a pile of wood and debris burning at the column’s base as well. They then ran out and climbed down rubble, waiting for the fire to do its job.

They waited for a long time as the caretaker moaned and cried through his gag. They had nearly given up hope of the fire catching, and Ratchis was creeping back towards the rubble-buried mastaba to climb up and check, when they all heard a loud boom and crash. Smoke and dust came billowing out of the double doors. Ratchis ran back to where the others waited safely. Sometime later there was another deafening crash as the entire tomb, mastaba and rubble disappeared into a black cloud. Black smoke and dust climbed high into the air, and the party retreated further back. The sound of tumbling and cracking stone filled the area, and nothing could be seen for a good long time. Even the sobbing of the crazy caretaker could not be heard.

Eventually, the smoke cleared to reveal a rubble-filled depression in the ground where the mastaba had stood. The party avoided walking there not being sure of its stability. Ratchis lit a torch and went into the cabin and knocking over an oil lamp he set fire to it as well.

“We don’t need anything climbing out that way,” he said, and the party agreed. However, the caretaker did not agree. He had worked his gag off with his tongue and lips and let out a long mournful wail.

“You’ve destroyed everything!” he cried. “You burned my house! You burned my house! You destroyed the crypt! You killed my family! Why are you so evil? Why are you so evil? Why? Oh, why? What did I ever do to you? Why?”

Kazrack stood by the caretaker, fist raised in case the man opened his mouth to curse them. The man closed his mouth and just sobbed pathetically, occasionally repeating “my home”.

The party marched back towards the orchard to camp for the night before making their way back to the main camp and the rest of Crumb’s boys.

“I think we have one day to make it back or they might leave without us,” said Beorth.

“Yes, Crumb said we’d be in Stone Bridge for three or four days. I think tomorrow will be the third or fourth,” Jana added.

Ratchis had tossed the bound and babbling caretaker over his shoulder, but the man squirmed and wriggled and fought too much. The woodsman let the caretaker fall off his shoulder with a loud wind-knocking thump and began to drag him along. The man continued to fight and claw to slow down their progress, but Ratchis was just too big and strong. And when he finally gave up fighting, and the ground became broken with sharp rocks, Ratchis picked him up again. The man’s spirit had been broken by bruises, cuts and skinned knees, elbow, and chin.

Making camp where they had two nights previous (where two fallen trees created something of a natural shelter), they dropped their gear and rested their battle-weary bones. Ratchis dropped the caretaker who after a moment of catching his breath, went back into his seemingly endless tirade against the party.

“You are all going to pay for this. Evil like this does not go unpunished,” he screamed over and over with righteous fury. “I was only doing my duty like my father taught me. I was only protecting my family. You are bad people. You will suffer greatly for this.”

“Do you want something to eat?” Ratchis asked him.

“You will pay! You will pay!”

Ratchis shoved some jerky into the caretaker’s mouth. The man chewed it up hungrily, and then continued on his tirade. This was repeated several times, until tired the bound man began look uncomfortable.

Ratchis looked at him curiously, “Do you need to relieve yourself?”

The man nodded. Ratchis looked around at the snickering faces of his companions (except Beorth who was impassive as always). He sighed and stood and led the man several yards away by a tree. And lowering the man’s pants said, “Go ahead. I’ll be right over there.”

Ratchis walked away and waited a few minutes admiring the orange of the sun melting into a blur behind the mountains to the west. However, when he looked back to where he had left the caretaker, he saw him awkwardly hopping with his pants around his ankles, back towards the south. Ratchis ran to tackle him, but the man tripped, his chin slamming heavily against a rock, and causing an explosion of blood.

Ratchis grabbed him.

“Nooooooo!” he wailed. “Let me go! Let me go! Why are you tormenting me? Let me go! I haven’t done anything. Please! Please!”

This pathetic begging continued as Ratchis covered him back up and carried him back to camp.

“What are we going to do with that guy?” Jeremy asked.

“We will bring him to Kennoch. He will know what to do,” Beorth replied. “The man is sick. He needs help. Perhaps Kennoch can cure him. What we are going to do with the amulet is more of my immediate concern. I bet it was what made that green glow I saw the other night, and if so, it controls, if not creates, undead. It must be destroyed.”

“Yes, I was thinking the same thing,” Ratchis agreed. “Let’s try.”

Once again, Ratchis borrowed Kazrack’s flail and Beorth laid the pendant on a rock. Ratchis slammed it again and again with the weapon, but when he stopped and looked, there was not a scratch it. He tried several more times, until his arm was growing numb from the exertion. However, the pendant did not break. Sighing, he handed it back to Beorth.

“We will have to ask Kennoch about what to do with this as well, it seems,” he said.

Osilem, 24th of Ese - 564 H.E.

The party spent an uneventful night in their make-shift shelter, and the next morning they marched to the river and then turned north. Ratchis led the caretaker with a rope from his wrists, and the man plodded along silent and sullen.

The march was long and slow, and Ratchis and Jana still felt the majority of the effects of the spider venom they had been injected with. They grew tired more easily, and the party had to stop often.

They arrived at the site of their fight with the skeletons just before mid-day and had a meager meal.

They continued onward, passing a barge of sand being poled up the river. The boatmen waved and the party waved back and hurried on.

It was overcast and already getting dark despite only being mid-afternoon when the party arrived. Before they even pierced the perimeter of the camp, they could hear Crumb’s Boys cheering, and see the flame of a bonfire licking against the gray sky.

Arriving at camp they saw Crumb’s Boys around the fire, cheering and drinking.

“Hooray Devon! Hooray Markle!” they cried.

“Hooray! Hooray!” the tipsy cheers went up with the tongues of flame from the bonfire.

Jeremy and the others saw Frank and Gwar sitting by their own meager campfire not taking part in the festivities.

“What’s going on?” asked Jeremy.

“I am going straight to Kennoch’s,” Beorth interjected and walked off, pulling the caretaker along with him.

Gwar looked up, “Hi guys. Some of us wondered where you’d disappeared to.”

“We were dealing with the source of the zombies,” replied Ratchis.

“Well, zombies attacked the camp while you were gone,” explained Frank, chewing on some beef jerky.

“A whole lot of them,” added Gwar. “Most people panicked, but Markle and Devon took care of most of them. You should have seen Devon; he took out six of them himself. Not all at once, of course. He really seemed to be enjoying himself.”

“Finn and Carlos were able to take one out together. They are pretty proud of themselves, though Finn puked after the fight was done,” Frank said with a smirk. “Then again, it was more than I did.”

Jeremy went to find some ale and a bite to eat, and Chance went with him. Ratchis and Kazrack hurried to catch up with Beorth, and Jana simply watched the foolishly drunken antics of Crumb’s boys. Markle caught her eye and waved, he was sitting with “the Square.” She nodded her head and exhaustedly walked towards her tent.

Markle intercepted her, “Been having fun?” he asked.

“Looks like you have been,” she replied wearily.

“You look tired, I just wanted to tell you that the time is coming soon for you to return that favor we talked about,” Markle said with his dashing smile.

“Ok, we can talk about it another time?” Jana said, opening the flap of her tent.

Markle placed a reassuring hand on the young girl’s shoulder, “Of course.”

From across the camp Chance looked on with a fierce grimace, and Devon could be heard above the ruckus screaming for Kamir to bring him more ale.

Beorth walked slowly to Kennoch’s house, as he was tired and the even more exhausted caretaker plodded along behind him. Ratchis and Kazrack caught up easily.

As they approached Kennoch’s house, they saw a lone figure entering town. He wore studded leather armor and had a large pack with a long sword sticking up from the top. He used the spear as a walking stick and had curly brown hair and a salt and pepper beard. It was the one of Crumb’s Boys who had disappeared when the wagons had broken down.⁸⁰ Kazrack hailed him, but he walked past ignoring them and heading towards camp.

Kennoch let them in, his soft face smiling at their return.

Beorth explained as best he could about the caretaker and sat the crazed man in a soft chair. The caretaker meanwhile had begun to scream and rave again when they brought him into the house.

“You are all gonna pay! You will pay! You will pay! He’ll get you! He’ll get you! You killed them all! I was supposed to protect them!”

Kennoch’s face grew stern, “Sir, this is a house of Ra and must show the proper respects to his sacredness when here.”

“Damn you! Damn Ra! Damn all of you!” the crazed man began to froth at the mouth as he screamed over and over.

Kennoch stood up straight, and his face took on a severe countenance, that the others did not think possible of his youthful looks. “Silence!” he commanded.

The caretaker gulped and was silent. Sweat poured off his brow and he sat perfectly still. He still had a look of utter fear on his face.

“It is not in my power of faith to heal this man’s mind,” Kennoch explained. “But there is a temple of Ra in Princeton, perhaps one of the Sunfathers there can help him.”⁸¹

⁸⁰ See Session #5

⁸¹ Priests of Ra and sometimes referred to as *Sunfathers*.

Beorth pulled out the pendant. "We believe he used this to control and command the undead."

Kennoch took the pendant in one hand and waved the other hand over it calling to Ra to give him divine sight.

"Yes, it is very powerful. Necromancy and enchantment. This is a dangerous thing and should be destroyed or dispelled. Unfortunately, that too is beyond my power, and this cannot be sent to Princeton on a caravan like this man can be."

They all paused in thought, and the care-taker's heavy breathing began to slow and relax.

"Perhaps you can bring it to Princeton?" Kennoch asked. "It is about six days or seven days south by southeast of here."

"Aye, we cannot," Beorth replied. "We already are signed on to go to Gothanius to help them with their problem. We have made an oath. Do you know of any temples of Ra in Gothanius that we can go to where this thing can be done?"

"Well, I do not know much about the Little Kingdoms, but the people of Gothanius are descendants of Herman-Landers, good Ra-fearing folk. I am sure you will be able to find someone there who can help."

"Then we will take it as our charge," Beorth replied.

The three ate a small snack with the priest of Ra and returned to camp. They all slept like rocks, while the rest of the camp continued to celebrate the victory over the zombies.

Tholem, 25th of Ese – 564 H.E.

The next day those of the party who had not yet done so collected their stipend for winter gear from Deet of Ptah, and found a local furrier, who sold them coats, cloaks, and boots made of various animal skins. Jeremy was very happy about his silver fox fur cloak, until he got back to camp and saw that Devon had a very similar one. Kazrack was annoyed that the rabbit skin hat he bought still had the ears on it, making him look rather ridiculous.

The group returned to town and camp, Kazrack announced that he was going to try to find a buyer for some of the stuff the party had found. Ratchis pulled out the caretaker's ring and passed it to the dwarf.

"See how much we can get for that," Ratchis said.

"Do you think it is right for us to sell the man's ring? It was his only possession in the world." Chance asked, "do you" sounding like "duh-ya."

"As far as I'm concerned that ring will help pay for us to find a way to destroy that evil pendant," Ratchis replied. "These types of costs must be balanced by something."

"I agree," said Beorth.

"Oh, good!" said Chance happily. "Ah just wanted to make sure."

Unfortunately, Kazrack was not offered the prices he desired from the grizzled old man who had set up a table and scales in the center of the rustic town. He returned to camp and gave the ring back to Ratchis to hold.

Balem, 26th of Ese – 564 H.E.

Early the next morning the band of would-be dragon-hunters gathered their things. Kamir ran about like a chicken with his head cut off, helping everyone to take down and pack their tents. Kinney and Horung loaded up two mules Crumb had purchased. The wagons and the oxen were gone. From here on they traveled by foot.

They crossed the stone bridge the town got its name from and turned north to walk on the west side of the river, walking into the strong breeze that blew the smell of pine down on them. As they walked, they climbed ever so slowly in elevation, and the river fell further and further below their line of sight until it was just a distant murmur at the base of cliff to their right.

That night they slept in copse of trees away from the cliff, and Deet appointed watches to split the night in three.

Anulem, 28th of Ese – 564 H.E.

Two days later they were still traveling. The stony trail they followed meandered away from the river for most of the morning, but came back in the afternoon, winding its way through low shrubby pines. Crumb's boys entertained themselves by seeing how far they could kick pinecones.

As the afternoon waned, the path led the group near the very edge of the ravine as it skirted around a stone plateau which obscured the top of the path. As they came around there could be heard the sound of many deep voices of men going, "Ooh!" and then the sound of clanging metal and breaking rock, "ahh!" soon followed; over and over again.

"Duh ya know what that is?" Chance asked.

"I'm not sure," said Jana.

The sound continued and they came around the corner.

Ooh! Clang! Ahh! Pause.

Ooh! Clang! Ahh! Pause.

Chance began to sing to the rhythm of the sound in his pleasant tenor, "That's the sound of the men workin' on the chain ga-EEE-ang! That's the sound of the men workin' on the chain gang!" Of course, when Chance sang it, it sounded like "chen-gong."

On the road they saw a large group of men chained together at the ankles, using hammer and picks to clear and flatten the very road that Crumb and his boys were following. The nearly two score men on the chain gang were guarded by about a dozen heavily armed and armored dwarves, who watched Crumb's boys carefully as they passed. Other dwarves could be seen going over plans stretched out on a large stone. Tents and fires revealed the plateau above to be their camp, and Crumb decided this was a good place to stop.

"We could probably make another mile or two before it gets dark, but I think we might as well rest near the safety of these good dwarves than take more chances than we need to on the road," Crumb explained. The mules were unpacked.

Ratchis made his way towards the dwarves.

End of Session #9

Session #10

While everyone else set up their tents, Kamir running about to help as much as he could as usual, breaking a sweat despite the frigid breeze, Ratchis walked down towards the dwarven guards. He walked down the line of chained men in tattered furs and watched them pulverize stones. The clanking and rattling of their chains chafed against the priest of the freedom goddess' sensibilities, and he felt his mouth get dry as he stepped up to a heavily armed dwarf. The dwarf wore a suit of chain mail and a helm that covered most of his face, leaving only his mouth, beard, and cold blue eyes visible. He had a battle axe on his back and a heavy crossbow in his hands. He stood unmoving and followed the approaching half-orc with his eyes. Ratchis could feel the eyes of half the guards on him, the other half never stopped watching the prisoners.

"Well met," called Ratchis.

The dwarf merely grunted.

"Do you mind if I ask you what is going on here?" Ratchis asked.

"We are building a road from the *Mountain Door* to the Kingdom of Gothanius," the dwarf said shortly. "I take it that is where you and your group are traveling to?"⁸²

"How did you know?" asked Ratchis.

"You are not the first," the dwarf replied. "I am on duty and cannot stand idly by and converse with you even if I were inclined to speak to one such as you normally. The captain stands by the engineers. He will answer your questions if he sees fit to do so."

Ratchis grunted a thank you and walked over to a metal table by a large number of tents set up near the road.

Again, he introduced himself, and then asked where the men on the chain gang were from.

"They are criminals," the Captain explained. "Bandits and the toadies of slavers and the like. Actual slavers and pirates are put to death. But these men often came to be criminals by being manipulated by others, so we give them a chance to be productive."

"How long are they prisoners for?" Ratchis asked.

"Most of them for twenty years, or until they are too old to work effectively. Whichever comes first," the Captain said, with some disgust for whom he was speaking to. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have matters to attend to. The day's work is almost done, and the prisoners must be put to bed."

Ratchis thanked the dwarven captain with a grunt and returned to camp. The dinner fires were being lit by Kamir and Kazrack finished putting up his comparatively palatial tent. He then went down to meet his brethren.

Kazrack greeted one of the guards, who directed him to the Captain who was yelling orders to his men.

The captain raised his fist in greeting, and Kazrack mimicked him.

"I am Kazrack Delver," Kazrack said, introducing himself.

"I am Captain Bardolph Gritchkar," said the Captain, and they grasped wrists. "You are traveling with these humans to Gothanius?"

⁸² The *Mountain Door* is the road that leads from Cutter Jack's to the *One Road* (which connects a series of town in a mountain range that bisects Derome-Delem.

“Yes. I had little choice. I am from Verdun, and it was either agree to come with these men to Gothanius or fight in a war I felt had nothing to do with me.”

“I see,” said Bardolph. “This road is being built by the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium to connect the Mountain Door to Gothanius, by way of a trade agreement with its government.”

“Now it is my turn to be surprised,” said Kazrack. “Is that not stolen land? Why would dwarves trade with these humans?”

“Convenience,” sighed Bardolph. “As there is no unified dwarven kingdom, as you well know, there is no means or impetus to retake these lands from the humans. However, by helping the Gothanians to remain strong we keep the Menovians at bay.”

“Menovians?”

“The Kingdom of Menovia, a corrupt land of slavers who put our people into bondage and slay all halflings and gnomes. They are evil worshipers of the human serpent god. Between them and the broken lands that once belonged to those who now call themselves the Bzontra, there is much evil afoot in Derome-Delem.”

“Bzontra, but that. . .?”⁸³

“My work calls me,” interrupted Bardolph. “But return when you see the fire alight in our camp and here the chanting of our voices. You are welcome.”

Kazrack returned to his camp just as Horung and Kinney were serving dinner, and by the time he was done, he could see the fires of the dwarven camp and hear their voices chanting dwarven tales. He bid his exhausted friends goodnight and returned.

Kazrack heard the deep bass of a dwarf telling the tale of Natan-ahb creating the world. As has he stepped into the edge of the circle of dwarves about a fire the tale ended with the fracturing of the first island by Natan-ahb, who struck his hammer upon the world to punish the dwarves who had gone astray.⁸⁴ The dwarven voice died away. Kazrack stepped into the light and spoke:

“I dreamt that Natan-ahb, our First Father, and the other Lords and Lady, were watching over my shoulder as I looked upon the First Dwarven Kingdom. All Dwarves called each other brother then, and we were wisely ruled by our King. We built wonders to behold and mined the earth’s mysteries. And the wealth gathered in doing so was to make the strong better able to help the weak lift their hammers. We knew the truth of this but yet the strong made the weak mine for them and hoarded the Grey Giver’s gifts. The Liar had told each of these Dwarves that they should be King, and that wealth would put a Crown upon their heads. None knew that the liar spoke to many heads and promised many crowns and brother turned against brother. I saw this drama play out below me. The Grey Giver’s mystery was shaped like two poles of uneven length crossed perpendicular to each other; the shorter pole close to the end of the longer. I watched as all the dwarves of the First Kingdom clung to the Grey Giver’s Last Gift. Each clambering for position and clinging desperately on to another if it proved impossible to grasp the Last Gift directly. I saw our Last True King command, beg, and cajole the others to let the Last Gift be. To turn away from it as individuals and return as a community. But the dwarves of the First Kingdom each cursed the other too loudly to hear their King’s wisdom. I looked upon the Grey Giver’s last gift and saw that the mass of dwarven kind had turned it into a Great Hammer. Natan-ahb’s mighty arm reached over my shoulder for it and hefted it into the air. Our last True King grew desperate then, crying frantically to our kind, “Let go! Turn away!” But again, our curses were too loud to hear wisdom. The First Father judged us and found us wanting. He brought that living hammer down upon Aquerra and shattered it. The many pieces scattered and landed into a configuration I recognize from maps today.”

⁸³ “Bzontra” means “shamed” or “beardless” in dwarven.

⁸⁴ Every culture in Aquerra has a legend as to how the first huge island was smashed into the many smaller islands found in Aquerra today.

“Who is this dwarf who comes and speaks of dreams and portents?” said the deep voice who had been chanting earlier.

“I am not speaking a portent, but rather...” Kazrack was interrupted by someone pulling on his sleeve. He looked down and saw Bardolph sitting beside him.

“Announce your name,” he whispered, alerting Kazrack to the fact that he has made a dwarven faux pax.

“Uh, I am Kazrack Delver, most recently from Verdun, but my family is from Derome-Delem, *Llurgh-Splendar-Tar*,” Kazrack said.⁸⁵

“Welcome Kazrack Delver,” said the dwarf with the deep voice. He had a white beard with streak of blonde. It was obvious to Kazrack that he was a hill dwarf. “You speak as would a rune-thrower and come to us from a land of humans to a place beset by that race. Take up a flagon and join us.”

Kazrack spent the evening with his brethren, sharing tales and news. He learned of the land called Dralmohir, which had once belonged to the Elgaard Dwarves, who now called themselves the “Bzontra,” having all cut off their beards until they regain their ancestral lands after their mountain was destroyed by an unknown god. He learned of the recent war between Menovia and the Principality of Rhondria, and how Rhondria had come under the sway of the former.

The night had grown even darker by the time Kazrack crawled drunkenly into his tent, as clouds had rolled in beneath the stars.

Ralem, 1st of Syet – 564 H.E.

Crumb’s Boys were awakened by the sound of jangling chains and the sound of hammers on stones before Ra’s Glory had even risen. Mumbling and murmuring complaints, they ate a cold breakfast, packed their gear and hit the road again. Not that there was much of a road beyond this point. It was more like a vaguely visible track through a rocky area with crabgrass which followed the edge of the ravine.

Kazrack waved to the dwarves as he and the others marched away, but none returned his good-bye, keeping a tight eye on the chained and working men.

They marched onward and upward most of the day. Many times they could see the river, now not as far below them as before, but gurgling angrily over rocks, as the incline became steeper and steeper.

Crumb’s boys began to breathe heavily as the going became slower. The mules sure-footedly picked their way over the uneven ground, and some of the weaker folks began to lag behind at times. They took frequent breaks and by mid-day the group had made perhaps as few as three miles distance since they started in the morning.

Soon after crossing an old stone bridge, Kinney and Horung began to unpack one of the mules and re-distribute its gear among Crumb’s boys, allowing Boris E. Crumb the Third himself to climb up on the mule.

The group continued their arduous march, and by mid-afternoon, despite the fact that the climb had leveled off, they could barely make any more progress as fatigue had set in. They stopped and began to make camp in a clear stony area surrounded by sickly pines and firs. Once again, the river was way below them in a ravine, and to the east they faced the near barren peak of a craggy hill.

⁸⁵ *Llurgh-Splendar-Tar* is often translated as “Low-Star Hills,” but probably means something close to *Spread Wide Like Stars of Gold Above the Hills*.

As Kinney wearily prepared a meal, and Horung brushed the mules, and Kamir ran about doing odd chores, including helping to set up Crumb's pavilion tent, Ratchis worked a large rock out of the dirt. He lifted it above his head and pumped it up and down several times, and then tossed it a few feet and then repeated the process.

"What the hell are you doing now?" Devon's voice rang out. "Trying to build up your muscles? Well, ya better keep working if you hope to ever beat me."

Devon laughed long and loud. Ratchis ignored him and continued with his exercises.

Jana had wandered away from camp and towards an area where the trees were healthier and thicker, and crawled beneath them looking for herbs and mosses that would help in her healing craft. While standing scrapping moss off a tree, she felt someone tap her shoulder from behind. Jana swung around, stepping back, and brandishing her knife. She had not heard anyone approach.

"Whoa!" Markle said, a big smile on his face and his hands in the air. "It is only me."

"You should be more careful," Jana said in her quiet voice.

"My apologies, but it is good to see you are ready for eventualities. It is a good addition to your other talents that I hope you will put to use for us," Markle said.

Jana simply smiled.

"Though our progress is slow, we will be getting to Gothanius sooner than you think and the time is coming for a choice. You owe me a favor, and I mean to collect that, but it need not be *just* that. You know you can really profit from this whole venture," Markle said, whispering and standing close enough to Jana to steal a kiss.

Jana put a hand up, and nervously took half a step back. "Let's not go into specifics yet. I don't want to know too much too soon."

"Of course not," Markle replied, his smile widening. "We cannot afford that risk and it is in your interest to be able to plead ignorance. I understand."

They were silent for a moment, and Markle looked around and stepped close again.

He continued, "I will tell you this much, the least I will require from you is to keep your goody-goody friends from getting involved in what we plan to do. It is none of their business, but as we both know, that has not stopped them before."

Jana nodded, her smile vanishing.

"But, if you want to play a bigger role, there is money to be made and things to be gained. Do you really think that the Kingdom of Gothanius is going to uphold a contract signed by a woman? A backwater rinky-dink little monarchy in the middle of nowhere? Think again. After all this effort, you need to take what you can, and I can give you that opportunity," Markle stepped back again. "Think about it. You know where to find me."

He began to walk off but looked back with a wink and a smile. Jana stood there contemplating the offer for a second, and then returned to looking for herbs.

Back by the edge of the ravine, Beorth sat upon a huge rock and prayed to Anubis, while the sun set behind him. As he contemplated death and rebirth, he heard a repeated and echoing bang from across the ravine. Beorth opened his eyes to see a pair of large rams slamming each other repeatedly on the craggy hill across the way, while a handful of other mountain goats looked on. BAM! Their heads would strike each other, and they'd stumble backward, pause, look at each other and then slam again. Beorth watched these evenly matched rams do this for some time when they

suddenly stopped. At that moment, movement further up on the hill caught the paladin's eye and he looked up to see the hindquarters of what must have been an impossibly large ram turn the corner out of sight. All he really got a good look at was one rear hoof, which looked big even if it had been a horse. Beorth was amazed and turned to see if anyone else had seen it when he saw Kazrack and Ratchis approaching.

"Beorth!" Kazrack called. "I just came back from helping to gather firewood and Ratchis said he wanted to talk to us."

They came up to the rock Beorth sat on.

"I wanted to tell the two of you because honestly I am not sure how much we can trust the others to keep this quiet for now and not raise a panic," Ratchis said quietly.

"What is it?" Beorth asked.

"I have reason to believe we are actually being led to where we will be sold into slavery in Menovia," Ratchis said plainly.

"Well, that must be why Crumb seems to think of us more as chattel than as people," said Kazrack.

"Who are the Menovians?" Beorth asked.

"Set-worshippers and slavers. It is one of the Little Kingdoms that Gothanius is a part of," Ratchis explained. "The reason I joined you after helping to deal with the wolf problem was because Crumb's group was the one I was looking for. I had reason to believe groups were being led to be sold into slavery under the pretext of gaining land and becoming heroes."

"So, why not tell everyone?" Beorth asked.

"I think it would cause a panic, especially since we have no way to know if it's the truth yet," Ratchis said. "Better that we just remain alert and be ready for the eventuality. If more evidence presents itself, then we can consider telling the others."

"Shouldn't we at least tell Chance, Jana and Jeremy?" Beorth asked.

"I don't think so," said Ratchis. "I don't trust Jana, period. I have seen her talking with Markle, and I'm not convinced that he and Devon and the little one aren't in on it. They are definitely different than the rest of the boys here."

"Then again, so are we," said Beorth thoughtfully.

Ratchis nodded. "As for Jeremy and Chance don't seem like they can be trusted to keep their mouths shut. Even if they wanted to, I think they'd end up blabbing."

"Agreed," said Kazrack. "How do you think it will happen?"

"I'm not sure," said Ratchis. "Either there will be an ambush, perhaps at night or when we are passing through a canyon that is not easily escapable, or we will be led directly into some castle or town where we will be easily captured. Anyway, I am telling you because I need more than one pair of eyes, and it is my sworn duty as a Friar of Nephthys to oppose tyranny and slavery wherever it may rear its head."

It was agreed that they would keep it to themselves, and soon everyone went to bed. As had been the habit on this stretch of the journey, people were set on watch that night in pairs. Ratchis and Jeremy for the first watch, Kazrack and Beorth for the second, and Jana and Chance for the last.

Ralem, 1st of Syet – 564 H.E.

Crumb's Boys awoke to frost on the grass, and a biting cold. There was not much for breakfast, and Ratchis feeling pity after watching Kamir shiver and seeing his toes peeking through his worn shoes, called upon Nephthys to protect the boy from the elements.

Chance and Jeremy ate the little there was while they let Kamir pack up their tent for them.

"What are you doing?" Kazrack admonished.

"Whut does it look like?" Chance said groggily. "We're eating breakfast."

"I mean, Kamir. Why are you letting him do you work for you?" Kazrack asked.

"Why not? He wants ta do it, I say let `em," Chance said.

"It is not good to take advantage of people like him," Kazrack said.

"Why not?" Chance said.

Kazrack sighed and walked over to where Kamir was taking the tent down.

"Here, Kamir, let me help you," the dwarf offered.

"Oh, no, it's fine, Kazrack. I got it. It's not a problem. I like to help," Kamir said.

"Well, so do I," Kazrack said. "Listen, Kamir. You can't let people boss you around."

"Oh, they don't boss me around," Kamir replied. "I like to help. When you are helpful, people like you, my ma used to always say, especially if you stay out of their way and just do all the work. She used to say that, too."

"Sometimes you have to do what you want to do, not what other people want of you," Kazrack said. "Duty is one thing but letting yourself be walked all over is quite another."

"But I *do* want to do it," Kamir said. "I want people to like me."

"But if you do it too much people will not respect you," Kazrack tried to explain.

"Well, that doesn't make any sense," Kamir replied.

"I know it doesn't," Kazrack said with a sigh.

When they were done, Kazrack tossed the packed-up tent to Jeremy angrily.

"What?" Jeremy said, dumb founded. Kazrack merely walked over to join the line of Crumb's boys beginning to march.

Crumb rode one of the mules all this day as well, and in places the incline was such that the group had to switchback many times, slowing their progress to as little as ten miles that day. By dusk everyone was exhausted, and the meager dinner did not sit well in their stomachs. Kamir, Frank and Gwar were sent to retrieve firewood, and the individual fires were much larger this colder night.

Osilem, 3rd of Syet – 564 H.E.

The smell of snow was little comfort to the tired and hungry men and boys who continued their march the next day. The cold was such that few words were spoken, and people just pulled their furs tightly around them and looked up occasionally to see if the snow had arrived yet, but the gray sky only threatened.

Ratchis blessed Kamir with another spell to help him endure the elements, as he was not as well-prepared for the cold weather as others were.

After mid-morning, the march eased up as the land sloped downward and soon, they were walking alongside the river again. They followed deep wagon ruts in the riverbank, and by midday they came to a rocky place where another river met the one they were following. However, the new river's water was murkier and almost black in places. Where it met the Tall Twin River, it foamed up, and the black scum floating downward and slowly breaking up as it passed them.

The group crossed a wide wooden bridge that led to the land between the two rivers. They stopped for lunch not far from there, where the edge of a hilly forest curved away from their direction and to the northeast. The track they followed broke in two here. One followed the Black River; the other followed the large river they had been following all along, but now on the other side of it.

Deet gathered everyone together; the skin of his balding head wrinkled from the cold, and his lips a blue that matched his robes. Crumb wanted to address his men.

"This is South Fork, and so we have officially entered into the territory of the Little Kingdoms. We are in the Kingdom of Gothanius, but not far from the Kingdom of Menovia. In a few days, we will reach North Fork Wall, and there we will have a long-deserved rest. From there it is but a half a day's march to Twelve Trolls and our final destination."

There was a pause, and then Crumb's boys dispersed to get what rest they could before the marching continued. Crumb looked perplexed as if he expected cheers, but what he saw instead were weakened men throwing themselves on the ground to get what little sleep they could. Leaning against a tree to gather his strength, Ratchis noted that this spot had the remains of other small campfires scattered throughout the clearing.

They marched onward about an hour later, heading west by northwest along the eastern side of the river for a time. However, exhaustion got the better of all of them, and it was not two hours later, when the crew stopped again and made camp. Actually, most of Crumb's boys just threw themselves on the ground again, while a few others tried to make fires, but the tinder was low again. Jana set up her tent and went inside to nap, and Ratchis just lay on the ground. Kazrack and Beorth set up their tent, and Chance crawled in, being too tired to set up his own. Jeremy and Kamir were sent to get firewood.

The dinner bell awoke everyone from their sudden slumber and the sky looked darker than ever. Ratchis, Kazrack, Beorth, Jana and Chance got the bowl of scraps served for dinner and sat around a tiny fire to eat.

"Anyone seen Jeremy?" Ratchis asked.

"Ah thank he went ta get some wood wit' Kamir," said Chance.

"They've been gone for a while," said Kazrack.

Ratchis slurped down the last of his food and stood, walking over to where Horung and Kinney were cleaning up the cooking pots.

"Where the hell is that boy? Don't tell me I'll have to clean all this myself!" Kinney was saying. "I'll tan his hide!"

"Have you seen Kamir?" Ratchis asked.

“That lazy boy isn’t here to do his chores. I have no idea where he is. Probably off hiding and shirking his duty.”

Ratchis growled and walked towards Deet.

“Have you seen Jeremy and Kamir?” Ratchis asked.

“I sent Jeremy and Chance to go get wood. I don’t know where Kamir is,” said Deet.

Devon, who was walking by to look for non-existent seconds stopped.

“Lose one of your little puppies?” Devon asked Ratchis mockingly. “You better hope no one threw them in a sack and drowned them.”

He laughed loudly, but Ratchis ignored him and walked back to the others. Snow began to fall.

“We have to go find, Jeremy and Kamir,” Ratchis said.

“You are sure they are not around?” Jana asked.

“I asked around, and it is getting dark. They may be nearby, but it is better to be safe,” Ratchis replied. “Chance, weren’t you supposed to go with Jeremy to get firewood?”

“Aye, but Kamir insisted he go for me, so I didn’t want to break his lil heart,” Chance said with a wink.

The group strapped on their armor and grabbed their weapons, while Ratchis jogged in the direction that he thought they might have gone and searched for tracks.

The others caught up to the tall woodsman.

“There is no good wood around here, they probably made their way towards that tree-covered hill,” Ratchis pointed north by northeast. “There are signs that at least two people broke through the brush here.”

Ratchis took the lead, keeping a good forty feet ahead of Kazrack, Beorth, Chance and Jana. They made slow progress as the woodsman stopped and stooped often to check for signs of their missing companions.

They came to the woody hill and found the way up to be treacherous. The increasing snowfall did not help. Ratchis led them slowly up the hill, the trail he followed curved nearly to the other side, but then switched back and then came to a severe drop that the party had to clamber down.

“It looks like they stopped a lot,” noted Ratchis. “Here, one person climbed up and another continued along this path. Let’s take the straight way. I don’t think that higher way will lead to the top of the hill.”

The followed the lower path for a few dozen yards, when Ratchis stopped again.

“Someone came tumbling down the hill here at right about the time it started to snow. There is blood here, and then two sets of tracks continue,” said Ratchis.

“I bet it was Jeremy,” said Kazrack with a smirk.

“I’m sure they were trying to make their way to the top of the hill,” Ratchis said. “If they were lost, they probably thought that from up there they could gain a better view of the surrounding area and find their way back.”

“That sounds pretty smart,” said Beorth.

Jana, Beorth, Chance and Kazrack finally made their way up to the top of the hill, led by Ratchis. The snowfall was not heavy, but rather its lightness was such that the flakes hovered, obscuring vision. The top of the hill was flat and

surrounded by a ring of leafless deciduous trees. Just off center of the plateau was a small pond that was partially frozen.

“Stand here,” Ratchis commanded, and began to wander around the top of the hill, sometimes getting down on his hands and knees and crawling about, his face nearly pressed to the ground.

After some time, he came back to the others.

“It looks like two people wandered around here for a while, going in circles around the top. They also stopped by the water and rested there. It also looks like someone else camped here perhaps a day or two ago, there are the remains of two small fires over by those trees. However, it looks like in the end Jeremy and Kamir were confused and chose the wrong way. They went down the side of the hill opposite of our camp.”

As Ratchis led the group in that direction, they found that the northeastern side of the hill was thick with tall deciduous and coniferous trees. A few hundred yards down and to the left they could see light emerging from beneath the canopy. The party headed down to a level equal with the light, and then turned left.

“I will go ahead and see what I can see,” whispered Ratchis creeping into the darkness. The party extinguished their own light and waited.

Ratchis got closer and closer to the light, but the snow and the trees and underbrush obscured the area it emerged from. He moved slowly and carefully trying to remain quiet and could only vaguely hear what sounded like talking and perhaps grunting. It was then that the backlit and silhouetted form of an armored man appeared atop a large rock up ahead.

“Who goes there?” the man called. Ratchis could see that the man held a light crossbow, and wore studded leather armor, and had a long sword in its scabbard at his side, but darkvision did not allow him to make out the detail of the tabard the man wore.

“Put a light up here!” the guard said, calling over his shoulder into the clearing the light came from. He turned back to Ratchis, “Stop!”

Ratchis moved in a wide arc to the guard’s left, so the man lifted his crossbow and fired, but missed.

“Who goes attacking travelers?” Ratchis asked, summoning all the authority he could in his voice, but making his way for the cover of a large tree. However, by this time the soldier had reloaded his crossbow and fired again and Ratchis felt the bite of the bolt as he dived for the tree.

A second figure armored as the first and holding a lantern in one hand and a long sword in the other, approached Ratchis.

“Stop in the name of the Kingdom of Menovia!” the soldier on the rock said, reloading his crossbow, and now Ratchis could see that the man blindly approaching him with the lantern wore a gray tabard with a purple serpent twined about a black tower.

“He’s over there to the left,” the man on the rock said. “Kill whoever it is!”

Ratchis prayed, “Nephthys infuse my weapon with your divine might so that I may slay these evil slavers,” and cast *Magic Weapon* upon his quarterstaff. The words of prayer led the lantern bearing one right to the Friar of Nephthys, and he received a hard blow from a long sword. While his chain shirt absorbed most of the hit, its force knocked Ratchis down, making him momentarily visible from behind the tree, and the crossbow-wielding soldier took another shot, but it hit the trunk instead.

Ratchis quickly got to his feet. “Come taste death, Menovian scum!” he cried, and swung his quarterstaff connecting heavily with the man’s shoulder. The soldier dropped the lantern (which did not break) and swung his shield into position and struck Ratchis again, drawing blood. “Captain!” he cried.

By this time, the rest of the group had heard Ratchis cry out and the sound of other voices and they began to move up. Jana spoke a word and touched Beorth's staff and it began to shed light. Chance hid behind a tree, but as Jana moved to join him, the guard upon the rock noticed her and she felt a crossbow bolt painful rip through the flesh of her calf. Beorth stepped in front of Jana to shield her, and Kazrack moved in a wide arc to get to Ratchis.

Ratchis slammed one end of his staff into the gut of the soldier he fought, but when he brought the other end down, his opponent raised his shield and the staff struck awkwardly splintering into countless slivers.⁸⁶ Ratchis' eyes opened in amazement. The soldier tried to take advantage of the moment of surprise, but Ratchis parried with what was left of his staff, and then dropped it on the ground.

A second soldier with a crossbow appeared from the clearing beyond. Jana moved to get into position and speaking arcane words cast a spell upon the guard that just arrived, but he shook it off. He replied by firing his crossbow at the young girl, and more blood was drawn. Ratchis drew his short sword and dealt a heavy blood-splattering blow on his opponent who fell in a heap on the snowy ground. Beorth moved towards the guard by the rock but could not get close enough to strike a blow, while Chance stayed low and crawled through the brush behind another tree. Kazrack hurried towards the circle of light in the clearing and dodged the crossbow bolt of the soldier upon the rock.

Another soldier appeared, wielding a long sword and shield and ran towards Ratchis' position.

"Nephthys, hear me!" Ratchis cried, laying his hands upon himself. "Heal my wounds so I may defeat these agents of evil!"

Kazrack moved to cut off the soldier going towards Ratchis, but another soldier cut him off instead, even as he felt a crossbow bolt pierce his scale mail. Beorth struck the soldier upon the rock twice with his light-imbued staff, while Chance crept up hidden towards the clearing. Jana cast her spell again, but again the spell failed, and she barely dodged another crossbow bolt. Kazrack charged his new foe with his halberd and struck a hard blow, which drove both into the clearing, and the soldier collapsed. The dwarf raised his head and gasped when he saw what was there.

Several lanterns hung from the branches of trees, and a small fire burned near the center of the clearing. Three more soldiers were moving in their direction, one to aid his companion falling before Kazrack, and two others moving towards where Jana and Beorth were. One last tall figure, with a black cape and wearing a suit of chainmail, was tightening his armor, and held a long sword of obvious quality in his left hand. The man's tabard had a golden braided trim. He had black hair and the shadow of a beard on his angular face. Jeremy was bound to one tree, his arms curved back painfully about the trunk, his head drooping down onto his chest, and on the ground before him was Kamir. The poor boy was on his knees in the muddy snow, his trousers around his ankles; his normally bright and smiling face was a black and blue swollen mess pressed against the cold ground; his breathing evident, but shallow.

"They're over here!" Kazrack was able to yell, as the man in the golden-lined tabard stepped forward and swung his sword with until now unseen skill, cutting deep into Kazrack's armor and sending painful waves up and down the dwarf's body; blood pouring in a torrent out of the wound.

Chance popped out of the brush and tossed a dagger expertly at one of the soldiers, striking him in the torso. The man grimaced in pain even as Jana cast her spell again and he turned and fled out the other side of the clearing clutching his wound. Beorth continued fighting with the soldier upon the rock, and while Ratchis moved from his position to support Kazrack, the soldier he had downed hopped up and took a swing at him, missing. Ratchis broke into the clearing and one of the soldiers facing Kazrack cut him off striking him with a glancing blow.

Kazrack, in an attempt to deal with his predicament used his halberd as it was intended and tried to trip the captain, but the captain was too dexterous and easily leapt over the low blow. The captain struck once with his long sword as he regained his footing and swinging the blade backhand, cut the dwarf deeply beneath the right arm. Kazrack dropped to the ground with a cry.

⁸⁶ **DM's Note:** Ratchis suffered a critical fumble that broke his weapon.

Beorth continued his ineffective battle with the soldier who had leapt down from the rock by now, so Jana cast her spell to make him flee in fear. Chance pulled his short sword and stepped in to aid Beorth against his opponent, striking a glancing blow as he turned to run. Ratchis, who had drawn his dagger by now, attacked with both blades, easily dropping the soldier that had cut him off. The captain stepped up to the tall woodsman, swinging quickly and with impressive skill. Ratchis was able to parry the first blow, but the second found purchase, and Ratchis could feel his leg numbing, as his life's blood escaped him. He gritted his teeth and growled, giving no ground despite the fact that he knew he was outmatched.

Jana circumvented that melee and positioned herself for a spell. Speaking her arcane words, she pointed at the captain and a ray of sickly green light shot from her finger at the man, but went wide, as she tried to miss Beorth, who was now moving to aid Ratchis against the captain.

Ratchis struck two effective blows, one against the soldier that had played dead and one against the momentarily distracted Menovian captain. The former fell and this time did not get back up. The captain spoke, "I'll teach you to step into Menovian territory!"

Kazrack, barely clinging to consciousness, rolled away from the melee.

"This will take but a moment," said the Captain, and he twirled striking Beorth soundly and coming around with a high arc blow on Ratchis, that the half-orc barely blocked with his short sword.

Jana shot her ray again and struck the captain, and Ratchis moved to flank him striking twice, scoring a nasty wound to his weapon arm. The captain's sword drooped as he grimaced, blood pour down his arm.

"You are going to pay for that," the Menovian said to Ratchis.

Beorth tried to press the advantage of the critical wound, but even through the pain and in his spell-weakened state the captain's prowess was breath-taking. He flipped his long sword into his off-hand and cut deep into the half-orc's side. Chance, meanwhile, had made his way to Kazrack and yanking the dwarf's beard and slapping his face said, "By Bes, get up and do something!"

Kazrack felt a fresh rush of energy and adrenalin and stood. He was about to re-join the fight against the captain when a voice called out, "Everybody stop, or the fat kid gets it!"

One of the soldiers who had fled into the woods after having been affected by Jana's spell had found his way back. He had Kamir pulled up to his knees by the hair and held a dagger to his throat.

Ratchis stepped back from the captain, "Hurt the boy and you won't get out of here alive; I can promise you that."

Beorth moved towards the soldier holding Kamir, and Kazrack and the others waited. The captain stepped towards Kamir.

"We're leaving and we're taking the boy with us," he said.

"No, you are not," said Kazrack.

"Leave the boy and go," said Ratchis.

"Yeah, right," said the captain with a smirk, blood still flowed steadily from his arm and into the snow. ⁸⁷

"You can have a head start," Ratchis added.

"Yeah, right," the captain repeated. "Move him out."

⁸⁷ **DM's Note:** Ratchis' blow was a critical hit with a "bleeder" result, causing continued damage each round from blood loss until healed or tended.

The soldier began to hesitantly step back with Kamir.

“Wait,” Jana cried.

Ratchis pulled a javelin from his quiver at his belt, “Let the boy go or I will kill you,” he said to the guard holding Kamir.

“Put down your weapon or the boy dies,” said the captain to Ratchis. “And just so you know, there are other patrols around here. You best be leaving while you still can.”

Kamir had a look of numb indifference on his face. There was no emotion, as if his mind were vacant; his mouth open with a look that might have been humorous under different circumstances. The soldier was basically holding him up by the hair, his knees bent and his legs slack, still naked from the waist down. He was covered with mud, blood, and snow.

Beorth stopped where he was, but Kazrack stepped forward, “You, holding the boy, your captain is leading you to death. Let the boy go and you’ll live.”

“Captain Himmell, let’s get out of here,” the soldier holding Kamir said nervously.

“You are NOT getting out of here alive,” Kazrack insisted. Jana tried to slyly move closer. The other soldier that had fled came back into the clearing. He held up his sword and shield and moved to cover the captain from Kazrack. The dwarf leaned his halberd against his shoulder and raised his crossbow.

Ratchis took a deep breath and yelled, “Let go of the boy and run!” and with great speed and strength hefted his javelin and threw it at the captain, hoping to kill him with one blow.

The captain knocked aside the javelin with his long sword, as he twisted his body out of the way.

The guard who had just returned charged Ratchis, but the friar dodged the blow. Kazrack fired at the captain, but the bolt went wide, and Beorth ran behind the tree Jeremy was bound to in order to free him.

“Kill the boy,” Himmell commanded, and pulling a clay vial from his belt sucked down the entire contents. Kazrack and Ratchis saw the man’s wounds quickly close. Chance attacked the guard that attacked Ratchis and missed, and Jana spoke some more arcane words and another ray of green light struck the captain.

And during all of these events, the guard that held Kamir did not hesitate. He drew his dagger across the boy’s neck with sudden violence, making a thick red line of blood appear from ear to ear as the chubby boy’s body flopped to the ground.

Ratchis roared and tossed another javelin at Captain Himmell, which pierced the man’s shoulder clean through. More blood poured out of the man. The soldier fighting Ratchis and Chance, hit the woodsman hard with his sword, and the gravely wounded friar collapsed in an unconscious and bloody heap on the cold ground. Beorth cut Jeremy free and the Neergaardian slid down the trunk into a ball. Kazrack, dropping his crossbow, picked up his halberd and raced at the captain. The pole-axe head buried itself deep in the Menovian’s gut and the captain roared with futile anger as he collapsed to the ground.

The soldier who slit Kamir’s throat ran back into the woods and disappeared into the darkness. Beorth hurried to Kamir and turned him over. It was too late. The young helpful boy’s eyes stared blindly into still falling snow. He would never help anyone again.

Chance continued his fight against the remaining soldier, but his martial skills were not up to the task, even after Jana spoke an arcane word and the man seemed momentarily distracted. Kazrack yanked his halberd out of Himmell and moving over to the remaining soldier easily slapped his long sword out of his sweaty hand with the polearm.

Seeing that Kazrack had things in hand, Chance ran towards where Himmell was on the ground and hacked wildly at the dying man, "Take that ya bloody evil bastard!"

Jana attempted to *daze* the soldier again, but he only turned and ran into the darkness. Kazrack was close behind him, the soldier's fumbling among the trees in the night made up for the dwarf's shorter legs. He tackled the soldier, and they tumbled one over the other. The soldier extricated himself and tried to continue to flee. When he heard that Kazrack would not give up, he turned and swung his fist blindly at the dwarf. Kazrack grabbed him. "Give up!" The soldier's shoulders drooped, and he surrendered.

Jana tended to Ratchis' wounds, while Beorth examined Jeremy's. Chance lifted his short sword with both hands and sunk the blade into Captain Himmell's neck, making sure once and for all that the Menovian was dead.

"Ta Set with ya!"

"Where's Kamir? They were hurting Kamir. . ." Jeremy said with a croaking voice. He sat with his back to a tree where Beorth had propped him up.

"He is dead," Beorth said, dabbing at a cut above Jeremy's right eye. "He has started his journey to Anubis' Realm."

"Oh, Malcolm is gonna be pissed!" Jeremy said, with a sigh. "The first one of us to greet him in Anubis' Realm is gonna be Kamir! Oh no. . . Oh no..."

Beorth turned to the others, "He seems physically okay. A little beaten up, but he'll be okay." ⁸⁸

Kazrack quickly searched the corpse of the captain after tying up the captive. Chance and Jana gathered the packs of the soldiers along with several woolen blankets, water skins and trail rations. Kazrack found a leather map case and a clay vial on the captain.

Jana cast *detect poison* to determine if the vial's contents were poisonous, but there were not.

"We had better get out of here in case there are other patrols around," said Kazrack. "It is dark, and we won't get far, but at least we can put some distance between us and this place."

Jana cast her spell of light upon Beorth's staff again, and Kazrack quickly assembled a sledge of sorts to drag Ratchis' unconscious form with them. Chance and Beorth carried Kamir between them. Jeremy forced the Menovian solider along at sword point.

They made their way up to the top of the hill by the pond and decided that was as far as they could go. They were all wounded and exhausted, and Ratchis could not be moved very far because of his size and condition.

They cleared the snow from under a tree and laid out the blankets there.

"Who are you people? Who are you with?" the Menovian solider asked, bewildered.

Jana played with her dagger in his view and eyed him maliciously and he shut up. Kazrack opened the map case and found a map of the Little Kingdoms and a duty roster for Captain Lawrence Himmell and the six men in his company.

"Can you tell us what happened?" Beorth said to Jeremy who has been sitting silently wrapped in a blanket against the tree.

⁸⁸ **DM's Note:** Since Jeremy's player (Ken) missed this session his having to be rescued with Kamir took the place of the party rescuing Chance and Kamir as originally planned.

Jeremy opened his mouth, but no sound came out for a few minutes. He coughed and then spoke, "Kamir and I went out to get wood. I guess it was our turn to do the chores, but there was no wood near the campsite, so we wandered toward a hill we saw in the distance, but we got lost. There were several hills, and they all looked the same, and we walked in circles and came up here to see if we could get a better look around. Before that, we had seen the light of the soldiers' lanterns and heard their voices. Kamir wanted to go ask them for help, but I thought better of it, and suggested we keep looking for our way back."

"But then..." Jeremy paused when his voice cracked. "But then, it was getting dark and it started to snow and we just chose a direction and started marching, and Kamir kept saying we should go to the light for help, and I gave in, but they found us first."

He paused again and looked at the bound soldier. "They started bullying us and questioning us right away. Their captain knocked Kamir down and kicked him in the face and called him names. Kamir just kept apologizing. I rushed him, but two soldiers grabbed me and punched me in the stomach and head a bunch. And I must've blacked out, because when I came to, I was tied to that tree and they had Kamir on the ground with a sword to his neck. When I saw what they were going to do to him I cried out, but someone hit me again and I passed out again. The next thing I knew Beorth was there."

Tears were sliding down Jeremy's flushed cheeks, and Chance got up and walked towards the pond and stood looking at the freezing water for a while.

"None of that was my idea!" The soldier pleaded. "The captain gave orders!"

They gagged the soldier and set up watches for the night. Jana and Chance watched first.

It was silent for a long time, only the sound of wind swirling snow in wide circles across the top of the hill. About an hour into the watch Chance finally spoke.

"Jana?" he said, without looking towards her.

"Yes, Chance?" she replied.

"Ah. . . uh, Ah dun know what ta do," Chance's voice broke, tears welled up in his eyes. "This is all me fault."

"How so?"

"It was me turn ta go get wood. Jeremy'n Ah were supposed to go get it, but Ah let Kamir go for me. It should've been me that died, an' it should've been me that had ta deal wit' the Menovians."

Chance sniffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

"You had no way of knowing that this was going to happen," Jana said. "It is not your fault."

"Yes, it is," Chance insisted, he was openly crying now. "Me Da' always said that it's good ta get outta work, that that is whut it meant ta be lucky, but he also said, that real good look isn't gained at the cost of others."

Jana patted Chance's shoulder. "It will be okay," she said. "You had no way of knowing."

Chance stifled his tears and was silent for the rest of the watch.

Beorth and Kazrack watched for the next shift, and then Jeremy awoke and took over for the paladin of Anubis until morning came.

End of Session #10

Session #11

Tholem, 4th of Syet – 564 H.E.

Groggy and aching, Beorth awoke in a cold dark place that seemed to be the lower crypt with the sarcophagi where the party had fought the mummified creature. The tapestries seemed to be maps of places in Aquerra. Beorth recognized one as Herman Land and another as the Black Islands. The others were blurry and hard to read. The wall to Beorth's right was covered with tall shelves filled with books, somehow Beorth just knew that these were all books on herbal lore that Levekt would love to have.

Suddenly, Beorth realized that lying around him were the bodies of all his companions. Instinctively, he knew they were dead, but they sat up and began to crawl towards Beorth.

Jana, her face twisted into a permanent grimace of death, spoke, "You should not have let us die that way, Beorth."

"Better that you would have killed us yourself," said Kazrack.

"Than to let us be turned into these painful abominations," said Ratchis.

"The pain never ends," said Jeremy.

"And it is your fault," said Chance.

"You must join us," said Jana.

"You are coming with us," said Kazrack.

"You could have stopped this," said Ratchis.

"But you cared more about yourself," said Jeremy.

"Than for your duty," said Chance.

"It is all your fault," they all began to chant together, over, and over. Crawling towards Beorth, they began to rip the flesh from his body with their thickened and black fingernails. Beorth put his arms up and tried to bat them away, but it was a feeble and futile attempt. He could feel blood pour over his raw and revealed flesh, and the comfort of death was replaced by the cold bitterness of the undead.

Beorth awakened with a start.

"You okay?" Kazrack asked him.

"Uh, yes," Beorth stood, and wiped some sweat from his brow despite the cold. "Just a dream."

The snow had begun to fall again, just light flurries, but already their tracks began to disappear. The pond was almost invisible under the blanket of white.

Ratchis stirred, and Beorth knelt beside him, placing his hand on the half-orc's temple. "Anubis, please heal this brave warrior who fights for all to enter your realm as free men," Beorth intoned.

Ratchis gasped and sat up, his normally ruddy hide was a yellowish color, and he was breathing heavily. He groaned.

"It is okay," Beorth said. "Rest. It will be some time before you are up and completely well."

They built a small fire and ate some of the rations they found in the Menovian's gear to regain their strength. Beorth wrapped the body of Kamir more tightly in the blankets, while Ratchis exhausted from his travails stretched and eyed the prisoner, who shivered from the cold.

"What are we going to do with him?" Ratchis asked, gesturing to the Menovian.

"We can bring him to the authorities, I guess," said Kazrack.

"And how are we going to do that?" Ratchis said. "How do you think Crumb will feel about bringing along a Menovian prisoner?"

"Well, what do you want to do with him?" Kazrack asked.

"Either we kill him or we let him go," Ratchis replied. "But first let's ask him some questions."

Ratchis removed the gag from the man's mouth.

"Why were you in this area?" Ratchis asked him.

"What do you mean?" the soldier asked through chattering teeth, a mix of fear and cold. "We were patrolling our border. You came into our territory."

"We did?" asked Kazrack.

"Yes, you did, and our standing orders are to question and capture anyone found on our side of the border with Gothanius," the man said. "I was just doing my job."

"And your job includes assaulting and killing innocent travelers?" Ratchis roared, kicking the man with the little strength he had in his exhausted body.

"Ow!" the man cried, trying to put his bound hands up to shield himself. "I was just following orders. They were on our territory. They could have been spies or bandits!"

"But they weren't!" Ratchis said and kicked the man again and again. Beorth stepped forward to stop the woodsman, but Ratchis stopped on his own. The man coughed blood and was unconscious.

"We should just kill him," Ratchis insisted. "He is a slaver and a murderer."

"We can bring him to Gothanius and he will be imprisoned," Kazrack suggested again.

"He should get a trial," Beorth offered.

"What do you others say?" Ratchis asked.

"I don't see how bringing him along will help or even be possible," said Jeremy. "But I'm not sure I want to let him go."

"If we let him go, he will either starve out in the woods or bring more patrols down on us," Kazrack said.

"Crumb will not want to bring him along. He will just be dead weight, and a worry if he escapes," Jana said.

"Kill tha bastard," Chance said.

Ratchis pulled his long hunting knife.

“Any objections?” he asked.

“I object,” Beorth said quietly.

“Well, then I will bear your animosity for this act. You can blame me for it,” and with that Ratchis jerked his knife across the man’s throat, killing him.

Beorth sighed.

They collected stones and built a cairn over the soldier.

Beorth spoke briefly,

“Anubis, here comes one bound for Set’s Realm once his stay with you is done. Please watch over him as you watch over all others until Osiris has duly judged him.”

And then they headed back to the camp, Ratchis silently leading the way.

“Ya know they probably left without us,” Chance said.

“We’ll catch up with them,” Kazrack said.

They marched down the hill, their boots crunching in the snow, moving through the scattered barren trees towards where the camp had been. Kazrack carried Kamir’s body tightly over his shoulder, huffing loudly with the weight.

Ratchis led the way, and soon spotted a lone figure moving from tree to tree. The woodsman called for everyone to stop.

“Did you see that?” Ratchis asked quietly.

“It looked like someone up ahead behind the trees,” Jana whispered.

The figure dashed to the group’s right, behind a larger fir, and Ratchis dashed in that direction, slowing down just before the tree, and starting to slowly creep around it.

At that moment they all heard voices calling, “Ratchis! Kazrack! Jeremy! Jana!”

Carlos, Finn, Frank and Gwar were making their way towards them calling their names.

“*Aqui estan!*” cried Carlos.

“There they are!” echoed Gwar. The four young men jogged forward waving. While Ratchis came around the tree, sword drawn to find the tall older man that traveled with Crumb’s group, spear in hand. He wore his studded leather armor and a fur cloak. The man grunted, and Ratchis could see how the spear was held lightly and comfortably in the man’s hand. He grimaced and backed away moving back to where camp had been.

“Where did you guys go?” Frank asked. “We have groups divided up looking for you.”

“Yeah, Deet ordered everyone to pack up and move on without you guys, but we refused and organized people to look for you,” said Finn. “It would not have been right to just leave without you guys.”

“Yeah, Finn stood up to Crumb,” said Gwar. “He got him to give us `til noon to find you guys. We were worried when you did not come back by morning. What happened?”

“Kamir has been killed,” said Beorth.

“What? No!” said Frank and Gwar in a moment of confusion.

Finn’s shoulders sagged.

They headed back to the camp together, running into the other searching groups as they got closer. They were happy to see them, but then immediately saddened by the news about Kamir.

As camp came into view, they heard a loud voice proclaim, “Ah ho! I knew my fine searching plan would be successful!”

Garcon stood there. He took off his hat and bowed as the party passed him.

“Oh, but I see a sadness has come into our merry group! But I am much relieved that it was not the fairest of our number,” he blew a kiss at the passing Jana, who sneered.

Deet and Crumb emerged from the latter’s tent (the only tent left up).

“What were you wandering off for?” Crumb asked as he approached. “What happened?”

Ratchis, Jana, Chance and Jeremy just walked past the two men, but Kazrack stopped.

“Jeremy and Kamir became lost and we went out to find them. Unfortunately, Menovians found them first,” the dwarf said with anger smoldering under his sadness.

“Kamir is dead?” Deet asked.

“I am carrying him now,” said Kazrack gesturing to the wrapped body on his shoulder and then walked over to a spot where he lay the body down. He and Beorth cleaned the body, as Crumb addressed the collection of men and boys.

“We will stay here to eat lunch and bury the dead, and then we will put as much distance between us and this place as possible,” the stout man said. “We should be in Twelve Trolls in four or five days. In that time, you do not have my leave to wander from camp, or to go look for anyone if they do. We will keep a low profile and march long hours until we are safely and more deeply within Gothanian territory.”

Jana began to gather stones for a cairn for Kamir, and Frank, Gwar, Carlos and Anthony (a short dark-haired lad who was traveling with the group) helped her. Chance merely sat to one side, resting his elbows on his knees, head hung low.

Eventually, they took turns placing stones over Kamir’s body, building a cairn, some saying a quiet word or prayer for his soul as they passed by. Chance played a mournful tune on his harmonica.

Finally, Beorth spoke, “Anubis, please watch over the spirit of this lad who never wanted anything more than to work hard and be helpful and to aid his fellow travelers to make their journey that much more comfortable and easy, who wanted nothing more than to do good and emulate the heroes of tales we have all heard all our lives. May Fallon take his kind spirit to her breast and bring him to a place where he need never work or suffer again.”

Everyone gathered their stuff, and as Kazrack walked to place Kamir’s flint and steel that he had used to light so many fires for others atop the cairn he passed Devon, who was adjusting the straps of his pack on his broad muscled shoulders.

“It was only a matter of time someone killed that kid,” Devon said, with his usual smirk.

“What do you mean?” asked Kazrack.

“Come on, someone like that? Someone that ‘helpful’ is either up to something or just damn annoying, either way people like that always get killed. Ya can’t do anything for anyone else without being punished for it,” his smile broadened. “Then again, it is gonna be rough having to shine my own shoes. Stupid kid got himself kilt too soon.”

The march began again, though Jana looked back and saw that Chance sat beside the cairn for a long time until the line of men was nearly out of sight, and then he stood and sluggishly followed.

As Crumb’s boys marched, they began to stretch out in a long line, walking in groups of two or three and mostly being silent, exhaustion having worked its way deep down into their bones and unshakeable. In time, the distance between the head of the line (Crumb upon one of the mules) and Chance, by himself at the rear was a few hundred yards.

Kazrack walked beside Beorth.

“Oh, I found this among Kamir’s things,” Kazrack pulled out a small wooden flat stick stained with some red sticky stuff on one end. “Do you know what it is?”

Beorth’s normally emotionless face was filled with visible pity as he took the stick from Kazrack.

“It was the stick of the candied apple I gave him when we were in Bountiful,” Beorth said quietly.

“Then I think you should keep it,” said the dwarf.

“I cannot believe that such a small gift meant so much to him,” Beorth said, looking down at the stick, and then fell silent.

They continued through the afternoon over barren hills that while they went up and down, were definitely ascending to a higher elevation.

As Ratchis moved up to speak quietly with Kazrack and Beorth, he noted that Markle slowed his pace to walk beside Jana who walked near the back.

“How are you holding up?” Markle asked with a smile.

“Tired, but okay,” Jana said simply.

“You have chosen good friends from among this group,” Markle said. “They seem pretty capable.”

“Yes, they are,” Jana replied.

“Well, the danger in such friends is that eventually they will take on something they can’t handle, or something that is just none of their business.”

Jana nodded.

“So, like I mentioned before, the favor we want of you is simple: Keep them out of it. Keep them from getting involved in whatever goes down when we arrive at Gothanius. However, we can offer you more if you are willing to do more. This can be *very* profitable for you if you should choose to do so.” Markle’s handsome brown eyes sparkled in the dying light of Ra’s Glory.

“I will keep that in mind, but you can assuredly rely on my returning your favor. I owe you,” said Jana.

“Of course,” Markle said, and increased his pace to move further up the line to where Devon and The Square walked. As he passed Ratchis he smiled and nodded. The large man grimaced and moved back towards Jeremy.

While Ratchis was with Beorth and Kazrack he told them to be on alert, he feared that they might be attacked by Menovians at any time. His two companions convinced him that he should at least warn their other companions. So, he moved back and told Jeremy.

“Good,” Jeremy replied. “I want a chance to kill some of those bastards. I’ll want to kill as many as I can and make them suffer for what they did.”

Ratchis just nodded and slowed his pace even more to let Jana catch up to him.

“We may be attacked, I fear,” Ratchis said to her.

“I figured it might be a possibility,” Jana replied.

“How is Chance doing?” Ratchis looked back at the sullen gambler falling farther and farther behind.

“Not too well, I am going to go talk to him and get him to walk faster before he slips too far behind,” Jana said with a note of sadness in her usual cold voice.

Jana slowed down to speak with Chance, while Ratchis moved up, but was interrupted by Finn Fisher. Finn had a look of worry on his travel weary face, and his growing black beard stuck out from beneath the hood of a black fur coat he wore.

“Um, Ratchis,” he said through his Herman-Lander fisherman drawl. “What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?” Ratchis asked.

“Come on, Ratchis,” Finn’s face became serious as his brow furrowed. “I saw you go and talk to Beorth and Kazrack, and then to Jeremy and then to Jana and now Jana went back to Chance. Something is happening.”

Ratchis sighed, “We have reason to believe we might be ambushed by Menovians. I just wanted people to stay alert, without causing panic.”

“Oh,” Finn’s face turned back to one of fear. “Well, I’m gonna tell Carlos and Frank and Gwar at least. The more capable people that are watchful the better.”

“Ok, but be discrete,” Ratchis replied.

“Thanks,” and with that Finn walked briskly to alert his new friends. Soon, Ratchis could see them all looking around with paranoia and shook his head.

Jana got Chance to quicken his step a bit, but he still lagged behind and was for the most part, silent.

The march continued into the cold night, including a very steep climb up a hill to a plateau where camp was finally made. Jana spent some time before going to sleep looking over the weary travelers for ills or frostbite, when Anthony led her to his younger brother, Stefan.

Stefan had one boot off, and Jana found a burst and badly infected blister that now made the entire front part of his right foot a yellow and scarlet mess. She did what she could to comfort him and tend to the wound, but she knew that more marching would only make the situation worse. She wrapped the pus-oozing wound and retired for the night.

Balem, 5th of Syet – 564 H.E.

In the morning, Jana pleaded with Deet and Crumb to allow Stefan to ride the other mule. They grudgingly acquiesced, as the supplies were running so low there was not so much extra to be spread among the walkers. Kazrack and Ratchis offered to carry an extra share.

Of course, Devon had to comment when he saw Stefan get hoisted upon the mule.

“Aw, look the baby!” the tall man said. “Does your footsie hurt? Markle, maybe we should rub his foot.” Devon erupted into loud laughter. Anthony sneered at Devon, who growled in return. Ratchis cracked his knuckles, but no conflict ensued.

They marched the whole morning through, with just a gradual incline. The river moved far away to their left, while to the right was a steep drop off to another narrow stream and a thick coniferous forest. They walked among increasingly thick pines and firs themselves.

At their stop for lunch, Ratchis scouted out the area around, checking for the possibility of attack. Looking to the east, he noted a line of figures dressed in black walking parallel to their own route, but southward along the stream a mile or so away. He summoned the others to take a look, while they all stayed low and out of sight.

“Menovians?” asked Kazrack.

“Could be,” replied Ratchis. “Looks like there are over a hundred of whoever they are.”

They relayed this information to Crumb, and the break was cut short. Ratchis and Kazrack took up the rear guard for the rest of the day’s march.

It began to snow again, and it was after dark when they camped. Ratchis and Jeremy took first watch.

Teflem, 6th of Syet – 564 H.E.

In the morning, Ratchis woke up earliest and went to check on Stefan’s foot, as the young lad had been moaning in pain through the night. The early odor of putrescence wafted up from the foot.

“We may have to amputate,” Ratchis said to Jana when she came over.

“I fear it might be so, but I think we still have some time to make the choice,” she replied. She bathed the foot in water in which different herbs had been steeped and put on a fresh bandaged.

Flurries began again as the group began their northward march once more. They set a faster pace than the few days before, and all were silent in their single-minded exhaustion and desire to arrive.

At lunch, all there was to eat were the cold scraps of meat left from the last dinner. Stefan did not have much of an appetite, but Ratchis fed him some dry rations regardless.

As Ra’s Glory set, Crumb’s Boys found themselves marching along a narrow ravine, the walls of which flanked them high on either side, plunging them into shadow when the sun should have still been visible. They marched quickly, but nervously, all inherently knowing that such an area was very dangerous, but when the last light was long gone, they saw before them a beacon light burning brightly. It was up upon an earthen wall, which as they approached, they could see reached from one cliff to another blocking the way. They could see the silhouetted forms of soldiers atop the walls, and the hulking shapes of war engines.

“Who approaches the North Fork Wall at this hour of darkness?” a voice called down.

“It is I, Boris E. Crumb the Third,” Crumb declared. “I bring you those who would be great heroes and save your realm in this time of great need! They are here to answer the king’s call and slay the dragon of Greenreed Valley or die trying!”

The great doors of North Fork Wall opened, and Crumb led the way through the dark passage that led to another set of great doors. Ratchis and the others eyed the murder holes on either side of them anxiously, and Jeremy looked up to note a grate above their heads where any sort of boiling something could easily have been poured atop them as they passed through. Once the whole group was crammed into that small space the outer doors were closed and they all stood there for what felt like too long a moment before the inner doors were opened, revealing a small village beyond them.

Crumb’s boys stopped just beyond the doors, to see that the village was abuzz with activity. To their left was a guardhouse and both bright lights and the sounds of music and festivities emanated from within.

A man with curly brown hair and a bushy mustache dressed in party attire, but with a long sword at his belt approached from the direction of the guardhouse, followed by six guards in ringmail, armed with spears.

The man spoke quietly with Crumb for a few moments and then addressed the group.

“I am Captain Hoss Izold,” he said. “Welcome to Northfork Wall. You are the last group to come through, so I am certain they are eagerly expecting you at Gothanius Castle. You are our guests here, but please remember that infractions of the law will not be tolerated. My men will show you to your campsite, but if you will excuse me, I want to rejoin my men in celebrating the High Holiday of Bast.⁸⁹ I know most of you must be exhausted, but there is celebrating also going on at *The Golden Lantern*, so feel free to join in.”

Two guards led Crumb’s Boys further into the village, which was set between two tall cliffs. As they walked, Kazrack noticed what looked like a construction site covered in a huge tarp. Three heavily armed and armored dwarves seemed to be guarding it.

Camp was set up just beneath one of the cliffs on the east side of the village, but the place was so small the very center of it could be seen from there. And just off the village square was *The Golden Lantern*, which was painted a bright yellow and was hung with ribbons and paper-lanterns. Music and merry-making could be heard from inside.

Ratchis and Jana examined Stefan’s foot again, and both concluded that he was going to have some toes amputated to save the rest of the foot. They agreed to wait until morning.

Chance and Jeremy headed out for *The Golden Lantern* and walked into the festive little building to find it full of off-duty guards drinking and singing in merriment. A young pretty girl was serving drinks to the happy men. She had long straw-like red hair, and dash of freckles across her nose.

“Ah new-comers!” greeted the barkeep, “My name’s Balfus, but people round here call me ‘Sarge’ or ‘Old-Timer’. Feel free to do the same. Get yourself some food and have a seat and my lil’ Sally will be over to serve you in a minute.”

The bar was covered with a spread of breads, meats, cheeses, and gravies. A large urn was set out and was partially filled with coins. Chance and Jeremy threw in some coins and grabbed some food.

They drank for a bit, Chance having ale after ale and not saying a word despite the festive atmosphere. He took unenthusiastic bites at his meat and cheese.

⁸⁹ Bast is the Cat Goddess, revered as a goddess of revelry, comfort, leisure and wealth, she is most popular among the rich and noble, but her holiday is celebrated by everyone as an excuse to be festive. On this day, cats (which are her holy animal) are fed and cared-for. Harming cats is considered a treacherous act in many Aquerran cultures, as those blessed by Bast are said to return in the form of these animals pampered by the rich.

Kazrack came in and the place fell silent. The two-dozen faces of the off-duty and drunken guards in mid-revelry turned to the dwarf and fell upon him like a weight. There was a pregnant pause, and then the barkeep spoke up.

“My, my, not often we get one of stone folk in here,” he said, waving Kazrack in. “In fact, I don’t think any ever have. But, welcome, welcome, I’ll have Sally send you over an ale.”

The guards went back to their revelries, and Kazrack grabbed some food and joined his companions.

Sally came over with a tray full of ales and placed one down in front of each of them.

“Bast bless you on this fine evening,” she said, batting her eyes at Jeremy. “What brings you into town? Are you here with one of those groups of dragon-hunters? I thought they had all already passed through.”

“We just arrived tonight,” Jeremy replied, slipping two copper coins in her apron pocket with a wink. “We are part of a group going up to answer the call for dragon-hunters.”

“Wow, really?” Sally replied, with a smile. “When I have a free moment, I’ll have to come by and you have to tell me all about it.”

She moved among the tables to collect empty plates and mugs, and they could tell that all the guards treated her with sisterly affection.

The three companions drank and ate quietly, just taking in the joy of the guards around them, when suddenly the door opened again and there was an even heavier silence.

Ratchis stood there in the doorway, Jana’s tiny form just barely visible peering from behind the hulking and ugly man. A few grumblings of displeasure could be heard from among the guards, especially some of the drunken ones.

Variations of “What the hell is a razza-frazzin’ pig-fragger doin’ in here?” in slurred voices could be heard.

“We don’t want any trouble,” Ratchis said, taking a step back out through the door.

“No, no, come on in,” the barkeep said in an obviously forced tone. “All the dragon-hunters are welcome here. Pay up a donation and have something to eat.”

The murmurings died down as Ratchis and Jana walked in. The companions ate and drank their fill and all left large donations in the urn. The guards began to make their way out about an hour later, some hefted out of their seats and out the door hanging on the shoulders of friends, mumbling drunkenly.

Ratchis left the inn, as the last of the food was being put away and Jana left with him. Chance got up and stumbled to the back door to use the outhouse. When it had been a while and he did not return Kazrack bid Jeremy goodnight and went out to see if the Wallbrookian gambler was okay and if he needed help getting back to camp.

Kazrack approached the door to the outhouse and knocked, “Chance? You in there?”

There was no reply, but the dwarf got the sense that someone was in there. He listened. A very soft and distinct sound of sobbing could be heard from within. Kazrack listened more closely and could hear Chance murmuring, “Argh, it’s all me fault! It’s all me fault Kamir is dead. Ahm sorry! It shoulda bin meh. It was me turn ta go.”

Kazrack knocked again, “Chance?”

“Gah away!” Chance managed to choke out through his tears. “Gah tha bluddy `ell away!”

The sobbing continued, louder now.

“Chance? What’s the matter, Chance?” Kazrack asked.

He sobbed some more, followed by the retching sound of his vomiting.

Kazrack took a deep breath, and then spoke in measured and comforting tones, “You know Chance, it’s a good thing I found you alone, because there has been something I have been hoping to talk to you about.”

“Whu-wh-whut are ya talkin’ `bout?” Chance said, through snorts of his runny nose.

“Well, I have been feeling bad for a long time about Malcolm,” said Kazrack.

“Malcolm?” Chance sniffled. “Why?”

“You see, I feel guilty about his death,” Kazrack explained patiently. “I sent him after Jeremy by himself and he died.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Chance asked through the door, through lessening sobs.

“I just needed someone to tell that I feel guilty,” said Kazrack.

“But ya had nothin’ ta do with his dyin’” Chance said. “He was crazy. He woulda run into some fight `ventually and died anyways.”

“So you are saying that I couldn’t have known what was going to happen to him?” Kazrack asked.

“Of carse not! It’s not like me case!” Chance cried. “It’s all me fault. Can’t ya see? It’s me fault Kamir is dead. Ah as good as kilt him.”

“But it just like me and Malcolm, Chance,” Kazrack said soothingly, and slowly opening the door to see Chance sprawled on the floor, his head on the vomit covered seat over the waste hole.

“Everyone has done things they would have done differently, or that that are not proud of,” Kazrack continued. “You are only responsible for being irresponsible, and now you know better, right?”

Chance snorted a bunch of snot back up his nose.

“I mean, if you had to do it again, you would do it differently, right?” the dwarf asked.

“Oh yes, oh bluddy yes,” Chance cried. “Ahm sorry, Kamir! Ahm sorry! Ahd change places with ya, I would, ahm sorry!” And with that he leaned forward and puked a steady stream of ale and bile.

Kazrack hefted the lanky lad on to his shoulders and carried him back to camp.

Meanwhile, all the soldiers had left, and Sally sat down with a very tipsy Jeremy while she was supposed to be cleaning up. Her father was in the kitchen, cleaning in there.

“So, you are one of the dragon-hunters?” she asked, all moon-eyed.

“Well, I don’t like to brag, but most of the others are just kids really, don’t really know what they are getting into. I, on the other hand, know a thing or two,” Jeremy said, with nary a slur, but with all his concentration. “Uh, and my immediate companions as well, they are a stalwart lot, under my leadership, of course.”

“Have you faced many dragons before?” she asked, leaning in.

“Well, to tell you the truth most tales of dragons are exaggerated. There aren’t nearly that many in the world, if any left. Experienced adventurers like me know this kind of stuff,” Jeremy explained, thinking this sounded reasonable.

“Wow, you sure do seem to know a lot. I’d like to learn more, but I have to finish cleaning up now, or father will chastise me,” Sally said, getting up. “I have to get to work now, but if you want, I’ll probably have an hour or two free tomorrow afternoon if you want to come see me.”

“That’d be nice,” Jeremy said, with a sleepy smile. He motioned to get up, and Sally left the common room, but he settled back into his seat and laying his head on the table fell right back to sleep.

Jeremy was not sure how long had passed when he heard the barkeep’s voice yell, “Hey! We’re closed! Wake up!”

Jeremy stumbled back to camp and slept.

Anulem, 7th of Syet – 564 H.E.

Early the next morning, the camp began to stir, but then many went back to sleep when they realized they were in a safe place and that today would be a day of rest and not travel. While Chance and Jeremy remained asleep in the tent they once shared with Malcolm and Kamir, Jana and Ratchis went to find Stefan who had not slept much due to his pain.

Kazrack went over to the closed down construction area to visit the dwarves he had seen the night before. He spoke with the guards, who were representatives of the Nauglimir Dwarven Merchant Consortium, set to guard the site of the future safehouse until construction could continue in the spring. He asked if they had heard of a rune-thrower called Beléar Gritchkar,⁹⁰ but they said they knew of no other dwarves in Gothanius aside from the six stationed here and the Royal Architect who was part of the Gothanian Court. Kazrack also asked about help repairing his armor, and they pointed him towards the Northfork Wall guardhouse, where they said the town guard has a reasonably sized smithy to deal with the large number of soldiers here.

Kazrack was able to arrange for several hours of time to work in the smithy and returned to camp to tell the others and see if anyone else’s armor needed mending.

Ratchis heated his knife, and Jana readied to cauterize the wound right way when the toes were removed. Stefan’s brother, Anthony, held his hand, while the young man bit down on a piece of wood.

A mid-morning meal of porridge, apples and bread was being distributed, and the companions took some and sat among the fires, when Crumb gathered everyone together.

“There is someone important that wants to address you all,” Crumb told the group.

A middle-aged man, with curly dark brown hair, a well-trimmed beard and a medium build stepped before Crumb’s Boys. He wore what were obviously finely cut clothing and a cape of pristine white fur.

“Greetings!” the man said. “I am Leonor Bozell, alderman of this fine village of Northfork Wall.” The man began to pace back and forth before the group, occasionally making eye contact with one of Crumb’s boys or another. “I want to welcome you all and thank you all for answering the call of the king in this, our time of great need. As you all know, we are not just in need of heroes who slay dragons, but great men can also be measured by their peaceful endeavors. Yes, you all will go off to a very dangerous undertaking, but when you return you will all be offered land and resources to use for the benefit of both yourselves and the kingdom, and I just want to be the first to offer you such a place. While Northfork Wall may not seem like much now, with the coming road and the trade agreement with the stonefolk, Northfork Wall will be the gateway to wealth for the kingdom. We have lands available for shepherds, and even some for farmers, and a need for craftsmen of all kinds, and officers in the standing army that guards our borders and has their headquarters here in Northfork Wall. So, basically what I wanted to tell you all is to keep us in mind. With your help and the help of strong young backs and minds like yours, our fine village can grow

⁹⁰ Kazrack was told to seek out this dwarf by his brother, Bardolph Gritchkar, when the former met the dwarves supervising the building of the road back in Session #10 saying that he heard his kin was in the area of Gothanius.

into something all of Gothanius can wonder at and be proud of. I hope to see at least some of you here again when this whole situation has been taken care of.”

Bozell stopped pacing, “Thank you for your time.”

Crumb’s Boys just sat not knowing how to react, “What was that about?” Guisel asked Finn.

“Politicians, all the same,” was all Finn said.

Kazrack collected armor from Ratchis and Beorth and headed back to the guardhouse, accompanied by Beorth, who came along to help him.

The rest of the day passed without noteworthy event. Kazrack worked diligently all day and showed something of what he was doing to Beorth. Ratchis stopped by, but the master-smith insisted that Kazrack could have no more than one person in there with him at a time and made it clear that he did not want that person to be a half-orc.

Jeremy did not go and see Sally.

Late that evening, when others were getting ready to bed down and conserve their energy for the last leg of their journey the next day, Jana went out to a secluded spot far from camp and prying eyes. There she placed the small wolf’s skull she had snatched from the goblin shaman what seemed like so long ago on the ground and cut her hand. She squeezed blood onto a chicken bone and drew a circle in the ground (which she had cleared of snow) and began her chanting that slowly drew her into a trance, reaching out for the being the token summoned. However, in the end her attempt failed, and picking up the skull, she covered the spot back over with snow, and bandaged her bloody hand.

Ralem, 8th of Syet – 564 H.E.

The next morning Crumb’s Boys packed up what was left of their gear and began a more leisurely march towards Twelve Trolls, the capitol of the Kingdom of Gothanius.⁹¹ Stefan was left behind under the care of a local healer, as he was in no shape to travel, and Anthony was sad to leave his brother behind.

The road to Twelve Trolls was smoothed mountain stone in many places, probably carved into the rocky outcroppings here by years of running water. But unlike most of this group’s journey to Gothanius, they could now see houses intermittently dotting the snow-covered hills—showing some patches of green due to the warming day—to the left and right.

After three hours of marching, there was a brief stop for a snack, but then they continued, new energy filling all of them.

They came over an embankment after another couple of hours of marching and before them stood a small town of earthen buildings tucked into plateau on the edge of the mountain. Across from it, on the other side of a broad natural stone bridge that crossed a deep chasm, another peak held an old stone fort—the tightly packed peaks of the area creating its moat. A bitter wind whipped up out of the chasm, howling.

There was a murmuring among Crumb’s Boys, when he looked back from atop his mule and said, “Welcome to Twelve Trolls, capitol of Gothanius.”

“We’ve come all this way to come *here*?” Jeremy protested.

Resigning themselves to their fate, they passed right through the center of town. The people of Twelve Trolls stopped in the streets, and some waved to them and other called a greeting, but most were silent and looked haggard

⁹¹ *Twelve Trolls* is named for the famous Battle of the Twelve Trolls during the Mountain Wars when the Kingdom of Herman Land tried to conquer Derome-Delem.

and tired themselves. The place was hardly bigger than Stonebridge had been, and definitely much smaller than Cutter Jack's.⁹²

They marched out the other side of town and began to cross the open stone bridge towards the fort. Narrower stone paths could be seen to go down into the chasm at right angles to the bridge where it branched from the plateau. They came to the great gate, and Kazrack took the place in.

The fort looked as if the few years (in his people's view) that it existed had been rough on it. The stones were worn, and ill-fitting in places. One whole section of wall looked as if it had been rebuilt with a different kind of stone. The rebuilt section looked like it might even be of better construction, however he was certain that one of the towers was askew.

Kazrack was pulled from his reflection and examination by the sound of the great gate opening. Crumb had called up to the soldiers lining the walls and they had replied.

They marched into the courtyard and beyond a bunch of smaller buildings that marked the border of what looked like a pretty large garden crisscrossed with paths was a palace in poor repair.

Over a score of soldiers stood on either side of Crumb's Boys as they marched in.

"Line up in rows of five for inspection!" a gruff voice called out.

"Women and Dwarves, Crumb?" the dark-haired man with the shadow of a beard said. He wore a suit of chainmail, unlike the other soldiers' ring mail suits, and had a fine longsword with a jeweled pommel at his side.

Crumb's Boys were lined up in groups of five, with five feet between each row. They watched Crumb and Deet standing by the guard captain.

"I brought what I brought. There was no stipulation as long as they were of age. Now, where do I get my money?" Crumb asked.

"They will take care of you in the castle," the captain said.

Crumb and Deet began to walk past the group and the portly man turned to the lads who had been under his charge these many weeks. "Well, good luck boys. Have fun. It's been real," he said with a wave and he and the Wayfarer of Ptah disappeared into the castle proper. They never saw him again.

The man who was obviously now in charge turned towards the group, "I am Edwin Merrick, Captain of the Castle Guard. The defense of this castle and the lives of all inside of it, but primarily that of that King and the Royal Family are my specific responsibility, so I just want to tell you all that you are looking at the face of the man who will kill you if by your actions you in anyway endanger my charges."

He paused for effect.

"You are all honored guests of the Crown and I expect you all to act as such," Merrick continued.

"Funny way to treat a guest," Kazrack said.

"Did I give you permission to speak?" Merrick said, curtly.

"So now guests aren't allowed to speak," the dwarf replied. "Especially guests who have traveled far and hard to fulfill the request of your king?"

⁹² The party arrived in Cutter Jack's in Session #3 and in Stonebridge in Session #7.

The captain walked up to him, "You can speak all you want when you are a guest of our dungeons, would you prefer that?"

Kazrack did not reply. Devon snickered, and the Captain turned to the tall man with a glare. Devon sneered but said nothing.

"I didn't think so," Merrick continued. "This is the time where *I* speak and *you* listen. *I* say the rules and *you* learn them. Understand?"

There was a smattering of "Yes, sir" in the group standing at attention.

"My guards will collect all your weapons. We will be searching your packs, but we will trust you to hand over everything else, or else we *will* make you all strip down out here in the cold if we find even one person holding out on us. However, we will be marching you up into the castle before we collect all such gear. Do not worry, it will be cataloged and inventoried to assure that everyone gets back what belongs to them. Of course, more weapons, armor and other equipment will be provided before you leave for your mission."

"When will be told more about the dragon and everything?" Kazrack asked.

"You need to learn when to keep your mouth shut," the Captain said.

There was silence.

"Also, there will be no leaving or returning to the castle grounds until after the hunt is officially declared started. No one will be allowed to leave, and anyone caught trying to sneak out will be considered in breach of contract and will be imprisoned. Understand?"

Crumb's Boys murmured that they understood.

"Tonight, there will be a banquet in your honor, 'your' being you and all the others who have answered the king's call for...ahem... *heroes*. You will behave in a manner expected for such a Royal event and in appreciation of his majesty's great generosity." Merrick cleared his throat. "One last thing, there is a portion of the castle open only to the Royal Family and their immediate servants. If anyone is found there for any reason they will be killed. The safety of the king comes before *any* excuse someone might have."

Crumb's Boys murmured.

"Any questions? No? Good. The record-keeper will take your names and then you all can follow me."

Captain Merrick led the way towards the castle. They walked through a large garden that had its paths and rows cleared of snow. A good number of winter flowers could be seen blooming, and it was clear that this place would be beautiful in spring. Two women were clipping flowers in the garden but looking over at the line of men marching past. They giggled. Many of Crumb's boys turned to look at the women. They were middle-aged and pear-shaped, wearing frilly dresses of satin and lace, and long tall hats with veils, with fur wraps made of mink or ermine. They waved and giggled again.

The would-be heroes passed through tall doors into a grand chamber where servants hurried back and forth decorating the walls and preparing tables and chairs. Tapestries were being hung from balconies to the left and right, and another smaller balcony was at the head of the room. They were led through a dining hall to the left and to a back hall and up two sets of narrow stone circular steps. Up here in the western wing of the castle, the halls were narrow, and they formed a long line before the door to a room flanked by two heavily armed guards.

"Okay, here is where you turn in your weapons and armor. A record will be kept of who turns in what," Captain Merrick said.

They moved along one by one handing over whatever they had, though most had nothing to hand over. Kazrack pulled off his scale mail and handed over his halberd and flail.

“Name?” the old man behind the half-door asked.

“Kazrack Delver,” the dwarf replied.

The man looked over his list, “Ah! There you are. What are you handing over?”

And on it went.

“Be careful with those,” Jeremy said as he handed over his swords.

And now a young man who introduced himself as Glenn, assistant to the castle steward, divvied them into large rooms with many bunks.

“These are the rooms you will be staying in. As you know, there will be a banquet tonight. Anyone that needs fresh clothes just tell me or one of the other assistant stewards and we’ll do what we can. Tubs will also be filled with water for baths. The banquet begins in about six hours, but the main chamber downstairs will be closed off to everyone for two hours prior to the banquet as final preparations are done, so if you leave the castle proper you may not be able to get back in for a while.”

Crumb’s Boys (could they be called that anymore?) went into their assigned rooms, which were already more than half full with other occupants, other young men, most looking to be in their late teens to early twenties; a good number having that Herman-Lander look. Ratchis, and Kazrack were put in one room, with Finn and Frank and Gwar and others, while Beorth, Jeremy and Chance were assigned the same room as Markle, Devon and The Square and some others.

Glenn pulled Jana aside, “We did not know that women would be among the groups to answer the king’s call, but another woman was with one of the other groups that arrived a few days ago so we have had some time to prepare for your special needs. We will have a dressing screen set up around your bunk, and you when you are ready to bathe, I will show you down to one of the maids’ quarters and you can use their room.”

Jana thanked him.

“Also, I will see what I can do about getting you some more appropriate clothing, as your skirt looks rather muddy and torn.”

Jana thanked him again.

Most of those who were once “Crumb’s Boys” fell into their cots and fell fast asleep, including Kazrack and Ratchis. Chance, Jeremy and Beorth waited on the long lines for bath water. Jana was shown downstairs and took her bath in the privacy of a maid’s room. She was brought a blue dress with short puffy sleeves and a yellow bow on the front. She felt ridiculous in it, but figured it was better than appearing at a royal banquet dressed like dirty pauper.

Jeremy, Beorth and Chance dressed in their best clothes they had been carrying with them on their long journey. Jeremy and Chance actually had similar outfits, white shirts, black trousers, and black vests, while Beorth a white priestly robe with a black belt and trim. He shaved off the bristly red hair that had been growing in as he did every few days. Jeremy and Beorth then went down to the garden to wander and explore the grounds a bit before the banquet started. Chance explored the castle as much as possible.

A few hours later when Ratchis woke up he found that clothes that could fit him had been spread out and winced. He had been given a white priestly garment, a rope belt, blue tights, and sandals with leather ties that wound up to just short of knee height. He was also given a blue cloak that matched the tights that was more of a cape. He felt ridiculous, but Chance assured him he looked fine (with a snicker when the brute wasn’t looking). As self-conscious

as Jana, Ratchis joined the stream of young men heading down to the Great Hall when the fanfare of horns called them all to the banquet. Jeremy and Beorth came in from the front of the castle, as they had had to wait out in the garden while the final preparations were being done.

The Great Hall was beautifully decorated with tapestries and ribbons, and lit with many candles, and lamps, including two chandeliers hanging from the ceiling two stories above the main floor. Three balconies circled the room, and large doors were open to the huge dining room, where the smell of food wafted over the perfumes of petty nobles milling among themselves and smiling nervously at all the would-be hunters in their awkwardly worn outfits.

Long tables were set with fine dishes and silverware and the companions began to take seats near the end of one table. However, as the seats filled at the other tables, a couple of young men took adjacent seats among the companions and waved over a young woman with short black hair and olive skin.

Servants began to place large pitchers of ale on the table, while a wine steward went around filling everyone's glass.

The two young men were obviously twins, one being maybe only slightly taller than the other, but both were pudgy and wispy sand-brown hair, and a bit of acne. They sat beside Jeremy, while the woman across from them sat between Beorth and Jana. She was dressed in brown woolen trousers and tall boots, and a cream-colored cotton shirt.

"How are you doing?" said the lad closest to Jeremy to the Neergaardian. "I am Simon, and this is my brother Peter."

"I'm Jeremy Northrop," the Neergaardian replied. "These are my traveling companions." He introduced his friends. "Where you guys from? Here to help hunt the dragon, I guess?"

"Yeah, we're from Swampstop and my brother Simon knows a lot about dragons, so we figured we'd be useful for such a mission, plus we didn't want to go to war. You guys a group of five?" Peter said.⁹³

"Group of five?" asked Beorth.

"Yes, we heard rumors that we all would be divided into groups of five," said the woman beside Beorth. "My name is Maria."

"Maria came up here in our group," said Peter.

"So, you know about dragons?" Kazrack asked the other twin.

"Oh yes," said Simon, his voice was nearly still that of a boy. "I have read many books on them and have spoken to sages and people who have seen them."

"Oh, yes, Simon is really smart. He knows all about dragons. Watch this! Ready?" Peter paused for effect. "Black."

"Acid," replied Simon without pausing.

"Red," said Peter.

"Fire," replied Simon with a smile.

"Blue?" asked Peter with a sly smile.

⁹³ Swampstop is a town in the southern portion of the Kingdom of Herman Land famous for drawing adventurers who explore the ancient crypts and abandoned forts of the Black Fens and other swamps in the area.

“Blue dragons are a myth, but according to legend they breathed lightning,” the pudgy lad replied, looking very proud of himself.

“What is that you are saying?” Kazrack asked.

“What kind of deadly breath they expel from their mouths,” explained Simon. “Dracologists call it ‘breath weapon.’”

“Do you know what kind of dragon they are supposedly having trouble with here in Gothanious?” Kazrack asked.

“Green,” said Peter.

“Chlorine Gas!” cried Simon. “Terrible stuff. Very deadly.”

“Can we talk about somethin’ else fer a lil while?” asked Chance. “All this dragon talk is pointless fer now.” E said “now” like “new.”

“Where are you from, Maria?” asked Beorth.

“I am from here in Derome-Delem, a town on the northeastern coast called Ettinos,” she replied.

“And what made you come here,” the paladin continued.

“A chance to prove myself,” she replied. “I have too many older brothers and all I gained from them is how to use a sword, and my father doesn’t want anything for me but to marry, but I want to do what I want to do. My brothers get to travel, own land, and take part in my father’s business, but not me because I am a woman. Heh! Though they don’t treat women much better here. Can you believe that they tried to get me to put on some poofy-sleeved dress?!? I’d rather die first!”

Jana shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“No offense,” Maria added, looking at the young witch.

“I just don’t know about this whole dragon thing. Dragons in stories cause great destruction. They are more obvious, but the dragon here seems to only appear occasionally, and there are no confirmed reports of death, though if there really is a dragon a lot of people are going to die,” Kazrack said.⁹⁴

“Didn’t Ah just say I didn’t wanna talk about the dragon?” Chance said, annoyed. “Thar will be plenty of time fer that later. Let’s just enjoy this fine food.” It came out as “fon food.”

“I agree with Chance,” said Jana.

They spoke for some time, sharing some tales of their journey to Gothanious and talking about their homes.

“What do ya thank yill spend yer reward on?” Chance asked everyone.

“I think it is too soon to worry about that,” said Kazrack.

“I have no idea,” said Jana.

“I will found a monastery for Anubis,” said Beorth.

“I think we’ll buy a bunch of books and become sages,” said Simon.

⁹⁴ Kazrack had asked the Captain of the Guard in Northfork Wall about the dragon, and he said he did not know specifically of anyone who died, but that there was a lot of damage to property.

"I never thought about it before, but it'd be nice to open an inn. Somewhere where lots of people travel through from many parts of the world, like Earthsea City or something," said Jeremy.⁹⁵

"Ahm gonna use me part of the reward ta enter one of those high-stakes poker games in Haffar's Part," said Chance with a smile. "I heard ya need a thousand ta enter, but kin walk out with tin times that! With that Ahl open me own casino!"

"Seems like a strange thing to do with all your money," said Jeremy. "You could lose it all, but a casino would be a good part of my inn."

"This all assumes that the dragon does not kill us all," said Kazrack.

"Ah thought Ah said I didn't wanna talk about the dragon!" said Chance, grabbing a piece of asparagus that was served on the table, in large tureen suspended in some onion cream sauce. He then slapped Ratchis hand, who discovering how delicious they were and proceeded to begin shoving asparagus after asparagus into his mouth. "Ya can't do that in a fancy dinner. Ya gotta let other people have some too."

Ratchis looked around embarrassed waited a minute and grabbed one more, refilled his goblet with ale for the fourth time and tried to get the attention of the wine steward to refill his crystal glass.

The servers began to collect their plates and glasses, and Ratchis tried to nonchalantly eat and drink as much as possible before they took it all away. He looked bewildered.

Chance put a hand on the big man's arm, "This is only the first carse. They'll bring more food and drink later, Ah promise."

There was a fanfare of horns from the Great Hall, and people began to make their way over there. The companions followed suit. As they stood Maria stepped over to Ratchis, "So where are you from? Not Ettinos, but usually people of orcish descent aren't treated well anywhere else."

Kazrack overheard and his eyes opened widely.

"I am from not far from here," said Ratchis cautiously. "How do you know so much about orcish people?"

"I'm from Ettinos. It's a half-orc colony. Almost everyone there has some orcish blood in them. Not me, but most people do," she said with a smile. "I never understood why people have a trouble with half-orcs, they seem just like everyone else to me, just as likely to be a good person or a bad person."

Maria stepped up her pace to catch up with Simon and James, and Kazrack who was lingering behind stepped up to Ratchis.

"I couldn't help but overhear," the Kazrack said. "Are you really of orcish descent?"

Ratchis looked down at his dwarfish companion with a stern face, "Yes, I am." He walked into the crowd of the great hall, taking spot right behind Maria.

Through the fanfare of horns, the family of the queen was announced and emerged, as were some of the Royal servants, among whom the Royal Architect Baulch Stonefingers was a dwarf, which made Kazrack raise an eyebrow. The five princesses followed and then the prince and his bodyguard. There came another fanfare on the horns, and everyone fell to one knee and bowed. Ratchis looked around and then followed suit.

The king and queen appeared on the balcony, and the monarch told everyone they could rise.

⁹⁵ Earthsea City is a port in the southern area of the Kingdom of Neergaard. Named for a famous Neergaardian marine unit, it is a center of international trade for the kingdom.

He spoke,

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

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

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

There was a pause and then a great applause and cheering.

“Oh, great, exactly what I need for a reward! Bah!” said Maria under her breath, annoyed.

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

The king and queen retreated from the balcony and the crowds began to make their way back to the dining room. Kazrack was slowed by the clog of people in the doorway, and by the time he got back to the table he saw that a young man, about six feet tall, with shaggy brown hair and robes of various shades of green had taken his seat and was talking with Simon and Peter. He walked up to take a seat opposite them.

End of Session #11

END OF “OUT OF THE FRYING PAN: BOOK ONE: GATHERING WOOD

Continued in “Out of the Frying Pan” – Book Two: Catching the Spark. . .