

Nothing Nobody's

TO BE A HERO



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Canon and Copyright

"This work is canon of Nobody's World, included in Nobody's Creation."

Nothing Nobody on October 15, 2016

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FOREWORD

The narrative presented hereafter is a fictitious account of imaginary historical events in the unreal Nobody's World. Names, conversations, written works etc. appearing in this story have been translated and transliterated from the original fabricated languages in which they occurred. Although the author has tried to tell the tale exactly as it should have happened, some inconsistencies and exaggerations may have slipped in because the author was intoxicated or lacking sleep or feeling unreasonably vivacious.

The author would also like to acknowledge world mythology, religion, folklore, history, geography, science, cultures, literature, cinema, combat schools, sports, gaming, the Internet and society in general for their inspiration.

Chapter I

School was out. Not out in the sense of done for the day but out in the literal sense, seeing as it was outdoors, and consisted of a crowd of children sitting cross-legged in the dirt of a freshly ploughed field.

The boys present wore the drab and simple clothing of peasants. Many of their tunics and trousers were frayed, with patches sewn over the larger tears. Mismatched hues of the patchwork did enliven their appearance a bit. Girls were absent at this time, they were busy learning from their mothers to ensure their households never ran short of nourishing food, warming fire and intact clothes. The commonborn daughters had taken their share of lessons less useful to the business of living earlier in the day, while their brothers had laboured under their fathers' guidance. Now was the boys' turn for formal education as king's law imposed.

The teacher of this class was named Gronks. His garb looked no better than his pupils'. In a vain attempt to conceal age's assault upon his supposed beauty, Gronks kept his wavy green hair brushed across the growing bald spot fore of his head. There was no fooling the boys though, they could tell. Children were unusually perceptive that way, or not blind.

The reasoning behind Gronks' choice of this field for a classroom was the churned soil being easier to write in. Paper was saved for real work. Gronks himself employed a gnarled staff to show how speech was written. This batch of students was past their thirteenth year, he was already teaching them nothing new, and he expected they would soon realize it to quit their schooling. In the boys' hands were fallen branches picked off the ground and slender shoots broken from shrubs. These they were using to inscribe the script of the Krit tongue in the earth. Some had chosen sticks that would write well, a few opted for sticks that would hit hard.

"Urchesk." Hicussaw was just loud enough to catch the ear of the fellow student on his left, "Lend me some of your smarts."

The boy Hicussaw was blue of hair and black of eye, flashing his friend a big stupid grin.

Brown haired and blue eyed Urchesk looked up from his own patch of text, “What do you need help with now, Hic?”

“How do you spell ‘you’?”

Urchesk stared, “Hic, come on. You have to know that one, you can’t not know it.”

“I know it; I’m only looking to make sure. Is it H-O-O or E-W?”

Urchesk complemented the stare with a shake of his head, “Neither. It’s Y-O-U.”

“Thanks a bunch.” Hicussaw put the word down in the earth, “The game still happening after the lesson? Who has the-”

“Quiet! How are those letters of gratitude to Lord Lansam coming along?” Gronks moved from student to student, poring over the results of their efforts. “Don’t fear to ask me your troubles with the spelling.”

“My teacher, have I got ‘indefatigable’ right?” asked a boy.

“Do you know what the word means, Oreed?” Gronks smiled. Since Gronks had not heard of indefatigable before, he was sincerely hoping the boy did and would inform him. If Oreed also had no clue, Gronks had a cover ready in the good old ‘you’re too young to understand that word now but when you’re older you will’.

“It means never tiring.”

Where do they learn these things? Gronks wondered. To Oreed he said, “Well done! And how have you spelt ‘indefatigable’?”

Gronks traced the boy’s letters with his staff, “E-N-T-H-E-P-H-A-T-Y-A-B-L-E, almost got it! Change the A-B-L-E to E-D-E-L.”

“Let’s see what the rest of you have got so far.” Gronks turned to another boy.

“O Ever Merciful One,” Gronks always read aloud, “I thank you for your l-lan-land you let us live on. I thank you for the t-a-taxes which feed and arm your men who keep us safe f-fr-from the da-dan-dangers running wild.”

Gronks patted the writer on the shoulder, “Very well done, Terik. Only next time press the stick harder, this isn’t paper you know, a couple of your words weren’t clear at all. And don’t take up so much space. You don’t have the whole field to yourself.”

Gronks selected a fresh target, a weedy child with brooding eyes and straw yellow hair: “Nolb, what have you got so far? Let’s see...Your Supreme Greediness.”

Gronks hesitated, he didn’t want to read this one out loud, but not doing so would mean him moving his lips in an obvious whisper. Revealing the fact he could not read without mouthing the words would give the boys a reason to ridicule him, apart from the hair.

Teachers could not afford to lose the respect of their charges, and besides, he could use this letter as an example of what not to do.

“Look here, boys.” Gronks waved his staff to attract attention, “Nolb has got the grammar and spelling perfect but the rest of it is horrible I’m afraid. Listen carefully, and don’t repeat.”

Gronks cleared his throat, “Your Supreme Greediness. I’m told we must be g-r-grateful to you for tax-i-ing us on the crops you do not sow and the livestock you do not tend. When pressing your boot down on our fae-fae-faces, could you please move your heel to our lips so we may kiss it.” Gronks sighed, “Nolb, your family’s misfortune was er...misfortunate, but my stupid boy, should what you wrote reach the ears of our noble rulers or our druzhinnik protectors, you’d spend your nights screaming yourself to sleep in a dungeon. Your father wouldn’t want to see you make *his* mistakes, now would he?”

“His father’s mistakes?” Hicussaw said to Urchesk, the bluehead scarcely believed his ears.

“Hic, quiet. You’ll get Gronks scolding us next.” Urchesk cautioned.

“Can’t blame the wolves on Nolb’s father or his brothers.” Hicussaw continued, “Nolb’s folk were grazing their herd east of Lone Oak Hill, close to the watch tower. The druzhinniks were the ones watching their cards and hooch instead of the land, they were late. Men-at-arms shouldn’t be late when a wolf pack’s hunting near the village.”

“Dying to wild beasts was his brother’s bad luck.” Urchesk said, “Ranting drunk at the tavern about Baron Lansam and the druzhinniks not doing their job *was* his father’s mistake.”

“Just words. For words, the druzhinniks took the cattle and dogs who survived the wolves. It’s awfully mean.”

“King’s law brands talk disrespectful of the barons as ‘sedition’. It’s a crime to be punished.”

“How’s it fair Nolz’s folk still have to pay tax or they get arrested? Druzhinniks didn’t leave them the cows to sell milk, meat and hide.”

“Hic, hold your tongue or *our* families will be failing taxes after our source of income’s been confiscated. King’s law doesn’t allow free living on a baron’s land.”

“Con-fish-ate? King’s law doesn’t sound righteous. Maybe it ought to be changed.”

“Were you a king, you could, but you’re a commonborn twerp so shut it.”

Urchesk silenced Hicussaw a moment. The bluehead quickly picked a different line to argue, “Gronks’ being too harsh. Didn’t have to chide Nolz on his letter for the whole class to hear, some bugger might tell the druzhinniks again.”

“Not our problem Hic.” Urchesk insisted.

“We’ll go over and say hello to Nolz later.”

“Best not to talk to Nolz in his troubled time. We shouldn’t pry into his affairs.”

“Pry? It’s no secret he could use friends, we should be helping him.”

“How?” Urchesk took recourse to reason, “There’s nothing we can do. We got plenty to handle taking care of ourselves.”

“Not an excuse to ignore life treating people wrong. Why don’t I see Romfer or Glag around Nolz these days? They were a tight bunch.”

“Romfer and Glag reckon they should get comfortable with Nolz not being here much longer.”

“*What?* That’s-”

“Has everybody finished their letters?” Gronks cast the question into the mass of students, “If you haven’t by the time I get to you, your fathers will hear you’ve been slacking.”

The boys quietened and hastily returned to scribbling in the earth. Hicussaw’s eyes went to the teacher. He hoped Gronks would not chance upon his botched excuse for legible writing.

A short period later, and none too soon for Hicussaw, Gronks declared that school was out, finished for the day. Students had to discard their sticks and go assist their fathers at work as sunset was yet hours away. Gronks couldn't wait to put distance between himself and his pupils, their stupidity and intelligence annoyed him equally, so he didn't. Unlike Gronks, the boys were in no hurry to desert the field. Most were unwilling to lose their thoughtfully picked sticks either.

"The gods have been kind to us. Teacher Gronks didn't read our letters." Hicussaw told Urchesk.

"Speak for yourself." Urchesk complained, "I put in the effort to craft mine good."

"Never you mind that now. No more studying today." Hicussaw's hand playfully smacked Urchesk's shoulder, "It's time to whack a gilly. You up for it?"

"Sure, I don't have to leave right away. Father has my brothers to help with sowing our fields."

"Howling!" Hicussaw grinned, "Just what we need after some tough schooling."

"Hic, you barely read and you can't write anything someone else can read. Shouldn't you spend some time practicing the lessons, I'll help you."

Hicussaw laughed, "I'm not going to be earning a living from the cleverness in my head. I can't even dream of the rich life a learned man like you will lead, you could become a scribe writing all kinds of important documents for nobles to stamp their seal on."

"If my future's bright as you say, I'll treat my friends to a prize of a meal every month."

"I won't forget to remind you of this claim!"

"I can promise you, you won't forget a chance at free food." Urchesk said, "Where are we playing?"

Hicussaw made a grand sweeping gesture, "Right here. Do you know a better place or time?"

"Who's got the gilly?"

"Maksyer's bringing it today. He's over there with Glag and Kipbo." Hicussaw pointed them out.

“Hey Glag, Maksyer, Kipbo!” Urchesk yelled.

He and Hicussaw joined the forenamed three jabbering at one end of the ploughed field.

“Ah, Urchesk and Hicussaw.” Maksyer said, “Have you ever laid your eyes upon a thing of greater beauty?”

Maksyer held up the gilly for them to admire. It was a stick but not one of the twigs the boys had been writing with. Just a bit bigger than Maksyer’s hand, the gilly boasted a fairly smooth surface and both ends rounded. Maksyer beamed with pride.

“Mak.” Hicussaw sighed, “You’re confused.”

“Huh.” Maksyer certainly was now, “How so?”

“You’re supposed to show off your short rod to *girls* not your buddy boys.”

Kipbo and Glag chortled. Urchesk couldn’t stop a smile, though he did feel guilty about it.

“Haha.” Maksyer’s tone was dry, “Not funny. Since you lot prefer bad jokes to good sport, should I take my gilly and head on home?”

“Now Mak.” Kipbo gently chided, “You should be happy for your friend. It’s not every day a potwit can string together enough words to make a sentence. It’s a miracle he doesn’t wear his trousers on his head and his tunic on his legs.”

Kipbo’s words elicited a fresh burst of laughter from four of them.

“It’s been years!” Hicussaw protested, “When will you buggers stop calling me that!”

Urchesk had thought up the term ‘potwit’ after Hicussaw got his head stuck in a pot for half a day until his father broke it open. Hicussaw had been trying to lick the butter at the bottom of the pot.

“Show us, Mak.” Urchesk said, “Why is your gilly so special?”

“Took me *hours* over the last two days.” Maksyer began, “I had to find the right wood and work it with my father’s knife, borrowed without his permission of course. Almost got caught a few times-”

“We don’t need the history lesson.” Glag grabbed the gilly from Maksyer, “The question is how does it *play*?”

Glag's eyes swept over the ground, searching for something.

"There." Urchesk spotted a likely candidate nearby. He scooted over and scooped up a rock, "Try this one."

Urchesk returned to the group and placed the stone on the ground. Glag dropped to his knees and palms in the dirt. The rock was smaller than the gilly. An edge of the rock rose to a peak facing the heavens. Upon this peak, Glag carefully positioned the gilly. He withdrew his hand and watched the odd little rod rest gently on an even keel, its rounded ends extending beyond its perch. Glag spoke, "Good job indeed, Mak."

Maksyer was pleased, "As I was telling you hasty buggers. Everything is perfect. The weight, the balance, the length and feel of it."

"Let's test it then." said Kipbo.

"Glag." Maksyer said solemnly, "Would you take the first whack? That's a strong looking stick you're wielding."

"Glad to." Glag grinned.

Glag got up to his full height. For a moment, he seemed frozen, simply staring at the gilly on its rock. Then he struck. The first blow of his stick hit an end of the gilly. It leapt spinning into the air. The second blow struck the gilly dead centre in mid-air, sending it on a course he had given little thought, an oversight he would soon regret.

Five pairs of eyes followed Maksyer's masterpiece as it flew high and straight, soaring over the field, past Nolb's head. The eyes remained fixed on Nolb, barely noticing the gilly crash into the earth behind him.

Nolb stood alone, his stick thrust in the soil. It appeared he had been lingering thus since Gronks' class had concluded. Adding more impolite things about barons to his letter, Urchesk guessed. Nolb looked to the direction the gilly had flown from, his gaze may have met with the boys'. It was impossible to tell at the distance separating them.

"Great whack. Went far." Maksyer said, "Need to improve your aim though."

"Yes." Glag sounded distracted, "Kipbo. Go fetch the gilly."

"Nolb can get it." Hicussaw said, "Won't he be joining us?"

"No. Romfer and Hoip will." Glag waved to the twosome on the other side of the field.

Urchesk caught Hicussaw's eye with a 'not now Hic' look. Hicussaw didn't take the hint, "Just Romfer and Hoip makes us seven. Can't split that number into fair teams. You, Romfer and Nolb on the same team are near undefeatable, remember?"

"I'm sure Nolb has better things to do." Glag said, "Besides, it's clear to me he's in a foul mood. He might even think we were trying to hit him with our gilly."

"More reason we invite him then. We can sort out any misunderstanding, and a game of gillywhack will cheer him right." Hicussaw was persistent.

"He's got nothing to be cheerful about." Kipbo said, "He ought to get home quick and give his folk another pair of earning hands, we shouldn't delay him with our silly sport."

Hicussaw shook his head, "No. We have to show Nolb and his folk we won't abandon them. They're in trouble. They need to see that they can count on us."

Glag repeated his father's response to a confrontation about aiding Nolb, "You speak a fool's words you do. He who helps others, ends up needing help himself."

Hicussaw had heard the adage on helping people before. It had never made a speck of sense to him. "What a load of shit! You can smell it as well as I can!" He countered with a thought of his own, "If everybody helped each other, nobody would need help."

Glag turned angry, "We can't fix Nolb's problems, our folk struggle to pay the taxes year after year. We waste coin on a doomed neighbour and we could be next to miss our dues on tax day."

Glag paused, "Everybody here has lost family-blood of our blood. Not one of us knows whether we'll be drawing breath and whacking gillies this time tomorrow. Nolb is finished, he's already gone. I'm not sacrificing a moment of my life to someone whose wretchedness will spoil my day."

"Boys, boys. I see you two all bothered, I'm curious as to the cause of this fuss." Romfer said, him and Hoip had reached the group.

Hicussaw was on the verge of unleashing his disapproval on Romfer, Nolb's other old friend, when Urchesk stopped him, "Hic, hold your tongue. Doesn't matter anymore."

"How can you say that?" Hicussaw asked, his temper souring.

Urchesk supported his stance with a pertinent observation, "You can't go near Nolb now."

He was referring to the gang of stick armed bullies creeping up behind Nolb who had returned to sullenly scribbling in the earth.

“Sweet unicorn farts!” Hicussaw cussed, “What’s Barnemit doing?”

Barnemit was the oldest of their batch of students. At almost sixteen years, he was huge. Barnemit didn’t fall in the category of hulking fat boys who used their excess weight to a crushing advantage. A particularly strong man’s muscle was developing on his big frame. And he was growing tall like he wanted to reach the sun. Curly black hair crowned his head. His brown eyes were usually watchful and wary. The dark stubble of youth roughened his jaw.

A hunter stalking prey, Barnemit’s attention was locked on Nolb. Barnemit’s two partners in bullying moved as he did.

“It’s no challenge to guess his purpose.” Maksyer said, “We’ve given a few too many precious moments to Nolb’s suffering already. The lot of us have to be working soon unless we enjoy bending off our fathers.” He indicated other students leaving the field, “They’ve got the right idea. I say we find a field free of Barnemit and start this game!”

“Aren’t you forgetting your gilly?” Urchesk asked, “I think Barnemit just stepped on it.”

“Oh.” Maksyer was dismayed, “Maybe I can go back for it later.”

“No game today then.” Kipbo sighed, “Shall we visit old man Mednib’s orchard? He doesn’t mind us picking a few apples.”

“Stay your feet!” Hicussaw admonished them, “We can’t just let Barnemit waylay Nolb.”

“Yes we can, Hic, and we are.” Glag was firm on the matter.

Barnemit and his cohorts pounced. Nolb felt stronger hands than his seize his arms and shoulders, steering him on a course he definitely would not have chosen. The stick, Nolb’s best defence had he the courage to wield it, was wrenched from his grip and cast aside.

“Touches me deep Nolb.” Barnemit said, “You and your folk have it bad.”

“We’re do-doing okay.” Nolb gathered the strength to say, “We’ll pull through.”

“There’s no use lying to us. Your drunk of a father and idiot brothers have been asking the whole village for work. No luck there, right? I mean there’s not much you can do

here and be paid for that folk won't do themselves and keep the coin."

"Don't worry yourself." Nolb was uncertain of where this was going, "My problems are mine alone."

"Nonsense. My buddies and I can help. Who wouldn't toss your oldest sister a copper piece for some fun behind the bushes? Eh, boys?"

The bullies guffawed on cue. Nolb went red, not with shame, anger spurred him to strike at Barnemit. Nolb struggled against his captors, his failure to break free wrought further laughter and taunts.

"We have seven to their three! The advantage is ours!" Hicussaw reasoned to his friends.

"Two and a third of us to one of them. Those odds aren't in our favour." Urchesk calculated swiftly, "Barnemit's a monster in a fight. Hic, you're not scared of Barnemit but you will be, I've heard he walloped a grown man."

"Are we seriously talking about fighting Barnemit? The answer is no obviously." Hoip contributed.

"I can't wait any longer." Hicussaw was watching the progress of Barnemit's gang and Nolb trapped between them, "I'll show Barnemit he can't fulfil every mean whim in his head, those brutes he walks with will see too. Barnemit will break easy. Why do you think he picks on the ones who are alone? He can't handle real trouble. Nolb will join us I bet-eight versus three. Three of us versus each one of them!"

"Not quite right on your numbers Hic, I understand it's much to ask of you but please be smart." Urchesk said.

"I don't want to get the piss beaten out of me." said Kipbo.

"None of us can hurt Barnemit. We can't save Nolb." Romfer spoke softly.

"Are you cowards just going to watch?" Hicussaw pressed.

"We'll play a game in your honour after Barnemit's thrashed you proper." Maksyer waved goodbye to Hicussaw.

"He who helps others, ends up needing help himself." Glag quoted his father again. His eyes were cold and distant.

“Go jinx yourselves.” Hicussaw delivered his parting words as he stormed to Nolb’s rescue.

The bullies had halted. Nolb’s eyes fell on the stinking mass of fecal matter in front of him. Dread replaced the rage on his face. The waste was probably dropped by the draft beast who had tilled the field and loosened the soil well for writing. The ploughshare the beast had been towing had dragged and spread the dung across a furrow it had cut into the earth. Though excellent fertilizer for the soil, it was not recommended to apply on skin.

“Why not save some money Nolb? Your poor father would have less mouths to feed if you ate dung here.”

“Hey Barnemit!” Hicussaw called, advancing towards the gang, both his hands grasping his stick.

Barnemit turned to greet him, “Move along, Hicussaw.”

“Sure. After you.”

“You think I obey you?”

“Leave Nolb be.”

“Nolb’s hungry, we’re helping him fill his belly.” Barnemit’s stick lashed Nolb’s stomach, “Isn’t that true, Nolb?”

Nolb whimpered, tears were forming in his eyes.

“Stop this Barnemit. I don’t want to fight you.” Hicussaw rapped his weapon on the palm of his hand, “Don’t make me break this stick off on your head.”

“Wrong grammar there, Hic, haven’t you been listening to Teacher Gronks?” Barnemit sniggered, “You don’t want to fight *us*.”

Hicussaw hadn’t thought of that, “Um...all of you? At the same time? Not very fair, is it?”

“Why should it be?” Barnemit asked. He didn’t wait for an answer, “Sleep quietly.”

Hicussaw breathed slow and steady. He had challenged the terrors of the village and they outnumbered him three to one. He was prepared to receive the worst hurting of his life. The bluehead was determined to make his stand though, to hammer in Barnemit’s

face the point people weren't toys to play rough with.

The bullies came at him. Barnemit from the front, Dafred from the right and Woss from the left. Barnemit swung his woody weapon, Hicussaw ducked and retaliated by sweeping his stick low, taking out Barnemit's legs and laying him on his back in the dirt. Woss sprang forward and went staggering back because of Hicussaw's foot catching him in the chest. Dafred attacked with his stick, Hicussaw blocked with his own, and punched Dafred on the nose.

Hicussaw couldn't believe the fight was going this well. He had taken mere moments to repel the combined might of Barnemit and his gang. Maybe today was the golden day Hicussaw broke the fear the threesome inspired in the village children.

Barnemit wasn't done, he was up on his feet again. The trio of ruffians, their bodies and pride bruised, circled Hicussaw. Hicussaw was careful to keep each of them in his sight and his hands tense on his stick. Woss charged, Hicussaw sidestepped it easily and parried strikes from Barnemit and Dafred. Hicussaw dealt a powerful blow knocking the weapon out of Dafred's hands, followed by a kick to the shin to get him on his knees.

Hicussaw swung the stick and smashed Barnemit's head, snapping his weapon in half and sending Barnemit crashing to the earth. Barnemit was done, and Hicussaw hadn't even broken a sweat yet.

There remained a foe on his feet, Hicussaw remembered, he spun around to combat the threat and found himself staring into Woss's shocked, no, horrified expression. Woss dropped his stick and ran.

That was how Hicussaw imagined it happening *before* Barnemit attacked the bluehead in reality.

Hicussaw suddenly falling into a reverie and staring straight at him, not a noise or a move, had disconcerted Barnemit, enough to delay his assault for a few moments.

"Wake up freak!" Barnemit lunged, his stick striking.

When Hicussaw raised his weapon to block, Barnemit grabbed it with one bare hand and flashed an evil grin. Barnemit's stick sped up and whacked Hicussaw's ribs. Hicussaw flinched, letting go of his stick in a poor choice of reflex. Woss and Dafred retained hold of Nalb, who would have been glad of the opportunity to escape. The duo

would only step in if they were required to secure a win for their team. This pitted Hicussaw against Barnemit in the fair fight Hicussaw had requested.

Barnemit realized he had no need for weaponry in this match, he flung away both his and Hicussaw's sticks. While Hicussaw was still smarting over the sting of Barnemit's stick on his ribs, his jaw was introduced to Barnemit's fist at an ungentle speed. Hicussaw felt his jaw explode with pain. The waves of hurt from the punch were fading and dying, and then Barnemit's fist smashed his jaw a second time, blood flew from Hicussaw's mouth as the fresh surge of pain shattered his senses. He almost didn't notice the third punch to his gut. He desperately wished he didn't feel the knee ram into his crotch.

Hicussaw crumpled to the ground and promptly puked, lost in his own private world of agony beyond further physical torment.

Hands, shaking with wicked mirth, pulled him to his knees. His head was held up, forcing him to witness Nolb's face ground into the dung. Pain dampened Hicussaw's understanding, the entire experience would be much worse when he recalled the details later. Nolb was released. The wretched boy coughed and spat, flies buzzed about the brown-black manure packed onto his face, clumps of it were tangled in his hair.

It was Hicussaw's turn now. Multiple hands drove his head down to the decaying waste. He shut his mouth, regrettably bringing to focus the taste of his own vomit and blood Barnemit had drawn. As the distance to the excrement reduced, the dung appeared to rise up in eagerness, growing wide to shove everything else out of sight. Hicussaw closed his eyes. This was the moment he would never forget. Glag's warning and its ancient wisdom sank into his heart, a truth he realized the world would only confirm again and again; he who helps others, ends up needing help himself. Somehow, Hicussaw knew it was a lesson he would continue to defy. And one day, he would prove the world wrong.

Chapter II

Bart Castle cut a hard grey figure against a blue sky where wisps of cloud floated gently. Industrious labourers under the guidance of a keen architect had put Bart together from stone and mortar enchanted to resist any magical attacks said architect could think of.

Banners displaying the Doneg coat of arms fluttered from the highest points of the fortress. Towers housed ballista war engines, allowing them to shoot out of windows while decently protected against return fire and flying enemies. On the ramparts, armour clad soldiers and rock hard gargoyles watched the green landscape, ready to relay to their commanders the news of arrivals and whether the newcomers were friend, foe or just plain strange. The first gate guarding Bart's sole entryway was a thick double door of wood shielded by spells and bands of iron. Its open doors admitted outsiders to the trespass, a passage beneath murder holes, offering a wide short path to the second gate, a portcullis kept raised in peace.

Between the outer curtain walls and the high rising keep of the castle was open ground sufficient to fit several thousand men standing to arms. Lord Doneg's fighters alone could not occupy the entirety of it. However, the space would shelter peasants fleeing disaster or the king's troops marching to war, should the need arise. Today, this ground was playing host to a trade caravan.

An aviary crowned the keep. Screeches, squawks and dispossessed feathers drifted out through the windows down to the stables at the keep's base.

In front of the stables, there prowled Bart Castle's Master of the Stable. Iksub of Ples Leek was his name. He walked purposefully, hands tucked behind his back and clasping each other firm. His eyes came to rest on a scruffy looking youth leaning upon the wide open door to a stable, whistling a merry tune, apparently enjoying the sights and sounds of the caravan.

"Calgemo!" Iksub yelled, "Didn't I tell you to bolt these doors?"

The stable hand Calgemo ceased his whistling. Below a wild mop of orange hair flecked with golden yellow, Calgemo's grey eyes swung in Iksub's direction. "You did." Calgemo said, "But then I'd have to unbolt them every time a beast wanted in or was

leaving. Didn't think of that, did you?"

"Your laziness is no excuse. You wouldn't have to bolt them, if I could trust you to stop the caravan's scum trying to sneak in."

"Because nobody possessing a pair of hands can undo bolts." Calgemo believed sarcasm was a beautiful form of communication.

Iksub stared dumbfounded a couple of moments, he finally mustered a response: "The bolts would slow them down, more than you'd ever do."

Calgemo continued unyielding, "Because thieves are eager to get their hands on the treasure inside our stables; hay, saddles, poor beasts living a mount's life under a rider's arse. Oh, did I mention dung? We're guarding a king's ransom in dung."

And once they have their loot, we'd never shout for the portcullis to be dropped and the gates shut, can't imagine us being so rude. The men-at-arms crawling all over the castle would wish them a safe journey too."

"You're right, they wouldn't get past the druzhinniks. When a caravan is about, I don't fear the property placed in our charge being stolen, I fear it being eaten."

Iksub's words struck Calgemo as fairly odd, "Hold on, you think buggers from the caravan are going to break into the stables to eat *what*? Hay? Saddle and bridle? A mount?"

"Half a prized steed and a bespoke saddle, in one case from my first days here. Both of which belonged to Lord Ristiff of Mid Syher. The half a horse was a grisly sight. And Lord Ristiff was an angry one after he learnt of his loss. The steed was worth at least four gold doubloons. The saddle was a fine thing, a custom fit, velvet seat and silver embroidery. Had cost Lord Ristiff another whole doubloon."

Calgemo whistled his amazement and said, "There's a story my buddies won't believe."

"Can't trust the foreign sort." Iksub was glad he was getting through to Calgemo, "These trade caravans always bring some creature or trinket I've never laid eyes on before."

"I was talking about the saddle. I can understand hunger making a man do things, and it would only be natural for a monster, but that saddle's price can buy the comforts of rich living for a month."

Iksub's patience was stretched, "You are missing the lesson in this."

"I see your lesson and don't want to touch it. It's stupid. When saddle and horse eating fiends are creeping about, we should be getting out of their way not in it."

“Looking to lose your job? Filling your post would be too easy. There are plenty of commonborn youngsters who’d spurn their girls for a chance to work the stables of Bart Castle.”

“No my master! Don’t send me away! Since I was a little boy watching my father sew raiment in the comfort of his tidy shop, I’ve dreamt of the day I’d weary myself tending beasts in Bart’s messy stables.”

Iksub knew better than to take Calgemo seriously but he would accept what he was offered, “If you love your job, do it! Bolt these doors and stand guard.”

“Done.” Calgemo assured him, “Right after I see to the hussar coming in.”

Iksub turned around to inspect the arriving horse and its rider. The man was wrapped in a cloak rather discoloured from age and use. He sported a skull cap on his head, a round shield on his back, a sheathed sword on his belt, and a crossbow on his saddle. Much of the equipment was worn and scarred like its bearded owner. His steed was a reddish brown mare. Her master slowed her trot, guiding her to a halt next to Iksub and Calgemo.

“Hey ho!” the hussar began, “I’ve gathered news of the farthest reaches of Tarfelm, for the rana and his advisors. The journey has been tiresome. My steed and I desire rest and our bellies filled.”

“Don’t tarry, Lord Doneg awaits what you bear. He bid me to send you to him the moment we saw you.” Iksub said, “Calgemo of Mos Wren here will take care of your horse. Your own needs will be well met in the Great Hall, the lunch hour is soon upon us.”

“Duty beckons.” the hussar dismounted. He paused to sigh, “Always.”

He removed the saddlebags containing his precious cargo of sealed envelopes and scrolls. Calgemo rushed to assist the hussar in unbuckling the straps holding the bags, it was a chance to prove his dedication to work while doing very little work.

Saddlebags in hand, the hussar headed for the castle’s keep, escorted by the Master of the Stable.

Calgemo was thus left alone to manage a stable hand’s responsibility of feeding, watering and grooming the hussar’s steed. Determined to complete this task and enhance his reputation in Iksub’s view, he thrust his head inside a stable and hollered, “Pank Hit! Quit stacking hay, I’ve got a real job for you!”

A response sounded within the stable, “What are you yelling about? My shift’s near finished here and then I’m off to see Tellyn.”

“Not yet. We have a conundrum to solve.”

“What trouble have you stirred up now, Cal?” Hicussaw emerged from the depths of the stable, wielding a pitchfork, its prongs dangling loose strands of hay.

The blue haired and dark eyed young man Hicussaw had once been the boy Hicussaw writing letters on Gronks’ classroom field in the village of Pank Hit.

“You haven’t heard a word of my problem yet.” Calgemo narrowed his eyes, “Hasty to judge is quick to blunder.”

“In your case, it’s wise to accuse, judge and execute the moment you open your mouth. In all the time I’ve known you, I can’t remember a single day you weren’t up to mischief.”

Calgemo drew the hussar’s horse forward by her reins and stroked her mane, “Behold this splendid example of a steed. She has braved the many dangers of the road to carry her rider to this sanctuary. Now she stands weary and dirty, asking for your gentle care. Will you not grant her humble request?”

Hicussaw set the pitchfork down on the earth, prongs pointing skywards, “You’re supposed to handle this, aren’t you?”

“Come on, Hic. You love horses. Bet you know what breed she is too, the book you read taught you. What’s its name again? Equine Species And Their Characteristics, Volume 4 of A Compendium Of Domesticated Creatures In Central Selmarr?”

“No. The book is called Horsing Around, Part 4 of The Joke Is On Them: Critters Of Middle Selmarr That Aren’t Complete Monsters. Was a gift from an old friend. This mare is a Dakashian red, you know it as well as I do. We’ve seen many of her kind.”

“Leaving aside horse breeds and books on them, I say we swap our shifts. This steed is yours to tend, I’ll relieve you later when you don’t wish to labour.”

“Should Master Iksub learn you’re shirking duty, he’ll tell the druzhinniks to throw you in the dungeons.”

“Changing the hours is not avoiding the work. Besides, Iksub will be eating his lunch in the Great Hall, where men of his position deserve to be and should stay put. By the time you’re done and I’ve returned, he won’t find a clue about what we did.”

“Returned? Where are you going?”

“Bowlykd discovered a trickster amongst the new caravan’s crowd. The bugger shows his audience a trick, no magic, and asks them to bet how he did it. Good money to be won when you guess right.”

“Guess wrong and it’s coin lost.”

“Can’t pet a dog unless you brave its bite. I and Bowlykd and Jams plan to try our luck.”

“Numbers hold no strength for gambling. Just more money to lose.”

“Bowlykd’s seen one of the tricks already-a cure for an ache in belly or head. The trickster sticks a hand in a man’s mouth and pulls daggers out.” Calgemo performed the appropriate gestures so Hicussaw could picture the act. He shoved his fist in his own mouth and wiggled it a bit before removing his hand. “Bowlykd reckons he knows the secret to doing it.”

“You sure about this?”

“Sure as ogres are green!”

“They are?” Hicussaw asked.

Calgemo shrugged, “Blessed if I know.”

“Halfwit.” Hicussaw cussed. His tone was gentler though, “Cal, you know I’d never refuse a buddy, I would switch shifts with you in a blink of an eye. But Tellyn and I plan to meet for lunch today.”

“There’s always a girl, isn’t there.” Calgemo sighed. The orangehead suddenly brightened, “Wait, she’s no cork in our bottle. Our swap can go ahead, Tellyn comes down here and you two enjoy lunch while you work!”

“We’re looking to spend time together outside the stables! Far from the stink of dung and hay. We could try the caravan or a simple walk along the ramparts.”

“I offer you better.” Calgemo said, “Think on this! I’ll take a night shift off your hands and give you my lunch slot now. Means you’re free to court Tellyn when the stars are shining on the night stage.”

“Trading lunch for dinner?”

“More. Promise her something special. A real bed not a pile of straw. A chamber to yourselves, no hunting dark corners to share a tender moment alone. Fine wine encouraging your and her...*appetites*.”

“Sounds a fancy fantasy. Can you honestly supply such an evening?”

“I know people. I play the game of favours. Everything I said can be arranged in a few days.” Calgemo winked, his elbow nudged Hicussaw hard and repeatedly, “I think she’d like it very much. Would be very romantic, and could end very *pleasurable*. Hic, do you understand how sweet a deal I’m giving you?”

Hicussaw swatted away Calgemo’s elbow, he wasn’t dismissing the orangehead’s proposal though, it did flaunt definite attractions. Said Hicussaw, “I can almost taste it. Promise me you’re not lying, Cal, you really can fulfil this vision.”

“I swear on every bet I’ll ever make. May I lose coin down to my last piece of copper if I’m bluffing.”

“Tellyn should love it. Would be a great gift for her.”

“A night befitting a noblewoman! How could she resist?”

“Have you treated any of your women this good too?”

“My girls feel themselves a princess whenever we diddle.” Calgemo stated.

“What?” Hicussaw chortled, “Do they? I’ve near stepped on you and your girls aplenty, rolling in the hay and dark of our stables. You believe that a royal experience?”

“Like a princess under her prince. The act runs the same for all men and women once the trousers and skirts drop. You and Tellyn don’t do much different in the stables, I’m giving you the chance to change.”

“Why me and Tellyn? Why not a diddle mate of yours?”

“None of them can free me of my shift this noon and the four hours after.”

Hicussaw ceased delaying the inevitable, “Alright Cal. I accept your deal.”

Calgemo whistled in delight, “You won’t regret this, my buddy boy.”

“Seeing how I’m stuck doing your work, you pass the message to Tellyn why I won’t be sharing her visit to the caravan.”

“She’ll be thrilled about what your labour is buying her.”

“No. I want to spring a surprise. Tell Tellyn, another stable hand fell sick so Master Iksub dumped an extra shift on me.”

“Hmm. Abandoning your lunch plans at the last kurn could upset Tellyn. I’ll be the bugger talking to her, she might unleash her wrath on me.”

“I guess I could meet her, and you stable the horse Master Iksub assigned you.”

“Don’t trouble yourself Hic, I love listening to my buddy’s sweetheart ranting angry.”

“You’re not going to. Illness and Iksub are beyond my control, Tellyn will understand.”

“You know your Tellyn best I reckon. Time’s wasting, I shouldn’t keep a girl waiting clueless for a man who isn’t coming, or miss the start of my trickster’s show. Catch sight of you later.”

Hicussaw said goodbye, “Goodbye.” Then he added, “Calgemo, tame your tongue. Don’t say anything stupid to Tellyn. Don’t bend her off.”

“Me?” Calgemo started walking backwards, still facing Hicussaw, “I’m always careful.”

He spun around and quickened his pace in the direction of the keep’s entrance, leaving the hussar’s steed with the bluehead. Hicussaw took hold of the mare’s reins, “Hello girl. Let’s get you a drink and a bite.”

Hicussaw led her inside the stable and an empty stall she could occupy. The stall had a manger to hold the resident’s meals, into which Hicussaw’s pitchfork pitched hay. On the stall’s wall he hung a water pail, and the steed stuck her snout in it to quench her thirst.

Hicussaw removed her saddle and bridle, proceeding to ready a brush, a comb, a bucket of soap water, a sponge and a linen towel. He began at the steed’s neck, his hand moving the hard bristled brush towards her tail, dislodging the dirt caught in her thin coat of body hair. She was Dakashian. A light and sprightly breed, fast on her hooves, swift to turn and leap.

“Stop me if you’ve heard this one before.” Hicussaw addressed the mare, “Which breed of horse can jump higher than a castle?”

His hopeful gaze pressed upon her indifferent eye.

“All of them, because castles can’t jump. Funny, right?”

She pulled her upper lip back to reveal her teeth, an equine version of a laugh Hicussaw liked to believe.

Hicussaw settled into a rhythm. Draw the brush from the neck, across her coat, down to the rear. Draw the brush from the neck, across her coat, down to the rear. Draw the brush-the sound of dry straw being crushed beneath heavy boots broke the relative peace of the stable.

“Hicussaw the Dung Eater! Hero of the stables! What fantastic adventures have you

been on since we spoke yesterday?” Barnemit boomed.

Hicussaw ignored Barnemit, and continued brushing.

“Pardon me Hic.” Barnemit persisted, “I see you can’t be distracted from your dream job, wiping a horse’s arse. I put you on to it, didn’t I? When I gave you and Nolb your first taste of dung seven years ago.”

Hicussaw did not grab the bait. He would abide Barnemit’s presence in silence, he would not allow Barnemit to goad him into conversation.

“Perhaps you’ve forgotten.” Barnemit drawled, “But don’t you worry, I remember.”

“Nolb helped me win my pips. My *lieutenant’s* pips.” Barnemit extended his hand to his forehead, then paused, “Oops. Off duty. Not in uniform.”

He was currently attired in his ‘coms’, slang for commoner’s clothes a soldier threw on when he wasn’t expecting work or trouble (those two often did go together). He wore a short tunic belted at the waist and trousers, these were linen garments similar to Hicussaw’s, the standard for poorer males of Krit society. His leather jacket, boasting an embroidered collar and cuffs, evidenced his better finances. He had crammed his black curls under a cotton cap matching their colour.

Barnemit had grown wider, a seemingly impossible feat to the witnesses of his younger size, though not as much as he had grown higher. Naturally, the entirety of his mass appeared dangerous muscle to human sight. There was nothing soft about him, except his eyes, a mischievous twinkle lit them. His clean-shaven face grinned, “One fine tax day, Nolb’s folk were out of money and time. They did the same every fool thinks of, they ran. Didn’t get far did they, my boys were following them, and marking the way for me to find. I did what any loyal subject of a baron would, I led the druzhinniks straight to Nolb and his family.”

Hicussaw stiffened.

Barnemit leaned in close, leering at Hicussaw who was reaching for the water bucket. “Hic, you *can’t* have forgotten Nolb’s mother wailing, the whole family was dragged through the village square, or Nolb yelling the nasty hurtful things he thought I deserved.”

Hicussaw set aside his brush, he picked the sponge out of the sudsy water it had

been soaking in, and started rubbing down the steed's legs with the sponge.

Barnemit backed off in a somewhat thoughtful manner, "Of course, you, Hicussaw, don't hear news of them, which might be why you forgot. Not me, a druzhinnik buddy of mine, his inspection duty takes him to the Fam Say mining camp, where he spots Nolb's pretty sister and her kin."

Barnemit inserted a mournful note in his voice, "An awful fate Nolb's folk are suffering, digging deep in tunnels full of darkness and stale air till they drop dead."

"There's hope their story won't have a wretched end." Barnemit cheered up, "Nolb, his brothers and sisters could be released from the mines, after about, oh, twenty years, of back twisting unpaid labour to profit the noble lords they tried cheating of a year's taxes owed."

"Soon as the law deemed us old enough, me and my boys enlisted." a broad smile brightened Barnemit's face, "We became men-at-arms in the Druzhina, body and heart pledged to stop harm coming to our lord and our people. I showed Captain Keant I was the best fighter in the training yard. Even better, my deeds had reached the captain's ears already, he said the terrible trouble with Nolb's folk proved I was loyal, and smart to do what needed doing whether anybody was ordering me to or not. He awarded me an officer's rank. I guess good things do happen to good people eh?"

Hicussaw would not yield.

"I heard your father had a great harvest this year. Have you ever known him to sell part of his crop in secret, so no tax catches the coin?" Barnemit's voice turned cold, "My next inspection of Pank Hit, I ought to visit your father, official like a Lieutenant of the Druzhina would, to check if he's trading under a bridge."

Hicussaw resisted no more. He dropped the sponge. He pivoted to face his tormentor. His hands clenched into fists dripping soapy suds. Barnemit would have taken up the brush, a wooden handle was harder than a fist and dealing a blow with it wouldn't bruise the knuckles.

"Vomit your rubbish at me Barnemit," Hicussaw breathed, "but don't dare bully my family."

"Bully? We're very nearly brothers Hic, the both of us from Pank Hit, among the few who

escaped a miserable life in our petty little village. Here we are wagging tongues about old times. Shouldn't we look out for each other?" Barnemit's voice conveyed a comradely warmth, "I keep an eye on your sisters whenever I'm in Pank Hit."

Hicussaw gritted his teeth, "Don't you touch them."

Barnemit was incredulous, "*Me?* Diddling *your* sisters? They can't steal a kiss from a drunken farm boy and they won't win a wink from me. I don't desire your sisters, a Lieutenant of the Druzhina has better choices. I'll be protecting your sisters against the men they pick, the bad sort no other women would accept."

Hicussaw's voice sank to the low tone of a man struggling to stop himself shouting, "They don't need your protection. They have my brothers, my father, and me."

Barnemit laughed, "The brothers and father you speak of, they grovel behind my shield. I'm a Lieutenant of the Druzhina. They trust me to defend them in their most dire hour. You're a stable hand, not fit to serve a nobleman his meals. You couldn't even protect the horses you're paid a pittance to care for."

Hicussaw's eyes blazed a deep rage. His thin frame went rigid. He moved forward, poised to strike.

Barnemit smirked. Getting Hicussaw riled up enough to throw a punch was a favourite sport of his. He could deal the first blow himself, yet he preferred Hicussaw starting the fight. When Barnemit won, Hicussaw would be left counting bruises. He would also face, once again, his own impotence to fulfil his anger, how powerless he was to stop his tormentor. Barnemit loved it.

"I'm a stable hand and you're a druzhinnik, not a knight." Hicussaw's words flew hot and heavy, "They tested you, they saw you could hold a shield without forgetting to use your sword, but it wasn't enough. You weren't up to the *quality* of a knight. They wouldn't waste a horse and their most expensive armour on Barnemit of Pank Hit. Can't dream of crossing the sky on a griffin can you? No, too high for a man of your worth. You're the son of a peasant, common blood. No, you're worse. You were born a mad dog, chomping on any hand you could reach. Accepting a druzhinnik collar and a nobleman's leash doesn't change who you are. Doesn't matter how many people you step on, you won't rise above us. You'll remain a mad dog through the long years of your life."

That was how Hicussaw imagined it happening. And that was exactly what

happened, as he spoke the words on his mind. But Barnemit's reaction was not the stunned silence Hicussaw had envisioned.

Barnemit's fist bumped into Hicussaw's mouth. It was surprisingly gentle. Hicussaw, a veteran of Barnemit's beatings, fully expected Barnemit to say 'sorry, my hand didn't see you there'. Hicussaw cradled his sore jaw and gingerly touched a split lip.

Several of the riding creatures in the stable noticed the violence. The hussar's Dakashian snorted and retreated a couple of steps. A dire ram rapped his horns on his stall door, in a 'is it time to charge?' knock. An ostrich boomed a warning of danger and stuck her head in the straw, instantly vanishing from sight.

Barnemit rubbed Hicussaw's blood off his knuckles, a useless action simply transferring much of it to his other hand.

"Just a tap, you jinxed dung eater. It's time you learnt to show the proper respect to your betters." Barnemit was careful to not reveal his disappointment in striking first. He flexed his fingers and formed a fist again, "Lucky for you, I'm happy to teach."

Barnemit's world crashed to pieces around him. In a single moment, his strength drained away. His knees buckled as the ache in his groin swelled to a tidal wave of pain searing through his belly. Barnemit gasped for breath, fighting the urge to empty his stomach. His hands dropped to shield the delicates between his legs from further assault. He turned and staggered to the side, putting himself in position to keep both Hicussaw and his surprise assailant in view.

"You stayed on your feet." Calgemo sounded impressed, "And I've been practicing."

Calgemo's statement brought a gasp of incredulity from Hicussaw, "Wait. All those hours you spent kicking a pail off a stool, you were--"

"Practicing my crotch kick." Calgemo confirmed, "I told you this, why are you surprised?"

"I didn't think you were serious!" Hicussaw said.

"Cal-Calgemo, you remind me of your mother." Barnemit coughed, "She goes straight for the twig and berries too, but with her mouth."

Calgemo whistled, "Nice. Not the best I've heard, yet you can crack a joke after taking one to the berries. I would buy you a drink if we had a tavern or I had the coin to spare or I

wanted to buy you a drink.”

Barnemit lunged towards Calgemo, his right fist drawn back for a punch. Barnemit was much faster than what Calgemo would expect from a man of his size. Thankfully, Calgemo would have to be dead before he was slower than a recent victim of his crotch kick. He dodged Barnemit’s punch, his own fist ready to strike. Calgemo never got a chance, Barnemit immediately followed his original attack with a left uppercut. Calgemo fell back to escape, he barely made it.

Barnemit paused, coughing and wheezing. His hands remained balled into fists.

This situation greatly displeased Calgemo, Barnemit had plenty of fight left in him. A cheap shot like a shoe to the berries wouldn’t work a second time, Barnemit would simply dodge or even worse, catch the foot.

“How are you still standing?” Calgemo demanded, frustration and disbelief plain in his voice.

Barnemit didn’t care to answer. Waves of pain were wracking him both below and above the waist. Not vomiting took nearly the whole extent of his willpower. Where the jinx were Woss and Dafred? He had left those dolts outside the stables to watch for people wishing to get inside, stop who they could, and warn him of anyone they couldn’t. The two of them together should have been able to handle such a simple task. He had received not the slightest indication Calgemo was entering the stable, until he had felt it in his berries.

Wham! This time, it was a bucket filled with soap water against the back of his head, knocking his cap off, courtesy of Hicussaw. Never should have turned my back on him, Barnemit thought as he stumbled forward, dripping and reeling, less a coherent thought and more a pang of anger really. Calgemo had been waiting for just such an opportunity. He sprang into action. Despite suffering a pail to the head, Barnemit didn’t fail to notice Calgemo’s foot rise toward his groin. He sidestepped the kick, half turned to bring both his foes into his line of sight again, and put up his fists. Barnemit placed his rear against a post between stall doors. He wasn’t taking the risk of exposing his back.

Barnemit was glad Hicussaw didn’t have the sense to dump the bucket *on* his head, blinding him and allowing Calgemo’s kick to hit home. He suspected the bucket bash had broken skin and drawn blood, he couldn’t check of course, confirming it would boost his

foes' morale.

Barnemit managed to sneer through his pain, "You horse diddling runty little rat wimmies only fight dirty. Throw a punch at my face like a man!"

"Go down when you get kicked in your berries, like a man!" Calgemo said, "Then we'll punch you in the face."

"One versus two. The both of you pulling every cheap shot you can." Barnemit said.

"Sure. I'll take those odds." Barnemit bared his teeth in a grin, "Come try me."

"Whether you're ready or not." Calgemo said. "It's time you learnt the stables are our territory, and you should stay out."

"No Cal. We don't want a fight." Hicussaw chose to be sensible, "Barnemit, you started this. You can end it. Walk away. Just leave, we won't stop you."

"Tell me I heard wrong." Calgemo asked Hicussaw, "Did you say we're letting him leave safe from the justice of our anger? We're not giving the jinxbait the thrashing he deserves?"

"Well, not in so many words but yes."

"The gods weep! What is wrong with you? We have him cornered. This is our moment, to avenge every time he's-"

Barnemit drove into Calgemo, who had made the mistake of shifting his eyes to Hicussaw. Barnemit's fist connected with Calgemo's face, breaking the orangehead's nose. His next punch went for Calgemo's ribs, Calgemo fell on his arse upon the straw strewn ground.

Hicussaw swung the bucket in wild panic. A single huge hand of Barnemit caught the pail mid-air. His cold gaze locked with Hicussaw's eyes in a moment of frozen time. Then Hicussaw was returned to normalcy by Barnemit's fist in his gut. Hicussaw's knees buckled. Holding Hicussaw up by the bucket which he would not relinquish, Barnemit hit him again beneath the ribs. Hicussaw crumpled to the earth even as Barnemit pried loose the pail from his desperate grip.

Barnemit swiftly returned attention to a dazed Calgemo. He grabbed Calgemo's bright hair and forced his head, blood running down from a busted nose, inside the

bucket. Barnemit shoved Calgemo's enholed head backwards, landing him flat on his back.

Barnemit opened his mouth to laugh his relief and triumph at the world. He relaxed, unfortunately for him, this granted the pain he had been blocking an opportunity to assert itself. The ache in his crotch hit a high note, expressed through Barnemit moaning in agony instead of laughing in joy.

A groaning Calgemo lashed out with his legs in the direction of Barnemit's moan. His shoe struck Barnemit in the calf, making the big man stumble. Barnemit almost fell to his knees, almost. Rising to his feet, Calgemo yanked the bucket off his head and flung it at Barnemit. Barnemit grunted as it bounced off him.

"Jinx you, you slaving mad dog!" Hicussaw abused as he stood up.

Barnemit withdrew once more to a secure position. He had established a kind of balance in this conflict, Calgemo and Hicussaw were hurting like he was now. He did regret not kicking the pair of them in their berries, but his own condition between the legs had made even the thought of performing a kick a little too painful.

Shoes crunched straw. All eyes swung to the stable entrance, and a reed thin youth walking in. Barnemit recognized the newcomer with his black and white hair, he was another stable hand and friend of Hicussaw. The prospect of fighting three men while his groin was in recovery daunted him. What the jinx was happening? Had Dafred and Woss simply wandered away, allowing anyone to come and go as they please?

"Jams! Where's Maksyer?" Calgemo called out to the blackhead stable hand.

Jams offered no reply, his widening hazel eyes were busy taking in the scene in front of him.

"Is he talking to Barnemit's buddies?" Calgemo asked.

"He-he's not done." Jams said.

"The gods weep!" Calgemo wiped the blood off his mouth with the back of his hand,

"Jams, I told you to get him in here quickly!"

Maksyer? The name rang warning bells in Barnemit's head. Maksyer of Sod Tin, the leading knight at Bart Castle. Not *that* Maksyer?

“Cal, what are you raving about?” Hicussaw seemed to voice Barnemit’s concerns.

“You know.” Calgemo muttered out of the corner of his mouth, so only Hicussaw would hear.

“Know *what*?” Hicussaw was considerably less quiet.

“Maksyer said he wanted to ride his steed after lunch. We had to make the beast ready, how could you forget?” Calgemo answered.

Bad, bad, bad. Barnemit’s mind spun. To hear rumours about a particular druzhinnik lieutenant harassing the castle staff was quite different from witnessing it happen. Hearsay could be ignored, the act staring you in the face could not. Knights tended to be fond of the creatures they rode into battle, and the caretakers who kept them fighting fit. Maksyer could hardly be expected to forgive Barnemit attacking stable hands in charge of his steed. Maksyer’s disfavour could kill Barnemit’s career, maybe even have him demoted to the rank of a common druzhinnik.

On the other hand, what would this scuffle look like to fresh eyes? Three stable hands ganging up on a noble Lieutenant of the Druzhina while he was off duty, unarmed and unarmoured? If he was careful, Barnemit could swing this whole affair to his advantage.

The crazed storm of thoughts in Barnemit’s head was broken by Hicussaw’s next words, “You can’t be serious.”

“What do you mean?” Calgemo was confused.

Hicussaw explained, “Maksyer said nothing of the sort you’re implying.”

“Uh, yes he did.” Calgemo insisted.

Hicussaw shook his head. “No, Cal. I see your ruse. But it won’t work, Barnemit’s too smart. You can’t trick him into fleeing.”

Ruse? Wait, what? Barnemit’s mind struggled to wrap itself around this development. Calgemo was lying, the jinxbait was trying to scare him so he would leave. Made sense. But why would Hicussaw betray Calgemo’s lie to Barnemit’s ears? How would it benefit Hicussaw?

“What the jinx is wrong with you?” Calgemo yelled at Hicussaw, “You know I speak the

truth!”

“Jams, why must you always fail!” Calgemo vented on Jams, “Are Woss and Dafred stalling Maksyer?”

“Barnemit!” Hicussaw captured Barnemit’s attention. “Calgemo is lying to you. You know it. Bends you off, doesn’t it, makes you very angry. But don’t go pouncing on him and Jams. I’m the one you really want.”

Hicussaw stamped the ground and flung his arms wide open, “Here I am. Let’s finish today’s spat and we can all go on our way.”

Barnemit was utterly confused. He didn’t have the slightest idea who was honest and who wasn’t. He had to make a decision fast though. This situation was becoming too dangerous, too great a risk to bear. Any moment Maksyer could walk in and-

“Bless your wimmy!” Calgemo ejaculated, “Hicussaw of Pank Hit, I’ve guessed your game! You’re plotting to have Maksyer watch Barnemit strike us with his own knightly eyes! You’ve got Barnemit in the pot and now you want to close the lid.”

The jinxbait! Barnemit screamed in his head. Wait again, did this mean Calgemo was on Barnemit’s side now? Jinx everything!

“There’s no need.” Calgemo continued, “Maksyer is right outside. Barnemit isn’t escaping blameless and unhurt this time.”

Said Hicussaw, “If Barnemit leaves now, he’ll see you’re lying. He’ll come straight back, with Woss and Dafred, to beat the piss out of us.”

“Well...” Jams began his piece hesitantly.

“Shut your bread-holes, the lot of you!” Barnemit commanded.

He was alert to the fact his foes would try a surprise assault should they suspect he wasn’t on his guard. He bent low to retrieve his cap, dusted it off, removed a few loose strands of straw, and placed it on his head snugly, taking a moment to adjust the fit. All the while keeping his eyes on the three stable hands. There was one way to resolve the present conundrum. Barnemit realized. The weakest link in the chain of stable hands, under a little pressure, it would snap to yield the truth.

He watched this link’s eyes dart from Calgemo to Hicussaw, noting their injuries

and unsteadiness on their feet, then to Barnemit's calm assured disposition. Barnemit appeared slightly dishevelled, he may not have even been brawling. The link was afraid. Good.

"Jams!" Barnemit addressed the link, "Your buddy Hicussaw, he eats shit. Calgemo, he talks shit. And you, your face looks like shit! The three of you together aren't stable hands, you ought to be called the shit hands."

So Shit Face, tell me, is Maksyer really strutting around out there? Are my buddies buying me time to get away? If you lie to me, I will remember. When you are alone, apart from friends to protect you and witnesses to hear you cry for mercy, I will find you. And then. I. Will. Hurt. You."

"N-n-no!" Jams stammered in a rush to reply. "Maksyer's not there. Calgemo was trying to scare you off."

Calgemo's face was aghast, "Jams, no!"

"Where are my boys? Dafred and Woss?" Barnemit pressed on, "Why didn't they warn me about you jinxbaits?"

"They...um..." Jams looked to Calgemo first then Hicussaw.

"You only need to look at me." Barnemit's voice was deadly cold.

"Don't say another word!" Calgemo instructed as he charged Barnemit.

The lieutenant was prepared, though his smarting crotch made him grimace with each blow he dealt. Calgemo ducked to avoid Barnemit's right hook. The full force of Barnemit's left fist rammed into his belly, sending him to his knees. Barnemit's next punch struck Calgemo on the left temple, leaving the orangehead sprawled unconscious. Barnemit was on top of the situation again.

"Cal!" Hicussaw moaned, "Why'd you have to be so stupid?"

"Dafred and Woss!" Barnemit repeated to Jams, "What's happened to them?"

"Tel-Tellyn. Hicussaw's gir-girl." Jams was visibly shaking, "We went to the kitchen to give her a mes-message from Hicussaw. She accompanied us back, to share Hicussaw's lunch in the stables. She's flirting with your friends. Let us slip past them."

Barnemit directed his murderous gaze at Hicussaw, "Your sweetheart is out there with my

boys. And no Maksyer to save the four of you. I should bring her here. She can watch what I do to you for today's trouble, or better yet, you can watch what I do to her."

His purpose determined, Barnemit strode towards the stable entrance. Hicussaw didn't even try to stop him, he simply stood in a defeated silence. Jams was incapable of any action or thought beyond 'don't invite Barnemit's wrath'.

Once through the stable doors, the first thing Barnemit noticed was the sunlight, his eyes needed a brief moment to acclimatize. The second thing he noticed was the attractive young woman speaking to Woss and Dafred in their coms. The sweet timbre of her voice, the melody of her laughter and the warmth of her smile seemed to drift over.

Her skirt hid her legs, her blouse gave no impression of curves and the colour of her raiment would catch no one's eye. Her hair she allowed to fall free in long tresses of darkest red. Her cheery face could brighten a man's gloomy day, and make him dream about the rest of her in her naked glory. She played a smile on her lips, teasing the same from Woss and Dafred. A basket hung on the crook of her arm. While the threesome bantered, Woss and Dafred took turns tearing shreds off a haunch of chicken with their teeth and taking swigs from a jug of ale. Food, drink and the company of a pretty girl. Most men would ignore the world if they had these three.

Barnemit saw that her smile did not reach her green eyes, they held a certain careful reserve. He couldn't help but imagine they were simply waiting to burst into vivacious life, perhaps in Hicussaw's presence.

The whore. Barnemit thought. *Hicussaw's whore*. She was distracting his boys, entertaining them, granting Calgemo and Jams the opportunity to pass them unnoticed. Well, he would make her provide a lot more entertainment. His fingers curled, yearning to lay upon her soft flesh with all the tenderness an enraged bull extended to a child in its path. She would learn to piss herself in fear at the very idea of meddling in the affairs of—"Barnemit of Pank Hit? Lieutenant, what were you doing in the stables?" Maksyer of Sod Tin enquired.

Sweet unicorn farts! Between the appealing sight of Tellyn and blinding rage at Hicussaw's friends, he had completely missed the knight on his far left. The one who could destroy the future he had laboured to build in the Druzhina. Jams had lied! The wimmy sucking jinxed skunk haired coward had the courage to hide the truth from him!

Maksyer was clad in coms under a ceremonial breastplate. A sword rested elegantly in the scabbard suspended from his belt. He was a man whose headstrong youth was transitioning smoothly to purely strong middle age, not too far below the peak of his physical condition. His yellow hair flaunted a fringe of greenish strands. Nestled between his lips, a pipe sent grey fumes twirling into the air.

“My knight, what a pleasure to run into you.” Barnemit wore his best smile. He approached Maksyer to make conversation easier. As he closed the distance, the pleasing acrid scent of tobacco wormed its way into his nostrils.

“Were you up to no good in there?” Maksyer asked.

“Where?” Barnemit faked confusion.

“In the stables.” Maksyer removed the pipe from his mouth to point it in the direction Barnemit was coming from.

“Haha. The stables? Haha. No, my knight.” Barnemit attempted to laugh the question off.

“I’ve been hearing nasty rumours about you, Lieutenant.” Maksyer stuck the pipe back in his mouth and sucked a draw, “Was meaning to have words with you on the subject.”

“Exactly what things?”

Maksyer puffed smoke, “You’ve made yourself a horrible bully to the peasant folk of Bart Castle.”

“Not true, my knight.” Barnemit began his defence. “Slander is a sport to these buggers, their babble is not worth your ears.”

Maksyer held up a hand. “I understand. Big man from a small village. You’ve got a bit of power now and you want to show these lowly scum their proper place.

Here is what *you* must understand, Lieutenant. These common wretches cook our meals, wash our clothes, saddle our steeds, polish our steel and take out our shit. They’re everywhere. We need them to think well of us. If we don’t treat them fairly, the hope of revenge and profit could drive them to treason and thievery, rebellion and spying. They whine and moan about their fortune in life as it is, we must not give them reason to betray us.”

“Of course, my knight.” Barnemit didn’t bother taking the time to contemplate Maksyer’s words. He was focused on appeasing his superior, “Your wisdom is flawless, I’ve much to learn from you.”

“Indeed.” Maksyer puffed, “What were you doing in the stables?”

Did she just wink? Did the whore wink at Barnemit? Barnemit had a good view of Tellyn, she had positioned herself with cunning, her front towards the stable doors. To face her, Dafred and Woss had turned their backs on the stables. They couldn’t see Barnemit but Tellyn could, she could see him watching her, she knew he knew her act, she knew he knew she knew, and she knew he was helpless under Maksyer’s gaze. Woss and Dafred, those rock-brained dolts still hadn’t noticed him and Maksyer conversing. How stupid could they get?

Barnemit was unsure how he should answer Maksyer’s question. How much truth was there to Calgemo’s claims? Were Maksyer to enter the stable of Barnemit’s brawl now, he would find three stable hands, two of them looking very bruised and battered. Did Maksyer have plans to be inside the stable or would he check anyway to confirm whatever Barnemit told him?

“Lieutenant.” Maksyer interrupted Barnemit’s thoughts, “I do not enjoy repeating myself.”

“Er...nothing, my knight. What brings you to this spot?”

Maksyer’s expression indicated surprise at Barnemit’s query, “Waiting. I wish to take Bloodlust for a jaunt.”

Bloodlust was the name of Maksyer’s steed as Barnemit recalled. “Why waiting?”

Maksyer spoke freely, “Finishing my smoke. Straw might catch a fire from a lit pipe. Those sort of things can’t be brought into the stables. The Master of the Stable forbids it. In the dark of night, only stable hands can carry lanterns in there. Observe how easily I answer, Lieutenant, this is another lesson you ought to learn. I have yet to hear your reply to my question.”

Jinx it. Chance the risk, play the game, always go for the upper hand. “I was attacked.” Barnemit said, “In the stable, not a few moments ago.”

“What?” Maksyer paused to comprehend Barnemit’s statement. “Who would *dare* attack

you? You're a monster in a druzhinnik officer's uniform! I wouldn't try you unless I had a sword in my belt and a knighthood to my name."

Which was precisely what he had, Barnemit noted. "Hicussaw of Pank Hit, Calgemo of Mos Wren, Jams of Bart. They possess a savage malice."

Maksyer passed a critical eye over Barnemit, "Your hair is wet. Looks to be soap. Clues of a bath not a fight."

"I beg to differ, my knight." Barnemit raised his hand to the back of his head. His fingers dove into the curls and came up with a slight but unmistakable smear of blood. Thank you Hicussaw for your bucket bash! Barnemit wished he could shout it aloud.

"I could squeeze more blood from a pimple." Maksyer was not impressed.

Barnemit bit back 'I can crush more out of your berries' and instead said, "The blame falls on them for trying, there was no lack of effort on their part, I'm a hard man to hurt."

"I don't doubt you are." Maksyer puffed on his pipe in thought, "I know the men you say attacked you. They seem as fair as the next man you'll meet in our little corner of the world."

"They are clever to match their cruelty. They take care not to offend the wrong people."

"Perhaps." Maksyer held out his pipe and flipped it, emptying its bowl in a shower of ash and a few smouldering flakes. "Let's settle this then, dally not a moment more. I shall be the judging eye of the king's law today. I must myself inspect the scene of such outrage against an Officer of the Druzhina. To the stables we go, Lieutenant."

No! Barnemit had just put some meagre distance between himself and those jinxbaits in their jinxed stable. He cried unseen in the confines of his heart. He didn't want to go back. Not back there with dung eater, crotch kicker and skunkhead. Maksyer tucked his pipe into his belt and turned towards the stable doors. As Barnemit accepted his fate and made to follow, he caught the uncertainty on Tellyn's face. Barnemit ensured he was displaying every sign of confidence, even throwing her a wicked grin. He wanted her to believe he was in control, that her beloved Hicussaw and his friends had bought more trouble than they could afford.

Shoving aside the hesitation in his mind, Barnemit stepped boldly inside the stable behind Maksyer's confident stride. The pair advanced through the dim light, down the

wide aisle with stalls on either side, amidst the odd noises the occupants made and the native scents of dung and hay. Calgemo was conscious, his head in his hands, resting his arse upon the ground. Jams and Hicussaw were standing over him. Jams spotted Barnemit and the knight first, “Welcome my knight!”

Barnemit watched Hicussaw’s eyes look up and find him, he read the challenge in that gaze and answered with his own hardened stare. Calgemo saw the entrants. He cussed and, grasping Hicussaw’s offered hand, pulled himself to his feet. Hicussaw spoke, “My knight, you have the monster in your custody, to deliver justice I hope!”

Barnemit’s violence had left its bloody marks clearly visible on Calgemo and Hicussaw. Maksyer addressed them, “Did Lieutenant Barnemit do this to you?”

“Yes my knight.” Hicussaw answered.

Calgemo was more vehement, “Right you are, my knight Maksyer!”

“In defence of my own person!” Barnemit protested, “My knight, do not forget these madmen tried to ambush me!”

“What the jinx?” Calgemo’s anger exploded. His ruined nose continued trickling blood down the lower half of his face. “You started it, you freak! You punched Hicussaw, talked about laying on a serious hurting! So I kicked you in the man-sack! Didn’t make a difference to a freak with berries made of iron!”

Barnemit winced. He could still feel the orangehead’s shoe.

Maksyer ignored the drama. He proceeded straight to one of the stalls. The war horse reposing in it picked up Maksyer’s scent on approach. A Zalifinaki thoroughbred, black of hair and hide, nickered in greeting and thrust his great maned head over the stall door. Maksyer caressed Bloodlust’s brow warmly.

“A commoner assaulting a druzhinnik officer is against the king’s law.” Maksyer stated in a calm tone.

Yes! Barnemit wore his glee on his face.

“The law does forgive commoners for resisting and reporting those druzhinniks failing their duty, betraying their sworn masters or causing harm to the kingdom in some other manner.”

Barnemit's face fell. The gods weep!

"Bloodlust is not ready?" Maksyer asked.

"No my knight." Hicussaw explained, "We had no time. We were busy being thrashed by Barnemit."

"True." Maksyer considered, "Barnemit's lack of discipline has prevented you from performing your job. Is this the case, Hicussaw?"

"Yes my knight." Hicussaw agreed.

"They lie!" Barnemit spat, "They sprang a trap on me. They're using me as an excuse."

"Lieutenant, today your vile habit of needless fighting has hindered me and my steed in our training. Tomorrow, you could spoil our chances for victory on the battlefield."

"You cannot believe these rogues." Barnemit insisted.

Maksyer thought differently, "It is your story that stinks of rubbish, Lieutenant. My own eyes have witnessed Calgemo and Jams entering this stable, but not you and Hicussaw. You must have already been inside. How could these stable hands ambush you when two of them weren't there?

Or is Hicussaw alone your attacker? Perhaps the Druzhina should expel you and recruit him given the bravery you claim he has. What Calgemo and Jams could have done is rush to Hicussaw's rescue, and shielded him from your fists with their faces.

Hicussaw is of the same village as you Barnemit. Word reached my ears you've been giving him trouble, an old feud begun when the pair of you were idiot boys."

"My knight, it is he who strikes first." said Barnemit. "Others have seen-

"You're not in some petty bumpkin village anymore. This is Bart Castle, you are expected to conduct yourself in the manner of a druzhinnik officer not a bullying brat on a peasant's farm."

"Forgive me, my knight." Barnemit squeezed out through gritted teeth, "I am not the one at fault here."

"We shall see, Lieutenant." Maksyer pronounced his decision, "I will speak to Captain Keant on this matter. To judge whether you deserve to remain a lieutenant or even a

druzhinnik, you will stand trial. A trial at which all those who dwell in Bart Castle will be free to speak for you or against you.”

“My knight, please have mercy.” Barnemit pleaded, “If I am in the wrong, this is merely a question of discipline. Surely it doesn’t merit a trial.”

“I don’t wish to waste more of my time on this subject.” Maksyer said dismissively, “Has Lieutenant Barnemit left any one of you stable hands in working condition to prepare Bloodlust for a ride?”

Jams became uncomfortably aware of Maksyer’s gaze focusing on him. Since he had not participated in the action, Jams appeared completely unharmed, better off than Barnemit, which he was.

“I-I will take care of it, m-my knight.” Jams stuttered. He hurried to fetch a saddle and bridle.

Barnemit bowed to Maksyer, “I hope the trial proves my innocence to you, my Knight Maksyer. I cannot endure a rare and noble man like yourself thinking poorly of me.”

Barnemit departed the scene, reining in his emotions the whole way. He made a point not to look in the direction of Hicussaw or Calgemo. He didn’t want to see the triumph on their faces, or maybe they would be mindful of Maksyer and hide their joy at Barnemit’s disgrace. Didn’t matter, he didn’t want to see them. As he exited the stable, his measured steps broke into angry stomps.

The sun hit him again with the happy brightness it had no reason to flaunt. Griffins shit on my head! Barnemit was convinced this was the worst day of his life.

Knights! Barnemit hated the mention of them, a perennial reminder of what he was owed and denied. It should have been him, in plate armour on a steed. It should have been his, the right to marry a noblewoman and wriggle into the ranks of the ruling class, granted to the commonborn knights.

He heard a laugh. He heard *her*. Tellyn of Dos Agg. The girl who had spread her legs for the jinxbait dung eater. She was a part of them, the enemies seeking to destroy him, they who had succeeded in putting his future on trial. And *she saw him*. Tellyn was watching the stables, she saw Barnemit emerge and the rage contorting his expression. She knew in an instant that things had gone badly for him in the stable with Maksyer.

Barnemit thought he could feel the smile she was using on Woss and Dafred turn into genuine delight.

How dare she! His boys would have warned him about Maksyer had she kept her pretty face and laden basket away! He marched right up to them, his buddy boys and Hicussaw's jinxbait lover.

"You worthless halfwits!" Barnemit roared, "For a kitchen maid and her treats you abandoned me to a knight!"

Woss spat a mouthful of ale he had just taken while Dafred almost choked on the chicken strip he was chewing. Both spun around and gave space to Barnemit treading between them.

"Did either of you spot Maksyer of Sod Tin having a smoke or Calgemo and Jams slipping by you?" Barnemit demanded.

"What? When?" Woss wildly looked around for the men Barnemit was naming.

"Barn! We were talking for only a moment!" Dafred claimed.

"My lieutenant, I accept the blame." Tellyn spoke up, "I was enjoying the conversation with your friends so much I simply couldn't let it end."

Tellyn's boldness infuriated Barnemit even more, "Hold your tongue, whore. Or I'll hammer your face crooked, you'll be talking through the corner of your mouth for the rest of your life."

Tellyn moved closer, well within the reach of Barnemit's deadly fists. She said, "We're on open ground. Touch me and my screams will draw Maksyer from the stable, if not half the druzhinniks from their posts. Do you want to be caught molesting a kitchen maid?"

Barnemit could say nothing. He hadn't expected her to poke holes in his threat and make all the menace leak out, reducing it to a sad empty husk.

"Didn't think so." Tellyn walked around him. She stopped and turned her head to meet the gaze of Dafred and Woss, "Bye boys. It's been fun. Keep the food and drink."

There was a pause when her eyes shifted to Barnemit, "You can do better than him."

"No they can't!" Barnemit yelled after her. She passed into the stable, beyond his sight, perfectly safe from his strength he couldn't use.

He vented on Woss and Dafred, “You dolts can’t do better than me! You can’t even keep a watch to save your buddy!”

“We were just having a little chat.” said Dafred.

“We didn’t reckon she was looking to distract us.” said Woss.

“Why else would Hicussaw’s diddle mate talk to you? She was playing you buggers.”

“Well, we *are* brave young druzhinniks.” Woss spoke his mind hesitantly, “A girl could find that charming.”

EEAAARRGH! Barnemit screamed inside his head. He suppressed the urge to punch Woss in the face and knee him in the berries. Thrashing those he relied upon the most wouldn’t win him their loyalty.

“Tellyn won’t spread her legs for your charm.” Barnemit explained, “She loves sucking the wimmy of the jinxed dung eater who hates you.”

He continued, “You’re brave because I fight by your side. You’re druzhinniks because I led you to enlist. Your young lives have lasted this long because I’ve taken care of you. Everything you are, you owe to me.”

Barnemit snatched the jug of ale from Woss and put it to his lips, tilting his head back he drained the contents in one go. There wasn’t enough ale left to intoxicate him properly or even dull his anger.

Dafred showed initiative. Casting aside the nearly completely devoured chicken leg, he said: “Hicussaw, Calgemo and Jams are all together. We should go in there and beat the piss out of them.”

“No. Maksyer is in there now.” Barnemit sounded frustrated, “Haven’t you been listening to me? The way you two stand guard, all of Bart could be in the stables this very moment and you’d be clueless.”

“So,” Woss pondered, “we lost, Hicussaw and his buddies won?”

“They think they have.” Barnemit answered, “Maksyer condemned me to a trial, where every twerp we’ve bullied can have their whining heard.”

“What do we do?” Dafred asked. “Tell us your plan Barn and we’ll do the rest.”

Plan, plan, plan. Barnemit closed his eyes and tried to clear his head. He didn't have a single idea how to get free of this mess but he needed one and fast. He couldn't think straight though, any attempt to reason was being drowned in a sea of anger. Hicussaw and the stable hands, Maksyer, Tellyn, even his own friends. Every one of them had done their part in crugging him good and proper. Jinx Hicussaw, jinx Maksyer, jinx Calgemo, jinx Jams, jinx Tellyn, jinx Dafred, jinx Woss, jinx Captain Keant who held power over him, jinx the knights above the druzhinniks, jinx the nobles who ruled them all, jinx the whole world.

Barnemit had to calm down before he could think up a solution. Revenge. That was the first step. He would scratch the itch.

Tellyn of Dos Agg. Her ploy of distracting Dafred and Woss was the chief cause of his present predicament. He had to make her pay, had to make her regret acting against him. If his vengeance was severe enough, he might even cow his foes into silence at his trial.

For the first time since the day's debacle began, he noted the crowd and clutter of the merchant caravan plying its wares at Bart Castle. The parked wagons and carts, the beasts bound to draw these vehicles, the individuals flocking around them-the entirety of this lively scene had simply faded into the background.

Merchants and nobles strolled around, scouting business opportunities and fine luxuries. The caravan also attracted Bart's labourers and soldiers, eager to spend their free time and spare coin. The little travelled residents of Bart were lured to this splash of exotic sights, smells and sounds. Fragments of intelligent conversation, persistent bargaining, idle jabber and the noises of caravan animals cavorted in the air.

"Find me an alchemist." Barnemit commanded his friends and subordinates.

"Um, there's Master Hillmit." Dafred pointed out.

"You know him." Woss said, "We've been to his laboratory in the Northeast Low Tower. Do you want to visit him?"

"No, not Bart Castle's Master of Potions. The caravan must have an alchemist with it." Barnemit said.

"But Master Hillmit serves the rana and his potions are free of charge to us druzhinniks."

Dafred explained the advantage.

“Hillmit will concoct for us only what we need for duty or to heal wounds we suffer on the job. Worse, he is certain to report our requests to Lord Doneg himself.” Barnemit elucidated the disadvantage.

“This is secret.” Woss understood.

“An alchemist from the caravan will speak of our business to no one.” Barnemit said.

“More importantly, by the time my deed is done and questions are asked, he’ll be long gone.”

“Is this the plan?” Dafred asked. “This has to do with the plan right?”

“Yes.” Barnemit said. “Now bring me an alchemist. Mind your words, he must not know we’re druzhinniks.”

The duo dispersed to fetch their friend his alchemist. Barnemit watched them disappear into the caravan, wondering whether they were capable of the subtlety he had ordered them to practice, or would they crug this up too.

The members of the caravan were drawn from races and countries near and far, both the familiar and the unheard of, their differences reflected in the myriad sizes and designs their vehicles were built in. Provisions for a long journey, various trade goods, magical items and novelties were either being loaded to go or unpacked with sellers and buyers haggling over price. Somewhere in the throng was the man Barnemit needed. The man who could help him put Tellyn in her proper place beneath his boot.

His eyes went to the stable entrance where last he had seen Hicussaw’s diddle mate. She would suffer the punishment due to her. Soon. Sweet unicorn farts! Soon Maksyer would emerge from the stable riding Bloodlust. Barnemit did not relish the prospect of facing Maksyer again. The previous encounter had pushed him to the brink of ruin. Barnemit was tottering on the edge, unprepared to survive the trial. Far worse, exacting vengeance upon Maksyer seemed impossible. He had no means of hurting the knight. He was truly at Maksyer’s mercy. It was the kind of position Barnemit hadn’t had to endure in years. One reminding him of weakness, of his own vulnerability to the vast cruel world. He did not want to face the notion.

Barnemit slunk into the caravan, passing several scenes where other people’s lives

and stories were playing out.

Here, a brown haired Lanishman was excitedly demonstrating a fire starting wand to an individual hooded and cloaked in mud stained green: “You’ll forget what flint and a tinderbox are!” (This was babbled in some foreign tongue Barnemit couldn’t comprehend)

There, a fat blue goblin was commenting on the rings in a tray a young nobleman was examining: “Eight hundred year old dwarf gold set with an exquisite three boro ruby.” (Barnemit knew Lolbol, a language that evolved along the trade routes of Selmarr)

A satyr with a long braided beard was flaunting her, probably his, spread of silks before a small collection of women: “Touch it for yourself, it feels like heaven between your fingers.” (Heavily accented Krit speech to Barnemit’s ears)

Barnemit was fleeing the very sight of a knight. How he hated them, those jinxbait knights! Barnemit fumed silently. There they were, enjoying the privilege and authority he deserved, had earned. He could have-should have been one of them, just one stupid noble wife short of joining the barons who ruled Kritland.

“We found you!” Woss announced.

“Why’d you move?” Dafred asked.

Barnemit ignored their queries, “Did you find me an alchemist?”

“Yes.” Woss beamed in triumph.

“Faster than I would expect from you two.” Barnemit observed the fact they were alone.

“Where is he?”

“He wouldn’t come.” Dafred said.

“He told us to take you back to him.” Woss added.

No respect for a Lieutenant of the Druzhina, Barnemit thought bitterly. Then he remembered, assuming his friends had obeyed him, the alchemist wouldn’t identify his customers as druzhinniks in their coms.

“He doesn’t know we’re men-at-arms in the Druzhina.” Barnemit said.

“We didn’t speak a word of our positions.” Dafred assured him.

“Fine.” said Barnemit. “Show me where.”

They did. The twosome wove through the mass of creatures and vehicles, leading their lieutenant to a wagon of a size exceeding the average Krit peasant’s house. The wagon was constructed of hardwood, the roof sloping to the left and right, and was mounted on huge wheels appearing worn yet sturdy. A chimney on the top vented a thin column of purple smoke which dissipated into the air. The wagon’s sides were pockmarked with scratches, dents, nicks and chips but nothing had penetrated the whole depth of their thickness. In the front was a closed window and in the rear a door, both were scarred to a greater extent than the rest of the vehicle. A brace of poles protruded from under the window, bereft of the driving beasts that should have been harnessed there.

Around this conveyance paced a huge naked brute, slightly surpassing Barnemit’s height and almost as broad as the wagon itself. Barnemit was surprised how gently it treaded on feet literally crude sledgehammers. The thing lacked genitalia, and nipples too. A craggy hide glinted grey over the massive muscles of its torso and arms. Each bulky arm ended in claws resembling blades. Its beady eyes were the burning red of coals in a furnace. The bald scalp gave rise to the curved cutting edge of a crest similar to an axe. This creature appeared unnatural, possibly supernatural, likely fae.

“What is this monster before me?” Barnemit enquired.

“NameisSnah.” the monster answered for itself. It spoke Lolbol in rapid guttural bursts, its words melding together. “Youthebigman whowantstobuypotions?”

“What?” came Barnemit’s response.

“He asked whether you’re the one buying potions.” Woss intervened helpfully, “I think.” Thinking back on what he had heard, Barnemit saw how Woss could reach a conclusion. He asked Snah, “You’re an alchemist?”

“No!” Snah barked happily. “Imbadatmagic. Verybad.”

Woss reacted to the stunned expression on Barnemit’s face before it could become anger. He said to Snah, “Hey! You told us you had every potion we could want!”

“YesbutI dontbrewthem.” Snah said. “Mymasterdoes.”

If he concentrated, Barnemit could just about distinguish Snah's words. He said, "Your master's an alchemist?"

"Yes he is very good at magic."

"Then I'm here to meet him. I have a special request to make." Barnemit's calm tone visibly relieved Woss and Dafred, they did not wish to get in trouble again so soon after Tellyn.

"Right ho." Snah proceeded to the wagon's door. He tapped on the door with his blunt knuckles in a specific rhythm of long and short knocks.

Bolts were heard sliding back and the door swung open. Out stepped a rather large individual whose sixteen rit tall frame towered over Barnemit's eleven and a half rits. The man was clad head to toe in colourful lengths of cloth, a flannel scarf wrapped around his head left no slit for eyes to see through. His exposed hands were pale, fat, sporting filthy black fingernails and extremely wrinkled skin.

"Zlusch, son of Resiak, at your service." the man said. At every word, the scarf creased, which Barnemit suspected was caused by fleshy folds underneath it quivering as Zlusch's mouth worked to speak.

"I smell soap strongly and blood faintly." Zlusch turned to Barnemit, "You are wounded."

"Less than a prick. You speak Krit well." Barnemit remarked on Zlusch's absolute lack of a foreign accent. "For a troll from North Selmarr."

"Elixir of Tongues." Zlusch explained, "Proof of my skill, as is Snah here."

"Snah? What do you mean?" Barnemit did not understand. Considering how the day had been crugging him thus far he thought it wise to fear the unknown. Faint tendrils of pain from his man-sack were curling around his stomach, a reminder of the devastating surprise Calgemo had inflicted earlier. Barnemit's alarmed gaze leapt to Snah, whose gleaming fanged grin offered neither comfort nor a hint.

"I'm sorry." Zlusch spoke, "Of course you haven't heard of his kind. Tarfelm is rather rustic among Kritland's provinces, ignorant of the world and ignored by it for the most part."

"Whatever strange race or fae breed your servant is, I can't grasp how it's any of your

work.” Barnemit stated irritably, “Unless a potion you brewed shifted his shape to his present monstrosity.”

“I made Snah in a cauldron using a formula of my own invention.” Zlusch boasted. “He is an ironskin homunculus.”

A homunculus! Barnemit could see Woss and Dafred were as awestruck as he was. Before this encounter, none of the trio had met a homunculus or an alchemist possessing the expertise to create one. They had heard of such beings yet nobody was prepared to come face to face with the stuff of stories.

It didn’t take Barnemit long to compose himself though, “I know of homunculi, your work is too sloppy to recognize. Your homunculus can scarcely talk.”

“Yousaybad thingsaboutme?” Snah moved menacingly close to the lieutenant. Dafred and Woss tensed, they lacked confidence their unarmed selves could battle a monster. Barnemit gazed upon the dagger-fangs Snah bared, he felt Snah’s hot iron scented breath on his face. The lieutenant did not budge in front of those powerful arms and claws capable of tearing him to shreds in the blink of an eye.

“Youinsult themaster?”

“Snah has little use for speech.” Zlusch said, “Snah, do not frighten our customers.”

Hearing his master’s command, Snah voiced a parting growl and fell back to a non-threatening distance.

“I concocted him to guard my home on wheels and pull it on the road.” Zlusch continued, “A purpose he fulfils without complaint from both him and myself.”

“So you say.” Barnemit said, “You should leash your pet monsters.”

Zlusch expressed his annoyance in the usual troll fashion of a loud disgusting snort. “If you’re here to mock and not to buy potions, I should return to my cauldron and let Snah do as he pleases with you and your friends. I count my moments dearly, you’ve wasted quite a few of them.”

Snah barked his eagerness.

“You’re right. We should stick to business.” Barnemit ceased his confrontational attitude, he approached the alchemist. “I have come to you because I need a little...” Barnemit

leaned close to Zlusch and lowered his voice, "...something something."

"Go on." Zlusch said.

"I prefer privacy to discuss this matter." Barnemit motioned towards Zlusch's wagon. "In there would be fine."

Zlusch agreed, "Very well. Only you, your friends can wait outside. Snah shall keep them company."

"You heard him boys?" Barnemit raised his voice.

"We'll be waiting on your word." Dafred acknowledged for himself and Woss.

"Good." Zlusch beckoned Barnemit to follow, and the lieutenant obeyed.

"Your name is?" Zlusch asked as he entered the wagon.

"Hicussaw of Pank Hit." Barnemit replied behind him.

"Welcome to my home and laboratory, Hicussaw of Pank Hit." the alchemist announced. He spread his arms wide in a grand gesture, "Take a gander at the amazing array before you."

Barnemit had already, and he had been impressed, with the mess. Rows of shelves jostled for space on the walls. Loading the shelves were all manner of vessels from tiny vials to sizable jars. Alchemical apparatus littered the floor; alembics, tubes and stirrers odd in contour and stretched in length. Of these containers and instruments, some were transparent and some were opaque, some were crafted of common glass and metals, some of materials alien to Barnemit. The vessels' contents were roots and herbs, powders and chunks, fluids and gases, and far stranger substances. Short desks and stools stood low amidst the jumble, bearing papers, scrolls and books, many of which were stained or partially charred.

Barnemit had to watch where he put his feet while the huge Zlusch deftly maneuvered through the clutter. How was the troll doing this? Barnemit wondered. Troll sight was known to be near blind, explaining why Zlusch had forsaken and covered his eyes. Barnemit could imagine the superbly keen troll nose sniffing its way around a forest or a city, but it couldn't allow Zlusch's steps to be so unerring, could it? In the air hung the pervasive odours of alchemical potions and their ingredients, though sealed

vessels cooped up most scents. Was Zlusch relying on a flawless knowledge of the chaos in his home or was this magic like his linguistic skill?

Occupying the central space was a cauldron, brimming with blue froth and puffing purple smoke into the chimney above. Barnemit's gaze pursued the smoke and spotted a straw mattress in a harness attached to the ceiling, probably lowered by a tug on a rope hanging down. Zlusch slept there? How the jinx did it support a troll's weight? More magic?

No flames were visible under the cauldron. The vessel's grimy metal was cold to Barnemit's touch. His hand lifted and hovered over the edge of the cauldron's bubbling blue surface, he felt the warmth of a boiling temperature. A magicked tool, enchanted to heat what was placed within it. He knew of similar items. Good. One less question bothering him, he couldn't ask any lest they confirm his 'rustic ignorance' to Zlusch. Barnemit didn't wish to appear a country bumpkin some world trotting alchemist could cheat.

"Alchemy, is a meticulous sorcery, its practice an art that tires patience." Zlusch launched his much rehearsed speech, "The ingredients are rare to find and expensive beyond belief, to say the least. Their proportions in the mixture must be perfect, the brewing can last years for the most potent elixirs-"

"Have mercy." Barnemit interrupted him, "My time is precious too. Just show me what you have to sell."

"Right ho. Here I present to you, the Recuperative Potion. A vial poured on your wounds can mend a broken bone or torn flesh in an hour. Take a flask and a day, and you could regrow an arm and a leg." Zlusch waved his hand at one shelf or a bunch of shelves, Barnemit wasn't certain.

"Magic to turn defeat into victory." Barnemit commented. "Regrettably, not what I seek."

"Victory? If you're planning on a battle, you must carry a Regenerative Potion. It may heal less and cost more than a Recuperative but it works in mere moments."

"No. I need a little something to melt the face off a certain someone." Barnemit clarified.

"Oh." said Zlusch. Barnemit could swear the fresh pattern of creases on Zlusch's scarf represented a grin underneath.

“This is not my first revenge plot.” Zlusch began rummaging among the shelves. “How deeply did this certain someone hurt you? To merit their faceless death.”

Barnemit was not interested in divulging the details. “Do you want my reason or my money?”

“No cause to get cranky, I didn’t mean to offend. A burden shared is lighter on the shoulders and the heart.”

“A Tincture of Dissolution.” Zlusch dangled a small, slim glass tube containing a translucent green fluid. “All you have to do is throw. Let this smash open upon your victim and it will melt through skin, cloth, metal, but leave the bare bone.”

“Perfect.” Barnemit found himself mesmerised by the play of light and shadow through the emerald green potion. Such a deadly beauty, an exquisite weapon. He could see endless possibilities through the magic. The power to change the world, to change his life...

“In Krit coin, thirty pieces of eighty an ampoule.” Zlusch interrupted Barnemit’s reverie.

Eighty copper cents to a silver reale and seventy reales to a gold doubloon. The gods weep! The troll was setting a price of thirty silver pieces.

On a lieutenant’s salary, Barnemit had saved thirty-seven silver in two years. One little ampoule of acid would eat the majority of his carefully hoarded coin. Bart Castle was ridiculous, revenge on a pisswet girl would cost him terribly. Pank Hit had been simpler and cheaper.

“Don’t count out your money yet.” said Zlusch, “Today has a special deal, hard to believe how much you will save on this.”

What? Barnemit thought. Did the troll notice his customer’s hesitation? Would the alchemist recognize his mistake of overcharging? Or was the initial high price merely a trader’s ruse, to convince buyers they were winning great value on the lower true price?

Continued Zlusch, “Two more silver on any purchase gets you a kit belt to carry your potions too, as long as I have kit belts to spare.”

“You’re trying to rob me.”

“If you think the price of my sorcery unfair, or my generous offers not up to your

expectations, you are free to make your own potions.”

“Can’t alchemists conjure gold? Why take my money?”

Zlusch laughed dryly, “Were I to charge a single copper coin to answer your question every time somebody asked, I wouldn’t need to concoct gold. Digging gold out of the ground is far cheaper than brewing it.”

“I’m not wasting this amount of coin on a single ampoule.”

“I don’t believe you can afford anything more. Although there is a way to break down the walls of wealth.”

Despite Zlusch’s accusation of poverty arousing his anger, Barnemit was aware he had to be calm and reasonable, his future depended on it. “What do you speak of?”

“You can borrow.” Zlusch said, “I have an arrangement with a generous banking guild, who would agree to pay me on your behalf. You only have to sign a contract and grant me a few drops of your blood.”

“My blood?”

“To cast a spell tracking you, a guarantee the bankers can collect their money. The contract is clear; no blood, no loan.”

Should the alchemist be questioned, Barnemit had intended Hicussaw would bear the blame, but magic didn’t care about names, his blood would lead a hunter straight to him. “What are the terms of the loan?”

“The next time I meet my bankers, I shall hand them your contract and blood, and I will receive my coin. You must return to them a fixed portion of the loan every year, plus a little extra in interest. The contract has the details.”

“What happens if I fail the yearly payments?”

“The answer is between you and those you owe.” Zlusch’s vague answer did not surprise Barnemit.

King’s law protected the obligations of written contracts. Older druzhinniks had tales of assisting money lenders in collecting a debt. Supposing Barnemit didn’t gather the coin to settle his dues, his creditors could sell him as a slave or to magickers desiring fresh bodies for purposes better not imagined. Fleeing was not the smartest thing he

could do; the creditors would recruit mercenaries to hunt him down.

“Fine.” Barnemit decided, “I want a loan I’ll be repaying a long time.”

“A lifetime?” Zlusch thought himself funny.

“Ten lifetimes. What do you have to place me in so much debt?”

Zlusch chuckled, “Are you trying to beat my joke?”

“Are you saying your goods aren’t worth the gold? I see no other joke here.”

Zlusch gave Barnemit a long, shocked, silent stare. Barnemit waited patiently. The troll used his voice, “Hicussaw of Pank Hit, have you lost your wits?”

“Great destinies are born when ambition rapes opportunity.” Barnemit’s face broke into a broad grin, his brown eyes burst into a fierce joy. His ambition had spotted opportunity, and would leave her flinching at the wind’s caress.

Zlusch admitted he was afraid to his own heart. To Barnemit he said, “That adage is new to my ears.”

“New to everyone’s ears, I just thought it, said it first in the world. Zlusch, son of Resiak, your customer seeks to fatten your purse, and you insult him? You may be a troll but your nose can’t pick up the scent of business.”

“You grumble at a paltry thirty reales. I doubt you can repay the amount you wish to borrow.”

“My doom is mine to seal, not yours to fret about.”

“True.” Zlusch paused to ponder, “The bankers will squeeze their money from you, you can be sure.”

“You’d be a wise man to seize this chance, better yet, you’d be a rich wise man.”

“I am paid no matter your fate. I won’t resist my profit.”

“We have a deal.”

“Will you draw your blood or would you rather I do it?”

“Wait. Do you have any items worth the money?”

Zlusch froze in astonishment. He finally snorted, “You demand a loan beyond your means. And now you refuse to spend it.”

“No, I’ll buy your best. Healing or melting is common stuff, I seek different and rarer magic.” Barnemit’s eyes roved over the products on display, “Do you stock potions a man can think up interesting uses for?”

Zlusch snorted again, “Choose your favourite trick, you’ll find it in my stock. Farsight, Tongues, Steel-”

“Put them on my list.” Barnemit bid him, shopping was fun.

Chapter III

Lord Doneg could not believe it. This could not happen. Impossible, it had to be impossible. Kryter's the son! He was a baron in his own castle with men-at-arms awaiting his orders in corners he didn't even know the place had. Yet here he was facing his end with no rescue coming. Several of his household servants were present, and druzhinnik soldiers too. They were silent spectators. Was it fear that rendered them unable to move or even whisper encouragement? Was it the horror of witnessing their noble lord driven to so pathetic a doom? Or was this what they desired, were they secretly hoping their master fell this day?

Sicper was the name his dear mother had conferred on him at birth. A name he had carried proudly through childhood and long after, a name under which he had studied languages, history, numbers and the doctrines of warfare and governance. The name he had rarely heard since his father's expiration passed onto him land and title, making him the Lord Doneg, Rana of Tarfelm.

Still he had not let slip the discipline he had been taught early in life. In younger days, he had trained vigorously in the techniques of combat on foot and on the back of horse and griffin. Despite long years in the security his high position provided, he was careful to grab an hour of practice every day.

Doneg had worked to maintain his level of fitness and skill, and his efforts had shown in the current conflict. He had executed the form of his fighting style perfectly. Not one mistake. He had made the prodding strikes with little power to gauge his opponent's reflexes and strength. He had conserved his energy for pouring it into decisive blows. He had observed his foe's moves, attacking every opening he spotted, never missing an opportunity. He had blocked and countered when he could.

None of his stratagems could save him from being beaten. The worst aspect of this horrid fate was the enemy himself, a commoner from whose hands Doneg could not bear to receive defeat. There was no hatred or joy in the foe's brown eyes, only a cold determination to see this through.

Doneg stood on the verge of utter crushing defeat, his enemy had pushed him to the edge like an unstoppable flood sweeping away all before it.

“It’s finished.” the opponent said, “Give up, and I’ll award you a swift end.”

“No.” Doneg gritted his teeth, “Surrendering to a foe in *my castle* while *my men* draw breath would reduce me to the joke of the nobility.”

“You think too greatly of my victory. With your skill, defeat must be no stranger to you.”

“I ought not to allow you speaking with such freedom in my hall.”

“I take your kindness, my rana. I hope you forgive me for this, but you have made a grave folly, and now I must punish you for it.”

The opponent made his move, a precise strike that forced through a vulnerability in Doneg’s defence and destroyed his vitals. The match was over, Doneg’s challenger had won.

“You surprise and entertain me, Master Wilup.” Doneg remarked.

Wilup of Mos Wren, the Master of the Library, bowed his head. “Thank you my rana.”

“Never fail to do so.” Lord Doneg examined the board of the tabletop game *Turns of Strife*, appropriately placed on a table, in search of clues to where he had gone wrong.

Doneg was dressed in the fine garments of the Krit affluent. A sleeveless surcoat split open in the front, over a long tunic, belted together at the waist. Breeches and stockings. All sewn from vibrant cottons and silks in contrast to the dull linen of the peasants. Doneg’s plain features were planted on a broad rectangle of a head topped with hot pink hair.

“It is my honour to entertain you, my rana.” Wilup said. He was garbed in the ankle length trousers and the shorter tunic of commoners, with an expensive sleeveless surcoat.

Doneg corrected him, “I was speaking of your gratitude.”

“Ah yes, I won’t forget.” Wilup performed the stiff smile of men who didn’t have the option of disagreeing, or so Barnemit thought.

Lieutenant Barnemit and his underlings Woss and Dafred were observing the whole affair. They had been assigned to guard the rana on this leisurely afternoon, and await any orders he had for his druzhinniks.

To complete the account of the varied attire present at the scene, Barnemit and his

buddies were in uniform during their duty hours. Each wore a tabard embroidered with the Doneg coat of arms: a white arrow striking the point where the tails of five sinuous black snakes entwined against a green background. Underneath the tabard was a hauberk of chain mail worn over a padded gambeson. A one-handed sword rested in a sheath attached to the belt. The nasal helmet was so called due to the protective strip of metal it extended down along the nose. Barnemit's rank was distinguished by the insignia on his helmet. Above his eyes was displayed a bronze badge, cast in the shape of a heater shield, a tiny sword of a line engraved horizontally across it.

Wilup and Doneg were seated beside the unlit fireplace of Bart Castle's Great Hall. Their table was just wide enough to lay a game board or a pair of dishes across it, a diminutive size compared to the long tables the hall housed. At mealtimes, many of the more privileged members of Bart's garrison would be seen eating and drinking here. While the long tables for commoners like masters and druzhinnik officers were supplied with benches, the one for nobles and knights boasted exquisitely carved chairs.

Daylight streamed in through tall narrow windows. Tapestries covered the bare space on the walls. They depicted glorious moments from myth and history; battles and adventures, births and coronations, miracles of magic and virtue.

Wilup started to re-arrange the playing pieces on the board. He paused to confirm, "Another game, my rana?"

"You may set the board. This time I shall play the Sky Lancers army."

A haughty voice rang out, "Dearest Sicper, your favourite brother-in-law is here."

Doneg looked in annoyance to the direction the words came from. Striding into the hall was a nobleman, judging by his apparel, flanked by his armed and armoured bodyguards. Barnemit stepped forward with Dafred and Woss matching his moves. He positioned himself between the newcomers and Doneg, but off to the side so Doneg's view would not be blocked.

Barnemit studied the surprise guest's escorts. One was druzhinnik, a lieutenant's rank on his helmet, clad in chain mail and tabard bearing his lord's coat of arms: a sword pointing its slender blade downward and its hilt sprouting a rose upward, red weapon laid upon purple. The other he recognized to be a mercenary, from the Chu Ko Nu companies dreaded throughout Central Selmarr. There was no mistaking the distinctive garb.

Armour consisted of breastplate, shoulder plates and long-tailed sallet helm. A skirt of leather lappets hung from his waist, a holster strapped to his back held a repeating crossbow and a bandolier slung across his chest was filled with ammunition magazines for the weapon. The purple of his visible tunic sleeves and trousers was the only concession made to the colours of his noble employer.

“Lord Anrieslem of Brin Dank.” Wilup acknowledged the source of the voice.

Doneg did too in his own way, “I am Lord Doneg to you, Festo. Your manners befit a commonborn pig herder. I shudder to think you are noble blood.”

“Likewise, Lord Doneg, your taste in dress shames all of Tarfelm.” Festo, more politely Lord Anrieslem, riposted. The non-noble observers could discern no difference in the clothing of the two barons.

The yellow haired Baron of Brin Dank was taller and younger than the Rana of Tarfelm. He sported a rather charming boyish face, a smile that promised good times, and deep violet eyes a girl could lose herself in. Those were not the reasons he was wed to Doneg’s youngest sister. The marriage had been arranged by the previous Lord Doneg in the hope of ending the rivalry with the House of Anrieslem, who accepted the proposal as it strengthened their right to claim the rana’s title should the men and women of the Doneg family prove too incompetent or too dead.

“What brings you to Bart?” Doneg asked.

“Am I to be questioned for visiting the brother of my beloved wife? Though age has wearied you and I still bask in the strength of youth, our hearts are bound by the closest bonds of friendship.”

“Are you going to vex me with your useless prattling? Or do you have a favour to request of me?”

“Lord Doneg! Your rude demeanour distress me. I will not tarry long, I wish merely to share a bottle of cider and a few laughs.” Anrieslem shook the aforementioned bottle grasped in his right hand.

Doneg opted to discuss work, “Lord Anrieslem, I was hoping you had come to gloat over your successful handling of the disappearances in your domain.”

Doneg’s hope surprised Anrieslem, “The what now?”

“Eight boys and five girls missing from your territory, is it not your concern to investigate the matter?”

Anrieslem’s eyes would have sprayed Doneg with arrows if they could, “I see your spies keep you well informed of the happenings in Brin Dank.”

“My spies bother little with your failures, they have darker and better hidden secrets to uncover. The taverns and inns of Brin Dank are bursting with talk of these troubles.”

“My lords, should you want the table to yourselves, I can offer Lord Anrieslem my chair.” Wilup spoke timidly.

“Please do.” Anrieslem commanded.

“Yes my lord.” Wilup stood up in obedience.

Doneg didn’t share his brother-in-law’s view, “Please do not. Lord Anrieslem shall soon be off to manage his affairs, and we will continue our games.”

“Yes my rana.” Wilup sat down in obedience.

Anrieslem glowered at Doneg. Doneg was flaunting his higher rank by dismissing Anrieslem’s order to a commoner.

“My earnest efforts have been put into the investigation,” Anrieslem returned to the pertinent topic, “it is ongoing as we speak, nothing more can be done. I have ordered my druzhinniks to search for the vanished little ones and offered a ten cent reward to anyone who has seen the unfortunate missing children. Chu ko nu have been hired to patrol the streets after dark.”

“Expensive mercenaries only to do a druzhinnik’s job? Seems a complete waste of money. Speaking of which, I heard the reward was fifty pieces of silver.”

“It was. When half the city claimed to have spotted the lost children, I thought it prudent to lower the reward.”

“Apart from the knowledge that money for talking lures liars, did you learn anything?”

“A great number of sightings and clues were reported, my druzhinniks are pursuing each one to discover which will lead us to the children.”

“I would think none of them will.”

Anrieslem ignored him, “At the moment, I suspect a wicked fae or a gang of kidnappers seeking ransom are to blame.”

Doneg said, “The fae is more likely. The amount of time that has passed with no demand for ransom would clear kidnappers of blame in this case.”

Anrieslem wasn’t finished playing detective, “We cannot forget we could be reading too much into this. The four disappearances may be completely unrelated, each a separate and baffling mystery in itself. In this world, you cannot throw a shoe without it landing on a ravenous beast, scheming villain or mad magicker.”

Seated in his chair, Doneg reached down and took off one of the fashionable shoes that had cost him twenty-five silver apiece, exposing his elegantly embroidered sock priced at three a pair.

Anrieslem was piqued, “We are in the safety of Bart Castle. You can hardly expect to find enemies here.”

Doneg raised the shoe with care, and hurled it at Anrieslem. The Baron of Brin Dank wasn’t prepared. The footwear projectile struck him on the shoulder. His bodyguards’ hands snapped to the handle of crossbow and sword, Barnemit and his comrades readied to draw their blades.

What the jinx was Doneg thinking? Barnemit was furious. The repeating crossbow was a weapon of mass slaughter, capable of cutting down a horde in a relentless hail of bolts, emptying its magazine into them before it had to reload. Doneg’s three druzhinniks, swinging swords and lacking shields, would have to charge the enemy through chu ko nu fire, an idea Barnemit found extremely unappealing.

He could see the crossbowman already had a magazine loaded in his repeater. At this short range, the low power repeater bolts could just about pierce chain mail, a scratch from them could confirm the chu ko nu’s deadly reputation for poison. Barnemit took a step back, leaving Woss and Dafred slightly in front of him. The moment the shooting started, he could duck behind one of his friends. Moving under the cover of a soon-to-be-lifeless corpse, he might reach the chu ko nu and strike when the mercenary ceased fire to replace a spent magazine. Of course, Barnemit would have to dodge the Anrieslem druzhinnik’s sword when he did so.

“The gods save us!” Doneg exclaimed, “I have hit a scheming villain!”

“Lord Doneg!” Anrieslem’s face contorted in rage.

“You must be a scheming villain. The body of the first to vanish has been discovered, drained of blood along with life. Why did you not mention this to me?”

“I do not wish to cause a panic in Brin Dank. That is why the news has not been announced to the people, of course your spies have already delivered it to your ears. My Master of Spells is studying the slain child’s wretched corpse for anything we can use to track the murderer.” Anrieslem’s eyes flashed anger yet his voice was calm.

His bodyguards and Doneg’s druzhinniks watched each other tensely, neither was willing to draw their weapons first. Though the chu ko nu had the advantage in the hall, the Anrieslem fighters knew escaping alive from Bart Castle was impossible once hostilities began. However, both groups didn’t want to be slow to attack if the situation deteriorated to violence.

“The bloodless corpse and the victim’s virgin age point to one creature known for such gruesome deeds.” Doneg said, “Your Master of Spells is a practitioner of blood magic, is he not? The same magic this evil creature is birthed from.”

Doneg was talking about the vampyre, Barnemit realized. From the stories surrounding the monster, Barnemit remembered that the vile vampyre gained power upon consuming the blood of a virgin. It would take an army to stop the blood sucking abomination if it bled enough virgins dry.

“Yes, it is true.” Anrieslem admitted, “The skills and knowledge of my wizard are perfect for the purpose of hunting vampyres. Most truthfully, I contracted the service of the chu ko nu to help him destroy the monster.”

“He would be less than keen to destroy an abomination he created.” Doneg remarked.

“My choice of those who serve me can be trusted. Master Rollted has no hand in this vampire, except in what will be its deserved death. I did not leave Brin Dank to listen to your slurs against me and the men loyal to the House of Anrieslem.”

Doneg had no interest in not offending Anrieslem, “Then you should have stayed in Brin Dank, instead of abandoning your realm to a vampyre on the prowl.”

“I see now my mistake in looking for advice and friendship in your castle, Lord Doneg.” Anrieslem spoke stiffly, “I shall return to Brin Dank, to my mansion and the pleasurable

company of Lady Anrieslem. Your sister sends her fondest regards.”

Anrieslem turned his back on Doneg and departed swiftly. Taking their hands off their weapons, his bodyguards followed. Their exit saw Barnemit release his grip on the handle of his sword, Dafred and Woss relaxed.

“You, fetch my shoe.” Doneg barked at one of the servants.

The attendant, thus far performing his proper role as a mute bystander to a confrontation between nobles, was startled into action. He quickly retrieved Doneg’s shoe and replaced it on the rana’s extended foot.

“My rana.” Barnemit said. “May I speak freely?”

“Why not?” came Doneg’s permission.

“This vampyre is a danger to the whole of Tarfelm, not just Brin Dank. Shouldn’t we help Lord Anrieslem in the hunt?”

“A noble quest to save the province.” Doneg was amused, “Who should I dispatch on such a grave errand?”

Barnemit was about to volunteer when Doneg spoke. “I see your ambition. You desire to slay the vampyre and earn a hero’s name.”

“In your service, my rana.” Barnemit affirmed.

“Certainly not. We almost had a battle in this very hall a few moments ago.” Doneg did not consider it relevant he himself had triggered the armed standoff. “Were I to send troops to Brin Dank, Anrieslem would forget the vampyre and spend his men fighting me.”

Barnemit didn’t give up, “We can’t let a monster of the vampyre’s strength stalk unchecked in Tarfelm. Do you truly have faith in Lord Anrieslem to conquer this menace?”

Doneg turned his eyes upon Barnemit, it was a gaze held steady by the authority of a rana who had been working his job for years, and perhaps by a sense of familiarity having seen such aspiring heroes in the past. The lieutenant did not shy away from Doneg’s stare.

“You are Barnemit of Pank Hit?”

“Yes my rana.” Barnemit was glad the rana could remember his name. It was a good mark for his career.

“The same lieutenant soon to face a public trial under Knight Maksyer and Captain Keant.”

“Yes my rana.” Barnemit wasn’t certain how to react. The rana knew him, good, for being a troublemaker in the Druzhina, bad.

“What are you accused of?”

“Conduct unbecoming an Officer of the Druzhina. Indiscipline endangering the servants of the rana. Indiscipline hindering the training of a knight.”

“You might lose your lieutenant’s rank or you could be expelled from the Druzhina.”

“Yes my rana.”

“Do you believe you have earned the right to challenge the quality of a baron, which Lord Anrieslem is?”

“My rana.” Barnemit decided he would not concede. He chose his words carefully, “I think I am free to share my fears for Tarfelm with the Rana of Tarfelm.”

“Then you raise the right question before the right nobleman.”

“Thank you my rana.” Barnemit was relieved, “My trial will draw forth all the scoundrels of Bart Castle, I’d be at the mercy of their slander. It’s my hope that hunting a vampyre will prove my worth to the Druzhina and spare me the trial.”

“Your honesty is charming after Lord Anrieslem’s deceit.”

Barnemit bowed his head, “My rana, I am forever grateful for your goodwill. We must act to guard against Lord Anrieslem’s failure.”

“In matters of such importance, I must confer with those whose skill and experience I can rely upon, not some rogue druzhinnik who attacks my servants and annoys my knights. In my benevolence, I spoke with you today, a favour you do not merit.”

Never trust a nobleman’s kindness to last, Barnemit told himself. “You are right, my rana. I was too bold, forgive me.”

“Be gone now.” Doneg dismissed Barnemit with a task, “What you have heard here, pass

on to Knight Maksyer, Captain Keant and Mistress Estka.”

“At once my rana.” Barnemit said. The lieutenant promptly pivoted and exited the hall, Dafred and Woss tagging behind him.

Doneg’s attention went back to the game board. Wilup noticed, “New game, my rana?”

“Yes.” Doneg replied, “Sky Lancers.”

Hicussaw sucked in a lungful of air. It was the simple things in life he enjoyed. Tasty food, strong drink, a warm bed, the smell of a woman. Well, one particular woman. She was intoxicating; steak, cheese, onions, potatoes, pie, honey and a medley of other aromas she was intimate with...the scent of a kitchen maid. She made him hungry, for a good meal, and herself as dessert.

“Ready for another round?” Tellyn asked. She lay beside him under the quilt.

“I wish I could stay.” Hicussaw sighed. He curled his arm around her, drawing her close. Their lips met in a tender exchange of warmth, touch and saliva. There was a tacit understanding; Hicussaw stifled the ‘ouches’ from the pain on his still healing lip (jinx you Barnemit) and Tellyn paid no heed to the swollen condition of the mouth she was kissing.

Hicussaw slowed the kiss and gently pulled away. “Sorry Tellyn. But I have to go.”

“You say Calgemo is tangled in some shady business again. That’s all in an ordinary night for him.”

“This time the trouble could be very bad. And he’s dragging Jams along.”

“What’s Calgemo doing, and what are you going to do?”

“He’s plotting to steal something he shouldn’t even be looking at. I’m going to stop him.”

“It’s his concern, not yours. You don’t have to meddle.”

“He didn’t have to kick Barnemit in the crotch, but he went ahead and did what was needed.”

Tellyn laughed, “I asked him to, in a way. Calgemo, Jams and Bowlykd were still near when I was bringing your lunch, I spotted Barnemit’s buddies on guard outside the

stables. Bowlykd said it wasn't his problem, he ran off into the caravan, but Calgemo and Jams wanted to help. While I caught the eye of Woss and Dafred, I told Calgemo to stop whatever nastiness Barnemit was up to inside the stable."

"Thanks, you saved me."

"Thank Knight Maksyer. He put the sword of justice to Barnemit's neck. That monster won't come after us now, he'll be too scared of running right into the blade. Which means, we don't have to worry about Barnemit watching our every move or lying in wait. We're safe unless we make terribly stupid mistakes. Calgemo's smart enough to take care of himself. Jams too I'm sure. Can't you sleep in with me tonight?"

"You know I have to go."

"Would these convince you to stay?" she cast aside the quilt, granting him an enticing view of her bosom.

"You're making it hard..." Hicussaw began.

Tellyn grinned.

"...to leave." he finished the complaint. The fact he had spent his vigour not two kurns earlier helped him resist temptation.

"Crush my hope, why don't you."

Hicussaw swung his legs off the cot and thrust them into his braies, a loose-fitting undergarment reaching from waist to knee (of similar length to the breeches the wealthy wore on the outside), followed by his trousers.

"We do owe Calgemo tonight." Hicussaw softly reminded her.

They were in a cellar of Bart Castle. This was where the rana stored his alcohol. Ale, mead, cider, wine, rum and more exotic drinks could be found in bottles on the racks and barrels on the floor. The cot and a table had been brought in especially for the lovers. The table held a pair of plates littered with crumbs, bones and other signs of a meal devoured. Two empty clay goblets and a half full bottle of Lord Doneg's finest wine stood on the floor next to the cot. There was a gentle flickering light, performed by candles burning down to stumps of deformed wax on the table. It was possible to call the atmosphere romantic, ignoring the musty air and the squeaking of rats.

The important thing was that Hicussaw and Tellyn were alone together this night, a rare and precious luxury to a stable hand and a kitchen maid who usually slept in their place of work.

“Hmmp. Calgemo arranging this makes you and him even. If you hadn’t agreed to swap work shifts, Barnemit would have never accosted you in the stable.” Tellyn watched him put his tunic on, she was facing his back yet she had little trouble imagining the cloth descending over the hair on his chest, those soft blue curls she loved running her fingers through.

“Then Barnemit would have never riled Maksyer and suffered a knight’s wrath. He would still be free to torment us all.”

“True.” she conceded. “I just wish we could stay here longer. You *have* to let me blame Calgemo for taking that from me.”

“Hey.” Hicussaw said, “What creature always sleeps with its shoes on?”

“A horse no doubt. When will you grow out of those dumb riddles?” Tellyn raised herself on her elbows.

“They’re not dumb, they’re from a book, a great book. A gift from the most learned man I knew in Pank Hit.” Hicussaw turned around to share one last kiss.

He savoured the taste of her as he climbed the stairs of the cellar to the ground floor of the Middlewest Low Tower.

Hicussaw pulled open a door and emerged under the dark heavens. He took a deep breath, the air was fresh and cold. He instantly missed the smell of Tellyn. High above him, the night’s black canvas, studded with glittering stars, stretched across the sky. Amidst these pinpoints of light, the white orb of the moon shone bright, despite a third of it shrouded in darkness. This awesome celestial vista cracked at the edges of Hicussaw’s vision, the stars blocked by the shape of Bart’s keep and towers. On the castle stone were pools of warming light where torches and fires blazed.

Calgemo had asked to meet him in the keep. The first time Hicussaw heard Calgemo’s proposal, he thought it was a joke. Then, when Calgemo convinced him of its seriousness, he believed it was mad. The gods weep! Why tonight of all nights. Yes, Calgemo had fulfilled his role in their shift trading agreement, in his own fashion of

course, and provided Hicussaw with an almost perfect evening in Tellyn's company. An evening ruined thanks to Calgemo's newest fae-brained scheme.

After a detour to the stables (where he washed off the musk of sex to avoid unwanted comments), Hicussaw proceeded to the entrance of the keep which was ensconced in a barbican fortification. The barbican's archer turrets were unmanned and the front doors stood wide open, revealing a trespass to the final gate of the keep. A stone passage running along the keep's ground walls joined the side of the barbican, linking it to the kitchen.

The pair of druzhinnik sentries posted at the first gate did not stir from their stools. They barely glanced up from their cards and drink. Hicussaw went unchallenged, the druzhinniks knew him to be no threat, just Blue Hicussaw the stable hand, less amusing to bully than Green Hicussaw the page boy. They also considered him not worth the effort of themselves opening the closed second gate, the real barrier protecting the keep should the weak kitchen door in the trespass be breached. Hicussaw put his hands against the final set of heavy doors and pushed, creating a gap just broad enough to slip through. He took care to shut the doors behind him, so the druzhinniks wouldn't be annoyed at having to do their job.

He moved quietly down the main corridor in the direction of the keep's stairway. Light and shadow took turns crossing his path, as some of the torches had already died in their sconces upon the walls. Indoor lights would not be relit at this late an hour. Hicussaw exited the stairway on the second storey, his destination was Bart Castle's Great Hall.

Calgemo had insisted he take one particular corridor into the Great Hall. Hicussaw was following this route when a door swung open in front of him.

"Quick, in here." Calgemo called in a low but urgent tone.

"Sweet unicorn farts!" a shocked Hicussaw stepped forward, getting a better view of Calgemo and Jams crammed into a garderobe, a chamber where people deposited their excrement. Calgemo's nose looked better than it had when Barnemit broke it, it would have been even better if Barnemit hadn't. "What the jinx are you two doing in there?" Hicussaw asked.

"Get in and I'll explain." Calgemo grew irritated.

The expression on Jams' face told Hicussaw he did not want to be shut inside an overcrowded stinky garderobe, "I will not."

"There's no time you idiot!" Calgemo struggled to put force behind his words while refraining from shouting, "Someone might see you, we mustn't be noticed!"

"You picked a garderobe to hide in? I can name ten less foul hiding places in this castle with a moment's thought."

"Hic, before a druzhinnik comes patrolling. *Get in.*"

"Jinx you Cal." Hicussaw swallowed his last gulp of unspoilt air and wedged himself into the garderobe. Calgemo and Jams wiggled around to make room. The orangehead yanked the door close.

Big ugly nails stuck in the back of the door were used to hang visitors' cloaks and coats. One of them nearly poked out Hicussaw's eye. To give Hicussaw more space, Jams and Calgemo leaned back over a wooden bench occupying a third of the garderobe, they were determined to avoid sitting on it. Calgemo was wearing a hefty satchel, which he supported in his hands and refused to let touch the bench. A hole in the bench's centre was cut above a stone chute descending into a cesspit. The bench was stained, either due to the poor aim of male patrons or explosive expulsion from the rear ends of people who failed to manage an upset stomach, probably both. The garderobe would be cleaned, the chute sluiced with water and the cesspit emptied only in the morning. Presently, the stench of the day's accumulated waste was wafting up.

On Jams' left, a recess in the wall held toiletries. These comprised a short pile of wiping rags, a jar of cleansing vinegar to dip the rags in, and a bowl of fragrant flowers and herbs for combating the odour. Jams pinched sweet scented leaf between his fingers and stuck it under his nose, almost snorting it in.

Hicussaw attempted to grab some too. Unfortunately, in the confines of the garderobe, Jams' thin frame completely obstructed him. Hicussaw tried extending his arm around Jams but knocked over the vinegar jar, which broke open on the bench and added its own pungent flavour to the atmosphere.

"The gods weep!" Calgemo abused as quietly as he could, "Hic, you've made the smell worse."

“Everything that happens in here is your fault.” Hicussaw found himself talking to Jams’ shoulder. He twisted to face Calgemo, “This place is meant to be used one at a time, not to fit three grown men and why the jinx do you have a satchel?”

Calgemo answered, “My bag of scoundrel’s tricks. How else will we carry the stuff we’ll need tonight. And the treasure we’re taking. In my hands? For every druzhinnik to see?”

“This is madness.”

“No, it’s common sense.”

“I thought about abandoning you to your shenanigans. Now, I’m certain I should have.”

“Bless your wimmy Hic, I knew you’d come. Jams said you wouldn’t.”

Panic flashed on Jams’ face, he needed to explain that he had never doubted Hicussaw. He had simply raised the perfectly reasonable question of whether Tellyn was keeping Hicussaw too long and maybe they should start without him. Hicussaw spoke first, “Cal, I’m here to *stop* not help you.”

“We can talk business later.” Calgemo said, “Don’t be shy. How wild did it get with Tellyn?”

“I could be in bed with Tellyn this very moment, instead of squeezed into a garderobe with a couple of jinxbaits!”

“Hey! You’ve had your fun. I got you two sweethearts a bed to yourselves. I deserve a ‘thank you’ at least.”

“You were three nights late on your promise of a bed Tellyn and I could share. And it wasn’t a bed, it was a cot in the back of the cellar.”

“Very romantic spot. Plenty of drink to choose from to help her mood. You freshly bathed and scented with the soap and perfume I scrounged. Sure as crows caw, she couldn’t wait to rip your clothes off.” Calgemo smirked.

“Yes, we were having a pleasurable time, till I left her to meet you buggers.”

“For good reason. Think of how well you can treat Tellyn with gold in your pocket.”

“Calgemo, quit this stupid plot of yours while you still can.”

“It’s already begun Hic.” Calgemo managed to raise his arm to his throat, stick it into his

tunic and pull free the clockwork watch attached to a chain around his neck. “We’re running out of time. I’ve planned our caper down to its last tick on my clock. We’re squandering precious moments on talk here.”

“This isn’t like nicking a pair of boots or that fancy timepiece you’re counting ticks on. We’re not robbing travellers who can’t linger to catch a thief. We’re not stealing a jugful of ale or a plate of pork the servants will overlook because they’re your friends.”

“You’re right.” Calgemo admitted.

“He’s right?” Jams ejaculated, “You told me this would be the easiest thing you’ve ever done!”

Calgemo responded, “He’s right about us not breaking the law. Thievery there may be in Bart Castle tonight but we won’t have any part in it.”

“What do you mean?” Hicussaw asked.

“Lord Anrieslem’s wife is Lord Doneg’s sister.” Calgemo explained, “She has as much right to the Doneg family heirlooms as Lord Doneg does. We’re simply delivering the property from one owner to another.”

Hicussaw stared, “You can’t be serious.”

“Well, they are her heirlooms too.” Jams said.

“Cal, try selling your excuse to the druzhinniks, to Lord Doneg, when they find us with the loot in our hands. Jams, do you think they’ll buy it?” Hicussaw locked his gaze with Calgemo, preventing the orangehead from pressing Jams with meaningful looks.

Jams did not answer immediately, he took a few moments to reach his conclusion: “N-no...”

Hicussaw continued, “Jams, supposing we get arrested, what do you imagine will happen to us?”

“We’ll be chained in the dungeons, waiting for Lord Doneg to judge us.” Jams felt his throat go dry and he swallowed, “If we’re lucky, he sentences us to death. If we’re unlucky, he condemns us to the dungeons forever.”

“Don’t forget, Barnemit will be tried by Knight Maksyer and Captain Keant in two days.” Hicussaw added, “We put him in that predicament. He’s been claiming we attacked him

first. We get caught stealing Doneg heirlooms, we prove ourselves to be the scoundrels Barnemit says we are. We'll give Maksyer reason to believe that jinxbait and Barnemit will walk free, free to do any wicked thing he desires to us in the dungeons."

"Can't pet a dog unless you brave its bite." Calgemo presented his counter, "Jams, what's our reward when we succeed?"

"Fifty doubloons to divide amongst ourselves. High wage jobs in the city of Brin Dank." Jams' expression lost some of its fearfulness and a glimmer of hope shone in his eyes.

"Exactly what the Anrieslem man-at-arms promised me yesterday." Calgemo assured Jams, "Sixteen pieces of gold for each of us, and two extra for me since I brought this to you. More money than we'd earn in a lifetime of cleaning stables. And the letters of course. Bearing the seal of the House of Anrieslem. We show them in Brin Dank and people will hire us with no questions asked.

As for Barnemit, he's in danger of losing everything because of us. Let's say the trial sees him kicked out of the Druzhina. Do you reckon he'll shake our hands with a 'well played, you nasty buggers' and slink off back to the miserable village he was born in?"

"Hey! Barnemit and I are from the same village." Hicussaw protested.

Calgemo took it in his stride, "Then you know how much Barnemit would hate it."

"No, Barnemit would never forgive us." the dread returned to Jams' face, "He'd wait, maybe a long time. When we're convinced we're safe, when we believe we have nothing to fear, he'd strike. Make us suffer till we're begging him to murder us and end the pain."

"Tellyn too, he won't spare her." Calgemo threw at Hicussaw.

"If Barnemit's demoted down to a sergeant or even the lowest druzhinnik rank of footman, he won't risk further punishment. If he's removed from the Druzhina, the druzhinniks will protect us against him. They can advance their own careers by getting rid of a former druzhinnik turned nuisance to Bart Castle. Barnemit knows better than to rile the Druzhina." Hicussaw said.

"A smart man would do as you say." Calgemo concurred, "But Barnemit's no man, he's a monster. A monster that can take a kick to the man-sack and keep on fighting. This caper provides our escape from both Bart and Barnemit."

“I think Calgemo’s right.” Jams asserted, “We need to get out of Bart.”

“Hold your horses.” Hicussaw demanded, “Can you hear yourselves talk? This is madness. We’re going to rob the rana, give the loot to the House of Anrieslem, grab our reward, leave Bart Castle and start new lives in Brin Dank. We’re stable hands not adventurers in a tale of daring, we can’t do this!”

“Stable hands is all we’ll ever be if we don’t do this. Is Bart where you want to spend the rest of your life?”

Hicussaw fell silent. His answer was no. He knew Calgemo could read it in his face.

“Hic, you’re the one who whines about how the world is crugged and wanting to change things. Do you mean any of it?”

“Yes.” Jams piped up, “Whenever you’re six cups down, you won’t stop ranting about making the world better. You say you wish you could but you’re just a stupid stable hand, scraping a living off a steed’s hoof.”

Don’t go there you jinxbaits, Hicussaw thought. Aloud he said, “We were sozzled on hooch. Drunks talk like fools dream. Drunken talk should be left to drown in drunken moments, not be dragged into sober hours.”

Calgemo disagreed, “Sometimes sober men need to take advice from their drunk selves. It’s the only way they’ll listen to their hearts.”

“Jinx you Calgemo!” Hicussaw gritted his teeth.

“If everybody helped each other, nobody would need help.” Calgemo stated a point Hicussaw had often raised, “Your words, Hic, fighting words in a country where men insist...”

“He who helps others, ends up needing help himself.” Jams supplied on cue.

Hicussaw had been hearing that adage for years. First on the lips of adults preparing their children to survive the big bad world, then among his friends as they grew into men and women who believed the selfish road was the safest.

“I thought you wanted to set the world right?” Calgemo prodded.

“Shut your mouths, you pisswet buggers!” Hicussaw vented his frustration, “I can’t change the way people think! Nobody will follow a jinxed stable hand!”

“Does Tellyn know you hate your life?” Calgemo played, “Or do you lie and say you’re perfectly happy with her in Bart?”

Hicussaw had given Tellyn no clue about the disquiet in his heart. How could he tell her? That he wasn’t the confident, content and calm man she loved. That he was a worthless coward, a man broken and twisted by the cruelty of the world.

The gods weep! Stuffed into a single seat garderobe with two sweaty dolts was not the ideal place to be thinking such heavy thoughts. Hicussaw had no space to move, no space to breathe. It was too hot. The smell was awful, suffocating!

“You bring this up here?” Hicussaw asked, “In a stinking garderobe? I can feel Jams’ wimmy against my arse.”

“We can’t always choose the moment but we can decide what we do in it.” Calgemo spoke wisely.

“Um, I don’t like Hicussaw enough for *that*.” Jams spoke awkwardly, and incredibly funnily in his opinion.

Hicussaw ignored him to say: “Stealing from the rana won’t turn us into heroes Cal.”

“No it won’t.” Calgemo acknowledged, “What it will do is send us to Brin Dank and put Anrieslem gold and letters in our pockets. Gold you could live off in comfort. Instead of giving near every moment to the lifelong quest for bread and hearth, you’d have the freedom to do the things you truly care about.

A letter of merit could make folk both in power and beneath it listen to you. Brin Dank’s not a bumpkin village or castle stronghold in the iron grip of the nobles and their druzhinnik dogs. It’s a city built on the hard work and hardy hopes of commoners seeking a better life. It’s a place where a man born with neither noble name nor father’s fortune can raise his voice and be heard. It’s a chance his words, his vision might change the world.

Maybe I’m stretching this too far, maybe you can’t fix the world by moving to Brin Dank. But you won’t know till you try. Don’t help us tonight and one day you will awake in a bed of regret, wondering what if you took that one step, could you have done everything your heart cries for in drunken misery? Because this is just a step Hic. One trifling, tiny step in the right direction. That’s really all we can do isn’t it, take one step

after another and hope we get where we're going before our time ends."

Calgemo's speech was crazy, ridiculous, stupid...sinking to the secret depths of Hicussaw's heart, fuelling the flames of hope, a fire Barnemit's defeat and humiliation had kindled. No longer did the monster weigh down Hicussaw's future. Could it-was being free of Barnemit a sign his luck was changing? A step towards the cherished ambition he had thought impossible. Was the world in a mood to grant and not deny Hicussaw his wishes?

"I can't just run away to chase boyhood dreams. I can't abandon Tellyn." Hicussaw was close to a whisper.

"Why would you? When you can rescue your sweetheart from labouring in Bart's kitchen and carry her to wealth and luxury in Brin Dank." Calgemo gently shredded Hicussaw's doubts.

Hicussaw pictured Tellyn in a home she could proudly call her own, with a bed and a table and more than one room. A window's sunlight marked her body's softly dark silhouette through the thin silk of her dress, her hands brushing away strands of her deep red hair from her face, whose each beautiful feature he could admire for hours, as she toiled over a meal just for the two of them. Chicken with gravy, sautéed mushrooms and onions, garlic bread, cherry custard.

"Look Hicussaw," Jams added, "should you fail at saving the world, you'll be no different than you are now, except richer with a fancy job in a city."

"Jams, let's not forget your secret dreams." Calgemo said, "Ale in your belly loosens your lips too, makes you happy to spill your heart's desire to anybody who can't flee. You've never been farther than twenty paces from Bart Castle in your life. Wasting your days stuck behind these walls is your nightmare. Do you crave a fresh start in a new home or not?"

"No!" Jams said vehemently, "I mean, yes I do. You don't have to convince me. I'm ready, I wish to leave Bart."

"Sure as crows caw you do!" Calgemo pushed an arm over Hicussaw's shoulder to pat Jams on his shoulder.

The orangehead returned to his original target, "Hicussaw of Pank Hit, this is the moment

you decide your life. Are you willing to seize this opportunity to fulfil your dreams?"

"Sweet unicorn farts!" Hicussaw spat, "I'm with you, you jinxbaits."

"I knew I could count on the two of you!" Calgemo wiggled a second arm around his friends and squeezed with both his arms in a group hug.

"We don't need you cramping us any worse in here." Hicussaw said, "Tell us your plan Cal."

Calgemo released his buddies, "Doneg family heirlooms are stashed in the heirloom chamber of the vaults under the keep."

Hicussaw was aware of their location, "Yes, you picking this filthy garderobe to meet in didn't make sense to me. The goods are downstairs, we shouldn't have come up here."

"We head upstairs first." Calgemo said, "To the sleeping quarters of the Master of the Household."

Calgemo's pronouncement confused Hicussaw, "What? Why?"

"Because rooms filled with dazzling treasure and priceless relics never have locked doors. We can stroll in at any hour of day or night, and seize as much as our hearts desire and our arms can bear." Calgemo said.

"We have to get the key." Jams explained.

"Can't you pick the lock? You've done that sort of thing in the past." Hicussaw asked Calgemo.

Calgemo sincerely wished he could, "The Anrieslem druzhinnik, let's call him Terik, he warned me. There's an enchantment on the door of the heirloom vault, we'll need the key to overcome it. I checked to be sure, put the right questions to the right people."

"Only four people in Bart will have the key." Hicussaw realized, "Lord Doneg and his wife, Captain Keant and Master Umfeb."

Calgemo said, "You're welcome to try picking the pocket of a druzhinnik officer or ransacking the bedroom of a noble couple, myself I'd go for the-"

"Master of the Household. He's unmarried and sleeps alone." Hicussaw agreed grimly, "How do we steal the key from him?"

“One problem at a time. We have to reach Umfeb’s quarters. Not getting caught is important. The good folk of Bart are asleep. Don’t make a racket to rouse them and nobody will notice us.”

Hicussaw was more realistic, “Except for druzhinniks on sentry duty, people creeping about for love and fun, and thieves-that would be us.”

“I’ve studied the movement of the druzhinnik patrols.” Calgemo said, “Marked their path and pace by the ticks on my watch. I know when they’ll be where. I’ve plotted a course that will take us through the men-at-arms unseen, like a mouse darting between the legs of dancers. Each moment we linger behind a corner or rush to the next one is calculated to keep us out of the druzhinniks’ sight.”

“You met your Terik yesterday afternoon, giving you a day to plan this.” Hicussaw voiced his thoughts, “The druzhinnik sentries are changed night to night and they don’t follow set patrol routes. You expect me to believe you can predict how they will patrol tonight, well enough to dodge them.”

“Yes.” Calgemo deadpanned.

“I’m not certain you can.” Jams offered his opinion timidly.

Hicussaw supported him, “Cal, your plan may be the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Um, the druzhinniks know us already.” Jams ventured, “If they do spot us, and bother to question us, can’t we just pretend we’re drunk, or lie we’re on our way to meet friends in the aviary? I doubt they’d suspect our purpose.”

“Hmm.” Calgemo considered Jams’ suggestion, “Good point. There’s no reason to sneak around unless we’re carrying the loot.”

“Then we also don’t have to be hiding in a garderobe for fear of druzhinniks, do we?” Hicussaw raised a very relevant question.

There was a brief period of silence. Hicussaw flung open the garderobe door and the three stable hands stumbled out into the corridor gasping for breath.

“I pity the page who has to clean that place in the morning.” Jams exhaled.

“Jinx you Calgemo.” Hicussaw gulped down air, “You’re an idiot.”

“Well pardon me for acting the proper mood of our crooked caper.” Calgemo panted.

“We’re supposed to be sneaky robbers.”

Thus did the foursome begin their night of adventure. Umfeb of Fam Say was Lord Doneg’s Master of the Household, in charge of the servants performing household chores such as sweeping and dusting, maintaining the lights after sunset and laundering clothes. He resided in a chamber near the top of the keep, on the storey beneath the aviary.

Greed for gold and adventure, the ambition to improve the world and the dream of a life beyond Bart had brought three men to Master Umfeb’s door. They stood in the faint illumination provided by a dying torch on the wall.

“...apart from the maid and a couple of servants. This worries you too Jams?” Hicussaw was enquiring.

“Yes.” Jams replied, “We haven’t run into a single man-at-arms the entire time we were coming here. We can’t be this lucky.”

“Maybe chance steered us to walk the course I had prepared.” Calgemo tapped the watch under his tunic. “I should’ve checked to see whether we were matching my calculated pace.”

“I’d believe donkeys could talk before your calculations worked.” Hicussaw said.

Calgemo didn’t argue, “Perhaps the gods see you becoming a hero and cleared the road to fulfilling your destiny. I don’t care how we made it this far but we have much further to go. We’re not even halfway done.”

Could it be true? Hicussaw wondered. The gods choosing him to remedy the injustice he witnessed every day. Was he *destined* to build a better world? Unlikely, yet...

“Alright.” Hicussaw conceded, “We still need Umfeb’s keys. So what do we do?”

“Jams, you can wake Umfeb, lead him away on some excuse.” Calgemo proposed, “While he’s gone, Hicussaw and I can search his quarters for the keys.”

Jams turned pale, “I have to deal with Master Umfeb on my own? When Barnemit was walloping the pair of you in the stables, and Tellyn was distracting his buddies, I couldn’t gather the courage to even speak to Knight Maksyer. I don’t think I can do this.”

“I remember.” Calgemo said, “Which is why I’m giving you this task, to pay us back for all your failures. I have faith, tonight you prove your worth Jams!”

“Shut your mouth Cal.” Hicussaw intervened, “I’m sure Master Umfeb keeps the keys on him. We won’t find them in his chamber.”

“We should try his room, Umfeb must take the keys off before going to bed.” Calgemo persisted, “Jams knocks on his door and crugs his sleep at this late an hour, there’s a chance he’ll forget to grab them.”

“A chance too small to happen.” Hicussaw put forth another reason to abandon Calgemo’s idea, “Let’s say it does. Jams gets Umfeb to leave his quarters and the keys. Umfeb will return to find the keys missing, guess Jams was distracting him and alert the druzhinniks. Barnemit himself might start scouring the castle for us and catch us with Doneg heirlooms in our hands.”

“Then how do we steal Master Umfeb’s keys and stop him raising an alarm?” Jams posed the relevant question.

“Socks.” Calgemo answered.

“What the jinx?” Hicussaw asked.

Calgemo sighed, “I didn’t want it to come to this. I’ll show you what’s in the bag.”

Calgemo lifted the flap on his satchel. He reached into the satchel’s depths and extracted a fistful of woollen fabric. “Clean socks fresh from a proper washing.”

“Haha.” Hicussaw granted Calgemo a dry laugh, “You’re a funny man. We are amused. Now can you quit the jokes and focus on our problem?”

“Isn’t a joke.” Calgemo insisted, “It seems you don’t understand the many uses of socks. Number one. They keep our feet warm.”

Hicussaw repeated his earlier statement, “What the jinx?”

“Obvious.” Jams declared.

“Number two. A mask to hide our faces when we’re snatching a key from the Master of the Household.” Calgemo separated a sock from the bunch and drew it over his head. It was a tight fit. His eyes gazed through holes cut into the sock.

“We could use those.” Jams said.

“For accosting Master Umfeb.” Hicussaw spoke, “Cal, I thought we would sneak around,

break into a locked room and pinch dusty old relics belonging to pisswet nobles. I didn't agree to become a masked thug thrashing people."

"Wait." a note of panic crept into Jams' voice as Calgemo's intent sank in, "Are we *attacking* the Master of the Household?"

"No." Calgemo passed a sock-mask to Jams, "We'll pick the keys off him without waking the bopper up. Umfeb's door has no enchantment. I can pick his lock and let us in myself. We just have to be very, very quiet."

"If he opens his eyes though..." Hicussaw began.

"We'll have our masks on." Calgemo offered a third sock-mask to Hicussaw. "And we'll silence him."

Hicussaw didn't take the mask, "How?"

"With this." Calgemo's hand dove into his satchel again and emerged clutching a sphere that fit perfectly in his palm. The grey metal ball was ringed by wide holes around the middle. A pin was plugged into the top.

"Thunder orb!" Jams froze in the process of putting on his sock-mask and backed away, half his face concealed by sock.

Calgemo looked at the object he was holding, "Oops. Not what I thought I'd grabbed."

Jams' uncovered mouth spoke, "I've seen the trickster using them in his act. Those are dangerous!"

"No they're not." Calgemo protested.

"Each contains the fury of a storm inside it." Jams provided in a dread whisper.

"Sounds deadly." Hicussaw said, "Like the grenade devices I've heard the satyrs use in war."

"Thunder orbs are harmless." Calgemo dismissed his concern, "Oh, they'll turn you blind and deaf, not forever of course, I think. Simply close your eyes, open your mouth and cover your ears after pulling the pin, and you should be fine."

His words did nothing to allay the fears of Jams and Hicussaw.

"Cal, where did you get that thing?" Hicussaw asked.

“From the trickster who left with the caravan and my money.” Calgemo said, “I lost a lot of coin that day. Bowlykd guessed wrong about how the cure for aching bellies and heads was done, there was no dagger hidden up the trickster’s sleeve. Wanted my money back, but I could only nick a few thunder orbs.”

“A few? How many do you have in your bag?” Jams demanded.

“Three, and the one in my hand.” Calgemo replied, “The gods weep! Jams, either wear the sock or don’t, you look ridiculous.”

Jams tugged the sock-mask down completely, “Listen to how quiet it is. A thunder orb would rouse half the keep. Worse, we can’t use one on Master Umfeb because it might kill him.”

“I didn’t mean to pull a thunder orb out.” Calgemo placed the orb back in his bag of scoundrel’s tricks. “I was going for this.”

He extracted another sock, it unrolled and hung down immediately due to a weight in the bottom.

“Did you put a thunder orb in that sock?” Hicussaw asked.

“What? No! It’s a rock.” Calgemo hefted the sock and swung it a couple of times, testing the feel and reach of its loaded end. “Number three in the uses of socks. A weapon to knock our foes into dreams naughty or nice, however they like it.”

“A rock in a sock.” Hicussaw was incredulous.

Calgemo explained, “The perfect weapon a scoundrel can slip past unfriendly folk checking his pockets and patting his crotch. They see a sock on your feet and think nothing of it, later you drop something heavy in your sock and you *demonstrate* to them how hard it hits. Old trick I learnt when I was a boy in Mos Wren.”

“Bashing Umfeb’s head in with a rock in a sock is not better than throwing a thunder orb at him.” Hicussaw stated.

“We’re not murdering him Hic.” Calgemo said, “Best part of a rock-in-a-sock is it’s no knife, it won’t kill with a blow and cause you more trouble than you started with. Just a tap on the head to, uh, quieten him.”

“This is jumping off the edge. I’m not hurting an innocent man.”

“He’s Master of the Household to the Rana of Tarfelm. I wouldn’t call him innocent, he must have ruined plenty of days for good hardworking people who earn a living wage by cleaning stinking garderobes.”

“He may be ‘bad master mean’ but he’s certainly not ‘Barnemit mean’. He doesn’t deserve to be woken and attacked in his own bedroom in the middle of the night.”

“I think Hicussaw’s right.” Jams said.

“So, you twerps want to give up on what we’re trying to do tonight.” Calgemo railed them, “You’re happy to return to the stables and pretend that living rich in Brin Dank was just a dream we could never have.”

Jams said, “We can find a different way to get the keys.”

“You could try getting Umfeb out of his quarters.” Calgemo reminded Jams.

“No, we’ve established that won’t work.” Hicussaw reminded Calgemo.

“Fine.” Calgemo yielded, “You jinxbaits keep in mind we have no time to waste discussing more stupid ideas. Our Terik from Brin Dank won’t dally a moment once the sun rises. We have to grab the goods and deliver them to him by dawn.”

Arrgh! Hicussaw hated the choices before him. Be the good man and spare Umfeb a thrashing this night. Miss the chance of a lifetime to escape a peasant’s drudgery and poverty, an opportunity that might result in changing the world like he had always dreamed. Or. Barge into Master Umfeb’s quarters, wallop him and steal his keys. Join the class of wicked souls (prominently including Barnemit) who would stamp on anyone in their path to progress and crush them into the dirt. Could Hicussaw sacrifice his better nature to build a better future for the whole world?

“Calgemo makes sense.” Jams said, “Hicussaw, maybe we don’t have a choice.”

Hicussaw’s response was: “Jams, take that sock off. Somebody sees you now, they’ll reckon you’re dressed to either rob or kill.”

Jams hurriedly obeyed.

Calgemo’s voice shook, “You choose, to remain a stable hand, the rest of your life.”

Hicussaw said, “Give me the jinxed socks after you pick the lock on Master Umfeb’s door. Jams and I will keep a lookout to warn you of druzhinniks and anybody who’d question

you breaking into Master Umfeb's quarters."

Calgemo grinned, "Smart. Glad to have you with me Hic."

Jams and Hicussaw moved to opposite ends of the corridor, watching around the corners for approaching wanderers of the night, prepared to block their view and stall them. Calgemo removed a cloth case packed with lock picking tools from his satchel and started using them on Umfeb's lock.

It was far too long in Hicussaw and Jams' opinion before they heard him say: "My buddy boys. Door's open."

The trio reassembled in front of the door. Hicussaw accepted a sock-mask and a rock-in-a-sock. He, Jams and Calgemo put their masks on together. They traded concurring glances and nods of readiness. Then Calgemo nudged the door open slowly and cautiously with his foot. The three friends gazed into the quarters of the Master of the Household in Bart Castle.

There wasn't much space and the furnishings were minimal-a chair, a desk, a closet, a bed in which Master Umfeb reposed, yet these marked a level of privilege alien to stable hands. Though their eyes had adjusted to the dimness, they still couldn't see clearly. The light flowing from the weakly burning torch in the corridor merely scratched the shadow.

"Jams, grab the torch." Calgemo instructed.

"Don't have a magical light in your bag of scoundrel's tricks?" Hicussaw mocked as Jams fetched the torch from its sconce.

"Oh I finished the last of those a month ago." Calgemo said sarcastically.

"Let's not linger where a patrol could walk into us." Jams said.

"Right you are." Calgemo agreed. They entered Umfeb's quarters and softly shut the door behind them.

Hicussaw surveyed the scene illuminated by Jams' torch. On the desk he observed sheaves of paper, a thick leather-bound ledger, an extinguished candle stump, a pot of ink and two writing quills beside it. Jams held the torch over Umfeb on his bed. The light starkly defined Umfeb's wide jaw and jutting nose. His bare chest sported hair matching the stubble and dishevelled locks of his head in their brown and red ley. Umfeb was fairly

old, his flesh loose and fatty. He had drawn his blanket up to his chest, covering a medium sized paunch. Hicussaw hoped Umfeb kept his braies on in bed. A silver chain around Umfeb's neck passed through a ring of keys.

Calgemo tapped Hicussaw's shoulder and whispered: "Desk."

He tapped himself, "Closet."

Hicussaw was annoyed, "What? We can see the keys on Umfeb. We don't have to search."

"We ought to be sure we don't miss other valuable stuff in here."

"We're not robbing Master Umfeb, we came for the keys. Stick to your plan."

Umfeb stirred. He rolled a moan in his throat, the sound of a soul deep in slumber acknowledging the existence of things in the real world asking for attention. He began to blink, eyelids rising and falling as some instinct needled him to wake. No doubt he could see the three men with socks on their heads and in their hands. Their eyes were drawn to his in frozen fascination, awaiting a reaction. Umfeb's sleep addled brain attempted to comprehend the scene his sense of sight was describing to him. His eyes widened, the first flicker of fear in his expression. His lips started to move.

"NUMBER THREE! ROCK-IN-A-SOCK!" Jams screamed and whacked Umfeb across the face with his rock-in-a-sock.

Umfeb was stunned. The blow sent him to the brink of unconsciousness.

Hicussaw was shocked, "Jams what did you-"

"Sweet unicorn farts!" Calgemo ejaculated.

Umfeb groaned in pain. Dazed, he turned his head to stare at the light and his masked attackers.

"NUMBER THREE! ROCK-IN-A-SOCK!" Jams repeated word and deed. This time Umfeb was sent all the way into unconsciousness.

Calgemo clamped a hand on Jams' mouth, "Quit yelling."

Hicussaw seized Jams' weapon hand, "The gods weep! He's bleeding."

"Ahmmshmmff!" Jams struggled to speak.

“You idiot!” Calgemo berated Jams, “Even the dead must have heard you. You’ll bring the druzhinniks running. Number three, rock-in-a-sock? What the jinx was that?”

Jams allowed his weapon hand to drop to his side. Hicussaw let go of Jams, took hold of Jams’ torch and bent down to inspect the damage his black haired friend had inflicted upon Master Umfeb.

Calgemo released Jams too. He went to the door, edged it open a bit and peeked out into the corridor, first in one direction and then the other. “No one seems to be rushing to Umfeb’s rescue.” Calgemo announced in a low tone. He didn’t abandon his position though, it was too early to be sure.

“I’m sorry. I saw him move, I hit him. I-I wasn’t thinking.” Jams spewed words as quietly as he could, “I saw him move. I was doing what you said Calgemo. He wakes up, we use our rock-in-a-socks to silence him. You said it. He-he was moving...”

“You didn’t have to scream bloody murder, you halfwit.” Calgemo said.

“I didn’t mean to.” Jams was panicking, his horrified gaze transfixed by Umfeb’s battered face. “I got scared and just did. I’m sorry!”

Calgemo continued, “Shouldn’t have smashed his face. You could’ve shut his mouth with your hand the way I did to you. Threatened him with the rock-in-a-sock so he didn’t fight. Maybe given him a light knock if he didn’t understand to hold his tongue. Hicussaw, how bad is Umfeb?”

“Jams, you swung with more heart than arm, and there was a sock to soften the rock.” Hicussaw was examining Umfeb. The Master of the Household had suffered two minor cuts, on his cheek and above the eye. “His wounds are shallow, just scratches really. The worst he’ll have to complain about is a swelling sore and ugly. But he’ll wake soon.”

“Thanks to the rock-in-a-sock, we’ve prevented our arrest for Master Umfeb’s murder.” Calgemo said smugly as he rummaged in his satchel.

“Which would earn us a lesser punishment compared to stealing family heirlooms from the Rana of Tarfelm.” Hicussaw said, “We can’t leave Master Umfeb free to send the druzhinniks after us.”

Calgemo produced additional socks from his satchel. “Umfeb hasn’t seen our faces or heard our voices, Jams’ bit of yelling isn’t enough. Umfeb can’t recognize us later. Take

his keys and lock him in here, he's not talking to anybody till they find him in the morning when our job is done."

The orangehead pushed aside Jams, who mumbled 'I'm sorry', to join Hicussaw at Umfeb's bed.

"Number four. A gag to hinder your victim from calling for help or screaming in pain." Calgemo stuffed a sock into Umfeb's mouth. He tied another sock around Umfeb's head to hold the gag in place, and proceeded to bind Umfeb's hands and feet with the remaining socks in apparently well practiced knots. "Number five. Tying up a captured foe."

"Rope is a better choice towards that purpose." Hicussaw opined.

"Can smuggle socks anywhere. People will question your plans for a coil of rope but won't care a toot about your socks."

"You're packing thunder orbs."

"Buried under a load of woolly socks. Who's going to dig to the bottom?"

"Wouldn't they think it odd you're bearing a bag full of socks?"

"I hate damp socks." Calgemo faked a grumpy voice, "My feet sweat a lot and I change my socks to stay dry. So I always carry a clean pair or six."

"You should act in a play. You'd make a great grumpy old man."

"I'd rather they supposed I was feeble minded instead of a thief or thug."

Hicussaw returned his attention to Umfeb, "Nice of you to wash those socks. Master Umfeb shouldn't mind the taste too much."

"Forcing foul socks in a man's mouth is torture. Number six." Calgemo said. "The sock has to be utterly disgusting, wearing it a few days isn't enough. Soak it in a bucket of piss and dung all hours of a day and night. Ought to be wet and slimy when you shove it down your enemy's throat."

"You've seriously thought about using socks to torture." Hicussaw wondered whether there was any reason to Calgemo's madness or simply more depths to it.

"Hicussaw, Calgemo." Jams spoke up, "Forgive me please. I don't know what happened, I

saw Umfeb move, then *I moved*, to stop him. I didn't think."

"Forget it Jams." Calgemo said, "Looks to me, tonight's our lucky night. Either folk didn't hear you shout or they can't be bothered to investigate. We're still safe."

Hicussaw viewed their situation differently, "Still safe? We've got cause to worry us. Why did no druzhinnik hear Jams? We're in the quarters of the Master of the Household. A man-at-arms on patrol should be passing Umfeb's door often enough to make us afraid to speak."

"I won't challenge our good fortune." Calgemo refused to acknowledge the problem.

Jams supported Hicussaw, "Um, it's suspicious, isn't it? We see no patrols while we're sneaking around the keep on a thief's errand. I-I was very loud, the druzhinniks should've heard me. That's too lucky to be luck."

"Are you saying you screamed to check whether the druzhinniks would come?" Calgemo enquired of Jams.

Jams wilted in the cold anger of Calgemo's gaze, "No, I..."

"Getting nasty with Jams doesn't help." Hicussaw said, "It feels like they're lying in wait, ready to pounce at the right moment. We could be walking into a trap. Maybe we need to quit this caper."

Hicussaw was suggesting a course of action he didn't want to follow himself. He had grown to believe, earnestly and foolishly, his life was going to change tonight. He wasn't willing to abandon that hope. Yet he couldn't blindly chase it. Go on Cal, Hicussaw thought, convince me we're fine...

"If this is a trap, we're up to our ears in it now. We've attacked the Master of the Household, gagged and bound him." Calgemo paused, "If it's not, we'll forever regret missing this opportunity, letting fear ruin the future we could have. We're masked. We get caught, we drop thunder orbs on them and run. Once we lose the socks, nobody will know it was us. All we have to do is deliver a bunch of noble heirlooms before dawn. Success wins us rewards to fit our dreams." Calgemo removed the chain of keys from Umfeb's person and slipped it around his own neck, "I'm not going to be late."

Hicussaw was relieved, Calgemo's line of thought actually sounded reasonable. They had the thunder orbs. Those things unleashed a storm according to Jams. In their

din and distraction, the three stable hands could escape an ambush. Calgemo's sock-masks protected them against being recognized. The druzhinniks wouldn't break the king's law which required evidence of some sort to arrest them.

Jams wasn't satisfied, "Calgemo, this Terik, he-"

"Terik who?" Calgemo cut Jams short.

"The Anrieslem druzhinnik." Jams replied, "The one you made a deal with to snatch the heirlooms."

"You do know Terik's not his real name, I picked it because it's shorter than saying Anrieslem druzhinnik."

Jams hesitated, "I know. You said he'd enter Bart through a secret tunnel."

"Yes. Terik told me where to meet him. He said he'd wait there tonight till the sun rises."

Quit it Jams, Hicussaw thought, we *need* this. We can't continue drowning our dreams in everyday sweat, we have to drag them to life on tomorrow's shore. Hicussaw spoke, "Jams, the best thing to do is move forward with the plan. We have the key, we've got to turn it in the lock of the heirloom chamber."

Hicussaw backing Calgemo was a disconcerting surprise to Jams. He took a moment to collect his thoughts and said, "Hicussaw, we've been here for years and never discovered any of the secret passages big old castles are supposed to have. How did Terik find one?"

Calgemo provided the answer, "The tunnels were built so our precious lords could flee if the castle fell to their foes. The nobles ensure they alone possess knowledge of the escape passages, and they guard their secret keenly. Stable hands, our kind of people, wouldn't learn it, would they?"

Our friend from Brin Dank was given the secret by the Lady Anrieslem of Brin Dank, formerly a noble maiden of the Donegs who have ruled Bart Castle a hundred years and counting."

"Are you absolutely certain Terik was a druzhinnik serving Lord Anrieslem?" Jams pressed, "Could he prove it? Do you remember his face?"

"Jams, you're wasting time with silly questions." Hicussaw said.

"He looked...it was..." Calgemo frowned, "Well, I've forgotten."

“How could you not remember the man who hired you to rob Lord Doneg?” Jams asked.

“Because the moment I heard his voice, I was at peace. My body and soul knew that fulfilling his wishes would bring me the greatest happiness of my life.”

“He charmed you with a spell!” Jams was aghast at Calgemo’s confession, “He was a magicker!”

Hicussaw was better at recognizing Calgemo’s antics, “Not the time for jest, Cal.”

Calgemo conceded. He addressed Jams, “Terik was wearing a uniform. Tabard and chain mail. Purple Anrieslem colours. Would you like me to describe the colour of his eyes? The ley of his hair? The shape of the scar on his cheek? My guess at the cause of the stain on his shoulder?”

“See Jams, he remembers. We can trust Calgemo.” Hicussaw said, “I’m sorry Cal but Jams is right to doubt. Can’t be too careful when we’re risking our lives.”

“I understand.” Calgemo sighed, “My buddy boys, you also *must* understand. We don’t have a moment to spare on suspicions and fears. The faster we get this done, the sooner we can kiss danger goodbye.”

Jams lapsed into an uneasy silence. Arguing was taking them nowhere, and he concurred with the notion of finishing this caper with haste.

Calgemo had reassured his partners, for the present at least, giving him a respite from their questions, to ask some of his own. There was neither scar nor stain on Terik the Anrieslem druzhinnik, or maybe there was. In fact, a clear picture of the man eluded Calgemo. The more Calgemo tried to reach for his memories, the further they slid beyond his grasp. The appearance of the bodyguard seemed an idea rather than something that had been in front of his eyes. Now he was thinking about it, he had a nagging feeling the bodyguard’s face and voice were familiar to him, even though he couldn’t recall them. Calgemo strained to recollect the details of the furtive encounter with the Anrieslem druzhinnik. His efforts were in vain, he simply couldn’t place where he might have met the man before.

Barnemit could, since he had run into Calgemo on many occasions prior to posing as a member of Lord Anrieslem’s druzhinniks.

How had this charade come about? Destiny. Destiny rewarding Barnemit for the relentless pursuit of his ambition.

First, destiny allowed Barnemit to witness Doneg and Anrieslem nearly kill each other over a vampyre. A bloodthirsty abomination was gathering strength while the most powerful noble families of Tarfelm were busy feuding. The entire province could descend into savage war interrupted by vampyre raids, creating the ideal battleground for a keen druzhinnik to demonstrate his exceptional quality.

Second, destiny gave him the presence of mind to carry his recently acquired potions in a belt under his tunic. Whatever need arose, he was prepared to deal with it. Considering the purchases he had chosen, Barnemit was confident of having an alchemical solution to every problem.

Third, destiny gifted him a stroke of brilliance. He could pluck the thorn sticking in his side and with it prick the noble arses of the Donegs and Anrieslems, making them leap into the conflict he desired. He could turn Hicussaw and his friends into Anrieslem's final trespass that would push Doneg to battle.

At the conclusion of the confrontation between Doneg and Anrieslem, Barnemit was assigned a mission scarcely above a messenger's job, informing Doneg's trusted advisors of the situation. He had to converse with Maksyer again, a meeting he preferred to delay. Hence Barnemit chose Estka of Hame, Mistress of Spells, to be his first stop. With Woss and Dafred accompanying him, he strode through the doors of the keep's main entrance, en route to Mistress Estka's sizable thaumaturgery in the Northeast High Tower. The men-at-arms on guard duty stood to attention and Lieutenant Barnemit awarded them a nod of approval. Despite his disgrace, his rank still afforded him a measure of authority, which the trial would soon strip away from him.

Then Barnemit received it, destiny's gift of genius, his salvation and the doom of Hicussaw in one neat little package.

Barnemit halted and uttered four words, "Calgemo of Mos Wren."

"What about that jinxbait?" Dafred asked.

"Find him." Barnemit said.

Woss didn't understand why, "You want to rough him up? Shouldn't we do as Lord

Doneg commanded first?”

“The lord’s orders can wait.” Barnemit stated his position on the matter.

“My lieutenant.” Dafred was respectful, “The quicker we complete the quest Lord Doneg gave us, the better he will think of us, of you.”

“You saying you don’t trust me to know what needs doing?” Barnemit didn’t appreciate Woss and Dafred’s reluctance to obey.

“No Barn.” Woss said, “You got the smarts to point us in the best direction. We walk in your footsteps, we cover your back, we always do.”

“Then fetch Calgemo.” Barnemit said, “Bring him to me at the top of the Northeast High Tower.”

“Why there?” Dafred shuddered.

Woss smirked, “You planning on introducing Calgemo to Mistress Estka? Talk her into practicing her magic on him?”

Barnemit said, “We mustn’t be seen. The thaumaturgery is perfect, no one dares to visit the Northeast High Tower unless they have work there. They’re scared of Mistress Estka.”

“Woss, Dafred.” Barnemit placed a hand on Woss’s shoulder and looked Dafred in the eye, “You hurry along now, and once we’re done with Calgemo you’ll see you how tomorrow night is going to change our lives.”

“Alright Woss.” Dafred slapped Woss’s arm, “Let’s go catch the orangehead jinxbait.”

The pair started on their new quest. Barnemit called out, “And boys.”

The twosome partially turned to hear him say: “Be quiet about it, don’t make a ruckus that’ll attract attention.”

“Uh.” Dafred faltered, “How?”

“Calgemo won’t come quietly.” Woss explained the problem.

“You babies want I should wipe your arses for you?” Barnemit was exasperated, “Tell Calgemo I’m prepared to cut a deal. I’m offering him and his buddies something they can’t refuse if they shut their mouths at my trial.”

“Of course!” Dafred said.

“Brilliant!” Woss said.

Barnemit continued on to his destination. The door to Estka’s tower was guarded by a lone miserable druzhinnik. He rose from his stool at Barnemit’s approach and held the door open, throwing a quick glance up the stairs. He was warier of the one who might leave the tower than anybody entering. Estka had a reputation, she was as quick to anger as she was to cast a spell, which was very fast indeed.

Barnemit cautiously treaded up the stairway. He fixed his gaze on the way forward and avoided looking left or right as he passed each floor. Visitors to the thaumaturgery were rare, should Estka spot him her curiosity would demand his purpose. He had no desire to lie to her lest her powers could detect the truth and she decided to punish his dishonesty.

The wind blew gentle and cool on the roof of the High Tower. Barnemit felt its soft touch on his face as he walked to the crenellated parapet. He spent a thought on wishing he didn’t have to wear his uniform’s uncomfortable armour. Vast clouds of white moved ponderously across the pale blue sky. The view at this height was fantastic, he could survey the grassy terrain around Bart Castle and the rolling forests beyond for octars in every direction, not to mention the castle itself. He would be undisturbed here. Good, good, good.

How long would his idiot friends make him wait? Barnemit wondered. Wait to negotiate with Calgemo, that pisswet jinxbait. The term of abuse described his feelings regarding Calgemo rather well. When he had drained his bladder, shaken the piss off his wimmy and tucked it in his trousers, then a few drops squeezed out. A dirty wetness, unpleasant and clinging. Pisswet.

Barnemit endured over a quarter-hour of beautiful scenery refreshing to the eyes and serenity soothing to the soul. Though his calm was never broken easily, Barnemit’s patience eroded steadily. How he handled Calgemo, the deal he made with that pisswet shit-talker, was crucial to his future. It all rested on Calgemo convincing Hicussaw and the shit-faced skunkhead to do their part. Eventually, Barnemit heard a medley of sounds-voices, footsteps and the clink of chain mail-come from the depths beyond the stairwell door.

The lieutenant's hauberk went as far as the middle of his thigh, his Doneg branded tabard went slightly further. Barnemit slipped a hand under the hems of both armour and tabard, reaching for the pouches and pockets of a kit belt cinching his gambeson at the waist. Wearing the belt openly would reveal his magical aids to people he didn't trust. He felt the various potions he had carefully inserted into his belt. His fingers closed in on the smooth slimness of an ampoule. Barnemit raised the small glass vessel to his eyes, grey mists swirled around in the cloudy solution it contained.

The door popped open. Barnemit immediately hid the ampoule behind his back. First to step onto the roof's stone was Woss, second was Calgemo and Dafred followed in the rear to ensure Calgemo couldn't run. Calgemo was quiet. Whether or not Barnemit's offer had bought his compliance, there was no denying no one wanted to irk Lord Doneg's Mistress of Spells.

Barnemit walked boldly up to Calgemo. The orangehead began, "Hey ho Barnemit. You may be a monster but I'm a reasonable man. I came because your buddy boys said you had an offer I couldn't refuse."

Barnemit acted quickly, one strong hand clasped the back of Calgemo's head while the other snapped the ampoule's neck using a single thumb, the broken glass top fell to the floor with a tinkle. "Refuse this." Barnemit breathed.

Simultaneously, Woss and Dafred grabbed Calgemo's forearms and shoulders, instincts honed in druzhinnik training overrode their surprise at Barnemit's assault. Barnemit pushed down on Calgemo's desperately resisting head and thrust the ampoule beneath the orangehead's nose.

The potion turned to vapour when exposed to air, the fumes escaping the ampoule through the only available route, Calgemo's nostrils. One moment the orangehead was struggling to break free, the next he went slack in the arms of Barnemit and friends. A befuddled dreamy expression took Calgemo's face. Barnemit released him, Woss and Dafred followed suit.

"Where are you?" Barnemit asked the orangehead.

"I don't know." Calgemo replied softly and slowly.

"Who am I?"

Despite staring straight into Barnemit's eyes, Calgemo found the query quite puzzling, "Who is who?"

Barnemit grinned. The Concoction of Confusion was meant to be hurled from a distance, the ampoule shattering to unleash enchanting fumes. Barnemit had forced Calgemo to inhale a dose many times the intended potency. Calgemo was rendered incapable of comprehending anything happening around him.

"Who are you?" Barnemit tested him.

"I'm...uh."

"You're a stable hand, Calgemo of Mos Wren, friend to Hicussaw of Pank Hit. Do you remember Hicussaw?"

"Hic? I know...he's..."

"Never mind, you will later. How did you get here?"

"Um." Calgemo frowned, "Barnemit's minions..."

"No!" Barnemit turned to Woss and Dafred, "Where'd you find him?"

"No?" Calgemo was puzzled.

"He was helping Lord Anrieslem and his men get on their steeds." Dafred answered, "We couldn't just barge in. We had to hold our feet till they left."

"Was he alone?" Barnemit demanded.

"Yes." Woss said.

Satisfied, Barnemit addressed Calgemo again, "We're in a stable of Bart Castle. You're tending to the horses of Lord Anrieslem's party."

"I am?" Calgemo frowned, "Didn't I do that already? I was the only one free when Anrieslem arrived. Iksub did the talking to the fancy lord guest and his guards, I did the watering and stabling of the weary horses, and un-stabling too soon after."

Barnemit ignored him to say, "My name isn't important. I'm from Brin Dank, the druzhinnik you saw escorting Lord Anrieslem. You know what he, what I, look like."

"Yes. Tabard in your lord's colours, chain-"

“Good job! I asked you to join me for a moment in privacy, in an empty stall.” Barnemit spoke at a slow pace, mindful of Calgemo absorbing every word, his confused imagination using the information to create memories he never experienced in reality. “You agreed to do so. We’re in there now. Who are you?”

“I’m a stable hand, Calg-”

“Calgemo, I have an offer you’d be a jinxed idiot to refuse.”

“Offer...”

This ‘offer’ seemed a little surer than Calgemo’s previous responses, prompting Barnemit to pause with a pang of concern. The potion’s magic couldn’t possibly wear off this quickly.

When Calgemo’s condition remained comfortably confounded, Barnemit resumed, “There’s a predicament you could help me with. Lord Doneg’s sister is the wife of Lord Anrieslem, Baron of Brin Dank, in whose presence you’ve had the privilege of standing. Regardless of her great happiness in her new home, my lady misses her birth family. She wishes to possess a few heirlooms of the noble House she was raised in, reminders of her roots. These heirlooms are locked up in Bart Castle. Due to his heartless nature and most unwarranted anger towards her husband, Lord Doneg declines her request to send these items to her in Brin Dank. That’s where you come in.”

“How?” Calgemo asked in a daze.

“You can retrieve the items for Lady Anrieslem. She would be most grateful.”

“Grateful.” Calgemo considered the proposition, “How?”

“Twenty doubloons. A fortune in gold. For you *and* your friends. You will need them to succeed in this task.”

“Hah!” Calgemo chuckled, “Try someone else. You can’t hoodwink me.”

“What?” Barnemit was astonished, had Calgemo regained enough sense to recognize and reject his ploy?

“A measly twenty gold is a trifling price for robbing the rana. My buddies and I wouldn’t be safe in Bart Castle once Doneg discovers his family heirlooms are missing.”

Barnemit couldn’t believe it. Calgemo was actually bargaining. With his mind

thoroughly disoriented, he was pushing for a better deal. The orangehead was completely convinced Barnemit's fabricated scenario was real, and was performing his role in it to the fullest.

"You want more?" Barnemit asked.

"I want a reward worth the trouble."

"What would the trouble be worth to you?"

"Fifty doubloons."

Barnemit laughed, "You greedy bugger, you can have it."

"And a new life in the city. Gold and Brin Dank's a fair price for our risk. Bart Castle was fun but I'm itching to move on."

Barnemit didn't understand, "I don't understand."

"Letters of merit. Ours would be from the Baron of Brin Dank, declaring that we've proven our talent and loyalty to Lord Anrieslem and enjoy his favour, and anyone helping us might also be fondly mentioned to Lord Anrieslem. Three of these letters, for me and my friends."

"You seek to live in Brin Dank, in better comfort and position than you've ever had." Barnemit kept his voice calm, betraying not a hint of his fury. Who the jinx did Calgemo think he was to escape his wretched existence as a peasant? Such dreams belonged to the strong like Barnemit alone. Weak, pisswet jinxbaits were lucky to die in the dung they toiled in instead of at the malice of a monster or madman!

"You're a smart bugger, aren't you?" Calgemo whistled. He managed to impart sarcasm to his tune.

"Letters of merit for theft, for breaking the law. My lord cannot grant such a request."

"Yes he can. Our deeds don't have to be written on the letter. We both know this sort of reward has been given to spies and worse who've served a baron in his unlawful needs."

"I could find others to do this for lesser recompense."

"I could report you to the druzhinniks this very moment." Calgemo countered hard.

"And I could kill you where you stand." Barnemit played just as nasty.

“I can burst out of this stable before you move.” Calgemo took a step back in threat not fear.

“My mercenary companion has closed the stall door behind you.” Barnemit provided for Calgemo’s imagination to follow.

Calgemo didn’t bother turning to confirm, he was a fortress of confidence. “I have a mouth and I shall scream. Do you and your Lord Anrieslem care to explain why you murdered Lord Doneg’s stable hand to Lord Doneg’s družhinniks?”

Barnemit sighed. None of this was real anyway, he wouldn’t be fulfilling his end of the deal. He spoke, “Fine. I accept your terms.”

“Pleasure to do business with you. When do you need the heirlooms?”

“Tomorrow night.” Barnemit desired Calgemo’s misadventure to occur ahead of his trial, yet not so close to it that the convenience to him would incur suspicion.

“Why not within the hour?”

Dafred and Woss, silent to maintain their absence in Calgemo’s mind, reacted with shocked expressions Calgemo failed to notice. Barnemit was stunned, “What? How can you-”

Then the lieutenant grasped Calgemo’s sarcasm. Barnemit’s goal was to avoid prolonging this sham conversation. His response was short and his tone brooked no argument: “The time for your quest can’t be changed. We are compelled by circumstances I can’t reveal to a hired thief.”

“You’re giving me a day and a half to prepare.”

“Are you refusing Brin Dank and money a stable hand couldn’t earn in a lifetime?”

“I said I’m in.” Calgemo assured him, “We’ve agreed on a price I’d risk Lord Doneg’s wrath for. I can handle this possibly impossible quest of yours. You picked me, the one man in Bart Castle skilled and daring enough to help you. Which brings me to a question, what made you decide to talk to me? Was it mere chance and perhaps the guidance of a god, or was there forethought to your decision?”

Barnemit felt ‘arrogant’ and ‘foolhardy’ were more apt than ‘skilled and daring’ when it came to Calgemo. He did not waste time expressing this opinion, preferring to simply

answer the orangehead's query with a little truth, "I recognized your orange head. You have a reputation, and a history."

"You heard about my past?"

As a Lieutenant of the Druzhina posted at Bart, Barnemit had. Had he been an outlaw of a few years in Tarfelm, he would have too. "Yes, though not easily, I was asking around for talented men of your experience in Bart."

"I'd think the mistakes of my younger days would have been forgotten by now."

"There are always those who keep in mind the, um, *interesting* deeds of men, in case they get up to something interesting again."

"I guess I'm about to become interesting again." Calgemo said, "Do you have any tips I'll find useful?"

And so the stage was set for the drama now unfolding under the cover of nightfall. Calgemo, Hicussaw and Jams were busy committing theft and violence against the Rana of Tarfelm and his Master of the Household respectively, while a Lieutenant of the Druzhina and his loyal subordinates watched on.

Barnemit and company could observe the stable hands undetected through the instrument of the Farsight Solution-another wondrous product of Zlusch. Barnemit held in his hands a wooden bowl borrowed from the kitchen, filled with a clear liquid. That is, it was clear in its idle state. At the moment, Barnemit had removed his right glove and had a finger dipped in the potion. A slightly blurred vision of Hicussaw and his companions floated on the surface. The Farsight Solution brought near far sights the user wished to see, requiring solely the user's touch and a link to the subject he wished to view. Barnemit had added to his potion a strand of gold dappled orange hair plucked from a magically confused Calgemo.

Witnessing the deceived trio in action, Barnemit was willing to swear Calgemo, Hicussaw and Jams were the worst robbers in Tarfelm. Those jinxed idiots could have reached the heirloom vault an hour ago if they didn't stop to squabble over every single thing they did or thought about doing. The lieutenant had wielded his rank to ensure Calgemo's party faced no interruptions; he had assigned new routes and changed the timing for all patrols and sentries in their path. He had gifted the three stable hands a huge window of time and space to do their job, and they were dangerously close to

crugging it. Jams' insane screaming almost made Barnemit drop the bowl and rush to Umfeb's quarters for fear the threesome would be apprehended by someone else. Fortunately, his deft rearrangement of the patrols left them leeway to be noisy. Even discounting Jams' outburst, they were too loud for their furtive task.

Barnemit had laid this trap with the hatred in his heart and the cunning in his head. He would be the one who sprang it. He yearned to see the look on Hicussaw's face when he confronted the bluehead tonight. Their stupid socks and thunder orbs wouldn't help them dodge their fate, none of their tricks were hidden from him thanks to the Farsight Solution.

However, Barnemit did have to be careful. The fact that he had plotted the whole affair, inciting the stable hands to rob the rana, could not be allowed to become known.

"The dolt remembers nothing." Woss laughed.

"No." Barnemit's finger gently stirred the potion, distorting the image which reformed with greater clarity, "Calgemo remembers what I told him to."

"They've already attacked the Chief Steward." Dafred said, "Stolen his keys. It's more than we need to arrest them. What are we waiting for?"

"We're going to nab these jinxbaits in the act, with their hands in Doneg's pocket." Barnemit insisted, "Once they've broken into the heirloom vault, we jump the lot, rip those socks off their heads and beat their plans out of them. Calgemo must feel we caught them fairly, we can't give him cause to think we set this up. Then he'll spew the lies I fed him, say the Anrieslems hired him. Maksyer, Doneg, Keant...everyone will learn of the treason and thievery of Hicussaw and his buddies. You know what happens next boys?"

"Your trial gets called off." was Dafred's answer.

"The folk in power see they can trust you to be their hero." was Woss's answer.

"And how would Doneg deal with Anrieslem trying to steal from him?" Barnemit prodded.

"Revenge." Woss said, "Lord Doneg could have some precious treasures of the Anrieslems stolen, or some of their best servants murdered. These troubled days, he might be bent off enough to wage war."

“However he does it, it’s our chance to earn glory and improve our place in the world.” Dafred added.

“Right you are. That’s why you’re my buddy boys.” the corners of Barnemit’s mouth twisted into a wry smile, “Great destinies are born when ambition rapes opportunity.”

Chapter IV

They had arrived. Hicussaw, Calgemo, Jams. On the second to last stage of their caper. In the vaults of Bart Castle buried securely underneath the keep. The stable hands advanced through corridors carved into the earth. No lights burned here. Except for Hicussaw who carried the band's single torch, driving back darkness to reveal massive hardwood doors sealing each individual vault, which were left in shadow as the trio passed on. Rough stone slabs were mortared or magicked over the walls and floor and ceiling, making what were essentially man-made caves conform to the architecture in the rest of the grand old castle. The torch was new, replacing the one they had picked up outside Umfeb's chamber, the one that had died on their journey down.

They had tucked their sock-masks and rock-in-a-socks back into Calgemo's satchel before the descent, to avoid being seen as law breakers on the prowl. The druzhinniks supposed to guard the ingress to the vaults had been missing, an ominous sign to Jams and Hicussaw. Calgemo hadn't given his friends time to think or talk. Seizing the chance to enter the vaults unobserved and unhindered, he had pushed his companions forward into the cold dark underground.

"Not this one." Calgemo mumbled at yet another vault.

"This place is new, to you, to me, to Jams. How do you know?" Hicussaw asked.

"Terik gave me a very detailed description of the door to the heirloom chamber." Calgemo answered, "Which Lady Anrieslem had shared with him." The last part was directed at Jams.

Jams was quiet, he said nothing and simply kept pace with his friends.

"Cheer up, both of you!" Calgemo whistled a perky note, "I know you dolts are burdening your hearts with terror over our good fortune. But you're being ridiculous. It's good the guards were gone, must be drunk and thinking they need to point each other's wimmies while they piss. Otherwise you'd have to draw them off Jams, like with Umfeb."

Jams maintained silence. Hicussaw didn't, "Druzhinniks on duty are a different matter from a half-awake Master of the Household. Jams couldn't trick them into abandoning their post."

“Easier than it sounds. He could scream a ghost was attacking him. Or put a sock on his head, let the druzhinniks see him and give chase. I’m sure he’d outstrip them in their heavy armour and lose the mask in a quiet corner.”

“How well would that work? What if Jams got caught or the druzhinniks raised the whole castle on an alarm...”

“Exactly why we’re lucky we didn’t have to do it. I’m telling you the gods have truly blessed us. Tonight we change our lives for the better, forge new destinies from our dreams. Don’t you think so Hic?”

“Yes. The gods are watching us win our freedom.” Hicussaw pronounced every word slowly. Hearing his hope aloud helped it feel real and not a fool’s desperate wish, helped it become a goal within a night’s reach. “The freedom to live and not just survive, to do what we want, what we should be doing. Soon that freedom will be ours, we only have this little job to finish first.”

It will all be fine, Hicussaw told himself, it will all be fine. He glanced to the side and caught Jams’ eye. Jams noticed, his gaze met Hicussaw’s, and held it for a moment stretching into a knowing eternity. A world of doubt and fear they were both aware of, contained in a lingering stare. Then Jams looked away, breaking the connection. I hope I’m right too Jams, Hicussaw thought.

“Not this one.” Calgemo mumbled at yet another vault.

A question rose to Hicussaw’s mind and lips, “How are we going to leave?”

“Huh?” Calgemo replied, “What do you mean?”

“The druzhinniks may return by the time we have the heirlooms.”

“The gods are with us, we could stroll out and nobody will be there to stop us. If the guards are back at their post, we’ll fight our way through. Socks and thunder orbs. We’ll take them from behind, they won’t have a clue what hit them. Take off the socks and we’re as tough to find as a seed in the sand.”

“With Doneg family heirlooms in our hands?”

“Don’t be stupid! We make haste and give those to Terik in the secret passage quick. Nothing will be left on us to prove we did anything.”

“We should wear the socks right now, to be safe.”

“Safe from what? No patrols walk the vaults.”

“In case there’s a trap.” Hicussaw gained Jams’ attention.

“There isn’t, I thought we had settled this.” Calgemo’s tone conveyed his annoyance.

“Won’t cost us to be prepared Cal.”

“You want the socks?” Calgemo opened the satchel and offered it to his friends, “They’re yours. I’ll keep mine in the bag till we have the heirlooms.”

“We all have to wear them or there’s no use. They recognize one of us and Barnemit will deduce the rest of us were in the masks.”

“The sock makes my face itch, I put my mask on when we’re delivering the heirlooms to Terik.” Calgemo said.

“We can be more careful in other ways.” Jams was talking once more, “Try to spot trouble before it spots us. Perhaps douse the light so we can’t be seen coming?”

“And how would we see anything?” Calgemo attacked the obvious flaw in Jams’ suggestion.

Jams corrected himself, “Two of us stand behind with the torch. One scouts ahead.”

“It’s spooky down here. You’re welcome to go prancing around in the dark but I’ll hold on to the light.”

“Fine. Jams can go first.” Hicussaw paused at the flash of panic on Jams’ face, “Or I can. You and Jams wait for me to tell you the path is clear.”

“I’m not wasting time waiting on your word.” Calgemo said.

“You’re leading us into danger.” Jams halted, “I’m not moving.”

Hicussaw sighed in exasperation. Persuading Calgemo was impossible and Jams’ dread was only making their quest harder. Perhaps he was letting Jams influence him too much. Hicussaw said, “We’re almost there Jams. Cal may be a reckless idiot but he’s not wrong, we shouldn’t stop or slow down. I want you to know Cal, this night could become our life’s greatest triumph, and I’ll still strangle you for not playing it safe.”

Jams was visibly shocked by Hicussaw's second betrayal in favour of Calgemo, just when he thought Hicussaw was back on the side of reason and caution. Hicussaw feared his black haired friend might never speak his mind again.

"When we're remembering this adventure over drinks in Brin Dank, I shall mock the squeamish girls you two turned into tonight." Calgemo promised, "Maybe I should've asked Tellyn and Lisit to join me instead. Their pretty company would be worth putting up with their whining. To think of it, Tellyn's a brave one and would fret less than you Hic."

"Squeamish girls? You're the one who won't abandon the light." Hicussaw said.

"Pardon me for using the light to find our way." Calgemo snapped, "Jams, you can stay here alone or stick with your buddies."

Jams resumed walking.

"Not this one." Calgemo mumbled at yet another vault.

A thousand voices inside Hicussaw's head screamed at him: Don't do this! You're mad! Escape before it's too late! Life isn't a story where everything magically works out for the hero! Still he persevered. He had no choice, not anymore. He was compelled. Possessed by the passion he had secretly sheltered in his heart. He was gambling his entire life on the slim chance Calgemo was right...no, he was staking his existence on the faith in his own purpose, his own destiny. He *had* to try, try pursuing the thing he desired so greatly it hurt to speak of it.

His feet were slow to rise and slow to fall, each step taking him closer to his dream and condemning him further by common sense. He felt trapped in a speeding carriage he couldn't control, gladly hurtling towards a future he craved, up a road full of potholes, at any moment a wheel would get caught or the horses would trip, and he would crash and break his neck. The gods weep!

"This is it." Calgemo announced in front of the seventh vault they encountered, or was it the eighth or ninth? Hicussaw had failed to keep count. His feet finally came to rest along with Calgemo's and Jams'.

"Are you certain?" Hicussaw enquired.

"If you doubt me, who would you ask to check? The druzhinniks?" Calgemo snorted.

Every door in the vaults thus far had been carved with markings of some kind. But the woodwork was worn and difficult to read. Whether they were scenes or writing or something else, Hicussaw was unable to distinguish in the brief moments the torch illuminated them. Here he had time to study the door. Cut into the wood was row after row of an identical mannish figure with a receiving hand extended to its right and a giving hand to its left. Between each of these figures was an object that could have been a loaf of bread or a rod or a sword. The intention appeared to be a passing of the item from one man to another in a continuous unbroken chain, an heirloom changing hands from one generation to the next as Hicussaw grasped. The sole break in the repetitive pattern was the aged blackened keyhole.

Calgemo lifted Umfeb's silver necklace over his head. He began examining the keys on the attached ring one by one in the light of Hicussaw's torch.

"We have our key, my buddy boys." Calgemo squinted at a minute version of the door's row of inheritance engraved on a particular key. "Now we unlock the spells protecting this vault."

Calgemo slid the key inside the lock it was made for. He turned the key and Hicussaw heard the click of the lock mechanism opening. The orangehead placed his hand against the door, giving a mighty push.

The door to the Doneg family's heirloom chamber in Bart Castle creaked and swung slowly inwards. Barnemit was positively beaming; a huge triumphant grin on his face. Sneering beside him were Woss and Dafred. The three warriors of doom were clad in the chain mail and tabards of the druzhinnik uniform, with hands clutching the hilts of deadly swords. They stood ready to welcome the stable hands to the end of life as they knew it.

That was how Hicussaw imagined it happening. In his heart, he thanked the gods reality didn't care what he thought it should be. Jinx me, Hicussaw cursed silently, it dawned on him what he truly believed reality should be was him succeeding in his quest to build a better world...

"Bring the light in here." Calgemo surged into the vault.

Hicussaw followed warily bearing the torch, a miserable Jams close behind him.

The heirloom chamber was smaller than Hicussaw had expected, roughly five times

the size of Master Umfeb's quarters with less room to walk around freely. Hicussaw's torch cast light on the carelessly stockpiled heirlooms from the rich history of the House of Doneg. Despite their possibly hundreds of years of age, the heirlooms seemed to be in excellent condition under the dust and scattered cobwebs. Hicussaw assumed some preservative magic was at work in the chamber. He saw framed paintings, busts and sculptures, books and scrolls, three great chests, assorted pieces of armour and arms plus two intact suits of ornate armour, garments, trinkets, jewellery, too much to bother taking in any more.

His attention was drawn to a bow and quiver slung on a weapon rack. The few arrows left in the quiver had shafts painted with strange white symbols he reckoned were magical runes. Similar markings were on the bow which was the short lightweight kind he had seen the Free Folk of the woods wield. Hicussaw was reminded of the arrow on the Doneg coat of arms, perhaps this heirloom was related to that heraldry.

"What do we take?" Hicussaw asked.

"In Terik's words, the pretty stuff a fine lady would find pleasing to her eye. In my words, whatever is easy to carry in our hands. My bag of scoundrel's tricks is stuffed to overflowing."

"Lady Anrieslem made no requests? There's nothing she especially wants?"

"I was told she couldn't decide. You know how fickle women are. Can never pick a mood or a dress."

Hicussaw agreed on the topic of womanly caprice. On an unrelated matter he considered it prudent to issue a warning, "Don't steal anything for yourself Cal."

"I'm no fool Hic. Keeping the rana's family heirlooms is not worth the risk to me."

The trio spread out in search of heirlooms that matched their criteria. Hicussaw moved himself and his light to the shelves on a wall, allowing shadows to creep over Calgemo and Jams. Calgemo was soon fingering the necklace around a bust's neck. The object of his interest was a delicate filigree masterpiece crafted of gold and glittering with tiny diamonds. Jams eventually picked up a little tin box. Inside he discovered a beautiful flower, its broad petals changing from pink to purple towards the centre, as soft and fragrant as the day it first bloomed.

Hicussaw was intrigued by a glass orb, a layer of dust obscured his view of its interior. He polished the orb on his sleeve, wiping some of the dust off. The sphere was dark and contained a model of a castle dotted with many points of light. Regardless of how near he brought the torch, the shadow persisted in the orb. He was wondering why this would be so when it hit him. Night time! The sphere must be an enchanted device displaying Bart Castle as it stood in the moment, including the torches lit after dark. Sweet unicorn farts! On closer inspection, he could even make out the gargoyles and maybe those things there were the patrols walking the ramparts. Perfect! When Lady Anrieslem grew homesick, a peek at this orb would cure her, offering her a constant connection to her childhood home.

That might have been it, he had found the heirloom of his choice, had it not been for the flicker of movement he spotted from the corner of his eye. Next on the shelf was an odd wooden statuette, resembling a tall personage entangled in a mess of vines or snakes, and in its heart was set a black gemstone. The figure itself was rather featureless with a blank face, he could not tell whether it was male or female. What had lured him to the artefact was the gem. Hicussaw kept twisting his head, looking at the gem from different angles, he observed a strange sense of motion within it. It reminded him of smoke swirling. He felt unable to look away. The longer he spent gazing, the clearer it became, a vortex of darkness he could lose himself in, pulling him in deeper and expanding to fill his whole awareness.

“Got the goods?” Calgemo had wrapped the necklace about his fist.

“Yes.” Hicussaw broke out of his reverie and grabbed the statuette.

Jams shut the box.

The three stable hands turned to leave. They had successfully obtained Lady Anrieslem’s heirlooms and their adventure was halfway done, delivering the items to Calgemo’s Terik was all that remained. As they turned however, the will to continue drained from them like blood from a slit throat. Hicussaw blinked twice to confirm the sight before him was real and not a cruel jest of his imagination. He wished his mind was playing one of its usual fantasies. Beyond the door of the heirloom vault, blocking their exit, was none other than Barnemit and four companions, armoured and armed in the druzhinnik fashion. Hicussaw recognized Dafred and Woss among them. The other two soldiers were holding torches. The bluehead had hoped tonight would bring his dreams

within reach, instead he saw it was his nightmare taking shape.

“Hello boys.” Barnemit flaunted a wide smile, “You’re under arrest for theft against your rightful and noble lord, Rana Doneg of Tarfelm. Will you come quietly?”

Hicussaw thought he heard Jams whimper. He wasn’t surprised to perceive a moaned ‘no’ of despair escaping his own lips. Running was useless. They had been caught with their socks off and Barnemit had seen their faces. Should they miraculously get past the druzhinniks, they would still have to flee the castle. And what of his sweetheart Tellyn? Could he desert her to save his life? No, he was being ridiculous, she would be the one forced to abandon their love, surrendering him to Lord Doneg’s wrath. He would never have a chance to see or talk to her again, not in the dungeons.

“THUNDER ORB!” Jams screamed and threw.

Hicussaw witnessed Jams hurl nothing. Jams had performed the action of throwing flawlessly, except his hand was empty, the thunder orbs were stashed in the idiot Calgemo’s satchel. Obviously poor Jams had lost his wits. In madness born of fear and desperation he had chucked empty air-BANG! Thunder roared in Hicussaw’s ears, not a distant thunderclap in the heavens but an explosion that shattered his hearing into countless tinkling pieces. His vision became a wall of blinding white. Hicussaw knew he had lost his grip on both the statuette and the torch, jinx that, he was falling too. He thrust his hands out just in time to stop himself landing on his face. This small victory was followed by an unexpected twist, blackness overpowered the white, and the void swallowed the ringing in his ears. In a single moment he went from drowning in light and noise to floating in the quiet dark. Then all thought and sensation ceased.

Should curiosity venture to a point preceding Barnemit’s arrest of the stable hands by about a quarter of an hour, it would see the doors to the kitchen of Bart Castle being pushed apart a short distance. Tellyn stepped inside, a pair of goblets balanced on top of two dirty dishes in her right hand and a corked wine bottle in her left. The night light of the moon and stars wandered in through the windows, faintly illuminating the cooking hall.

Cauldrons and spits rose tall over the dead cold fireplaces. Stone blocks ringed these fireplaces to prevent the spread of cinders and ash. A huge stone oven was built into the

left side of the kitchen. Two large pails rested on the wall of a well in the centre. There was a broad doorway to the right, opening into the corridor which connected the kitchen with the trespasse in the barbican of the keep's entrance. This passage was used to deliver food and drink safe from wind, snow, rain and bird dung. Along the walls were shelves holding pots, pans, plates, knives, forks, spoons and the like. In the back was a pantry where flour, meat, vegetables and other raw foodstuffs, taken from the storerooms, were kept in preparation for the day's meals.

Temperatures could rise to a stifling sweat in the heat of cooking up a feast for the Great Hall, despite a chimney to let the smoke out and windows to let the air in. But dinner was over, the cooking fires had been killed and this dark stretch of the night saw the kitchen staff sleeping in the cool comfort of linen sheets unrolled on the floor.

Tellyn nudged the doors shut with her back. A soft voice startled her. "My, my. Who's trying to slip in at this hour? Tellyn of Dos Agg. Where *have* you been, young lady?"

"Etch." Tellyn whispered, "I could ask you the same, awake as late as you are."

"I already know your reason; Hicussaw of Pank Hit. Want to know mine?" Argetch of Ples Leek offered, stirring from her place below a window near the entrance.

"Yes."

"Knight Giberl."

"You bagged yourself a *knight*?"

"Oh they may chase the barons' daughters but they won't say no to fun with a peasant girl."

"Lucky you. Maybe true love will sway him to pledge his heart to you."

"Life isn't a storyteller's fantasy, Tell. Though you might be living in one. Where did you get that wine? The bottle's green glass, bears a paper label written in Lanish. Looks expensive. Tellyn, you know we can tap the casks till our thirst's quenched but you're holding the good stuff. A bottle of a noble's favourite drink gone missing will be reported to the druzhinniks."

"Don't worry. Calgemo of Mos Wren arranged it with Master Hoip."

“What favour does the Master of the Kitchen owe Calgemo?” Argetch was impressed, “We work for the Master and can’t get him to overlook more than a jug of Krit brewed ale. And you Tellyn, have you caught two fish on one hook? I thought Hicussaw was your sweetheart yet Calgemo’s treating you to the best he can wrangle.”

“Calgemo did this for Hicussaw, they’re best buddies.”

“Bless your paplons! I’ve diddled Calgemo and he’s never done the like for me or any girl he’s had.”

“It’s not finished.” Tellyn jiggled the bottle and Argetch heard the wine splashing inside, “Help me wash the dishes and we can split this half. I think I need the hooch to drown my sorrows.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“Hicussaw and I had planned to spend the night together. Instead, he had to meet Calgemo.”

“Hicussaw didn’t show his face? He abandoned his sweetheart?”

“We shared love’s caress, he departed after the deed.”

“You let him just diddle you and leave?”

“He had good reason.” Tellyn’s slow uneasy tone didn’t sound convinced to Argetch, “He had to stop one of Calgemo’s misadventures.”

“Would he abandon Calgemo to meet you?”

“I don’t know...let’s talk about something else.”

“Not a chance, Tell.” Argetch relieved Tellyn of the dishes, “I’ll wash these and you open that bottle again. Spill your heart to me girl, tonight I’ll teach you to handle a man who grabs both paplons when offered one.”

It was a pleasant conversation, as drinks with friends almost always are. Settled upon a window sill, gazing out to the castle grounds and curtain walls, the twosome traded words and the bottle, in no hurry to conclude either the night or their chat.

“...she’s in Brin Dank now. Her letters claim the place is huge, thousands of people living together. Near everyone has a bed to call their own.” Argetch said.

Tellyn agreed, “Brin Dank’s a real city, the only one in Tarfelm. Most people there won’t be scraping a living off a baron’s boot like us.”

Argetch tilted her head back and upturned the bottle over her mouth, tapping the bottom to jolt loose the last drop. She licked her lips, “Give my thanks to Hicussaw and Calgemo for me. This was fabulous. Tell Hicussaw to treat his woman better or next time you’ll be seeking the comfort of another man not your chummy girl.”

Tellyn chuckled, “I think I will, he deserves a little scare. You’re right, he may have to pluck his friends from trouble but it was *our* special night. My feelings were hurt, I should have told him, and he should have cared enough to worry about how I’d feel. I’ve been too nice.”

“Glad to help you fix your boy troubles. Completely my intention. I mean, I’m not the kind of girl who’d wag tongues with anybody about anything just to taste the wine those fancy noble ladies drink.” Argetch hopped off the window sill.

Tellyn grinned. She withdrew from the window too, turning to the interior of the kitchen and the thought of slumber.

Shoes clumped on earth close behind Tellyn. She swung around, and there at the window was none other than her lanky bluehead lover, Hicussaw of Pank Hit.

“Hicussaw!” Tellyn couldn’t believe her eyes.

What was he doing here? Had he been listening to her entire girl-to-girl session with Argetch? The bulk of his body filled the window, blocking the already weak light from outside. His face was in shadow, reading his expression impossible. He was silent, and felt different somehow...cold? No, that must be the night chill. Surely his rescue of Calgemo would not be done this soon. How had he appeared so suddenly? She had been watching idly out the window not a couple of moments earlier, she would have seen him approach.

“Speak of the dog! He’s here.” Argetch reacted. She addressed him directly, “Come crawling to beg your sweetheart’s forgiveness have you?”

“Etch, not now. Hic, are you alright?” Tellyn started to move towards him but he beat her to it. Hicussaw put his hands against the sides of the window and his leg over the sill. He was climbing in! Without a whisper or a grunt, Hicussaw pulled himself through the

window into the kitchen.

Tellyn fell back, “Hicussaw, what are you doing?”

He straightened himself in the dark. She was afraid, something she had never before experienced with Hicussaw. Tellyn fought the instinct to run, it was foolish of course, she loved him, and he her, maybe he wasn’t saying anything because, well, why wasn’t he saying anything?

“Hicussaw, talk to me, what’s wrong?” Tellyn asked.

Hicussaw stepped close, his eyes a mere finger’s length away from hers. The night’s shade hid his face, his eyes seemed even darker, an alien intelligent blackness imparted them a sinister life. A ridiculous notion, Hicussaw’s eyes were naturally black of colour. The gods weep! She could use some light. His hands rose to her head, cradling her chin. “What are you-” Tellyn’s words ceased in confusion as his fingers gently brushed her lips. The manner of this visit was too creepy to get romantic! He knew better!

His hands snapped close around her neck in an iron grip. Warm hard fingers pressed irresistibly into her soft throat. She choked, her breath cut off. Hicussaw applied the pressure of his strength, pushing her to the floor. Tellyn’s legs folded up beneath her. Hicussaw went down on his knees, hunched above Tellyn where she lay in a painfully twisted heap, strangling her to death.

Argetch’s shrill scream pierced the night. Tellyn noticed it as part of the background, meaningless noise, her attention was understandably focused on her own murder. She was gasping for air. Her eyes hurt, like they were going to pop out of her head. Despite the darkness, black spots flickered into existence across her sight, twinkling the way stars did. Tellyn was clawing at her throat, having absolutely no effect on the skinny hands killing her. She couldn’t think, she just wanted the terror in her heart and pressure on her throat to end.

And it was ending. Things were slowing down, they felt less important, drifting into the distance beyond her concern. She might have been falling asleep. It stopped hurting, the pressure was fading.

“Get off her!” Argetch yelled.

Clonk! The squeeze around Tellyn’s neck instantly loosened, though the grip

remained secure. Tellyn sucked in air with a long ragged breath. Hicussaw keeled over, nearly crushing her, but not quite. His weight was rapidly diminishing. *His body was steaming.* A few blinks of Tellyn's eyes saw Hicussaw's physical form disintegrate into smoke that whirled away into nothingness.

Tellyn beheld her rescuer through the vanishing vapours. Argetch stood shaking on her feet, both hands clutching the handle of a heavy pan. Her quick blow had saved Tellyn's life.

"What the jinx did I just see?" a cook cried out. The rest of the kitchen had woken.

Tellyn coughed and sputtered, "I-I wa-was, attacked-"

The doors of Bart's kitchen burst open noisily to announce several more Hicussaws. Her back to the front, Argetch didn't miss Tellyn's horrified expression. She turned with pan ready to smite again.

Five had not moved for six days, perhaps longer. He much preferred to spend his enslavement frozen in his favourite position: talons of his feet grasping the edge of the rampart, hands covering bent knees, bat-like wings tucked in behind him. Quiet as a rock, he watched the forest surrounding Bart Castle from his high perch. The night blinded his gargoyle vision no more than the day.

He did not enjoy the view, Five had been staring at the same scenery since he had unwillingly arrived here some two hundred years ago. At the time, Bart had been in the process of reconstruction after a particularly damaging siege. Worked into the curtain walls of the castle was a spell binding five kidnapped gargoyles to Bart, tasking them to protect Bart Castle and its occupants till either the fortress or they met destruction. Five would have entertained thoughts of vengeance against the enchanter who had taken his freedom, but the wretched mortal must have died in the first century of Five's enslavement, leaving immortal victims to suffer forever.

Five's true name, the first word to pass his lips when he awoke to life, included sensations ranging from notes of music to pangs of emotion. Mortal creatures, lacking the supernatural traits of the fae, could not hope to fully comprehend or pronounce such things. So the humans had called him Goglas for a few centuries, before he became the fifth gargoyle magicked into Bart's defences and was given the slave name, number really,

Five. Apart from enslaving him, the humans had been kind enough to equip him, providing arms and armour. Their fine steel armour (helmet, breastplate with faulds hiding the crotch, vambraces for forearms) could endure laughably little harm compared to his body of living stone. The equipment's true purpose was performing the role of a uniform. Their helmet hid his whole face and was fashioned to resemble a wolf's head. Their unenchanted flanged mace hung unused on his belt, inferior to his claws of rock.

While Five's kind could abide an eternity barring violence and accidents, age did take its toll. A head could only hold so many years. Gargoyles were feared even amongst the fae thanks to their practical invulnerability and earthen strength, yet their short memory and slow minds were a constant joke. Slow by fae standards, not mortal of course.

Five repeated his fae name to himself. One would expect an immortal being of stone to easily resist blending into the short lived meaty masses around him. One would be wrong. The captured gargoyles did not utter aloud their native tongue, they denied disgusting mortal minds the inhuman grace of fae speech. Speaking nothing but Krit over the long years had led to Five catching himself thinking in Krit. He struggled to remember flying free, soaring and diving above the endless woods, hunting under the moon and stars, scraping the flesh sheath off the delicious bones of screaming men and women. Wearied by the bland mortal world, his senses had forgotten the entrancing delights of Wonderwhere, the realm of his birth both changeless and ever changing. These precious memories had been reduced to mere ideas, he could not recall what he had seen, touched, heard, tasted. Five repeated his fae name to himself.

A human female shrieked beautifully, below and behind him, inside Bart Castle. More shouts from both genders followed. Jinx them. He was cussing in Krit now! Bart's interior was none of his business. The terms of his forced service required him to respond solely to external threats.

An attack in progress, Five deduced, enemies had snuck in. Good for them.

"To arms! The walls are being stormed!" a druzhinnik barked not far at all, in fact, that came from Five's left.

Walls Five was bound to defend. Five moved. He absorbed the situation bit by bit in a slow ponderous turn. The shouting druzhinnik was trapped in a crowd of remarkably identical peasant men. The attackers must be clones or mirror images. Five reasoned.

This many could not get up here without being noticed, unless they teleported somehow. Powerful magic was at work.

The clones had seized the one-man patrol, wrestling away his crossbow. Their superior numbers enabled them to simply lift and hurl the unfortunate soldier down from the ramparts to a smashing death. The man's desperate futile scream sounded a pleasant note in Five's ears.

Scuffles had erupted all along the curtain walls, indeed the entire castle was breaking into battle. Five spotted another gargoyle launch into the sky, clones clinging to his body and several falling off. The boar's head helm identified Five's fellow gargoyle as Two. Two shot to the moon, or tried to and halfway there decided to drop earthward on top of another bunch of clones. The friction of his sudden descent tore loose the last clingers. Those Two landed upon were crushed into puffs of smoke.

Having disposed of the closest patrol, the first crowd of clones Five had observed now advanced on him. They began to pummel him with their fists, Five didn't feel the punches. He flashed his claws at a foe, ripping away the clone's face, with the clone dissolving into black smoke before his arm finished its swing. These things were weak shadows, easy prey. They possessed the advantages of surprise and numbers but they wouldn't survive for long fighting Krit druzhinniks, and this was ignoring Bart's gargoyles. Five counted three new clones materializing as he watched sheer air bleed dark vapours, vapours which swiftly coalesced into blurry forms, forms which rapidly grew solid and clear into the same blue haired, black eyed human male. The complete process took a moment or half in Krit time. Hmm. Five would have to correct his initial assessment. This would not end quickly.

The floor felt hard and cold against Barnemit's back. His hearing was useless, high pitched ringing drowned everything else. His head ached, like someone had taken a club to him. Griffins shit on my head! Barnemit saw white, only white. What just happened? What the jinx was going on?

He had been one step ahead of the stable hands at every stage of the night. When he saw Hicussaw and company depart Umfeb's quarters for the heirloom chamber, Barnemit rushed to the vaults ahead of them. First, he got rid of his bowl of Farsight Solution, he wouldn't need it anymore, and his private alchemical stock he desired to continue holding

as a secret advantage. Lieutenant Barnemit commandeered the druzhinniks posted to guard the vault entrance. His official story was that he had learnt of an intended robbery, and was planning to ambush the outlaws with their hands in Doneg's pocket. He told the men-at-arms they had to allow the treacherous stable hands free passage to commit their thievery and prove their villainy. This was true. He also said he could use an additional pair of swords in apprehending the scoundrels. This was false. Barnemit believed he could wallop Hicussaw and his friends with them in armour and himself alone both naked and unarmed. If that wasn't enough, Dafred and Woss were by his side. The extra druzhinniks' real value was as witnesses who would confirm the vile deeds of the stable hands, witnesses who unlike Dafred and Woss were not known to hate Hicussaw.

Within the vaults, tracking the light and noise of the stable hands was ridiculously easy. Again, worst thieves *ever*. Barnemit and his comrades had extinguished their torches, thus they went undetected in the quiet and dark while stalking Hicussaw's group.

Then came Barnemit's moment of triumph, the glorious victory his scheming had led him to. Saving himself from trial, destroying Hicussaw and creating further opportunity for advancing his status, all in one brilliant move. Barnemit had never experienced greater happiness, well, except for the first time in his boyhood he thrashed a full grown man or enlisting in the Druzhina or achieving the rank of lieutenant fresh from the training yard. This night ranked right up there with the very best of his life.

Barnemit had worn the stupidest grin, he couldn't control it. The look on Hicussaw's face, on Calgemo's, on Jams'. The bruised lips and broken nose he was responsible for. Quite possibly the most hilarious thing he had ever seen. Had Jams and Hicussaw yelped in the manner of frightened dogs? Yes they had, just before...

"THUNDER ORB!" Jams had screamed.

Barnemit remembered Calgemo's tips on countering the effects of a thunder orb, he didn't bother with them because the shit-faced madman Jams had thrown nothing. Barnemit regretted this line of thinking when a thunder orb exploded practically in his face. He had no idea where it came from. It had overwhelmed his senses and stunned him for dangerously long moments. Barnemit feared the white blindness would never pass, the shrill ringing would never stop.

The unbearable light did fade, a dark world emerged in its absence, indistinct and gradually sharpening to shapes he recognized. Torches lay burning on the ground,

illuminating Hicussaw standing over a prone druzhinnik. Barnemit raised himself on his elbows. The soldier wasn't Woss or Dafred, he was one of the vault guards. Hicussaw bent low and drew the druzhinnik's sword from its scabbard.

Hicussaw plunged the sword into the man's chest, failing to penetrate the chain mail. Disoriented by a thunder orb, Barnemit still instinctively analysed the attack. Hicussaw hadn't put sufficient force into his strike, and the distance from blade tip to target was too short. The man cried out (Barnemit saw rather than heard) as Hicussaw pushed down on the sword's hilt. The blade drove links of chain mail into flesh and rib cage, painful but not lethal.

Barnemit pulled himself to his feet. His sense of balance had not yet returned. Standing straight took considerable effort. The deafening tinnitus in his ears was diminishing.

Barnemit's thoughts jumped to his potions. Had the fall broken anything? Didn't seem to have, but his fingers couldn't check under the chain mail at the moment. He hoped the enchanted wool padding his kit belt's containers had fulfilled its purpose of cushioning their very expensive contents against impact.

Hicussaw finally understood the armour was protecting his victim. He lifted the sword and thrust it into the man's unshielded mouth, through teeth and tongue and throat and brain stem and skull, hitting the metal of the man's helmet with a dull thunk. Murder. Hicussaw had just murdered someone. He had murdered a druzhinnik, if Lord Doneg let him live, it would be in torment in a dungeon till his last breath.

The druzhinnik's death gurgle signalled peril to Barnemit's brain, sweeping away the thunder orb's daze. Alert with his senses largely restored, Barnemit realized he was surrounded by Hicussaws. Eight Hicussaws. What. The. Jinx.

Dafred, Woss, Calgemo, Jams and the surviving vault sentry were picking themselves off the floor. And there was a ninth Hicussaw, already on his feet, frozen stiff. No trace of white was visible in eyes darker than the unlit underground. His gaping mouth fumed black vapours. The original Hicussaw, Barnemit thought, in the grip of some foul magic.

"Hic!" Jams spotted the original, his panicked voice directed the others' attention to the ghastly spectacle. Terror prevented Jams from even thinking of any action he might

undertake. The shit-faced one could help nobody.

Hostile Hicussaws reminded everyone of their presence when one of them punched Jams in his gut. Jams collapsed in pain. Another Hicussaw wrapped hands around Calgemo's neck, the orangehead responded with a knee to the crotch. His Hicussaw silently crumbled in a swirl of smoke. Calgemo staggered away from everyone, his hands fumbling in his satchel.

"Defend yourselves. Or Hicussaw will kill you." Barnemit pointed his own sword at the Hicussaw pulling his blade free of the bloody ruin that had been a man's face.

Calgemo's hands emerged clutching a thunder orb, he looked around wildly, trying to comprehend what was happening and who he should fight. Calgemo's eyes found Barnemit. Barnemit witnessed the fear in Calgemo's expression turn into the confidence born of hatred aged and justified. Calgemo thought he knew who presented the greatest threat, who his enemy was.

"No you fool!" Barnemit yelled.

Calgemo yanked the pin from the orb and flung it at Barnemit. This time Barnemit was prepared. He moved to his left, the thunder orb hit the floor where he had been standing. Barnemit covered his ears, opened his mouth and shut his eyes. These were Calgemo's instructions on surviving thunder orbs with your senses intact, overheard through the Farsight Solution. As far as Barnemit could tell, Calgemo's tips didn't work. The thunder orb's lightning flash and thunderclap left him blind and deaf again. Barnemit managed to keep hold of his sword and sink to his knees instead of falling on his face or back. Moments later, he was struggling to his feet a second time. Barnemit had to admit, the blast did seem weaker and recovery easier, was it the result of Calgemo's advice or had Jams' imaginary thunder orb simply been more powerful?

Calgemo had fared significantly better, not only was the interior of the heirloom vault beyond his orb's area of effect, he had ducked behind the vault door which blocked most of the flash for him. The orangehead was now fending off the three Hicussaws inside the vault with him, swinging at them with a sock...no, too much. Too much. 'Crugged' Barnemit could handle. Life had trained him to deal with 'crugged' since his helpless days of early boyhood. This whole situation wasn't just crugged, it was insane, it had to be a dream, except he couldn't believe the weak shit-eating Hicussaw would win such a prominent role in his nightmares.

Caught in the orb's explosion, the Hicussaws and druzhinniks outside the heirloom vault were unsteadily rising to their feet. The druzhinnik killer was retrieving his sword from the floor. Eight Hicussaws, plus the three battling Calgemo and the magicked original. Eleven in total? Calgemo had destroyed one. That should have reduced the fighting Hicussaws from eight to seven, not added three more. Barnemit stabbed the nearest Hicussaw. As his target evaporated off his sword, two new Hicussaws popped into existence beside him. They grabbed Barnemit's arms, attempting to restrain the huge lieutenant. Barnemit flung himself forward, his great strength made escaping the Hicussaws' grip effortless. The lieutenant parried a blow from the druzhinnik killer and slashed his belly, the sound of the killer's sword clattering to the ground was the sweetest song Barnemit had ever heard.

The gods weep! These smoke men were spawning continuously! Attacking the magical Hicussaws was a waste of time, their numbers would soon swell to an invincible tide! How the jinx could he defeat them? Wait, the original Hicussaw. An evil power possessed him, he *had* to be the source of his killer twins.

Barnemit entered the heirloom chamber, both hands on his sword, his purposeful gaze set on the original Hicussaw. Calgemo's sock strikes had somehow killed off three Hicussaws but five had taken their place. Four focused on the shit-talker, one leisurely pursued Jams. The shit-faced skunkhead stumbled amidst the heirlooms in frantic retreat, knocking several down.

Calgemo wasn't about to let Barnemit slaughter them all. He slew a Hicussaw to break out of their encirclement, then whipped his sock at Barnemit. Though Barnemit feared no flailing fabric, tonight's experience had taught him to never underestimate a foe. He pitted his sword against Calgemo's sock, slicing it in half and causing the hefty rock it contained to drop out.

Sweet unicorn farts! Calgemo's other hand brought up a fresh thunder orb, the orangehead posed to pull the pin and hurl it at Barnemit's head. Jinx you Calgemo! This pisswet trend of one thunder orb after another had to stop. Barnemit was certain too many of the terrible explosions would inflict lasting damage on his eyes and ears. Worse and of immediate importance, the blasts were helping the Hicussaws. While the druzhinniks and stable hands were stunned, Hicussaws were materializing unchecked. Barnemit couldn't fight both the Hicussaws and Calgemo. Outside the heirloom chamber, Hicussaws were appearing faster than the swords of Dafred, Woss and the vault

sentry could cut them down.

“You won’t murder us!” Calgemo declared.

“I’m not the villain here.” Barnemit said, “I only want to arrest you, Hicussaw wants the lot of us dead.”

Calgemo seemed to ignore Barnemit’s second sentence, “Not the villain? Oh, just giving Hic a friendly little tap with your sword are you?”

Barnemit gritted his teeth. He didn’t need a weapon to defeat Calgemo and the Hicussaws, his bare hands were sufficient to end their miserable lives. He did need to avoid thunder orbs detonating in his face however. The lieutenant uncurled his fingers, releasing the sword to fall to the floor. “See? No blade.”

Calgemo’s suspicions would not die easy. Barnemit punched and destroyed a Hicussaw that got too close, “Hicussaw is doing this, making these murderous clones. Kryter’s the son! Remember he tried to choke you!”

Calgemo wavered, face now plainly uncertain. Barnemit seized his chance, turning away from the orangehead, he moved upon Hicussaw of Pank Hit whose rigid body seethed with the blackest magic. Calgemo didn’t interfere, he produced a second weighted sock and attacked the hostile Hicussaws.

“Sleep quietly.” Barnemit threw a punch. He felt the satisfying weakness of Hicussaw’s jaw on his knuckles, felt it give way before the unstoppable force of his fist and arm working together.

Hicussaw’s eyes snapped shut. Black vapours and dark spittle flew from his slack mouth. He toppled over and lay sprawled on his side. In an instant, the hostile Hicussaws were snuffed out, reduced to whiffs of smoke.

Looking down on the unconscious Hicussaw, Barnemit noticed a little wooden statuette next to the bluehead’s tangled legs, the same one Hicussaw was holding prior to Jams’ thunder orb. The figurine was badly charred and chipped, a faintly smoking hole at its heart revealed it to be hollow. Surprisingly, what disturbed Barnemit most were Hicussaw’s lips, they were completely healed as if Barnemit’s blow had never split them.

Lieutenant Barnemit’s three druzhinnik allies barged inside the vault, swords eager to strike. Jams cowered in a corner. Calgemo tensed, his right hand wielded the sock

weapon and his left put the thunder orb to his teeth so he could bite the pin off.

“The castle is awake.” Barnemit addressed Calgemo calmly, Hicussaw’s mad magic was finished and the lieutenant was back in control of the situation. “You can’t fight through every druzhinnik in Bart. Using a thunder orb in here will stun you too. You’re out of choices.” Barnemit paused, “I’d like to see you three jinxbaits in the dungeons. Surrender or die.”

Nobody moved, the strain of watchful silence stretched the moments to a breaking point. Then, Barnemit winked at Calgemo, bared his teeth in a cheerful grin and stepped towards the orangehead. Calgemo lowered orb and sock, he knew pain was coming to him and his friends, but at least they would have to be breathing to feel it.

“**Have we uncovered** exactly who or what sought to murder us in our sleep last night?” Lord Doneg submitted the question to a gathering of Bart’s highest ranked functionaries, held in the rana’s official meeting chamber in Bart Castle’s keep. The room hosted a fireplace alive with crackling flames and a long table which seated the individuals attending the meeting. Lieutenant Barnemit had also been invited.

“The attackers took the shape of one of our stable hands. They could be doppelgangers.” Master Iksub suggested.

“An army of doppelgangers?” Estka, Mistress of Spells, raised a cold sceptical voice. Bright lime green hair she cut short. Passive blue eyes betrayed none of the hot anger she was famous for. Her raiment, a silken dress of grey, was tailored in a plain yet elegant style. Unfortunately, the effect of light grace was lost due to an ungainly assortment of necklaces, pendants, bracelets and rings adorning her neck and hands. No doubt the jewellery carried enchantments to fulfil different purposes. Big temper in a small package, Barnemit thought.

She continued, “The doppelganger is a fiercely territorial breed of fae, it abhors its own kind. Doppelgangers would rather kill each other than share a stalking ground. I slew a few of the attackers myself. To my trained senses, they were clones conjured by shadow magic. Their vast number would hint at a great power having spawned them, were it not for their weakness. The slap of a mere woman could destroy these shadows.”

“Lieutenant Barnemit, who are the stable hands you arrested?” Doneg asked.

“Calgemo of Mos Wren, Jams of Bart and Hicussaw of Pank Hit. Hicussaw was the one making the clones.” Barnemit responded.

“These are the same folk who assaulted you and stole your keys, Master Umfeb?”

“Lieutenant Barnemit claims they are.” Umfeb’s face bore the evidence of Jams’ violence, “I can’t be certain myself, the attack was too fast. I was asleep, I was barely awake, I was knocked out. In the moment I had sight their faces were masked.”

“Lieutenant Barnemit had always suspected these three stable hands of villainy.” Captain Keant, commander of the druzhinnik garrison at Bart, added. He and Barnemit were in full uniform save helmets. “That’s why Barnemit kept an eye and an ear on them. Yesterday, a loyal servant who wishes to remain nameless told the lieutenant of the stable hands’ talk he had overheard, they meant to rob you of your heirlooms my rana. Barnemit swiftly laid a trap for the scoundrels, he arrested them inside the vaults, in the midst of looting your family’s cherished treasures. When the clones attacked, Barnemit stopped them before they did much damage.”

“How many did the clones cost us?”

“Five dead, twenty-nine wounded.” Keant rattled off the casualties.

“Jams, of Bart? He was born within our walls?”

“Yes. His mother was a chamber maid, no clue about the father.” Master Umfeb supplied, “The mother is no longer with us. She wed a merchant’s clerk and left the castle in his company. Jams was perhaps eight years old at the time. The gossip goes the poor boy didn’t learn she was gone till a few days later, she was never keen on mothering.”

Jinx me, Barnemit smirked, Shit Face was ugly enough to repel even his own mother’s love.

“Tell me of this Calgemo.”

“Oldest son of a tailor in Mos Wren. Well-to-do family in a decent town.” Iksub said, “Calgemo was a troublemaker and a scoundrel, a shame to his parents. Sixteen years old, he picked the wrong pocket, stole a secret letter being passed between rebel leaders. The boy sold it to the local druzhinniks for a few cents. When the rebels discovered he was behind the barons ambushing their ambush, they sought to punish him. A pair of them came close to doing it too, but Calgemo proved a tricky target to hit. After the failed

murder, Mos Wren's druzhinniks sent him to Bart Castle where rebels wouldn't dare unsheathe a dagger."

"Hicussaw of Pank Hit?"

"Travelled to Bart with a merchant caravan." Iksub recalled, "Showed me he knew how to care for horses. I gave him the job he wanted because he seemed a good man, impatient to work and work hard."

"A perfect bunch of misfits." Doneg pronounced, "Hicussaw is the honest to goodness one eh? He will discover he has the heart of a true hero, and will set out to perform a hero's deeds. Calgemo is his rogue friend who grudgingly helps him, and Jams, this bastard of Bart, is the harmless little twerp who comes through in the end to save the day. A tale the storytellers would love to write."

Umfeb laughed, "Very funny my rana. Thieves of a baron's heirlooms portrayed as heroes!"

Barnemit stifled a chuckle, he had a name for such a story, The Shit Hands Get The Piss Beaten Out Of Them.

Doneg turned a deadpan gaze upon his Master of the Household. Umfeb shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Doneg spoke, "It would not be the first time a hero's tale began with rebellion against a cruel ruler."

"You are hardly cruel, my rana." Knight Maksyer insisted, "You grant your most wretched subjects kindness they do not deserve."

"Perhaps. In any case, our three stable hands cannot be heroes if they die in my dungeons. Knocking Hicussaw out cold killed his army of shadows?" Doneg asked.

"Yes my rana." Barnemit confirmed, "I believe the vile magic of a trinket was possessing him."

Estka said, "I examined the item, the spells of binding it bore were ancient and delicate, and are unravelled now. Whenever they were cast, it was done in haste, the magic was flawed. The trinket may have been a stopgap, never made to endure centuries, a desperate measure to hold a powerful being while the makers crafted something better."

"This trinket was one of my family heirlooms. Do we know nothing of it?"

“My rana, as you know, I have studied the archives of the House of Doneg and can speak its history at any moment, but this particular heirloom baffled me. To solve the mystery, I spent hours scouring the records for a mention of the item.” Master Wilup shuffled through the papers and scrolls spread on the table in front of him. He pulled out a dry, yellow, tattered half-page of parchment. “I found this, a scrap of a copy several times over of a letter, addressed to a ‘beloved grandson’ by Doneg Windcharm.”

“Doneg Windcharm, the legendary hero from whom the House of Doneg is descended?”

“The very same, my rana. Windcharm is thought to have lived a thousand years ago. The writing is in an abandoned form of Krit but I was able to translate a few scattered lines and words; ‘world nearly conquered’, ‘treat gentle’, ‘soul of darkness’ and what appears to be a description resembling the trinket.”

“Which tells us a fragile artefact of incredible evil and terrible power was simply thrown in with other heirlooms and forgotten in the dust of time.” Doneg sighed, “Why am I not surprised? It’s a miracle the king-forsaken thing broke last night and not sooner.”

“There is more we could do to bring this lost secret to light.” Wilup said, “Lady Silverglaze, the so-called Queen of Wildsong Woods, is the eldest and most powerful fae in Tarfelm. Long are the years of her life, she might have met Windcharm in the flesh and could recognize this heirloom.”

“Knowing the peril is surviving the peril.” Keant said, “We must dispatch men of courage and skill on a quest to question Lady Silverglaze in Wildsong Woods.”

“I can depart in four kurns, a couple of our best knights shall ride beside me.” Maksyer offered.

“Maksyer, you and the knights are needed here should Bart suffer another bout of clones and shadow magic.” Doneg said. “The gods must favour you, Lieutenant Barnemit. Your accusers are revealed to be treacherous robbers, you were right to persecute them.

The charges against you I dismiss, you will stand no trial. Once, you asked of me an opportunity to prove your worth and win glory in my name. Today I choose you to meet this fae queen.”

“Thank you my rana.” Barnemit beamed, “In two weeks or less, I shall win answers from Lady Silverglaze and deliver them to you.”

“Weeks?” Doneg was unpleasantly astonished.

Keant spoke to restore Doneg’s confidence and correct Barnemit. “Lieutenant, you can leave this morning itself. The journey to Wildsong Woods is only a few days.”

Barnemit’s face fell. “My captain, I wish I could. My duty has already been decided, I’m to leave tomorrow on the inspection of Pank Hit.”

Keant couldn’t believe Barnemit. The captain had been supporting his lieutenant the entire meeting and now Barnemit was stupidly throwing it all away. “Surely, the quest to Wildsong Woods, given to you by the rana, to *you* instead of his favourite knight, takes precedence over Pank Hit.”

Barnemit visibly struggled to compose an explanation. “Since I came to Bart, for two years I have led the druzhinnik parties conducting the rana’s inspection of Pank Hit.”

Maksyer’s tone reflected amusement, “Do you care more for bullying peasants in your old village than obeying the rana and advancing your career?”

Jinx your tongue Maksyer, Barnemit abused silently, I care to feed you your steed’s wimmy. The pisswet knight should not have used the words he did in the presence of Lord Doneg and Captain Keant. The eyes of captain, knight and rana were upon Barnemit, observing his every twitch and blink, wondering why he was squirming to refuse this chance. Estka was watching him curiously.

Bad, bad, bad. Skipping a trip to Pank Hit could prove disastrous, he was supposed to drop in once every three months. If he didn’t or was late...dread of the very possible consequences quickened Barnemit’s heartbeat. Sharing his reason with his superiors would be a terrible idea, they would deem him soft and weak, unreliable, not a man they could trust to pursue his mission under any circumstances. Barnemit knew he was cornered, the way he had cornered Calgemo just hours earlier. The lieutenant had no prepared excuse, no escape route that would defy his rana and also spare his future in the Druzhina. Playing the long game meant he had to make a sacrifice here. Barnemit begged the gods, his failure to show his face on time in Pank Hit should not result in the worst.

“Yes, I was mistaken, I wasn’t thinking.” Barnemit yielded, “Forgive me, I haven’t slept and the clone mystery further confused my drowsy head. I shall hasten to Wildsong Woods within the hour.”

The faster he finished this quest to Lady Silverglaze, the faster he could return to Pank Hit.

Hicussaw opened his eyes. There was an eternity of peace bundled inside the moment or two between the initial awareness of consciousness and his eyes being completely open. Faint fragments came to him. Kissing Tellyn goodbye. Cramped in a stinky garderobe. Socks. Jams screaming and assaulting Umfeb. Wandering the underground tunnels of the vaults. Barnemit grinning at him. The clap of thunder and flash of lightning. The gods weep! What a nightmare! He was in bed with Tellyn yes? He needed to touch her, feel her comforting warmth, to assure himself he was not alone in the dark.

Hicussaw's attempt to move met stiff resistance. His eyelids fully raised, he saw where he was. The sense of peace vanished, vanquished by the scene his eyes beheld. He was in the dungeons. The flames of braziers and torches flickered light across the chains and cages, the instruments of pain spread on tables and benches, the machines of torture, the filthy floor and four walls of their particular hall. Cold iron clamped down on Hicussaw's wrists and ankles. Memory flooded back, in vivid sound and picture, in wild panic. The nightmare was real.

"Hic, you're awake!" Calgemo called.

Hicussaw looked to his right, Calgemo was with him. Further craning his neck revealed Jams beyond the orangehead. Like Hicussaw, they were shackled to a wall, their bodies pressed to the grimy stone. Fresh bruises and scrapes marred their faces.

Easing his neck, Hicussaw set his head back. He wished to speak. His numb tongue tumbled in his mouth and he managed a spitting cough. His second try was better, "H-how, how did we get here?"

"Barnemit the Monster is how. Hic, my buddy boy, don't you remember?"

"We hate the name. An enemy, we shall end him." Hicussaw heard himself say, which was odd since he had not thought the words.

"I don't know why I said that." Hicussaw admitted aloud.

"Said what?" Calgemo asked quizzically.

Calgemo hadn't heard him, maybe the remark on Barnemit was another trick of his jinxed imagination. He hadn't even moved his lips, it *had* to have been in his mind. Hicussaw shook his head, "Barnemit...was he waiting for us?"

"I've been told a jinxbait tipped our lieutenant about a plot to steal Doneg heirlooms." Calgemo said.

"Barnemit arrested us." Hicussaw clutched fragments of memory, "Jams, you cast a thunder orb spell."

The adjacent Calgemo was blocking Hicussaw's view of Jams' face.

"I already tried talking to our screamer." Calgemo turned to Jams on his right, "You surprised me, Jams. Didn't know you had magic in you. You could have told us, might have been helpful on a baron robbing caper."

Jams stayed silent.

"Jams isn't saying much." Calgemo said, "I guess he has other secrets to keep."

Hicussaw choked with guilt, "I'm sorry Jams. We, I shouldn't have ignored you, I should have taken your side. We should have stopped when we first suspected something was wrong. We should have worn the socks, we should have scouted ahead-I'm sorry."

"We're going to die down here." Jams said softly. His voice was devoid of fear or sorrow, simply stating fact.

Hicussaw could not honestly disagree with him. The stable hands were thieves caught stealing a noble family's heirlooms. The most lenient sentence he expected from Lord Doneg was a quick execution, it was preferable to a lifetime of torture in the dungeons.

Calgemo chuckled, "Been listening to the ghosts eh? Don't pay them attention Jams, makes them stronger and louder."

"Ghosts?" Hicussaw asked.

"The dead whispering in our ear, poisoning our souls with their doom and gloom." Calgemo elaborated, "These dungeons are haunted. Haven't you heard them yet?"

That would explain the voice declaring its hatred for Barnemit, giving Hicussaw false hope of revenge on the monster. "Yes, I think so."

Hicussaw continued, “After the thunder orb, everything went black. What happened?”

“Oh the usual, Barnemit set himself to arresting us or worse, Jams was scared useless, I was desperately looking for a way the three of us could escape, you were busy conjuring an army of clones and murdering people.”

Something about the last part didn’t seem right to Hicussaw, “What are you talking about? Killer clones?”

“You were out of control, possessed. Must have been the jinxed heirloom you touched. Kryter’s the son! We were drowning in clones of you, they wouldn’t stop spawning.”

This was ridiculous, he had been knocked unconscious, the thunder orb stunned him and he fell, probably hit his head. “No. I did no such thing!”

“It’s true Hicussaw.” Jams said, “I thought you were a demon, I was afraid you’d kill me before Barnemit got a chance.”

“You don’t remember?” Calgemo asked.

Hicussaw tried to. No matter how much he focused, his mind was a blank, all he saw after the orb’s blast was darkness, a beautiful soothing darkness moving and swirling, drawing him in deeper and deeper. Sweet unicorn farts! The wooden figurine and its enchanting black heart, he had dropped it. Why had he taken the jinxed thing in the first place? It had been influencing him, it, *it had possessed him!*

Calgemo saw the realization in Hicussaw’s face. Hicussaw gasped, “The shadow in the heirloom!”

“One of you near strangled the life out of me. You put a sword through a man’s mouth. He was a druzhinnik sure but I think stabbing his face was going too far, I would’ve settled at an insult.”

Hicussaw had murdered a man. A powerful alien force had entered his body, filled his mind, seized the reins, and used him to commit evil. Hicussaw’s body simultaneously constricted and strained to bursting with horror. “I did magic? I hurt people?”

“You were at war with the whole castle.” Calgemo replied, “Crugged as this sounds, we were lucky Barnemit was there to wallop us all. His punch saved us from your clones. Your jaw doesn’t hurt does it?”

“My-my jaw?” Hicussaw was in no pain. Apart from the sensation his heart was pumping terror through his veins and arteries instead of blood, he felt great. “It’s fine.”

“You don’t have a mark on you Hic. Your lips are healed too.” Calgemo pointed out the contrast to his own damaged nose.

“Magic.” said Jams.

“We do not suffer damage easily.” Again Hicussaw heard his voice when he wasn’t speaking. Jinx the ghosts, why did they have to mimic his voice?

“The thing that possessed you ended up broken and burnt. I suppose it’s destroyed now and you’re...safe.” Calgemo didn’t look convinced.

Hicussaw didn’t blame Calgemo. The bluehead would be shaking if he wasn’t fastened to the wall. Hicussaw had seen the darkness, he hadn’t fought it, he had blindly allowed the shadow to suck him in, swallow him.

“Awake the lot of you!” boomed a voice dripping with malicious glee, “You’ve got visitors.”

No door barred access to their hall, through this open entryway walked a pair of men clad in black; cowl, sleeveless vest and trousers. The uniform of dungeon guards, Hicussaw had rarely spotted it above ground. They were rumoured to be cruel men lacking the courage for battle, hence they willingly served in dungeons haunted and cursed by dead prisoners, where they could satisfy their vile urges on the condemned defenceless in chains. One of the duo was broad shouldered and flabby with the suggestion of a paunch. The other was lean and short. Both were unshaven scruffy specimens. Fats and the Thin Man, Hicussaw named them in his head.

Behind these two followed a petite green haired woman in fine attire of grey, heavily bejewelled, and a bulky individual in the black of dungeon guards. He wore no cowl. A leather mask, black of course, was pulled taut over his head. Shiny steel studs covered the mask. Narrow slits cut into it were a concession to dark eyes and mouth. There were long gashes sewn shut running along the hard muscles of his arms. Hicussaw had seen the woman before, he recognized her as Estka, the dreaded Mistress of Spells. The masked man he assumed to be Bart Castle’s Master of the Dungeons, a character who inspired the kind of fear even a raging magicker could not match.

Fats had announced the party’s arrival. He continued in his delighted tone, “My master

and my mistress, the prisoners are ready to receive you.”

Estka strode straight to Hicussaw, ornaments tinkling slightly. She stated, “You are the possessed one.”

How could she tell? Hicussaw wondered. Was she magically sensing it, *was the shadow still inside him?*

“Not yet. But we’ll have you soon.” The words had an eerie quality to them, rasping whispers drifting to Hicussaw over a vast distance. Hicussaw had almost screamed. At least the dead weren’t speaking in his voice now.

“Master Alders, do not touch Hicussaw of Pank Hit until we learn the nature of this threat. We do not know what might happen if he is harmed. We certainly do not wish to risk clones invading Bart again.” Estka addressed the Master of the Dungeons.

“He will remain unspoilt.” Alders said, “His companions are the ordinary sort of scum though, I take it we can work on them. My men and I haven’t had fresh flesh in here for days. We can question the prisoners, compare their stories to the reports from the druzhinniks present at the scene. Check for any discrepancies, any differences showing us the scoundrels seek to hide something.”

“Yes. Do as you please.” Estka was disinterested, “Which of these two is Jams of Bart?”

“The blackhead.”

Estka drew near Jams in soft slow steps. “Jams of Bart, I have heard Lieutenant Barnemit’s account of your spell.”

“Sp-spell?” Jams stammered, “Wh-what are you talking about?”

“I am impressed, you spent your whole life in this castle and nobody suspected your powers. Lord Doneg is troubled to discover a rogue sorcerer secretly dwelling in Bart.”

“I don’t have any pa-powers! I’m no magicker!”

Estka halted in front of him, “You cast a Thunder Burst spell, an old favourite of the storm school. Quite a poor cast since the spell stunned your foes and friends alike. The lieutenant told me you were yelling ‘Thunder Orb’ while you did it.”

“I thought, I thought I had a thunder orb. I don’t know what I threw. I-I was scared out of my mind.”

Estka closed in, so close Jams had nowhere else to look except her face. Jams wilted before the intensity of her unfeeling blank blue eyes. “You have never studied magic?” she asked.

“No. Never!” Jams shut his own eyes. He didn’t have to endure her stare, she couldn’t make him.

“Meet my gaze when you answer.” Estka spoke in her bland tone.

Jams yielded and raised his eyelids.

“How did you conjure your thunder orb then?”

“I’ve seen thunder orbs explode. I wanted to do that, I did that.”

“Cast solely on instinct, your Thunder Burst was surprisingly good. You might be a rare talent Jams, a gem among common stones, much polish needed obviously.”

“Thank you?” Jams ventured. He had broken into a cold sweat, he did not handle stress well.

“A pity Lord Doneg will grant you and your friends no mercy. I am learned and experienced enough now to take on an apprentice, some magically endowed fool ignorant of the sorcerous crafts. Teaching you could have been enlightening, my old teacher claimed my questions led him to answers he would not have reached without me.”

“I didn’t hurt anybody.” Jams protested feebly.

Estka abruptly whirled around, necklaces and pendants jangling, “All yours Master Alders. I am finished here.”

“Glad to be of service.” Alders said to Estka’s retreating back. She wasted no time in departure.

Alders sauntered past a bench, dragging his hand across the array of wicked implements laid on it, his fingers lovingly caressed the devices of torment from the start of their handles to the tips of their cutting edges and piercing points.

He spoke in a slow drawl, “Hicussaw of Pank Hit, Jams of Bart, Calgemo of Mos Wren. The rana entrusted you to our hospitality. We must welcome such honoured guests to the dungeons of Bart Castle in the traditional manner.”

Alders gently spun the serrated circular blade of one vicious instrument. “I dabble in sorcery myself. I may not wield magic the way our Mistress of Spells can but I’ve mastered a few tricks of healing. Given them a little twist to better suit my job. It would be my pleasure to perform on guests.”

Alders had moved on but the blade he touched kept turning faster and faster, driven by an enchantment.

“Oh I see what you did there.” Calgemo laughed dryly, “Perform *on* guests not *for* them. You’re a funny man my master.”

Alders patted the empty table next to him, set with leather clasps for binding hands and feet, “Bring the orangehead.”

Fats and the Thin Man advanced on Calgemo. They undid the clamps holding him in place. The orangehead did not resist, he let his arms and legs fall limply, until he was completely free. That’s when he cut loose, lashing out with fists and feet. The dungeon guards made no attempt to restrain him, the Thin Man simply drew his dagger and struck at the orangehead’s side. A quick deep stab, right up to the hilt, in and out.

“Every one of you buggers thinks you’re special.” Fats smirked, “Think no one’s tried what you’re going to do. We’ve had smarter and stronger than you in our chains, stable hand. You’re not escaping us unless it’s in pieces.”

Calgemo ceased fighting, he put his hand to the wound. He stared dumbfounded at the blood on his fingers. The shock numbed him to the pain. Blood dripped down his leg to spatter on shoe and floor.

“Calgemo no!” Hicussaw shouted, “You jinxbaits are supposed to torture him not kill him!”

“It’s not the end! Cal is strong you’ll see!” Jams insisted. Calgemo’s removal gave Hicussaw an unobstructed view of Jams. The blackhead wasn’t looking in Hicussaw’s direction, he didn’t appear to be watching Calgemo either. He was sweaty and distracted, gazing straight ahead, perhaps talking to himself, which meant Jams was probably responding to a ghost’s taunt.

“Just a prick.” Fats said, “Don’t worry, your buddy won’t bleed to death, Master Alders will fix him good.”

The dungeon guards helped a staggering Calgemo to the table where Alders waited. As they strapped the orangehead in, his blood spread and smeared over the surface. The Thin Man slashed Calgemo's bloody tunic down the middle, exposing the gold specked orange fuzz on his chest and stomach.

Alders retrieved the spinning saw and selected a pair of pincers to use with it.

"Rest easy." Alders told Calgemo, "I will not allow you to pass into senselessness or the afterlife. I shall guide you on your quest in search of truth. The pain will cleanse you of pretense and bluster, leaving only the essence of you, a chance to remake you in a more favourable image. For the first time in your life, you shall know yourself."

Alders hovered his saw above Calgemo's breastbone, "This is the time to speak freely of your crimes against the rana. The truth is your salvation, your answers can lessen the suffering, maybe even stop it. As I strip away every lie you tell yourself and the world, we will meet the real you together."

"Go jinx yourself." Calgemo mustered the strength to cuss.

"We remember this part." the dead whispered to Hicussaw. Murmurs of assent floated into his ears:

"Under the Master's hands, I begged to die."

"Hicussaw is it? You have no idea how it feels."

"A whole new world of pain, beyond the grasp of words or thought."

Hicussaw wept while Calgemo screamed.

Alders opened Calgemo up, blood sprayed and gushed in copious quantity. However, the bleeding slowed or stopped remarkably soon, Alders was an expert at keeping victims alive. His moves were precise, calculated to achieve the greatest pain. The prisoner was his canvas, his rock, his paper and the ordeal he was crafting was his painting, his sculpture, his poem. The hours passed too slowly as he sliced and poked and tugged and shifted things around inside the orangehead. Occasionally he ordered the dungeon guards to fetch tools or assist in a procedure. At one point, loops of Calgemo's intestines were being unrolled around him. At another he witnessed his own lungs in the Thin Man's grimy hand, felt him squeeze.

Calgemo stayed conscious, Alder's magic ensured he missed none of what was inflicted on him. The screams Calgemo couldn't control, they came from a deep part of him, an instinctive reaction to agony no body was made to endure. Creatures of flesh and blood were intended to die before they experienced this. His throat eventually too hoarse to scream, Calgemo took to ragged breaths and gasped cussing.

Alders talked through the entire operation, demanding details of the stable hands' larcenous plan. Calgemo surrendered nothing. Alders asked whether they had been hired by enemies of Lord Doneg, Calgemo replied they worked for the elf who lived in Alders' trousers.

Tears coursed down Hicussaw's cheeks, moist, tasting salty upon his lips. It was all his fault, Hicussaw understood, all his fault. He had left Tellyn when she needed him beside her. He had abandoned her in bed, diddling her and deserting her, denying her the sweet slumber of the beloved in the arms of her lover. Why? To save his friends. He had resolved to dissuade Calgemo and Jams from their foolhardy venture. A noble goal worth the sacrifice of a single night in his sweetheart's embrace. An admirable task. One he failed spectacularly.

Taking things that didn't belong to you was wrong. Robbing folk, noble lord or peasant farmer, was a wicked thing to do. Calgemo saw it differently but Hicussaw didn't. He knew better, he had to stop his friends committing a terrible mistake. And what did Hicussaw do once he met the twosome? He joined them wholeheartedly. Calgemo was Calgemo, he could not be blamed. The fault lay with Hicussaw succumbing to his secret failure, the ghost of his boyhood dreams. He wanted to be a hero, Calgemo's words had aroused the passion long buried.

Hicussaw became a zealous convert to Calgemo's cause, betraying reason and the trust of Tellyn and Jams. Ever cowardly Jams was right to be afraid this time. Hicussaw had brutally stamped on Jams' resistance to their errors. Despite sharing Jams' concerns, he made the decision to reject them. Kryter's the son! He had banded with Calgemo and forced Jams to discard good sense too.

Stupid, incredibly stupid, beyond stupid. He should have guessed Barnemit was watching them, patiently awaiting a chance to take revenge and avert his trial. Now, Barnemit's power was safe and growing again thanks to their arrest, Calgemo was being tortured to a rit short of death, Jams had found magical talent that could change his life

only to be thrown in a dungeon, and Hicussaw himself had been possessed.

Tellyn! Where was she? Did she see his clones? Had she learnt of his arrest? He wished she was standing in front of him, presenting him the opportunity to say goodbye. Their romance could not survive his term in Bart's dungeons. Tellyn, I'm sorry I did this to our love, my foolishness killed us. You always forgive me, not this time, I'm not worthy. You deserve a man who listens when you ask him to stay, who prizes your heart above his selfish notions of friendship and heroism.

The dead echoed relentlessly in Hicussaw's ears. They picked on stray thoughts and used them to batter him:

"I was taken from my wife and children. You chose this over your sweetheart."

"Hero? You wouldn't be here if you weren't a villain. The Master of the Dungeons will serve you your just reward."

"Can your tears match your wretched friend's blood, drop for drop? No, there's too much blood. Bet he'll forgive you since you're crying eh?"

Desperate to think of something other than the whispers, Hicussaw turned to Jams. Jams was mumbling to himself. He looked dazed, his eyes half-closed and unfocused. Trapped in conversation with the dead, Hicussaw realized.

Here was good he could do. Hicussaw tried calling to Jams, "Jams, don't listen to them! The ghosts are trying to break you. They take joy in making you miserable, twisting you so you're bitter and hateful like them."

Jams may as well have been deaf. Hicussaw grasped how ridiculous the notion he could help his friend was. Hicussaw knew he was no hero, he was a fae-brained halfwit jinxbait stable hand who had chased an idiot boy's dreams into the jaws of doom.

"Why should he heed you? Following you got him into this nasty trouble in the first place." the dead reminded Hicussaw, "Ignoring your madness is the best thing your buddies can do."

"Go away, jinx your souls, go away!" Hicussaw pleaded through the tears.

"We need not suffer the chatter of the dead." Hicussaw heard his own voice cutting into the stream of deathly rasping. The ghosts were imitating him again.

“This rabble of the dead has confused you. I am not one of them, I am you.” Hicussaw stepped out in front of Hicussaw. He stared himself in the eye. The Hicussaw still shackled to the wall had white present in his eyes, the Hicussaw standing free gazed from pools of the purest black.

The dead whispered no more, the sudden absence of their noise left an ominous silence to mark the appearance of Hicussaw’s shadow twin.

Hicussaw of Pank Hit did not scream. A portion of his mind insisted he should, it was an appropriate response to the situation. He wanted to, he really did, but he lacked the burst of energy necessary to fulfil the impulse. His night of mistakes and morning of regrets had overwhelmed his ability to react. He couldn’t anymore, couldn’t get scared or angry or happy or sad...

Here he was face to face with a killer clone spawned of himself, a fine example of the wicked fiends Calgemo and Jams had told him about. The clones must have returned to finish their war. It was the perfect end to this nightmarish tale of Barnemit, evil magic and bloodthirsty torturers. He and his friends would perish not under the blades of the dungeon guards but by Hicussaw’s own possessed hands.

“Jams, Calgemo, I’m sorry.” Hicussaw uttered his last sentence. Strangely in these final moments he felt no fear, he was prepared to meet his end. Death was both punishment for the harm he had wreaked and salvation from the torment he was condemned to.

Jams muttered disinterestedly. Hicussaw looked across to Jams and saw that he was still lost to the dead. His ghosts hadn’t fled the clone’s appearance.

“Sorry won’t put your buddy back together or keep you safe.” Fats twisted his head and laughed at Hicussaw, throwing a little attention Hicussaw’s way before resuming work on Calgemo. The orangehead was rattling off verbal abuse valiantly.

Their nonchalance baffled Hicussaw. Were all of them blind? Didn’t they notice the sinister clone?

Shadow Hicussaw spoke, “You see me with the vision of your soul. Those outside yourself cannot. Speak to me and I alone will hear.”

Hicussaw swallowed. He dared to pose a question, “What are you?”

“You if you were me.”

Hicussaw had difficulty wrapping his head around that one. “What?”

“We are the same, of one soul.”

Hicussaw believed the shadow lied, “No, you’re not a part of me. You’re the shadow from that heirloom.”

“Think of me as *your* shadow. Truthfully I am more you than you.”

“You tried to kill everybody, there’s no murder in me.”

“I was not awake at the time. You were in charge, you perceived our life was at risk and you wielded the power of my rebirth to attack every living thing we sensed near us. Had I been capable of thought and control, I would have set the clones to merely guard us.”

“You won’t deceive me! I wouldn’t hurt people!”

“Your heart knows.”

Those words sickened Hicussaw. They triggered a memory of darkness, unthinking and unconscious yet aware of the crushing sense of danger. He remembered blind terror, and a cold anger determined to survive. “I did it, I murdered people, tried to kill my friends.”

“*We* did it. You are me as I am you. It has not been long since the rebirth but already we share much of our heart. In time our wills shall unite in purpose.”

“Rebirth?”

“The moment I became you and you became me. This is not my first birth. I have walked the earth many times in ages ancient and forgotten. I was different then, not you.”

“You’ve possessed people in the past?” Hicussaw started adding things up; ‘birth’ was possession, the shadow was very old, it had been imprisoned in a noble lord’s family heirloom, it insisted their souls were bonded. What had he heard about thinking things that possess mortals? Fae or the dead didn’t care about your soul, they craved your body for their use.

He reached a conclusion, “You’re a demon!”

“Yes, in your language, the name ‘demon’ would describe beings of my nature.”

“You’re the greatest evil there is!”

“Are we? I must say you are either refreshingly honest or ridiculously arrogant.”

“I’m not evil! You’re evil!”

Shadow Hicussaw actually sighed, “No difference between us now. Every passing moment I grow more like you.”

“I’m not you!”

“We are us together. It is annoying to repeat myself.”

“Are you corrupting me? Are you making me think wicked thoughts?”

“Do you wish me to? The mortal I was before you quite enjoyed wicked thoughts and deeds.”

“N-no.” Hicussaw stuttered.

Shadow Hicussaw frowned, “I sense your distress. I apologize, our joining is frighteningly new to you while I am no stranger to the experience. Soon we will get to know each other too well for your comfort, first you should come to understand me and I you. We need to talk alone where you feel safe and willing to listen to me. Let us leave this place.”

“I can’t exactly take a stroll right now.” Hicussaw would have laughed were he less tired.

The interaction between him and his demon clone seemed unreal. Jams, Calgemo, Alders and the dungeon guards. They were oblivious, seeing and hearing nothing, busy conducting their affairs in the background. Calgemo’s screams and Jams’ incessant murmurs sounded far away, removed from the private space of Hicussaw and Hicussaw.

Hicussaw couldn’t pinch himself, so he blinked instead. He hoped he would awake on a bale of straw in the stables. The next thing he would do was find Calgemo and Jams to share his insane nightmare and merrily jest about how terrible it was.

His eyelids sealed shut a mere instant, during which his ears grasped the change. Birds twittered and chirped in their soothing fashion. The air smelt fresh and a pleasant warmth alighted on his skin. His arms fell loosely to his side. Hicussaw’s eyes opened to a forest in the sunlight.

“Where?” Hicussaw gasped.

“Safety and solitude.” Shadow Hicussaw declared. They stood within the edge of the

woods. The trees sprouted sparsely enough to permit a grand view of the cloudy sky and of Bart Castle's stony shape in the grassy distance. The two Hicussaws were outside the dungeons, all the way outside.

"What did you do?" Hicussaw demanded, "Did we teleport?"

"Yes in a manner of speaking, we travelled through the shadows to reach this point of sanctuary. There is shadow everywhere, even in brightest day the shadow endures in nooks and crannies."

Hicussaw's voice rose in panic, "Calgemo and Jams, you left them behind in the dungeons. You have to save them."

"Such a feat is beyond us."

"You can't teleport three men?"

"We cannot."

"Then we go back and conjure an army of clones to rescue them." Hicussaw's hand wiped the salty wetness of tears off his face. His agitation was only increasing in contrast to Shadow Hicussaw's calm and his tranquil surroundings.

"We lack the power to create shadows in the numbers you desire."

"Don't hoodwink me demon!" Hicussaw yelled and startled the local birds into flight, "You fought the whole castle when you possessed me!"

"We were stronger at my rebirth. Between my being released and bonding with you, my full power was briefly in our grasp, though your poor skill rendered the shadows feeble. We are weaker in this moment but our strength will be regained as time brings your soul and my spirit closer."

Hicussaw didn't care, "We need to rescue Jams and Calgemo!"

"There is nothing we can do, we are not strong enough."

Hicussaw thought it was plain what had to be done, "Take me back."

"You wish to return to the dungeons, to the tormentor Alders."

"My friends are at the mercy of Master Alders and his minions."

“I understand.” Shadow Hicussaw nodded to himself, “You seek death, to escape our common destiny. I have been others who also thought this. You will learn like they did, we are troublesome to destroy and not easily parted.”

“Not everything is about you! I won’t abandon my buddies, they’re crugged because I was stupid!”

Shadow Hicussaw paused to consider Hicussaw’s stance. The birds settled and carried on their chirpy conversations.

“Take me back.” Hicussaw repeated firmly, “My disappearance must have enraged the dungeon guards. They’ll unleash their anger on the flesh of my friends unless they hold me prisoner again.”

“When we came here, I crafted a shadow to take our place in shackles. Our foes will not discover the deception till they touch the shadow, or try speaking to it. Not my best work. We can wait to recover our power.”

“How long?”

“A few days.”

“A single hour could be deadly late for Calgemo and Jams!”

“We have no choice.”

“You’re right.” Hicussaw said, “Take me back.”

The duo became locked in a wordless contest of wills; Hicussaw staring down the demon, both basking in the rays of the sun and the cheery sounds of the waking forest. Resolve hardened the fury in the bluehead’s eyes, while the demon’s face remained calm and bland, his self-concern a cold thing lacking passion. It was Shadow Hicussaw who conceded, “Since it is our will.”

Shadows sprang out from behind Hicussaw and enveloped him. He knew the shadow moved too quickly for mortal vision. Getting possessed had magically improved his senses if he could witness the process this clearly. The teleportation concluded in a blink, giving Hicussaw a moment’s glimpse of utter darkness.

The shadows vanished and the scene had changed. The sun’s steady light was replaced by the quivering illumination of torches and braziers. He breathed stale air

tinged with the stink of blood, sweat, urine, feces and Alders alone knew what else. The trio of Alders, Fats and the Thin Man were busy doing unbearable horrific things to Calgemo, whose screams had diminished to moans of agony. Jams continued mumbling to his ghostly acquaintances. Yesterday had someone told Hicussaw his greatest joy would be being bound in a dungeon during one buddy's loss of mind and another's torture, he would have faked a laugh and reported the potential mad dog killer to the nearest druzhinnik.

Hicussaw's friends were alive and no worse than he had left them. Immense relief swept through Hicussaw along with a small measure of despair. How exactly was he supposed to save Calgemo and Jams? But the question was not so formidable was it? He had power to wield, a demon to serve him...no, he had to be careful, that way lay evil and damnation.

Shadow Hicussaw was gone. Hicussaw barely realized the absence before he pictured his demonic counterpart next to him. He immediately heard Shadow Hicussaw's perfect imitation of his own voice: "We shall never be apart. I will come to think your every thought as you will come to think mine. While we wait for our bond to strengthen, you may speak to me and I to you at a wish."

Finally, Calgemo fell quiet and unconscious, signalling the end of his gruesome cruciation. The Thin Man brought Alders a needle and a spool of black thread. Alders went on to sew Calgemo up. He secured the new positions of organs and bones, arteries and veins, muscles and nerves. When he was done stitching the skin shut, Alders announced, "Good job boys. We carved some room to accommodate our trinkets. After lunch, we start putting them in."

"Where does this go?" Fats prodded a squishy chunk of flesh that might have been part of an organ, presently forgotten on a table corner.

"Nowhere important now." Alders said.

Fats and the Thin Man unstrapped Calgemo from the table and removed his tunic. They carried him to the wall. Stitches crisscrossed his front similar to the sutures on Alders' arms. Orange chest hair was darkened red, matted with blood. Calgemo stank horribly. His trousers were soaked in blood, and piss and shit due to his soiling himself after the pain blotted out thought of anything not pain. Holding Calgemo erect, the guardsmen fit his hands and feet inside the wall clamps again. Hicussaw couldn't

understand how Jams seemed immune to Calgemo's foul odour between them. Hicussaw retched, dangerously close to puking.

The Dungeon Master's duo of student torturers tore Calgemo's split and filthied tunic to rags, which they used to wipe down their work table and sweep the bloody waste into a rubbish pot. They did not care to be particularly thorough.

Alders cleaned sweat and gore off himself with the aid of a barrel of water in a corner of the torture hall. Their task completed, his subordinates took their turn washing at the barrel. Master and guards lacked haste, unknowingly straining the patience of a demonically empowered Hicussaw. Fats engaged his master in an intellectual conversation on professional subjects, including how to extract a man's eyeball while maintaining his sight, and whether sewing a man's tongue to his ear enabled him to taste sounds. The Thin Man did not participate.

The torturous threesome departed the hall. Hicussaw waited for Fats' voice and their footsteps to fade over an inaudible distance.

"Are Master Alders and his minions gone?" he asked his demon self when the men had passed beyond his hearing range, "Your powers can detect them?"

"They have not halted or slowed their pace, the time separating them from us grows. I shall warn you should they approach again."

"Teleport me free of these bonds, not to the woods, right here within this hall."

Hicussaw had difficulty finding words to describe the sensation. It was an entirely novel experience in his trifling human life. He was solid yet liquid, the air weighed upon him like a fluffy blanket. Slipping out of his irons and onto the floor was a single smooth movement. Then he shot up straight, meat and bone once more.

"Th-that was new!" Hicussaw gasped, "How? What?"

"Shadow walking would expend too much of our mana. Changing our form to shadow costs us less."

"Mana?"

"Magical energy used to cast spells. You will understand it once our minds are fully melded."

“Fine.” said Hicussaw, “Can you turn Calgemo and Jams into shadows, get them out of their shackles?”

“Why should we? Their trammels have no lock that needs a key, your unbound hands are enough to undo them.”

Hicussaw hadn’t thought of it. Rather than admit his stupidity he tried compensating with brilliant insight, “If we’re all shadows, escaping Bart is a stroll on your father’s farm.”

“*Our* father’s farm. I have no father save yours.” Shadow Hicussaw’s words disturbed the original Hicussaw, “Our idea has merit but we cannot change other mortals at this time.”

“Thank the gods I have hands to do what your magic can’t.” Hicussaw grumbled.

“The gods will favour us solely with destruction, they despise beings of our nature.”

Hicussaw decided to be terrified about his demon twin’s warning later. He had bigger problems in the moment.

Hicussaw was grateful Calgemo was senseless, incapable of feeling the damage Alders and company had wreaked on his body. He would give Calgemo the opportunity to rest. Unfastening Jams’ clamps, he said softly, “Hey, my buddy boy.”

Jams’ limbs hung limp as they were released. Freed of his restraints, he collapsed into Hicussaw’s arms. Jams did not require the support, the moment his feet touched the ground he stood firm in a muttering trance. Jams’ mouth beside his ear, Hicussaw distinguished some of the insane murmurs, “...bones...chains...secret...”

“Demon, can you scare away Jams’ ghosts? The way you did mine?” Hicussaw guided Jams to a clear bench and sat him down.

“No.”

“Sweet unicorn farts! You’re helpful eh? Where would I be if you weren’t possessing me?”

“Stuck in your trammels on the wall.”

Fair point, Hicussaw admitted in the privacy of his mind.

“You are wise to recognize reason.”

Great, no hiding my innermost thoughts from you.

“We share our mind. Between us, thinking and speaking is the same.”

Hicussaw’s gaze drifted to Calgemo, “They crugged Calgemo badly. Will he survive without Master Alders’ magic?”

“We do not know.”

“Do your powers include healing creatures of flesh?”

“It is not among our many talents.”

Hicussaw sighed, he looked from Calgemo to Jams. “How do I move these two?”

Shadow Hicussaw didn’t care, “The dungeon guards or Alders will return. We cannot linger here, we must shadow walk to freedom.”

“My buddies and I escape together or not at all.” Hicussaw refused to budge.

“We strove to save your friends but we face failure. Gather the courage to accept the truth, they are doomed and we newly born are still weak to the magickers and soldiers the rana commands. Let us save ourself now and rescue or avenge your friends once our power is regained.”

Hicussaw ignored him, “Fighting through Bart Castle won’t work will it?”

“Had we waited a few days, we would have the strength we need.”

“Can you teleport people one at a time? First Calgemo, then Jams, then me?”

“Today, we may only shadow walk ourself.”

No! Hicussaw wondered what cruel god had cursed him to have success on the tip of his tongue and never swallow it. Even unbound, breaking out of the dungeons and Bart Castle seemed impossible. A powerful demon bonded to him was proving itself to be very little help. Hicussaw could see no answer, no hope of delivering his friends to safety.

“Hic!” Jams cried, “Where’s Master Alders?”

Hicussaw was dumbfounded.

“Where are the dungeon guards?” Jams was on his feet and looking around wildly.

Jams sounded coherent, had he shaken off the vile influence of the dungeon ghosts? Hicussaw decided to answer, “Elsewhere, no telling how long we have before they come back.”

“The gods weep! Calgemo!” Jams’ gaze fell on the orangehead, “Did they do that to him?”

“Yes.”

“I heard screams through the whispers. The whispers were many. They drowned everything. They couldn’t drown the screams.”

“Calgemo was screaming.” Hicussaw said quietly.

“Why did the guards set us loose? Shouldn’t we be on the wall with Cal?”

Hicussaw thought Jams got over the horror of Calgemo’s torture rather quickly, it was unlike Jams. “We should. I got us down.”

“You did?” Jams frowned, “How?”

Hicussaw grimaced, “The thing possessing me has a few tricks.”

“You-you’re possessed!”

“The shadow from the heirloom. Don’t worry, I’m in charge, I won’t let it hurt us.”

To Hicussaw’s surprise, Jams laughed. “The lot of us are crugged. You have your shadow, I have my ghost.”

“Your ghost?”

“He’s dead.” Jams said, “The dead speak to me.”

“Jams, they’ve been talking to each of us, twisting the truth and poisoning our souls.”

Jams shook his head. “This one is different. I made a deal with him.”

“What are you raving about?”

“A ghost promised to lead us outside Bart’s walls.”

“Jams.” Hicussaw reproached his friend with a kind tone, “He was lying. We can’t simply wave farewell to the guards and walk through the gates. I’m sure the dead can, they don’t have to be seen. They don’t have to use gates when they can fly through walls. There’s no

safe route for the living.”

“There is, you’re forgetting the secret passages of Bart Castle. My ghost said he’d show us a path that tunnels under the earth and into the woods. The entrance is on level four of the dungeons.”

This was interesting. Hicussaw considered the possibility Jams wasn’t being manipulated, “How does he know?”

Jams paused to listen to his ghostly ally, “He says a fellow prisoner shared the secret. He’s checked it since he died so he knows it’s true.”

“Not the most convincing story.” Hicussaw said, “We’re supposed to trust a dead stranger who was imprisoned in the rana’s dungeons. He could be the ghost of a thief or murderer or spy.”

“We’re no better, we’re heirloom robbers.”

“He died in a dungeon, his last moments full of misery and torment. The suffering and anger of his death has twisted your ghost, he’s laying a trap.”

“I think.” Jams spoke boldly, “I think we can trust a ghost if we can trust you, keen as you were on murdering your friends last night.”

Hicussaw suspected he would lose all future arguments because of the one time he got possessed and conjured an army of clones to kill everybody. “Why would the ghost help us?”

“He wants peace.” Jams’ expression saddened, “His bones rotted dry in cell seventeen of D block, on level three of Bart’s dungeons. He asked me to take his remains with us and bury them in free soil untainted by pain. Says he’s accepted his sins and his death, he’s ready to step into the afterlife, but the agony in his bones grounds him here.”

“What do you think?” Hicussaw asked his demonic twin, “Is Jams’ ghost perceptible to your senses?”

“A long dead soul abides at Jams’ side. A few moments earlier, the ghost silenced and chased off his companions in death. Perhaps he is protecting Jams from them.”

“Can you hear his whispers to Jams or read their thoughts?”

“We cannot pry into the minds of others, living or dead.”

Jams was staring, “Are you alright? You just froze there.”

“No.” Hicussaw replied, “Was talking to my shadow.”

“Oh.” Jams took a moment to hear his dead guardian, “My ghost says there’s an evil power inside you. He’s a dead man talking and *you* frighten him.”

“Are you afraid of me too?”

“Sure as crows caw.” Jams confessed. He added, “You’re my friend Hicussaw, so I’ll believe you would never harm me on purpose. You’ll fight any evil that pushes you to do wrong.”

Hicussaw’s lips curved into a small smile. After everything he had failed at recently, Jams’ faith was precisely what Hicussaw required. “Thank you my buddy boy.”

“What’s our plan Hic?” Jams continued, “The dead can help us escape.”

Hicussaw couldn’t think of an alternative. His options were try Jams’ route or hope Alders didn’t notice they weren’t shackled on his next visit. “I guess we follow your ghost. But Calgemo is stuck, moving him might kill him. I’m not certain he’ll live if he doesn’t get Master Alders’ magic.”

“Hold on.” Jams said, “Er...Ghost of Bart, Alders has tortured our friend awfully. You’ve been here, done that. Will moving our buddy in his condition hurt him further? Does he need Master Alders to stay alive?”

Hicussaw waited while Jams received a lengthy response. Jams’ face brightened, “Master Alders keeps a stash of healing potions on this level. They’re his life savers, in case he... forgets to be gentle with prisoners pending trial or the ones not sentenced to execution. We pour a potion down Cal’s throat and in a blink of our eyes, he’ll be ready to break out of these king-forsaken dungeons.”

Hicussaw didn’t want to comprehend the idea that Alders had been gentle to Calgemo. The Master of the Dungeons was exceeding Barnemit in sheer monstrosity.

“Your dead friend is our life saver.” Hicussaw declared. “The ghost whispers the path in your ear. Can you fetch a potion yourself?”

Hicussaw noted the touch of fear in Jams’ eyes. “No.” Jams said, “I don’t think separating is a good plan.”

Fortunately, a solution was in plain sight to Hicussaw. “I can do it.”

Jams reacted defensively, “I’m not being a coward. You’ve heard the same stories I have, splitting up in dangerous places gets people killed. We have to stick together in Bart’s dungeons.”

“Jams, I agree with you.”

“You do?”

“What you don’t know is, I can teleport to Master Alders’ stash and bring back a potion in a couple of moments.”

Shadow Hicussaw spoke to Hicussaw, “Excellent. We are beginning to use our powers wisely instead of merely throwing them at our problems.”

Jams was briefly confused, “What? How? Oh, your shadow.”

“Do you see the shadow roads?” Shadow Hicussaw asked Hicussaw.

Hicussaw replied to him, “No.”

“You will soon. I shall guide us in the present. Ask Jams for directions.” Shadow Hicussaw said.

Hicussaw addressed Jams, “Tell me the way.”

Chapter V

The teleportation felt different, longer, even though it could not have been more than a moment. It seemed to Hicussaw he was dashing through a tunnel of shadow. He exited in a chamber roughly the size of Umfeb's private quarters. No lights burned inside this locked room yet Hicussaw could clearly distinguish his surroundings in the darkness. Being possessed by a demon definitely had advantages.

It was a storeroom. Hung upon clothing stands was dungeon guard black ranging from cowled vests and hooded robes to belts and boots. Weapon racks were loaded with an assortment of arms including daggers, swords, whips, crossbows, and polearms. Boxes, barrels and other forms of storage cluttered the remaining space. In a corner rested the object of Hicussaw's quest, a tough looking wooden chest broad and short. Hicussaw cautiously approached the chest through the dark and the mess, "Calgemo could have worked the chest's lock open."

"No lock can bar us." Shadow Hicussaw scoffed.

Hicussaw became shadow and poured into the keyhole of his target trunk. His substance swirled around the cramped interior, feeling rather than seeing vials and bottles held in a rack or more accurately a wooden frame with holes. Instinct or the will of the demon spurred his actions, the shadow transformation did not come as a surprise, he had expected it, perhaps desired it at the unthinking subconscious level. Hicussaw was content to allow his demon control in this situation. He felt himself engulf a particular bottle, a small bulbous vessel with a cork stuck in the narrow neck. He wrapped it within folds of his shadow, gobbling it up. Hicussaw passed out through the keyhole and solidified in open space, a transparent glass bottle of cherry red liquid firmly in his grasp. "This potion should heal your friend Calgemo. Its magic is strong." Shadow Hicussaw said.

"The ghost wasn't lying. The potions are here, maybe he's helping us after all." Hicussaw pondered, "You changed the potion to shadow, could you do that to people now?"

"Even alchemy in a bottle is a simple affair compared to a mortal creature. Taking a man with us into the shadow and restoring him to his original condition would be a challenge

we cannot overcome. Again I advise patience, in time we shall be powerful enough to do this.”

“Let’s get to Calgemo then.”

In an instant, Hicussaw made the trip through a shadow corridor back to the torture hall.

“You did it!” Jams received him joyously.

Hicussaw lifted the potion in triumph, “We did it Jams. You won a ghost to our side. His knowledge and my shadow powers brought us a means of saving Calgemo.”

“Spilling the potion on wounds we see may not spread the magic to deeper injuries. Your friend should swallow.” Shadow Hicussaw said.

The duo strode to the ruin of their old friend clamped to the wall. Hicussaw uncorked the potion. Holding up Calgemo’s chin, he stuck the bottle’s mouth between the orangehead’s lips. He tilted the potion forward, pouring it down Calgemo’s throat.

“Drain the bottle.” Shadow Hicussaw instructed. “We must make certain he can live on, untreated by Alders’ spells.”

“Uh, uh.” Calgemo groaned. His eyes fluttered open, “Wha-”

“Drink Cal.” Hicussaw commanded and Calgemo obeyed.

A few big gulps left the bottle empty. Hicussaw tossed it away to shatter unheeded. Calgemo coughed terribly while the potion fulfilled its purpose undoing Alders’ work. The orangehead’s hairy chest and stomach rippled as muscles, bones and organs shifted around. Flesh twisted, knitting together under the skin and black stitches. Calgemo was healed but the thick dark threads were still embedded in his chest. His nose was restored to a state before it met Barnemit’s fist, Hicussaw suspected it had been improved.

“It is good that Alders did not place any items inside your friend in his first session.” Shadow Hicussaw remarked, “Such things could have killed your friend now.”

Calgemo ceased coughing. “What’s that smell?” he gasped.

“You’re alive and fighting fit!” Jams pronounced.

“Fighting fit?” Calgemo’s tone was incredulous. He coughed and sucked air. “A madman

cut me open and played with bits nature would have put on the outside if they were supposed to be touched! I'm covered in my own blood and shit! Why does my chest hurt? *There are threads sewn into my skin!*"

"Piss too." Jams literally pointed, "You pissed your trousers."

"I'd like to see how quickly you soil yourself when Master Alders lays his hands on you." Calgemo seethed.

"No." Jams sputtered, "You're very brave, I didn't mean, I wasn't taunt-"

Hicussaw intervened, "Breathe easy Cal. You drank a whole healing potion, a strong one, you're going to be fine."

"Oh, I'm going to be fine! I'll just wait here on this wall with stitches in my chest till then. Didn't think to pull them out?"

"I was afraid they were holding you together." Hicussaw confessed.

"Jams, take his other side." Hicussaw unclamped Calgemo's left wrist, careful not to inhale the stench. Jams did the same for the right, his nose and face wrinkling in disgust.

"How are you buggers free?" Calgemo reached down and released his ankles himself. The orangehead dropped to the ground, he swayed unsteadily. Hicussaw and Jams grabbed his arms to support their friend. "Where did you find a healing potion?" Calgemo asked.

"We had help. A demon possessed me and Jams befriended a ghost." Hicussaw offered by way of explanation.

"Demon! Your shadow is a demon!" Terror lit up Jams' face. "The most terrible of evils in a world of perverse fae, mad gods and Barnemit."

Calgemo took a few moments to absorb this information, just a few. "Jinx it! It's no stranger than everything else we've suffered."

"Jams, don't worry, I'm in charge. I rule the demon." Hicussaw said.

"Where's Alders and his boys? Did you two freaks kill them?" Calgemo enquired.

"No." Hicussaw answered, "They finished torturing you and went on a lunch break."

"We waiting for their return? If we have to fight those jinxbaits, your pet demon and ghost better be doing it for us."

“Where’s your Terik’s escape passage?”

Calgemo laughed, “He didn’t share the details. We were supposed to meet the bugger same floor as the noble bedrooms. Think we can visit the keep now?”

Hicussaw doubted they could have made the noble chambers past druzhinnik patrols, even free of Barnemit’s interference. He did not push the matter, “Forget Terik. Jams can get us out of Bart.”

A surprised Calgemo turned to his black and white haired friend, “You have an escape plan?”

Jams explained, “I made a pact with a man who died in these dungeons a long time ago. We all desire freedom. He’ll guide us to a secret tunnel that starts in the dungeons and ends in the forest. On our part, we gather his bones and bury him somewhere nice beyond Bart’s dungeons and walls.”

Calgemo considered the arrangement carefully. “Works for me. We’ll have to sneak around the dungeons, won’t we?”

“With Jams’ ghost scouting ahead and my shadow senses, nobody can catch us.”

Calgemo removed his buddies’ helping hands, “Dungeon guards will smell me a hundred oots away. I need to clean up.”

“There’s water in that barrel.” Jams gestured to the same vessel Calgemo’s tormentors had used.

Calgemo tried taking a step in shoes filled with drying blood and excrement. His foot squelched, Calgemo groaned in disgust. He kicked off his shoes and, toes pinching fabric, tugged off his socks. Hicussaw observed Calgemo stomp barefoot to the barrel, his wet footprints would have been invisible on the grimy floor had they not glistened in the light. Jams awkwardly trailed after the orangehead, willing to help but uncertain his assistance would be appreciated.

This was real, Hicussaw thought. He, Jams and Calgemo were about to escape Barnemit, the rana and Bart Castle itself. Assuming Jams’ ghost was honest and not leading them to their doom, they could not return to Bart in the lifetime of its current garrison, which was certainly their lifetime too. He would never see Tellyn again. He had known their love was over when he thought he would die in a dungeon. But now he was

going to be free, which meant they could be together far from Bart and the reach of Lord Doneg.

“We can shadow walk to her.” the demon suggested to his mortal host, “Bid her to join us.”

Hicussaw responded to his demon, “Why do you care a toot?”

“Your desires are my desires. She is of great importance to us.”

Calgemo stood at the barrel. Cussing softly, he yanked down his trousers, his back to his friends. His braies were stained worse since they had caught the excrement. Hicussaw looked away, then remembered Jams and called out to him. “Jams, take me through your ghost’s route.”

Hicussaw resumed the conversation with Shadow Hicussaw, “What would I say to her? Hey ho Tell, I’m possessed by a demon and have to flee the castle. Would you like to join me?”

“You fear she will reject you.”

“She has good reason to. I can’t handle Tellyn leaving me, not on this jinxed day, and I can’t fault her for it.”

In the distance, Calgemo had stripped naked and was noisily splashing himself while his fingers scrubbed the crud stuck to his body. Jams neared Hicussaw and began talking, “The entrance to our escape tunnel is on level four. We’re on level two, in hall...”

Shadow Hicussaw ignored him, “We may conjure a shadow to bear her a message, telling her to meet us outside Bart in the twilight of the setting sun. She will come if she loves us.”

“Me. She loves me, not us.” Hicussaw reminded the demon.

Shadow Hicussaw sighed, “What is the difference?”

“Me caring about the difference *is* the difference.” Hicussaw grasped the heart in his statement as he uttered it. “I need to know,” he admitted, “does her love still hold?” The painful urgency of his words hung in the air. “Send your messenger.”

“Where should she await our escape?”

Hicussaw relayed the requirement, “Jams. Ask your ghost exactly where in the forest the tunnel stops. Heading towards the spot from the castle gates, how would we get there.”

Jams didn’t seek the reasoning behind the specific nature of Hicussaw’s request, at least not aloud. He dutifully passed on the question to his dead friend, listened briefly and repeated the answer for Hicussaw.

“My buddy boys, I could use some cloth.” Calgemo raised his voice, addressing them without turning, “Lend me your tunics, one to wipe away my filth and one to cover my twig and berries.”

An idea struck Hicussaw. He proposed it to his shadow twin, “The storeroom we were in, we saw plenty of raiment. Can we shadow walk those back here?”

“Yes. We have the strength.” came the reply.

“Wait Jams.” said Hicussaw to Jams who already had his tunic halfway over his head. “I can nick clothes from the same place Master Alders stashed his potions.”

Calgemo heard. He shouted his disapproval, “Am I supposed to follow you about, dripping wet and swinging my wimmy?”

“I’ll get you something to clean yourself and something to wear, before you can mouth the ‘fart’ in ‘sweet unicorn farts’.”

“Demon? Ghost? Jams’ magic?” Calgemo guessed his buddies’ newfound powers made the feat possible, “One of you freakish buggers going to fly faster than the eye can see?”

“Not fly, shadow walk.” Hicussaw said.

“Shadow what?” Calgemo faced his friends.

“Hic teleported to Master Alders’ hoard of potions earlier. He calls the spell a shadow walk, I think.” Jams said.

Calgemo noted the important bit, “Hoard you say. Are there more potions?”

“Potions, clothes, weapons... equipment for the dungeon guards.” Hicussaw answered.

“Right. Bring me a tunic and trousers, socks, a pair of boots, and a healing potion.” Calgemo instructed.

“Why would you want a second pot?” Hicussaw asked.

Calgemo ran his fingers across the sutures binding his chest, “This is why. I’m tearing them out, likely to shred my skin doing it.”

“Cal, you can’t drink a potion this soon.” Jams spoke, “The magic of the first must still be in your blood.”

“I’ll chance it.” Calgemo plucked at his stitches.

“Ah, your friend wishes to die. We should not have wasted our time and power healing him.” Shadow Hicussaw commented.

“I didn’t save your life for you to kill yourself.” Hicussaw addressed Calgemo, “Too much alchemy could explode your heart or grow your nose into a wimmy. Everybody’s heard tales of fools who thought they’d try just one more concoction.”

“Tell me, how would you buggers feel if you had jinxed itchy stitches to remind you Master Alders had been inside you?” Calgemo demanded to know, “I’m to live with his sewing in my flesh then?”

“A few hours Cal. I’ll shadow walk to the storeroom now and pick up the stuff you need, a potion included. Let the old one’s magic fade before you pour the new one on.”

“We are overusing the few spells we can cast in our weakened state. Shadow walks will cost us mana we do not have to spare.” Shadow Hicussaw warned.

“We’re trading your energy for precious moments.” Hicussaw responded, “The less we dally, the quicker we escape.”

“Sorry my buddy boys, you speak sense, I should wait.” Calgemo admitted his rashness, “I hastened to rid myself of the relics of my most crugged day ever.”

“We all do, we’ve all suffered today.” Jams thought he was comforting the orangehead by sharing the sentiment of their experience.

“You’ve got signs of Master Alders touching you eh?” Calgemo sported a bemused expression. Jams appeared horrified he had said the wrong thing again.

“Jams and I couldn’t begin to guess the pain the Dungeon Master put you through, Cal. The both of us are glad you didn’t break in Master Alders’ hands.” Hicussaw shot Jams a reproachful look.

Calgemo chose to forgive his friend, there were greater concerns. “And you Hic, loot the

storeroom good and proper. Grab arms to defend ourselves and potions to keep us fighting fit when we take a hit.”

Calgemo’s words scared Jams, “Do you think we’re going into battle? The plan is to sneak our way free.”

Hicussaw didn’t like the possibility either but he realized the necessity of considering it. “Jams, Calgemo is wise on this matter.” said the bluehead, “In case we fail stealth, our choice would be either fight the dungeon guards or accept their chains. We should be prepared to survive the battle for our freedom.”

Level one of Bart Castle’s dungeons was solely dedicated to cells holding outlaws until they stood trial. The inmates not assured a death sentence or worse, a term in the dungeons, were sufficiently important (for reasons like noble blood) that those in power wished them unharmed. Such prisoners would be spared a visit to level two, probably. The rest were not so fortunate. Bart’s dungeon guards tortured their charges on level two.

The stable hands had been escorted directly to the dreaded level two, nobody thought Doneg would allow them to attend their own trial. Master Alders had assumed he could begin full treatment of the new prisoners as early as he pleased.

On level two, passages connected wide halls and too small chambers where prisoners were subject to the twisted art of Master Alders and his students. Through the poorly lit corridors trotted our three escapees, barely restraining their eagerness to be free. They maintained a measure of caution lest in their haste they drew attention with noise or blundered into a guard. Jams’ ghost whispered directions and Hicussaw’s demon alerted them to dungeon guards both idling and on patrol.

They reached the stairs descending to level three without incident, having avoided the scattered foes in their path. Instead of a continuous stairwell running from level one to four, the stairways were placed far apart to make escape difficult. The stable hands would have to traverse most of level three to find the staircase heading down to level four.

Jams’ dead companion had advised the trio to snatch torches off level two. Calgemo and Jams were glad for the warning. Darkness spread malignantly in the length and breadth of level three. This was not the mere absence of light Hicussaw had experienced in the vaults, it was a black despair he could smell through the stench of centuries of

accumulated filth, depressing the hope in his heart and converting zeal to fear. Islands of illumination formed around weakly burning braziers at the intersection of passages.

Level one's holding cells were relatively open affairs with their walls of steel rods, the cells on level three resembled level two's torture and isolation chambers. Sturdy iron locks kept shut the thick hardwood doors of each cell. Sliding panels were set in the upper sections of the doors, to transfer food and check whether the inmates were dead yet. Inside these nightmarish spaces languished the convicts, outlaws tried for their crimes and sentenced to the dungeons.

The horror would have been significantly easier to ignore had the prisoners been quiet. They reacted to the slivers of light the stable hands' torches slipped under their doors, penetrating the world of blackness they dwelled in. They replied to the fall of shod feet on the ground interrupting their sombre silence. The stable hands were greeted by a wail, a moan, a scream, a burst of sobbing, shouted gibberish and abuse. Some of the commotion was the dead but the majority of it was the living calling to the living.

Hicussaw knew better. He had learned his lesson. He who helps others ends, up needing help himself. Last night's attempt to save Calgemo and Jams had proved it further. But this time was different, wasn't it? Now he wielded true power. He possessed the ability to rescue and save lives.

In the trio's third corridor on level three, Hicussaw halted. "We can't leave them."

"Who?" Calgemo asked over a spurt of desperate pleading for forgiveness. The orangehead was clad dungeon guard style, in cowled vest and trousers, belted and booted, one gloved hand grasping a burning torch and the other a crossbow, with a quiver of bolts and a sheathed long dagger on his belt. His cowl was lowered, exposing his gold flecked orange mop.

"No!" Shadow Hicussaw opposed his host's compassion.

"It's scary here." Jams' face was pale in the light of his torch, his eyes twitched in this direction and then that, nervously responding to every sound and flicker of shadow. His free hand bore a crossbow, slung around his waist was the quiver. "We shouldn't linger. The unfriendly dead will take notice."

"The people trapped behind these doors." Hicussaw pointed to the nearest cell. Himself he carried neither torch nor arms, confident his demonic talents could fulfil such

purposes. “We could have been them. We should free them.”

Calgemo let Hicussaw have it, “Because throwing open the doors to the rana’s dungeons is absolutely safe. I doubt the thieves and murderers in there would murder us and rob our corpses, I mean they’ve never done that sort of thing before.”

“Hicussaw, no.” Jams hesitated, “We have to pick up my ghost’s bones. Cell seventeen in block D.”

“Calgemo, they can’t all be monsters like Barnemit...they had a bad day, made stupid choices, like we did. Jams, we’ll grab your ghost’s bones. My demon tells me few guards are posted on this level, we’ve no reason to hurry.”

“We’re not risking our lives to save jinxed convicts!” Calgemo was glad his hands were full, it prevented him driving his point home with a fist.

“We aren’t free of sin, we’re heirloom robbers Cal. Haven’t these folk suffered enough?” Hicussaw pressed on, “Master Alders tortured you for one morning. They’ve been suffering his treatment days, months, years.”

“I was close to breaking in a single session.” Calgemo said, “The pain, I was losing myself, I couldn’t care about anything except ending the pain. Lucky I dropped the cup when I did. Had I been awake, if it meant the Master leaving, I’d have told him about the Anrieslem deal. Alders would have reported to Lord Doneg. Within the hour, the three of us would be judged traitors and condemned to death by torment. Master Alders wouldn’t bother keeping us alive then. These prisoners have spent too long in his care, they’re already broken, there’s nothing to save.”

“You know their plight, how can you abandon them to endure another day in here?” Hicussaw continued his appeal.

Calgemo resorted to brute honesty, “Stop playing the hero! I’m sorry I lied to you Hicussaw. I didn’t believe you ever had a chance of bettering the world, I spat words your heart would love, to convince you to join me. I needed an extra pair of hands and used your dreams to win yours!”

“Given your knowledge of Calgemo, this should be no surprise.” Shadow Hicussaw said.

Yet it was a surprise, one Hicussaw processed slowly and silently. Hicussaw’s gaze met Calgemo’s. The orangehead didn’t look away, Hicussaw did.

“Er...Hicussaw?” Jams prodded.

Calgemo stared at the mute Hicussaw in wordless anger.

A man laughed madly in a nearby cell.

Hicussaw spoke softly, “My buddy boys, we’re doing this.”

“Who died to pass you lordship?” Calgemo demanded.

“Everything that went wrong yesterday, it began with your plot to rob the rana.” Hicussaw fought back, “You owe us Cal! We’d be bound to a wall, awaiting the return of Master Alders and his minions if it wasn’t for me. You owe me!”

“Us is right, this isn’t you and me. Three of us stand to lose our freedom and lives here. Jams’ ghost is leading us out of this crughole. Jams, what do you say?”

“Me? I-I don’t know.” Jams panicked, “What do you buggers think?”

Calgemo spoke, “Jams, this pisswet idiot isn’t simply squandering our time. He’s putting our lives in danger of crugged convicts who won’t give us a moment’s mercy. They’ll kill us to steal our weapons.”

Jams saw the sense in Calgemo’s argument, “The risk is too great.”

“Jams.” Hicussaw caught Jams’ eyes with his own. “The prisoners won’t hurt us, we’re their ride to freedom. They’re not monsters, they’re real folk of flesh and soul stuck in these king-forsaken cells. Lend a thought to their misery. We’ve got a demon, a ghost and an escape tunnel. We’re well protected. We’re in a position to save them. I drank with you Jams, I’ve known you at your most true. Are you the kind of man who’d wish such a wretched fate on anyone?”

“N-no.” Jams answered honestly, “I wouldn’t.”

“Jinx your tongue!” Calgemo vituperated, “Jams, you don’t have to follow Hicussaw’s mad quest to save the whole world.”

“I’m not following.” Jams defended his decision to err on the side of kindness, “It’s what I feel we should do.”

“Two out of three Cal. We’re not forcing you to stay. Want to flee? Jams, give him directions to the secret tunnel.”

“I don’t ditch my buddies.” Calgemo stated coldly, “Whether it’s against Barnemit, or dying over dungeon scum you halfwit jinxbaits think you can rescue.”

Hicussaw tested the orangehead’s commitment immediately, “Can you pick the locks on the cell doors?”

“Using what? The lock picking kit was in my bag of scoundrel’s tricks. No clue where it is now.”

“Why not use your dagger?” Hicussaw suggested.

“I’d struggle for half an hour on a lock I could pop open in moments with the right tools.” Calgemo explained, “You do understand unlocking these cells would take as good as forever. We don’t have forever.”

Hicussaw paused to consider their options, “Keys? Jams, ask your ghost about keys to the cells on level three. Where do we find them?”

“Um, my ghost heard you.” Jams replied, “He says he won’t help us. It’s not part of our pact.”

“Dead Man Talking, you’re listening aren’t you?” Hicussaw spoke aloud, “We will deliver your bones to the untainted earth under the heavens. Before we bury you, we’re going to rescue the folk imprisoned in these cells. They’re suffering the same evil that killed you and damned your soul to wander the dungeons. They don’t have to become what you are. We can free the lot-them, you and us-in one great escape.”

Jams conveyed the ghost’s position on the matter, “The living don’t concern him.”

“How do we collect your bones without the keys to unlock the cell?” Hicussaw raised the question.

Jams spoke his ghost’s answer, “He says you can become a shadow to fetch the bones.”

“You frighten the ghosts. Do you possess power to harm dead souls?” Hicussaw enquired of his demon.

“We dare to strike the dead, we are bold.” Shadow Hicussaw’s tone was smug, “In a few days our shadow could grasp their souls. Spirits fear us because they see our own bonded soul, their invisibility deceives not our senses, and we are immune to their malice. They do not detect our present weakness.”

“No one knows your possession of me has diminished your strength. Jams’ ghost and my buddies have witnessed the things you *can* do.” Hicussaw pondered, “We could put this to our advantage.”

“Yes.” Shadow Hicussaw said, “I am delighted to discover our cunning nature.”

“Calgemo started it.” Hicussaw asserted.

Hicussaw addressed Jams’ dead companion aloud, “Remember, it is a demon who requests this favour. I could quit the stealth act and fight my way through Bart. Why should we take your secret tunnel or your bones then?”

Jams quietly paid attention to the fresh bout of ghostly whispers. He finally said, “Each block of cells has a single key to unlock their doors. Master Alders keeps a complete set on him, his most trusted guardsmen carry them too.”

Hicussaw frowned, “Is there a set walking around on this level?”

“The ghost can recognize the key bearers, he’ll leave my ear and search the entire level himself.”

“Let’s quicken the hunt. I can tell your ghost where to find all the guards on level three.”

“Oh, do you see the guards through the shadows?” Shadow Hicussaw asked. “We are bonding faster than I expected.”

“No, I’m supposing you’d share those details with me.” Hicussaw confessed.

Calgemo whistled, a sound last heard what might have been ages ago in the vaults. The musical note startled Jams, it seemed so normal, the same lilt Calgemo whistled every day in the stables. But it was wrong, nothing would ever be normal again. Not with the rana wanting them in chains, Hicussaw under demonic possession and the shocking revelation of his own magical ability. Calgemo said, “We’re attacking dungeon guards now huh? We’ve moved several steps down, when I was in charge we were walloping Masters of the Household.”

Coswil of Dos Agg scratched the stubble on his chin and flipped a page in his book, a worn affair of 152 yellowed pages bound together between scratched wooden covers. Best Friends Against The Wild read the title, a tale about a boy and his dog, separated

from his father's caravan, lost in the wilderness of No King's Country. Coswil had forgotten how often he had read this story, it was an old favourite that always remained fresh in his heart. Even today, he barely paused to breathe as peril threatened the adventurers, and he shed manly tears as human and canine strengthened their bond in soul touching moments.

Coswil glanced at the hourglass beside the black booted feet he was resting on a table. Also on the desk lay a coiled bullwhip and a half-finished bottle of cider within easy reach of his right hand, to his left was a lantern containing an unlit candle. The table, a pair of chairs and two braziers occupied a surprisingly bright corner of level three. The sand in the hourglass had run down maybe fifteen kurns, a rough hour, since his last patrol. Time to have another look around.

He had positioned his chair next to a brazier, catching the light of its charcoal fire on the pages of his book, a fire he had been careful to keep well fuelled and burning intensely. Coswil folded the page he was currently reading, a mark to resume later. He set the book on the table and his feet on the floor. Standing up, Coswil stretched, eying the shadowy passages beyond the light. The dark of the dungeons held no terror for him, not after four years working the dingy corridors. He didn't particularly love what he did, he didn't hate it either, which was better than could be said for most jobs. The pay was fair enough, he could afford to gift his parents something nice when he returned to Dos Agg once a year, and still buy himself a new book every six months. Of course, there was the additional bonus of pocketing any items taken off the prisoners.

The best part about dungeon guarding was the amount of time he could spend alone if he chose to. Plenty of hours to read uninterrupted. He wasn't fond of company, precious few folk appreciated a comfortable silence. They yearned to open their maws, babbling on about their trivial interests and petty gossip. The tales storytellers wove offered him experiences the buggers could not imagine.

Coswil picked up the whip and clipped it to his belt next to a ring of keys, on the opposite side of a sheathed stabbing sword. He removed the candle from the lantern, lit it at the brazier and placed it back inside its vessel. Pulling his cowl over his head, Coswil was ready to begin checking the section of Bart's dungeons assigned to him.

The usual silence broke, the prisoners had been disturbed. Coswil was quite pleased his block remained quiet most of the day and night, the residents having given up any

notion of hope, they had surrendered to an existence of mute darkness where the sole change was the pain and horror of ‘treatment’. Of course, there were always exceptions who never accepted their fate until they were sent to level four.

Years of practice ensured Coswil’s ears distinguished footfalls amidst the racket. Who could it be? One of the other guards on this level, visiting him for a chat? No, these footsteps belonged to a number of men. Master Alders or a convict, plus an escort? Coswil waited to greet them. The shadows fled before the light of their torches. As the source of the footsteps came into view, Coswil’s left hand descended to the grip of his whip, he regretted the right was busy clutching a lantern.

Two of them were clad in peasant rags, the black and white haired ugly faced one was pointing a loaded crossbow at him. They weren’t in the best condition but they had clearly not received the Master’s touch. He saw no sutures and their manner of moving was too co-ordinated, too healthy. The bluehead was unarmed, a sorcerer perhaps. Coswil’s hood was enchanted to resist the influence of the dead, he doubted it would protect him against direct spells. The second crossbowman was dressed in dungeon guard attire, a very bad sign, they might have already murdered a guard and stolen the clothes and weapons. Coswil knew he couldn’t trust them to leave him alive.

“Give us the keys. We don’t wish to hurt you.” The bluehead spoke with complete confidence, definitely a magicker, probably a liar.

“You trying a rescue? Or do you fools think you can unlock your way out of the dungeons?” Coswil laughed. He was staring down two crossbows, a single bolt in the right spot would kill him, provided the shooters could aim. The blackhead looked jittery, he could be spooked into ruining his shot. The orangehead was steady, a ruthless glint in his eye. It didn’t mean he could hit his mark though, in fact both were using one hand on a crossbow requiring two to shoot straight. The idiots were holding torches while the magicker had two hands unoccupied.

Hicussaw was incredulous, “You can’t fight crossbows with your whip and blade. You’re outnumbered. If you surrender, you keep your life and we take only the keys.”

“Don’t listen to him.” Calgemo contributed, “You’re free to fight.” He lifted his crossbow one-handed to eye level, an exaggerated gesture of taking aim Coswil was unimpressed by. Without a second hand steadying the bow, the orangehead was unlikely to hit his target.

Coswil asked, “Do you promise not to kill me?”

Relieved, Hicussaw spoke, “Yes, we-”

The lantern smashed into Hicussaw’s face. The whip cracked a lash across Jams and Calgemo. Jams cried out, dropping crossbow and torch. Calgemo lost grasp of his torch too yet managed to fire a bolt, predictably it went wild. Coswil drew his sword, and cracked the whip at Calgemo. The second lash struck the orangehead’s hands. Though his leather gloves stopped the whip stripping a layer of skin, the nip of concentrated pain forced Calgemo to let fall his crossbow.

Hicussaw’s face was cut up frightfully bloody. He transformed into shadow, the splinters of glass in his flesh tinkling to the ground atop the lantern’s shattered remains. The shadow sank to the floor, immediately darting towards Coswil. Reacting on instinct, Coswil stabbed the shade in front of him, his blade bit the earth uselessly. Hicussaw in shadow form passed under Coswil’s feet, his slimy blackness slithered up the burly dungeon guard’s body, wrapping around the arms.

Hicussaw regained solid shape and unmarred face. Materializing behind Coswil, he threw his strength into restraining the enemy. The bluehead found he couldn’t handle Coswil’s greater weight, the dungeon guard was physically stronger.

“We can’t hold him long! A mere man can overpower a demon?” Hicussaw asked his twin shadow.

“We are masters of shadow not wrestling.” Shadow Hicussaw said dismissively.

“Cal, now!” Hicussaw barked.

Jams reclaimed his crossbow, took trembling aim and shot the wall to the right of Coswil. The blackhead froze, unable to comprehend how he had missed a target less than four octets away. He was utterly worthless. Calgemo didn’t bother picking up the crossbow he would have to reload, he unsheathed his dagger and charged. Grappling with Hicussaw holding him from behind, Coswil desperately flicked his whip. Calgemo jumped over the poorly executed lash, and seized the hand of Coswil flailing a sword. A weak lash stung the orangehead at close range, Calgemo ignored it, his free hand drove the dagger into Coswil’s belly.

Coswil screamed. Savagely drowning the guard’s voice in his own yell, Calgemo

yanked the dagger loose and slashed open Coswil's throat, turning the guard's howl into a gurgle and spraying blood in the orangehead's face. A horrified Hicussaw felt Coswil struggle fiercer a few moments before going limp, saw the weapons slip from Coswil's hands, smelt the emptying of bowels as death relaxed Coswil's muscles. Hicussaw released him to the floor.

"The gods weep!" Hicussaw cried, "I thought you'd punch him, I didn't say slit his throat!"

Calgemo spat Coswil's blood, "Because you were doing so well pitting your strength against his!" Calgemo's black gloved hand wiped down his face, several times, a smear of the spilt life fluid continued to coat his features, "Mighty demon indeed! Thank the gods one of us can wield a weapon right!"

"He's dead! Dead, dead, dead! Cal, you killed him! We'll be judged murderers!" Jams ranted.

Calgemo reminded him of reality, "We're no worse. Slaying a dungeon guard would earn us lesser punishment than robbing the rana."

"We had the advantage, three against one. We could have beaten him senseless. He didn't have to die!" Hicussaw argued.

"I witnessed us 'beating him senseless' you pisswet dolt! We were three and about to lose. He was going to kill us or return us to Master Alders' tender care." Calgemo said, "No time to be soft on our foes, not if we want to live free."

"Somebody must have heard us." Jams was shaking, he clumsily retrieved his crossbow. "More guards will come."

Calgemo shared Jams' opinion, "We need to hurry! We'd be fine had we stuck to quietly sneaking out of the dungeons, instead Hic pushed us to a loud messy rescue of every jinxbait locked up in here."

"Dungeon guards won't fret about prisoners screaming, that's what they'll tell themselves they heard." Hicussaw shut his eyes and took a moment to prepare himself. Eyes unclosing, he reached down to the corpse in its pool of blood, plucking the key ring off Coswil's belt.

Said Hicussaw to his demon, "I was in a position of power over this guardsman yet I offered him mercy. I was better than Barnemit, the druzhinniks, the barons...Why did he

fight? He was willing to sacrifice his life for what? A pittance in wages? Loyalty to the Master of the Dungeons? Wickedness?”

Shadow Hicussaw responded, “He appeared to be a skilled warrior, perhaps it was in his nature to resist. His reasons do not truly interest us. Your friends are weak defenceless mortals, our shadow magic prevented the guard from slaughtering them. They are a burden we risk much to protect. This quest to rescue prisoners and friends costs us mana, it tires and weakens us. We should shadow walk to the woods alone.”

Hicussaw disregarded his suggestion.

“You think we can spare the time?” Jams ventured.

“You’re still trying to save the dungeon scum? Sweet unicorn farts!” Calgemo abused.

“Yes, I’m certain. We killed a man to get the keys. We’re not abandoning the prisoners Jams. You chose to do the right thing. Would you forsake our decision? Would you condemn folk like you and me to dying in Bart’s dungeons?”

“I, I don’t know. Yes? No?” Jams floundered miserably, “He who helps others, ends up needing help himself. We could’ve died at a guard’s whip.”

“Bless your wimmy Jams! Another guard might discover this jinxbait’s body and raise an alarm. The guards could track us by the convicts’ din wherever our light goes, by the corpses bleeding dry in our wake. Before those pisswet buggers catch us, let’s flee the dungeons!”

“My buddy boys, we don’t have to fear the guards. The prisoners will fight on our side once we arm them.” Hicussaw revealed his brilliant strategy, the one he thought of a moment ago.

Calgemo paused to digest Hicussaw’s new idea. He had this to say, “I’m not giving my bow and dagger to a convict who’s been tortured mad!”

Shadow Hicussaw read his host’s intentions and warned, “Save our strength, do not waste it travelling to the storeroom. If we are to survive this rescue, we will need our spells for battle.”

“They can have the guards’ stuff.” Hicussaw’s shoe nudged Coswil’s fallen sword, “I’ll fetch more from the same place I nicked yours Cal.”

Shadow Hicussaw sighed, “We shall rue our foolishness.”

“Yes!” Jams agreed eagerly, “We’re safer in numbers! With a small army of convicts, we’ll be hunting dungeon guards in a dungeon.”

Calgemo looked from the ‘hero till it kills me’ Hicussaw to the ‘trust dungeon scum to protect us’ Jams. Both seemed equally crazed to him. He spoke, “Hic, Jams, both of you pisswet jinxbaits sworn to doom me, I surrender! You win, jinx stealth! Stick a prisoner’s knife in my back and march me before the eyes of a guard, just don’t ask me to share a potion!”

Thus did the stable hands commence the liberation of Lord Doneg’s convicts. Calgemo sheathed his blood stained dagger and loaded his crossbow. This time he used both hands to wield the weapon. Jams took up Coswil’s sword, he reasoned swinging a sword would be easier than shooting his previous weapon. Retaining the torch in his left hand made him the sole stable hand holding a light. Hicussaw added the whip and Jams’ quiver to his belt, the crossbow Jams had dumped he carried in his arms.

The trio resumed their escape, departing the scene of their grisly violence. Hicussaw halted outside the first cell they came upon after Coswil’s cosy corner. The inmate could be heard moaning faintly. Prisoners in neighbouring cells were sounding their presence as well.

“This cell holds nothing alive.” Shadow Hicussaw determined.

“I suppose the groaning I hear is the wind three levels underground.” Hicussaw spoke to his demon.

“My ghost had a peek!” Jams cried, “Don’t open the door! It’s a dead man walking! A ghost possessing a corpse!”

Undead. The thought sent a tingle of cold dread down Hicussaw’s spine. Those monsters were nearly impossible to slay, their whole body had to be destroyed. Had he unlocked that door, the three of them could have fed a starving zombie.

“How the jinx is there a zombie trapped in a cell of Bart’s dungeons! Why didn’t the dungeon guards burn the damned thing?” Calgemo asked.

Jams offered his dead friend’s answer, “The dungeon guards are lazy, they would never move a corpse, clearing the undead might only happen for a new convict needing a cell.

When a prisoner dies, a ghost has the chance to grab the empty body.”

Calgemo ventured to the sliding panel set in the door. He drew back the panel and gazed into the moaning black. The prevalent odour of the dungeons was terrible enough to mask the stench of decay. “Shine your light here Jams, I want to see.”

Jams said no, “No!”

Hicussaw concurred, “Don’t bother the undead, Cal.”

At the next cell, the threesome performed what would become their customary pre-cell check on this caper.

“I see the prisoner is alive.” Shadow Hicussaw informed Hicussaw.

“Dead Man Talking says it’s a living man in there.” Jams confirmed independently.

Hicussaw’s fingers searched the ring of keys on his belt. The door before him was marked B6, the prisoner behind it was sobbing bitterly. The bluehead found Block B inscribed on a key.

“We start here.” Hicussaw announced. He jammed the key into the lock and twisted.

“You’re saved, friend!” Hicussaw shoved the cell door wide open.

The bluehead spotted the prisoner lying on the dirty floor in the dark. A dull wave of light from Jams’ torch reached the prostrate form, touching his tangled mass of grime encrusted locks. The prisoner lifted his shaggy head, his weeping waned and ceased altogether.

“You’ve come?” he whispered.

He pushed himself off the floor, rising to the highest his hunched frame could go. His raiment hung in tatters upon his scrawny body. Alders’ ugly stitching could be seen on every bit of his exposed flesh, even the glimpses of face his hair didn’t hide. His eyes were watery and blinking.

“Yes.” Hicussaw replied unsurely, “To rescue you.”

The prisoner nodded, “I knew it. I’m prepared today.”

“Ah, good?” Hicussaw tried.

“Remember me telling you they’d be mad?” Calgemo reminded the bluehead.

“Never take me alive!” the prisoner erupted. He hurled himself through the doorway straight at Hicussaw. The bluehead hefted his crossbow between them, a moment later the prisoner hit and the twosome were flung upon the ground.

“We’re here to save you!” Hicussaw gasped, blocking a flurry of punches with the crossbow.

“I won’t be saved from myself!” the prisoner spat, “I won’t be remade into your pet!”

“The gods weep!” Hicussaw ejaculated, “We’re not going to hurt you.”

Hicussaw didn’t miss Calgemo taking aim. The bluehead shouted, “Cal, don’t! He doesn’t understand, he doesn’t mean it!”

“Are you not shooting his face on purpose? Hic, it’s better to pretend his hands are stopping your trigger.” Calgemo said.

“Please, listen!” Hicussaw pleaded, “Your ordeal has ended. We’ve brought you freedom.”

“Freedom from the sins of my old life? I know your tricks, your lies!” the lunatic worked his hands under the bow of Hicussaw’s weapon, establishing a firm grasp of Hicussaw’s throat.

“My hero, Hicussaw of Pank Hit, may you grant me permission to fire once you’re dead?” Calgemo enquired.

The prisoner began to squeeze. “I’ll send you to freedom, Alders and the rest of you freaks!”

Hicussaw choked, “I’m...not Master Alders...we’re not dungeon...guards...”

Their eyes met, the bluehead’s black and the prisoner’s brown. Hicussaw saw neither hatred nor fear in his attacker’s dark depths, only the unflinching gaze of the dedicated. Admirable a quality though it may be, in this case it was an unfortunate commitment to strangling the life out of his supposed enemy. Hicussaw felt himself fading away.

“Shall we defend ourself?” Shadow Hicussaw asked.

A question proven unnecessary when a black boot flashed across the madman’s face,

kicking him to the side of the bluehead.

Hicussaw swallowed foul, life sustaining dungeon air. He cried, “Cal, don’t hurt him.”

Calgemo landed his foot hard on the prisoner’s groin. Satisfied, the orangehead retreated a couple of paces. His victim grunted, then sprang towards him. Despite the unexpected assault, Calgemo managed to swing the butt of his crossbow before the enemy reached him, striking the foe’s jaw and sending him into a daze.

“My crotch kick did nothing!” Calgemo was revolted, “Where are his berries? He was too soft to be armoured!”

“Not his fault. Blame Master Alders.” Hicussaw sat up.

“We can’t take the jinxbait Hic, he’ll be trying to kill us the whole way.” Calgemo rammed his weapon’s handle into the prisoner’s stomach.

“What do we do?” Hicussaw asked the world, he could conceive no answer to their disaster of a rescue attempt. “What do we do?”

“Leave him in his cell or quell his misery.” Calgemo proposed, “Jams or I can stab him, why spend a bolt?”

“Not me!” Jams spoke, maintaining a safe distance but also ensuring everyone had light to trade blows by. He wouldn’t shirk his duty to friends in combat.

“Murder him? We were planning to save him!” Hicussaw tossed aside the crossbow and got to his feet.

“He’s beyond our help Hicussaw.” Calgemo dodged a flailing fist, “How do we get him free of the dungeons? Walk him at the shooting end of a crossbow? He’d rather die fighting. Should we bind and carry the bugger?”

“Jinx you, you sons of rats! I diddled your mothers and your fathers!” the prisoner contributed to the discussion. “I’ll eat your fingers!”

“No, we can’t.” Hicussaw admitted, “Can’t escape with him.”

“Let’s put him back.” Jams recommended.

Calgemo and Hicussaw thought it to be best. No more words were required, the bluehead and orangehead grabbed the lunatic. The duo wrestled to contain his manic

vigour, every moment he squirmed and fought. Suffering his punches and kicks and words, they drew him inside the cell.

“Don’t touch me!” the prisoner sobbed. Hicussaw recalled Nolb in the clutches of Barnemit’s bullies.

“Lock me up, lose the key!” the madman raved, “I won’t return to the dark!”

They granted one of these requests. Calgemo slammed his crossbow’s wooden stock against the prisoner’s head twice, dazing him and allowing the pair of stable hands to race out the doorway unchallenged. Hicussaw banged the door close on the madman in the darkness. He turned the key and locked the lock.

“This place is worse than any crughole I could imagine.” Hicussaw’s tone was grim, they could still hear the prisoner’s wild sobs and cries. Calgemo hoped the bluehead was reconsidering their quest. Hicussaw dashed those dreams with a renewed zeal, “We must save who we can.”

Their recent encounters prepared the stable hands for the task ahead. Demon and ghost alerted them to undead and possessed prisoners lingering behind locked doors, these they ignored. The prisoners they did release could be sorted along the lines of their reactions.

Some took to the prospect of escape, eager to help. Others Hicussaw and Jams coaxed into believing the reality of rescue despite initial doubts. All were given weapons, thanks to Hicussaw and the storeroom on level two.

A few refused to speak or budge, preferring to abide in the silence of their unlit cells. Several understood and declined the stable hands’ offer, unconvinced they could succeed regardless of escape tunnels.

The insane attacked their rescuers barehanded, shrieking nonsense and nightmares. Hicussaw attempted to return them unharmed to their cells, a goal he failed frequently. His band of armed, tormented, vengeful outlaws had a standard reaction to the hint of danger; brutal violence. They fell upon threats in a frenzy of stabbing, bashing, hacking, shooting, and whipping. Of the five dungeon guards the escapees ran into, Hicussaw was able to keep two alive but wounded. He locked them in the same cells they had guarded, in a plight not unlike the inmates they had shown no pity.

The band collected the physical remains of Jams' ghost from cell 17 on block D, lynching the cell's lunatic occupant in the process. It was the first time the stable hands had to dig out the bones of past convicts amidst the aged, hardened wastes of years of residents. The bones had been broken and gnawed on, there were stories there Jams never wished to know. He was glad he didn't have to gather the bits of skeleton alone, Hicussaw helped while Calgemo watched their armed comrades nervously.

Hicussaw's convict army did suffer casualties, they lost four men on level three itself. The bluehead yearned to heal his fighters using the potions of Alders' stash. However, Calgemo held those in his pockets, at each fatal incident his response to Hicussaw's begging stare was a cold glare. Hicussaw shocked the demon by following its advice, he did not speak of healing magic in the presence of his excitable companions who had very visibly been touched by Master Alders' techniques. The bluehead was aware their total supply of potions was limited at three, and it was wisdom not selfishness to conserve them. Demonic possession had rendered Hicussaw effectively invulnerable, less fortunate were his friends and the liberated prisoners. The potions could prove crucial to the band fighting through level four, now that stealth was forgotten. Shadow Hicussaw had sensed many freely moving men on the last level, enough to outnumber the three stable hands and twelve convicts descending the stairs to level four.

"Get ready to battle." Hicussaw led the way down. He had developed the habit of holding the frontline position, since any damage he took was mended in a moment of shadow form. The crossbow, which close combat made impossible to reload, he had traded for Calgemo's long bladed dagger. "The next level is the toughest."

"Haven't met a guard we didn't crug up!" Lorrick the One Eyed rasped. In his entirety he resembled a crumpled heap of cloth and hair. Unwashed for years, his purple hair appeared black. His right eye was sewn shut hence the informal title Hicussaw added to his name. Lorrick hobbled on uneven legs, supporting himself with a short spear. He claimed to have been a caster of spells, whose magical ability had been crippled through torture.

"As a demon has his hell, Master Alders has level four. He chooses to dwell in the deep underground, surrounded by his creations. No, his *abominations*, the prisoners in the final stage of his treatment, whom he has twisted to please his curiosity. We're entering Master Alders' private realm, where he forbids even guards to venture except the most advanced of his students." Jams relayed his ghost's account, lugging the corporeal

vestiges of his dead companion in a sack over his shoulder.

“Thank you Jams, because your tale of unthinkable horrors boosted everyone’s morale. We’re looking forward to fighting Master Alders’ monsters now.” Calgemo said.

“Knowing the peril is surviving the peril.” Jams muttered.

The stairway opened into a wide earthy chamber, well lit due to the four braziers placed beside the walls. Instead of cut grimy stone, unshapen rock and packed soil formed the surfaces of level four. Aged wooden beams prevented the whole level from caving in. Hicussaw hoped the broad joists were enchanted to endure, their worn rotten appearance inspired the fear of collapse.

No guards had been posted at the stairs on levels two and three. The patrols occasionally checking those locations the escapees had either eluded (level two) or ambushed (level three). A duo of man-things barred the sole exit of the stairs landing room, a sign security would be considerably tighter on this level.

To Hicussaw, the sentries fit the description of Jams’ abominations. Their hairy bodies were sutured and deformed, garbed only in dirty loincloths. The smaller of the two moved on four limbs, lacking feet, or rather his feet had been replaced with someone else’s hands. He wore a pair of daggers on a belt. The bigger was an enormous brute, whose forearms were enholed in rusty iron tubes, which could deal nasty crushing blows Calgemo noted.

“Everyone off the stairs, spread out!” a former rebel leader convicted of his cause yelled.

His fellow prisoners hurried to obey, their mutilated faces expressed horror in beholding the monstrosities they might have become.

“We don’t want to fight.” Hicussaw strode boldly to the enemy. He was unarmed, the least intimidating of his band of escapees.

Too much blood had been spilt. Imprisoned outlaws and the men guarding them, both had been slain. Had they been good or evil folk, Hicussaw decided he could not judge. Did their past sins justify their deaths, was it right to kill them? He certainly didn’t think so. Destroying what distressed you was an attitude the world preferred. Surely it was better to talk first and strike later?

The sentry creatures held their ground, no aggression in their stance, they seemed

confused. Hicussaw realized their hideous forms hid the hearts of ordinary people, who disliked suffering and undoubtedly hated the roles they had been forced into. The bluehead's confidence grew, he stepped closer, "Would you like to join us? You can be free of the dungeons, of Master Alders."

"Jinx me! Hic, are you serious?" Calgemo said, but softly. He was not immune to the slight sense of hope Hicussaw's sheer will had brought their group. Jams and the convicts were waiting, their very breath tense with anticipation, wondering whether a miracle was possible. Could they avoid battling Master Alders' creations?

Iron Arms lifted an iron appendage and reached for the bluehead. Hicussaw matched this gesture, his fingers brushed the cool concave metal Iron Arms offered. Hicussaw looked into the eyes of the abomination, seeing there a strange blankness, perhaps a childlike innocence.

Hands For Feet's cracked lips stretched open to let loose a long terrible shriek. Iron Arms' extended iron tube shot out of its elbow socket, flying an arm's length on a chain, bloodily smashing and knocking aside the bluehead's squishy fleshy limb. Its owner reeled the tube in, quickly plugging it back into his socket.

Hands For Feet attacked, twirling and hopping an erratic course, murderous daggers in hand. Three crossbows fired and a single bolt caught Hands For Feet in mid-jump, throwing him to the earth. A convict axeman rushed in, the abomination's agonized squealing ended under the heavy thump of blade on meat and bone.

Calgemo was already reloading, the haft of the crossbow squeezed between his legs shooting end down, his foot in the stirrup the way he had witnessed druzhinniks do it. The orangehead cranked the bowstring into the cocked position, eyes tracking Iron Arms the whole time.

Iron Arms was giving the band of escapees a real fight. He waded into the thick of his foes, swinging those massive tubes dripping Hicussaw's blood. Deftly did he block many a strike, never presenting a still target. However, defending all directions simultaneously was proving impractical, several weapons dug into his unarmoured muscles. At each blow the brute flinched, stumbled, and grunted. Again he fired a tube, pulping the chest of an escaped outlaw.

Bugger got death, Calgemo thought, the best kind of freedom. One way or another,

nobody's staying a prisoner today. The orangehead loaded a bolt.

Hicussaw uttered not a sound. While he knew his left arm had been reduced to a mangled wreck, no pain upset his calm. The shock of the devastation had numbed his senses. Shadow Hicussaw briefly relieved his dazed host of control, he turned their damaged self into shadow crouched on the floor.

Crossbows spat their bolts, none missing their huge mark. The relentless spate of wounds drove Iron Arms to his knees. A sword to the back of the neck finished him.

Hicussaw sprang to his full height, taking physical form. "Why must everyone choose to fight and die?" he wailed, clenching the fist of his now intact arm.

"Master Alders has been inside the heads of these poor jinxbaits, he's cut their brains to fit a monster's manner of thinking." Lorrick opined.

Hicussaw walked to a prone body, the other victim of Iron Arms' tube on a chain. He looked to Calgemo, "He's dead."

Corpses were beyond the magic of Alders' potions. Hicussaw's grief over the dungeon scum they lost annoyed Calgemo. Fighting through to the escape tunnel would cost precious time, time they couldn't afford to waste mourning.

"We can't risk mercy. Waiting for our enemy to surrender lets them have the first strike. We might not survive to make a second." Calgemo said.

"Same as before, kill them if they move." Glag of the Shortened Fingers spoke.

"No, we, kill, on, sight." Trouble Breathing Jorwyd insisted.

Howls and shrieks echoed in the distance, in the depths of the underground.

"The monster's cry was heard! The dagger fighter sounded an alarm." Jams announced in panic.

"Reload your bows!" Stoff the Rebel Commander barked, "Melee weapons to the front! Crossbows behind! Enemy incoming!"

A new abomination appeared in the exit corridor. Embedded in his chest was an armour plate to protect vital organs. Beneath his right elbow a wicked jagged blade completed the arm, and below his left wrist was a spiked mace head.

“Guess we’re just getting started.” Calgemo voiced the common thought among the escapees.

The struggle to reach the escape tunnel Jams’ ghost had promised them was desperate and hard-fought across the rough-hewn passages, chambers and halls of level four. Abominations continued to assail the prisoners in ones, twos, threes. Scarcely could the escapees pause for breath, usually when they found monsters unwilling to abandon their favourite spot regardless of any invaders. Ordinary ‘untreated’ dungeon guards were nowhere to be seen.

Adopting an optimistic view, Jams noted this level was better illuminated, blazing braziers at regular intervals ensured level three’s hopeless dark was not repeated.

The dead ruled whole sections of the level unchallenged. Once living abominations possessed by ghosts stalked alongside the incorporeal shapes of phantoms, spectres and worse. The escapees didn’t deceive themselves, neither their skill in arms nor their spells could combat the undead horrors well. They relied on demonic and ghostly perception to guide them around the lifeless parts.

Hicussaw would charge ahead and draw enemy attacks upon himself. Thus he gave his comrades the opportunity to safely press their numbers against one foe at a time while the monsters were busy trying to kill him. The bluehead suffered a tremendous amount of punishment, though the practice did improve his dodging.

The first dungeon guard they met was leading a pack of five abominations, the largest such group the escapees had the misfortune of confronting. Hicussaw lured the guard’s band into the path of a vicious wraith, a spirit of the dead whose hatred of the living could rend flesh and steel.

The next black clad men our escapees encountered were a foursome in a cavernous hall. Wielding instruments of a vile craft, these students of Master Alders laboured over the naked bodies of prisoners and their removed organs and limbs in various stages of modification, all neatly strapped to messy tables. Here the abominations were fashioned from flesh that beating hearts kept warm. The escapees had previously discovered food, cots and similar signs of habitation in level four’s chambers and halls, but this was the birthing room of the entire wretched hive. Seeking a defence, the students began releasing their half-done abominations, insides exposed and appendages missing. Hicussaw’s band raced to slay the dungeon guards before they freed enough monsters to

overwhelm the escapees. Battle raged, during which some ‘mistreated’ creatures even turned on their ‘creators’.

Eventually, five outlaws and three stable hands faced the Two Headed Thing. He barred their route through an intersection of corridors after the Hall of Abominable Creation. Two heads used four arms. The upper pair of arms held a kite shield and a one-handed axe, providing close quarters defence to the lower pair loading a crossbow from quivers strapped to their thighs. Rows of cruel iron spikes studded the Thing’s chest. Their legs were the regular set of two, Jams spent a moment wondering whether the wimmy was shared or each head had his own.

The Thing’s lightweight crossbow lacked a stirrup. Though quick to load and cock by hand alone, its bolts could not penetrate deeply or fly far. Unfortunate then, for the escapees to have neither armour nor the choice to stay at a distance.

“Be you the source of the alarm in our home?” the green haired head on the left asked.

“Rotten they are, not pure in the Master’s vision like us!” the blue haired head on the right said.

Hicussaw approached the Two Headed Thing. He spoke aloud the words he thought Calgemo would choose, “Lucky you buggers don’t have a mirror. You can’t see how ugly both of you are!”

“We’ll look better when we’re wearing your face.” Blue Head riposted.

“You freaks scared your mother when your heads showed between her legs, didn’t you?” Hicussaw taunted.

“Ah, truly you reveal a sophisticated soul of the highest quality. How I regret becoming you.” Shadow Hicussaw confessed.

Wouldn’t have bet the fae-brained jinxbait had it in him, Calgemo marvelled, must have learned it from me.

Sweet unicorn farts! Was that the meanest and most disgusting insult ever to pass Hicussaw’s lips? Jams felt terrible simply hearing it.

“Mother? Two there were, mine and my body brother’s.” Green Head said, “We were born apart. Our sins led us to the Master’s care, he believed we belonged together. The Master

helped us accept the truth, he bonded our flesh to mimic the kinship of our souls.” Hicussaw thought he heard a tinge of sadness in Green Head’s voice.

The escapees’ last surviving crossbowman, Calgemo, fired his weapon. No doubt the orangehead had aimed but the Thing were expecting it, their shield moved swiftly and caught the bolt. The Thing returned fire, their shot would have buried itself in Calgemo’s belly had Hicussaw not thrown himself in its path. Paying no heed to the over 3 rits of bolt sticking out of his side, Hicussaw drew his dagger and sprang upon the Thing. Following him were the outlaws, and a slow cautious Jams.

The Thing did not shy away, they surged forward into a flurry of blows, shield blocking and axe parrying. A maimed Hicussaw did his best to obstruct the Thing and stop them reloading the crossbow, for his efforts he received a second bolt in his stomach.

Calgemo had also reloaded, he cursed as he tried to get a clear shot. An outlaw screamed and fell back, the Thing’s axe had mangled his hand at the wrist. Hicussaw and his dagger turned to shadow, the bolts killing him clattered to the ground, and the Thing’s third shot passed through.

Jams saw it happen. He was able to conceive ‘jinx me’ before the bolt hit him. Fast thinking, no dodging. Jams staggered back, blood spreading across his tunic where the bolt was lodged. His sword and the sack of his ghostly friend’s bones crashed down on the floor.

Hicussaw became solid, his cry of ‘no!’ was cut short as the axe struck his neck. He shifted form to shadow again.

Calgemo fired, right through Hicussaw’s shadow, into the Thing’s left shoulder, the shoulder of the arm wielding the axe. Green Head grunted. Blue Head shrieked, “Only the Master may touch us that way!”

The battle resumed. A physical Hicussaw abandoned the action, and grabbing the wounded Jams, withdrew to safety. Calgemo joined them, he had taken one hand off the crossbow to fumble around in his pocket.

“Here!” Calgemo thrust into Hicussaw’s hands a small bulb of a glass bottle filled with red. “Give it to him.”

Jams was in shock, beyond the reach of pain, staring dumbfounded at the shaft

planted in his chest. Grasping the bolt, Hicussaw wrenched it loose with its broadhead point further ripping flesh on the way out. The bloodied bolt he tossed aside. Hicussaw uncorked the potion and poured the contents over Jams' wound.

The Two Headed Thing was being pressed hard, their injured arm wouldn't work, leaving them just the shield to protect themselves in melee. Four intact outlaws went on the offensive. The Thing's shield couldn't guard left and right at the same time, their lower arms were struck repeatedly till they dropped the crossbow. Enraged, Blue Head screamed. The Thing pushed aside an attacker with their shield, exposing their chest spikes. The spikes were effective armour, placed close enough to block most weapon blows. The Thing also proved them a deadly weapon. An unlucky escapee was trapped between shield arm and chest spikes. The Thing hugged him viciously, impaling the man on their iron chest.

A terrifying, brutal move. Also stupid, as it provided the Thing's foes a moment of opportunity; the Thing's shield arm was held against their front, unable to stop a mace bashing in Blue Head's skull.

"I suppose-" Green Head began. Hicussaw never heard the rest of his sentence, neither did the others, since Lorrick put a spear through Green Head's eye.

The Thing toppled over, landing on their front and pinning their impaled victim to the floor.

Jams coughed, his hands checked the jagged hole in his now blood soaked tunic. His fingers rubbed the pink-new skin the Regenerative Potion had mended for him. Briefly did he look around wildly, before reaching down towards the bag holding his ghost's remains. He picked up his sword next.

"Heal me you jinxbaits!" the outlaw cradling his ruined hand cried.

"Pots? You had healing potions all this time while we've been dying?" Lorrick didn't sound happy.

"This one is finished." Hicussaw said, discarding the empty bottle to reinforce his point.

"This one? There are more?" an attentive outlaw asked.

"No." Calgemo declared.

“Yes.” Hicussaw admitted.

“We don’t have enough.” Calgemo’s tone was firm, refusing to add the ‘for those I don’t care about’ in the end. His crossbow was loaded, he lifted it in the direction of the prisoners he had freed, men who had been risking their lives beside him not ten moments ago.

“You’re not sharing?” Lorricks yanked his spear from the prone Green Head’s eye socket. His two able-bodied companions readied their weapons and turned to face the stable hands. The maimed outlaw retreated behind his level three comrades, whimpering.

Hicussaw stepped between his friends and his rescues. He addressed Calgemo, “We’re on the last level. Saving the potions serves no purpose now. We’ll fix your stitches later, when we’re free and safe.”

“Hic.” Calgemo said, “Don’t do it. There are two potions in my pocket. Three of us, four of our convicts. Using a pot on this luckless, handless bugger brings us down to one potion and seven men. You’ve got a demon to heal you, Jams and I will have one potion. No, wait, seven men will have a single potion of magic to save their lives. Are you prepared to bet our lives we won’t need another?”

Hicussaw didn’t answer. Calgemo saw the pain in Hicussaw’s eyes. If he pulled the trigger, Calgemo wondered what his soft-hearted friend would do. Hicussaw wouldn’t hurt him or Jams, and he couldn’t stop the convicts turning to violence despite his best intentions, which meant Hic would in the end back Calgemo.

“Our numbers are why we made it this far through the dungeons of Bart Castle.” Hicussaw reasoned, “Can’t afford to lose anyone, we need the whole lot of us fighting fit.”

“I think we’ll do just fine with two potions to two men.” Calgemo said.

“Which side do you pick, my noble leader?” Lorricks’s spear slipped to the left, in position for a strike at Hicussaw.

“Let these fools shed their blood, we can collect the potions later. They undo themselves, it is not our fault.” Hicussaw’s shadow advised him.

“Cal, please. We battled the nightmares of level four together, we can’t kill each other, not when we’re a few hundred paces from the tunnel and freedom.” said Hicussaw.

“Hic is right.” Jams spoke up and stood tall, shaking a little though. “We should be fighting the guards and monsters in here not the folk we set free, the folk who’ve been helping us. It’s not fair I get healed and they don’t.”

“Cal, we don’t have time for this.” Hicussaw pleaded.

The escapees endured a tense silence, awaiting Calgemo to start shooting or a fresh abomination to assault them. Finally, Calgemo lowered the crossbow, “Hic, I want you to know, to remember. What happens next is on you.” The orangehead fished a second bottle of red out of his trouser pocket.

“I know.” Hicussaw took the potion and beckoned to Potch the injured convict, who came forward eagerly.

Wounds healed and hands restored to working condition, the liberated prisoners continued their great escape. The convicts were glad Hicussaw was in the lead. They were confident he could survive without their assistance, which gave them the luxury of keeping a wary eye on their rear, where Calgemo and Jams marched. Potch was wielding the crossbow formerly the property of the Two Headed Thing. Calgemo was certain Potch had seized it to match his own ranged advantage.

“Our escape tunnel lies in the hall down the corridor.” Jams directed.

“A hall? Not good.” Osmer with the reversed elbows said, “Could be packed with abominations.”

“I sense a lonely guardsman.” Hicussaw stated.

“If I didn’t know my nose didn’t work no more, I’d say I could smell fresh air.” Lorrick rasped.

“You remember the scent of fresh air?” Mickmit of the Missing Ribs asked.

“Not a whiff.” Lorrick confessed, “But I’ve got a great imagination.”

Hicussaw was the first to enter the hall. Upon beholding its singular defender, the final obstacle in their path to freedom, his lips yielded two words; “Oh no.”

“In time, our perception will sharpen so we may not walk into such traps.” Hicussaw’s shadow whispered.

The cavernous hall was hollowed in the rough shape of a circle, its centre was

occupied by none other than Bart Castle's Master of the Dungeons. Alders looked upon them from his little black eyes set in the studded mask of matching colour. A pair of rusted, grime encrusted, curved swords were thrust in his belt. He spread wide his burly sutured arms, a strangely welcoming gesture. Lining the rocky walls were massive glass vessels. These contained dead abominations suspended in a foul liquid Calgemo guessed was a preservative of some kind.

"Griffins shit on my head!" Calgemo voiced the popular sentiment.

"Do not stop now. You are so close to the end." Alders admonished them, "I was wondering if your band had the strength to reach me. I am glad you did."

Nobody on the escapee side of the conversation felt it safe to speak.

"Ah, you ask how have I been tracking you? You murdered my creations, the lawless souls I had reformed, whose true nature I brought to the surface, whom I gifted meaning. My creations and I have a connection, one I worked deep inside them. You destroyed my work, how could I not feel the loss?

Then you ask, why did I wait till now to accost you." Alders continued, "It was because you had to meet those who came here before, whose footsteps you follow." He indicated the contents of the glass tombs, "Like you, they did not accept the gift of my touch, leaving me no choice but to teach them life's last lesson, death.

I have been given the power of life and death over men, a power I do not take lightly. For fairness and justice, I grant even the unrepentant a chance to save themselves." Alders stepped to the left, pointing out the exit in the back of the hall; a dark wooden door the height and width of a man, whose iron spikes guarded against assault.

"There is your 'secret' tunnel, here is the key." Alders literally coughed up the key, showing it to them as it glistened blood-wet in the palm of his hand.

"Often I brought my most resistant patients here. Should they defeat me and claim the key, freedom was theirs. None have succeeded, all learnt the futility of fighting justice, the stupidity of rejecting my enlightenment. And I have enjoyed watching them understand, that there is no escaping my care." Alders allowed himself a slight smile. He swallowed the key, again literally.

Blood-caked knives started sawing through the tight leather of Alders' vest,

shredding it to reveal an unsightly mess of hairy muscle and visibly rippling stitching. The blades retracted into the sewing lines they sprang from, while cutting none of the essential sutures. Alders' whole body might have been taken apart and pieced together again. His gaze passed from one escapee to another, if they were unshaken it was only because they were petrified with fear.

"Your turn." the Master of the Dungeons challenged Hicussaw's escapees.

"I-I'm sorry!" Jams broke down, "I didn't know...the ghost didn't tell me earlier! He says you can beat Alders Hic!"

"The foolish soul has greatly mistaken our strength at this moment. What little power we have is nearly spent." the demon possessing Hicussaw spoke to him, "We can still flee this fate, shadow walk to the outside. We do not have to die here."

"I'm escaping this crughole with my friends or dying with them, I won't abandon them, I won't abandon anybody." Hicussaw said to his shadow. Aloud he said, "It's alright Jams. It doesn't matter, this is our way out. Right through Master Alders."

Hicussaw charged, dagger ready.

Alders grasped his wicked swords and raised them above his head. The knife blades burst forth in a spray, each neatly slipping between the threads binding Alders' torso. Hicussaw did not flinch amidst this storm of steel. Several of the knives he stopped in his own flesh. The rest of the blades lost momentum and crashed just a little beyond Hicussaw.

Calgemo observed the limits of Alders' ability. "His knives don't have much range. When he lifts his arms, run out!" Calgemo called. He and Potch were moving to encircle Alders, seeking a clear shot at the Master.

"We shall bleed to death." Shadow Hicussaw remarked on the state of his host.

"We can handle these wounds. Turn to shadow."

"Are we certain we wish to, now? Wisest it would be to save our last use."

"Last use?"

"We feared this would happen. Our mana has been squandered. We have enough left to cast one last spell and no more."

“What?” Hicussaw suddenly found himself feeling the shards of warm metal piercing his chest. Metal bearing the warmth of Alders’ living body, soaked with the Master’s bodily fluids, not a pleasant thought. Metal that was killing him.

Alders met the bluehead fiercely, his swords tested Hicussaw’s sole dagger and dodging skill. The bluehead hadn’t expected Alders’ agility. The big man was fast and Hicussaw was wounded, though he did have the past few hours’ experience in ignoring fatal injuries.

Lorrick, Mickmit and Osmer converged on the Master. A bloodied steel appendage erupted from a suture in Alders’ right shoulder. It was a horrific thing; long slicing blades, their ends linked one to another except the tip of the last, each articulated joint granting an incredibly flexible range of movement. Alders’ Third Arm dripped with blood. The Third Arm darted and twisted, blocking blows and attacking foes. Every few moments, it made sweeping strokes Alders’ enemies scrambled to evade.

All of Alders’ arms went up, on cue his enemies fell back, narrowly escaping the knives he fired. Then they returned to the melee fight. Hicussaw wasn’t quick enough, his own blood darkened his tunic and trousers courtesy of the first burst of blades. Alders’ second burst skewered him too. The bluehead changed to shadow.

“Thanks for not teleporting me to the woods.” Hicussaw whispered.

Shadow Hicussaw spoke, “A poor choice indeed. We are crazed. Though there are others here I can become once I am free of madness.”

Free of...the import of those words sank in. Hicussaw asked, “Are you going to leave me?”

“How can we escape ourself? We are certain death shall part us soon.”

Potch and Calgemo were having a hard time hitting Alders. Either an escapee would block their aim or the Third Arm would snap into position to deflect their bolts.

Jams was afraid. He had retreated at the first burst of blades. ‘Safe’ distance be jinxed, he wanted to be as far as possible from Master Alders. Now, he was hovering uncertainly near a tomb of an abomination, clutching the bag of his ghost’s bones and a sword worthless in his hand. Jams wished to live, which meant not fighting Master Alders. Watching the Master slaughter his friends was equally unappealing. Instinct needled him to flee, Jams withdrew a step farther. The corner of his sight caught the

unclosed eye of the hunchbacked, four legged, contorted corpse floating in the grey waters of the glass tank. Kryter's the son! Don't run Jams, he told himself, think. Your buddy boys are battling the Master of the Dungeons, you're no good in a fight but there must be something you could do.

"The things in there, are empty husks." Jams addressed his dead friend in a hushed tone, "Can you possess one?"

Shadow form Hicussaw darted across the ground and raced up Alders' front. Fending off Lorricks' spear, Osmer's mace and Mickmit's axe prevented Alders from reacting, not that he could harm a shadow. Hicussaw materialized with his dagger buried in the Master's chest right where Alders' malicious heart was.

Alders awarded Hicussaw a chuckle, "Looking for my heart? I moved it years ago."

The Master could have finished Hicussaw. The bluehead held the handle of a dagger deep in Alders, no defence against a sword strike from two directions or the Third Arm from above. He would never be able to dodge in time. Hicussaw got lucky. Instead of simply butchering the bluehead, Alders lifted his arms, preparing to perform his third burst of blades.

Hicussaw and his fellow hand-to-hand fighters threw themselves out of the burst's area of effect. The bluehead barely made it. Alders did not immediately lower his arms after the act, he fixed a stare on the mace wielding Osmer.

"Eyes off me freak!" Osmer yelled his defiance.

Alders responded by means of a stitched slit in his belly, the suture launched a steel jaw on a chain. The jaw bit into Osmer's chest, crushing ribs and tearing flesh. No scream did Osmer give, blood gurgling from his mouth. The chain swiftly reeled him in, Alders' Third Arm cleaved him in half the moment it could reach him.

Sweet unicorn farts! Calgemo thought. This was new.

Hicussaw recovered his senses first, resuming the assault on Alders. Offering the Master a respite to try a new move would doom them. Mickmit hesitantly joined the bluehead's efforts. Lorricks, however, Calgemo noticed, had spun around and was heading the wrong way. Calgemo didn't appreciate the fact the poking end of Lorricks' spear was pointed at him.

“What are you doing?” Calgemo set the sights of his crossbow on Lorrick.

Lorrick halted, his spear definitely threatening Calgemo. “Give me the pot!” he demanded.

“To save Osmer? He’s dead, no healing pot can patch him up.” Calgemo said. He knew then, Lorrick was claiming the potion for himself.

“Don’t, Lorrick!” Potch swung his weapon towards the man he was calling. “We made it to the Master, we can beat him. They healed me, if you get hurt, they’ll heal you I’m sure.”

Lorrick didn’t stand a chance facing crossbows. Calgemo was about to declare this truth aloud when Lorrick ran, straight into the corridor that had led them here, back into the nightmare of Bart Castle’s dungeons.

“Thanks!” Calgemo yelled at Potch. The orangehead spotted Jams waving to him and patting an abomination tank.

“Jams, stay back or come to my side!” Calgemo shouted, “I’m trying to shoot Master Alders!”

With two less melee allies to avoid, Calgemo landed a bolt on Alders’ thigh, which appeared to have little effect. Potch was experiencing similar results. Neither shooter could score a hit on the Master’s vitals under the rigorous defence of the Third Arm. Jams scurried over, bringing his sword and his ghost’s remains. Calgemo wondered how Jams had not yet pissed himself in terror, the blackhead was trembling.

Once Jams was close enough to whisper and be heard, he did so, “My gh-my ghost. He can use the dead things and make a zombie.”

An undead monster on their side? Calgemo was awestruck. Could be the difference between freedom and eternal slumber in a glass tank.

“Should we break an abomination out?” Jams released the bag of bones onto the ground, he tightened a two-handed grip on his sword.

Calgemo realized it wouldn’t work, “Alders will see it coming. He can deal with it, he’s strong. We need to surprise him.”

The hand-to-hand battle paused, Alders was about to cast his fourth burst of blades.

How many knives did the king-forsaken jinxbait have inside him? The burst done, Alders turned, his deadly gaze latched onto Mickmit.

“Mick, get behind a glass tomb!” Calgemo shouted.

Confusion blossomed on Mickmit’s face, replaced by agony as Alders’ jaw-chain grabbed him.

“The gods weep!” Calgemo dropped his crossbow. He yanked Jams by the shoulder and seized his buddy’s sword. “Tell your ghost to possess the one Master Alders hooks.” Calgemo breathed in Jams’ ear.

The orangehead rushed to confront Alders, passing the ruins of Mickmit. Demonic magic might heal the bluehead, but Hicussaw alone could never survive Alders in close quarters combat. The two former stable hands were not a fair match for the Master of the Dungeons, it was less them suppressing him and more they kept him busy with targets to kill. The Third Arm almost took off Hicussaw’s head, the bluehead was able to duck. He did suffer the blade cutting a groove across his back. Hicussaw dropped to the earth and rolled away, eluding a broad sweep of the Third Arm. Calgemo gave ground. The orangehead thought another burst of blades was in store. Alders took advantage of the breathing room, his eyes found Potch and locked onto him.

“Potch!” Calgemo hollered, “Tomb!”

Having heard Calgemo’s last moment advice to Mickmit, Potch knew his escape route. He sprinted, jumped the last few octets, and crashed behind the bulk of a tank at the same instant the jaw-chain fired. Alders’ jaw-chain smashed into the tomb, shattering glass, spilling stinking fluids. The weapon embedded itself in an abomination, and began hauling the bloated carcass to Alders.

The Master’s Third Arm sundered the dead thing without a second thought. Its splintered halves would have collapsed, had they not started wiggling and flung themselves upon Alders.

Shocked, still the Master of the Dungeons reacted speedily. His Third Arm and dual swords sprang into place to stop the undead monstrosity of unnatural life and supernatural strength ripping him to pieces. To his misfortune, his actions left him open to the attack of the escapees.

Calgemo slashed the stitches in Alders' back, flicks of his blade peeled skin, revealing steel devices and the bone of a skeleton poking through masses of muscle. Part of the Third Arm jerked back to strike him. Calgemo parried the blade, Hicussaw stabbed Alders in the neck twice, Jams' undead ally tore loose a chunk of Alders' chest. Alders sought to slay them all in one move, his Third Arm cut a swath around him. Hicussaw and Calgemo were forced to cease their offensive and get out of its path. The undead creature didn't bother dodging, the damage Alders' Third Arm inflicted couldn't even slow it down.

Alders fought on, the stable hands closed with him again. Calgemo's hacking at Alders' exposed flesh revealed a glimpse of an entwined spine and chain. The orangehead severed the spine immediately. Potch's bolt slammed into the Master's head. Hicussaw crouched and thrust his dagger in Alders' groin.

Master Alders died silently, his enemies bathing in the spray of his blood. His limp body slumped to the floor in a tangle of the Third Arm's blades and the limbs and entrails of the undead abomination.

"It's over!" Calgemo gasped.

Hicussaw was staggering, covered with blood and gore his own, Alders' and the undead monster's. His clothes hung on him in tatters where he had been sliced and stabbed. His dead stare, seeing everything yet nothing, completed the portrait of exhaustion, of a man pushed to his limits and past them.

Calgemo hoped he himself didn't look *that* bad, though he certainly felt it.

"It's over!" Hicussaw repeated. He fell to his knees and set his dagger to work cutting up Alders.

The bluehead's actions revolted Calgemo at first, then he remembered, then he understood. Calgemo sat on his haunches, adding his weapon and hands to Hicussaw's in rummaging amongst Alders' innards. They separated the metal contraptions, blades and chain from the organs, bones and muscles. The undead creature lay unstirring, its scattered bits devoid of motion and life again. Hicussaw discovered a pouch of pink veined skin attached to the Master's oesophagus. Slitting the pouch produced a gush of foul fluid, the small current carried a key into Hicussaw's waiting fingers.

"It's over." Hicussaw whispered. He raised the rusty key, watching its wet metal reflect

the light of the torches burning on the walls.

“Thank you, for everything.” Jams was rambling in the background, probably to his ghost. “I’m sorry you had to wear rotten flesh, I know how much you hate it.”

Hicussaw proceeded to the door barring the escape tunnel. He slipped his arm between the spikes, inserted the key in a lock untouched for years, his wrist turned. The click of the lock mechanism, loud in their ears, sounded even heavier in their minds on account of its meaning. The bluehead and orangehead gingerly pushed the door open, mindful of the spikes. On the other side of the tunnel’s door, a darkness smelling of the earth beckoned them.

“What about Lorrick?” Jams asked.

“Jinx him.” Potch remarked.

“Bugger chose to flee. His fate is not our problem.” Calgemo said. As he spoke, concern about Hicussaw’s foolish heroic attitude drew his gaze to the bluehead’s fatigued face. Please, his eyes begged his friend wordlessly, let’s not chase after the jinxbait who wanted to spear me.

“We’ll leave the door open.” Hicussaw decided, “Should Lorrick return.”

Potch spoke, “We may be followed. The dungeon guards-”

“The mess we’ve made of their Master and their levels should put the fear of us in them. They’ve no leader in place to order a pursuit. Even if they do follow, we’ll be gone, we won’t tarry once we’re outside Bart Castle.” said Hicussaw. No one argued, the tribulations of the escape had sapped them of the strength and the desire.

They plunged into the black, one behind the other as the meagre dimensions of the tunnel permitted. Hicussaw, at the front of their bedraggled column of course, had plucked a torch off the walls of Alders’ hall. The light of its flames bathed the crude passage of hard earth and jutting rock but it was not their guide. Hope drove them, ‘a few steps more’ their constantly repeated thought, the promise of freedom and safety always just ahead. The journey may have taken the band half an hour of groping and stumbling, to the escapees it seemed a single moment stretched onwards forever.

Finally Hicussaw found the tunnel ascending sharply. The way narrowed, forcing him to crawl upon his belly, across stones and soil, till his fingers scraped on flat wood in

the end. A trapdoor was the final obstacle. The bluehead pushed against the wooden hatch, shoulders straining. Pain flared in his wounds, the torch he had let go of was singeing some part of him, all sensations somehow distant and insignificant. The hatch gave way, dislodging a shower of dirt, opening an exit framed by roots grown firm and strong with age.

The bluehead wriggled from under a tree, into the soft dusk beneath the boughs of many trees. Evening had fallen. The rest of the escapees pulled themselves out after Hicussaw. Jams would never forget this breath he drew beyond Bart and its dungeons. He could *taste* the air he swore; pure, fresh, boasting the living scents of a forest, no stink of death and decay. Instead of screams and sobs, the background chatter was of free beasts and birds and bugs going about their business as the day changed to night. He felt he had been reborn, the womb of hell that was Bart's dungeons had released him into a new world where time was measured in light and dark not torture sessions.

The rattling whispers of a dead man disturbed Jams' moment of bliss. "We have to bury my ghost." Jams announced.

"You seek her?" Shadow Hicussaw spoke of the foremost need in Hicussaw's weary mind.

Hicussaw responded, "She didn't come. Your messenger scared her off...or she has understood her love is folly."

"No, she is near. The spreading shadow heralds the night and furthers our sight. I see her. Shall I lead you to her?"

"Please." Hicussaw's voice sounded tired even in his mind.

"I know where we'll be safe." said Hicussaw to the escapees. The bluehead did not wait to hear any query (none were raised), he headed in the direction his demon had given him. The escapees trudged in his wake.

"But my ghost?" Jams asked.

"I'll show you a good spot Jams, help you dig too. Follow now." Hicussaw kept walking, not bothering to stop to speak.

"Oh, thanks Hic." Jams fell in line with the others.

It didn't take them long, perhaps fifty strides, before they spotted a light in the

greying world of tree and bush. Walking onward, Hicussaw's party came to a curious sight. Two women in peasant's garb holding lanterns; one a redhead, her back to them, and the second a creature of straw coloured hair. Three fully packed knapsacks were piled at the base of a tree between the women, both appeared to be watching for something.

"Tell, behind you!" the yellowhead called. Hicussaw recognized her, Argetch of Ples Leek, a friend of Tellyn's, clutching an iron frying pan for whatever odd reason.

"Tellyn." Hicussaw whispered.

She turned, the woman of his passions. Slowly did she approach him. The distance separating them closed and at last her eyes met his. Gazing into their green depths put flight to the nightmare he had lived. He couldn't remember the sweat and tears he had shed, or the blood. The torture he had witnessed, the prisoners he had rescued, the abominations he had battled...those things faded. He remembered the tune of her laughter, how she cuddled in his arms, the mischief of her smile, how gently she touched him...all he wanted to do was hug her and forget the world, she was his shelter, his protection against the cold and the dark, his refuge in the storm. She *made sense* when little else did. He required nothing more, her happiness could quench his thirst and soothe his aches, it was the sole purpose to which he aspired. He advanced towards her.

"The gods weep!" Tellyn cried, "What did they do to you Hicussaw!"

Hicussaw was keenly aware of his appearance. He was close enough to embrace her but didn't, he didn't wish to smear his gore and filth on her perfection. His fingers hovered at her face, not daring to hold her. He saw them then, ugly marks of violence upon her soft skin, bruises on her throat.

"Who did this?" Hicussaw demanded, rage quickening in his black eyes.

"You did." Tellyn said. Two words, softly spoken, slew him.

No. He couldn't have, yet there was no lie in her quiet manner. Her eyes never left him. He imagined a black shadow, cast in his own shape, clawing at her neck.

"You tried to kill her!" Hicussaw accused his demon.

"I had been less than a dream across a thousand years. When I awoke, I had become you. When the seal was broken, and our power unleashed, your frightened will wielded our magic."

Tellyn reached through his anger and sorrow, clasping his hand. She said, “Come on. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

Tellyn drew Hicussaw to the knapsacks. The redhead unpacked several skins of water, passing them to the escapees. Argetch never relaxed her guard, though she was doubtful her pan could defeat the crossbow, sword and dagger the men were carrying, men who had apparently survived the worst Bart’s dungeons could throw at them. The former prisoners splashed and scrubbed themselves as best they could. Tellyn removed the bluehead’s torn tunic. She helped him wash the gore and dirt away, uncovering the slash on his back besides a multitude of nicks and cuts.

“It looks like they killed you.” Tellyn remarked.

“Um, we have a healing potion.” Jams suggested.

“Not wasting it on Hic, he can heal himself.” Calgemo dismissed the idea.

This was news to Tellyn, “You can what?”

“Can we heal?” Hicussaw asked his shadow self.

“We lack the mana. Sleep would hasten our recovery.” Shadow Hicussaw replied.

Hicussaw spoke to Tellyn, “Yes, later. I’ll be fine.”

“Hic, er, we really ought to lay these bones to rest now.” Jams hesitated, “My ghost says we’re betraying him, but we’re not, right?”

“We’re not.” Calgemo intervened. He spared a grateful Hicussaw the necessity of telling Jams to quit interrupting.

Calgemo walked about, his sword stabbing the earth. “Here, here’s soft, easy to dig.” Calgemo began working the ground with his blade. Jams went to aid the orangehead, he selected a large sharp stone as his implement of choice.

“Use this.” Hicussaw tossed Jams his dagger.

Tellyn opened up a pack, producing a fresh set of man’s clothes. She offered the garments to Hicussaw, “Your clone caught me in the corridor between the kitchen and trespasse. Nobody else was around. I saw a shadow become you, Hicussaw. I should’ve screamed. My throat wouldn’t open, feet wouldn’t move, brain wouldn’t think. You’d finish what you started last night, I thought I was dead. You might understand my

surprise you didn't strangle me, you whispered in my ear and disappeared. That's the moment I dropped my dish, folk heard it break. They fetched me water. I told them of your shadow, not your message. They said the clones were gone, said I was just seeing nightmares. The Master of the Kitchen ordered me to sleep the day off, a rare kindness on his part."

Dismay squeezed Hicussaw's heart. He was the source of Tellyn's terror, the notion physically hurt him. The bluehead longed to comfort her, instead he simply accepted the tunic and trousers. He dreaded his touch triggering another fearful reaction in Tellyn.

She continued, "I shared your words with Argetch, she reckoned I should report the matter to the druzhinniks."

Hicussaw changed into the new raiment. Tellyn's words earned Argetch cold stares from Calgemo and Potch. Argetch was convinced Potch's loaded crossbow was pointed down because he was targeting her legs to prevent her running.

"I almost did." Tellyn sighed, "But I wasn't sure, and I had to be, or my heart would forever question my mind. Argetch is the best a girl could hope for. I begged her not to alert the druzhinniks, I asked her to help me. We grabbed provisions for you and your buddies, to last a few days on the road fleeing Bart Castle."

Hicussaw felt clean in his laundered clothes. His wounds stung under the fabric. He was glad the bleeding had stopped so they wouldn't stain.

"Please explain yourself. The truth, Hicussaw, how-why did you attack me?"

She was giving him a chance, Hicussaw realized, a chance to justify the mess he had made. She still loved him. However, she didn't know whether the man she loved existed anymore or had ever been real. She needed the whole story, in order to decide, whether to hand them the knapsacks and wish them luck or...

"I failed." Hicussaw confessed. He recounted the sequence of events since he had abandoned Tellyn's bed to save his friends from committing their stupidity, through joining them in their mistake, to being manacled in Bart Castle's dungeons. Hicussaw outlined the great escape and rescue he had undertaken, omitting only the gruesome details of the abominations and battles he had fought.

"You're possessed by a demon?" Tellyn asked. Argetch shuddered at the redhead's side,

protectively tightening her grip on the handle of her faithful pan.

Hicussaw answered, “Some kind of shadow demon. It obeys me, it won’t hurt a bug unless I let it.”

Calgemo and Jams were done digging the grave of Jams’ ghost. Their combined efforts had scratched a very shallow excuse for a ditch in the soil. Jams emptied his bag of bones into the excavation, which Calgemo proceeded to fill with the earth they had displaced.

“Enjoy the afterlife.” Jams kept his tone low.

Tellyn pressed Hicussaw, “The clones murdering people were your doing?”

“Maybe. I was in control of the magic, not of myself. I wished no harm upon the innocent.”

“You never pick your fate. You allow the winds of others’ choices to bear you where they please. Calgemo, this demon...they lead, you follow.”

“Tellyn, Hic and his demon saved us all.” Jams defended his friend, “They’re not evil.”

Calgemo entered the discussion, “Hey! Hicussaw is the reason we’re alive. Me, Jams, Potch here. I wouldn’t have imagined it, yet this fae-brained jinxbait led us to freedom. Hicussaw held the front fighting men and monsters, he bore the nastiest of it. Your sweetheart’s a hero, you’re crazy not to see it!”

“My buddy boys, don’t.” Hicussaw requested.

“Where will you go now?” Tellyn addressed her lover.

Hicussaw recalled the safest destination he could think of, “Home. Pank Hit. My family will give us shelter.”

He couldn’t read Tellyn’s face, her expression was impassive. She was hiding her emotions from him. Yesterday he alone had been privileged to witness every little one of them.

She had to know he understood. Hicussaw said, “I don’t deserve you. What I’ve done shouldn’t be forgiven.”

“No, Hicussaw I forgive you.” a deep sadness tinged her voice.

Could it be? Hope was kindled, “Will you join me?”

“Take the backpacks and go Hic.” Tellyn commanded.

Hope died.

Tears welled in the redhead’s green eyes, her voice remained steady. “You’ve gone too far. *Everything*...this is too much. I can’t, Hic, I can’t accompany you and your demon. Can’t spend each moment wondering if today’s the day its evil magic hurts me. Can’t trust a man who makes stupid, dangerous choices because he wants to play hero.”

“I’m sorry I destroyed us, Tell.” Hicussaw said.

“You should hurry.” Tellyn warned them, she would not look at Hicussaw. “We may be out of sight of Bart Castle but the distance is not great. You won’t have much time. Captain Keant could’ve already dispatched parties to hunt you down.”

Argetch spoke up, “Tellyn and I will return to Bart. The druzhinniks might question us seeing our trip coincides with your escape.”

“Barnemit!” Hicussaw spat the name, startling both women. Tellyn briefly met his stare.

“Tell, Bart Castle is not safe!” Hicussaw pleaded, “Barnemit is free to-”

Argetch cut him short, she wouldn’t abide Hicussaw forcing a conversation on Tellyn as her friend clearly didn’t wish it. “Lord Doneg sent Lieutenant Barnemit on a quest this morning. He left with Dafred and Woss. Tellyn had me ask about them.”

The panicked Hicussaw looked ready to grab Tellyn. “Barnemit will arrest you the moment he’s behind Bart’s walls again. He’ll torture both of you to death!”

Argetch stepped between Tellyn and Hicussaw. “We could surrender to a merciful knight first, claim the demon frightened us into helping it. Knight Giberl wouldn’t have women tortured.”

Hicussaw relaxed instantly, his immense relief surprised the yellowhead. She had expected him to fight her proposal.

“Yes! Brilliant! Captain Keant or Knight Maksyer would also be gentle.” the bluehead sounded positively eager, “Answer them honestly. If they threaten torture, don’t lie.”

“What? No! Lie! Protect us, don’t betray your friends to the rana’s dogs!” Calgemo

corrected the bluehead.

“Pank Hit will stay secret.” Tellyn promised. Her eyes steadfastly shunned Hicussaw’s.

“You believe this Barnemit can guess our destination is Pank Hit?” Shadow Hicussaw read his host’s mind. “We should travel elsewhere then.”

“I’m tired, hungry, wounded and want to go home.” Hicussaw said simply.

The sun’s last rays withered into darkness. Forest denizens grew chattier as the curtain of night was drawn shut across the woods. Hicussaw’s escapees hung their weapons on their belts and shouldered their knapsacks. They decided not to ignite the candle lanterns in their pack, lest pursuing men-at-arms spotted their light. They would rely on Hicussaw’s demonic vision guiding their way in the night. The bluehead watched the glow of the departing women’s lanterns wink through the trees and the black. He never did say a proper goodbye to the best thing that ever happened to him.

“She is not our soul mate.” Shadow Hicussaw attempted consoling Hicussaw.

“What could you possibly understand of love, demon?” Hicussaw demanded.

“Nothing. *Ourself* we understand, this woman is not the great love of our life. Destiny has already chosen the one worthy of our heart.”

“When do I meet this love?” Hicussaw laughed silently, “Am I doomed to love you while you devour my soul?”

“You glimpsed our love a number of your mortal years ago.” Shadow Hicussaw responded, “Soon we will remember. We shall not long deny our passion.”

Shadow Hicussaw fell quiet, he would not expound his cryptic predictions despite Hicussaw’s prodding. The bluehead turned to his companions. They were on the verge of a new stage in their miserable misadventure. Normal life was impossible. Servants of barons and the king’s law would chase them the length and breadth of Tarfelm, perhaps the whole of Kritland. Were Hicussaw and friends doomed to wander and hide in king-forsaken corners like rats in a manor forever? Would they be forced to seek refuge in a foreign land, where folk were either too fair or too dark or a different race entirely?

“The lot of us aren’t perfect.” Hicussaw’s gaze drifted over the men who had endured the dungeons of Bart Castle and defeated Master Alders. “We’ve made mistakes putting us in

terrible trouble. Fixing those problems was something we'd rather fight about than agree on. Sweet unicorn farts! Had there not been guards and abominations, we'd be brawling amongst ourselves. The days ahead will test us further, we've got to dodge the danger of being caught and killed or returned to torment in Bart."

Calgemo felt the motivational speech Hicussaw believed they needed was lacking motivation.

Hicussaw ended his pause, "You know what? I think we can handle it. When we faced peril, not one of us deserted the others, each bugger jumped in and did his bit. Maybe, maybe that's enough. Us squabbling till the castles crumble is alright. In crugged moments we just have to cover our buddy's arse. Our band survived the Barnemits and Donegs and Alderses. Sticking together, we'll survive life on the run, we'll do fine."

Potch coughed, "Well said. Wish I could join you."

"You're not coming?" Calgemo's was the first reaction.

"Got my own path to walk. Places and people of mine I've been meaning to see for years, so many years...Four? Two? One? Tough to tell the days in the dark of a dungeon."

Hicussaw realized he hadn't thought much of Potch and the convicts during his inspirational speech to the boys. Hicussaw compensated, "You're welcome to Pank Hit, Potch. The Dungeon Master would've put our corpses to perverse purposes if you hadn't been there."

"I must leave. Only thing keeping my mind whole inside Bart was the dream of what I'd do on the outside."

"Hate to lose you." Hicussaw accepted Potch's compulsion, "Have some of our supplies."

"Taking these." Potch tapped the knapsack he was wearing. "You bunch do me a favour? I could use the last potion."

Calgemo rejected his proposal, "We'll hold on to it."

The orangehead expected the ever generous Hicussaw to object. The bluehead did not, "Sorry Potch. My buddy boys might get hurt and I can't heal a body not my own."

By the faint light of the moon and stars overhead, the former stable hands observed motion in the night. Very casually, Potch had raised his loaded crossbow to an aiming

position. The hand steadying the crossbow also had another bolt tucked between his fingers.

“Potch?” Calgemo asked.

“The potion please.” Potch said.

“We gave you one already, we didn’t have to, but we did.” Hicussaw said, “I went against my friends to do it.”

“Thank you.” Potch acknowledged, “You’ve been too kind. Which is why I can’t enjoy shooting you buggers, feels wrong.”

“Shoot us?” Calgemo chuckled, “No matter what my idiot buddy says, we didn’t escape the dungeons just because we ‘covered our buddy’s arse’, we have a demon. Heard the tale he was telling his sweetheart?”

“A demon who won’t heal himself.” Potch said, “I know a bit about magic. The jinxbait’s energy, his ‘mana’, must be drained. I could kill him now, bolt to the heart.”

“Hic?” some of the confidence was missing in Calgemo’s voice. “Creep your shadow up his arse and show him your demonic wrath.”

“Oh jinx us.” Jams sighed.

“Surrender the potion.” Shadow Hicussaw advised, “We do not need it.”

Hicussaw calmly dealt with the situation, “Potch, your crossbow can slay one of us. The question you ought to be asking is; will you survive the two still standing? You shoot me, Cal and Jams charge you. Care to bet you don’t finish your reload before their sword and dagger hit?”

“One of you jinxbaits would die.” Potch reminded.

“We have a healing pot.”

“This crossbow nearly cocks itself. I’ll shoot two of you buggers. You have one potion.”

“You can’t load it fast enough.” Calgemo scoffed, “This is a joke.”

Potch meaningfully shook the second round of ammunition he was holding horizontally under his weapon. “Want to try me?”

“You said you were leaving to find...friends? Family? Why would you risk not living to see them?” Jams asked.

“They must believe me dead now. No loss to them if I don’t survive. But I want to reach them alive. The world’s got plenty of druzhinniks, bounty hunters and worse to endanger a free convict. Your potion may save me.”

“You saved me from Lorrick.” Calgemo said, “I thought you understood working together helps us all.”

“Calgemo, you’d watch me bleed to death, I didn’t forget. Hicussaw the Demonhost healed me. When Lorrick broke, it looked to me he was right, we couldn’t defeat Master Alders. All the cutting and stitching Alders did to me...the guards beating, knifing, whipping...truth is I’d die to escape Bart, you buggers gave me the chance and I grabbed it. I’d die to get home safe, I’m grabbing my chance.”

Calgemo began, “Doesn’t make sense, you crazy-”

“Stop trying to talk down a man pointing a loaded crossbow your way. Give me the pot or two of you die. Can you live knowing your stubbornness killed your buddies, after everything you’ve survived?”

“Jinx you.” Calgemo said, “It’s dark, your shots will miss. We have the pot to heal us. Pull the trigger and this ends with only you dead. You can’t win. Lower your crossbow Potch.”

“At this range, the light doesn’t matter. Are you feeling lucky, jinxbait?”

“I am.” Calgemo stepped towards Potch.

“I’m counting till your potion is in my hand, I shoot on one. Five!”

Calgemo reasoned Potch was bluffing, an attempt to trick the stable hands into relinquishing their last healing potion. The convict recently liberated of Bart’s dungeons and Master Alders definitely did not have a death wish. Assuming Calgemo stood his ground, Potch should break and retreat.

An alarmed Hicussaw said, “Potch, I’m beg-”

“Four!”

Calgemo readied himself for the impact of a crossbow bolt, in the unlikely event

Potch did shoot. Where would it hit? A flesh wound in the muscle of arm or leg? No, Potch was aiming for the torso. He could puncture a lung, rend intestines, pierce a heart. The gods weep! The orangehead hoped Potch did not hit something important, in the unlikely event he did shoot.

Hicussaw tried, “Cal, give-”

“Shut it Hic!” Calgemo interrupted.

“Three!” Potch continued.

Calgemo would not yield to Hicussaw’s fear. Jinx Potch, they weren’t losing both their final potions to the same pisswet dungeon scum. Wait, they were, weren’t they? The potion would be spent healing any damage Potch inflicted, in the unlikely event he did shoot.

“Two!”

Jinx the jinxbait! Calgemo hated this awful waiting! His feet were eager to run and his arm keen to swing the sword. He was sure he could take down Potch even with a bolt in him, in the unlikely event Potch did shoot.

“One!”

Clonk! Potch crashed to the ground, landing on his face. The crossbow and extra bolt dropped from his hands. Behind Potch’s prone unconscious body stood a vision. Night shrouded the shape wielding a frying pan, moon beams barely brushed the figure head to skirt, yet Hicussaw had no difficulty seeing the red locks of hair, a spark of green in the eyes, the determined set of her jaw. Memory supplied what his sight could not.

Hicussaw’s heart gagged his brain and leapt to his lips, “I love you.”

“As I love you, Hicussaw of Pank Hit.” Tellyn exhaled, her voice shook a little, sneaking up on and bashing outlaws was not a part of her daily routine. “Promise me, you’re the master of your demon, it doesn’t control you.”

Hicussaw did not hesitate, he spoke, “My demon is tamed.”

“She is not our soul mate.” Shadow Hicussaw repeated.

Tellyn had more, “You won’t be stupid again. No chasing mad dreams. You will think about the course you are choosing.”

“My time of selfish mistakes is over.”

“Then I’m coming with you, Hicussaw, I’m coming with you.”

Calgemo whistled, sharp and happy, relieved he wasn’t shot. “Dog wag a tail! Tellyn, you heroess of a woman, the day you decide you’re too good for Hicussaw, remember I’m not too good for you.”

The escape from Bart Castle was done, the journey to Pank Hit had taken its first step.

Chapter VI

The twitter of early birds roused Barnemit. Morning light filtered through the fabric walls of his one-man tent. He had snapped awake, his senses keen, body tensed. A number of little aches announced their presence, their existence thanks to the chain mail pressing against his flesh the whole night. Under his armour, a gambeson prevented the metal rubbing skin raw, it didn't stop the heat and sweat however.

Barnemit's nose inhaled the hint of a delectable treat. The prospect of fried meat incited hunger pangs in his stomach, their urgency made ignoring his soreness easy. He folded back the flap of his tent and emerged into the open, blinking as the sun's warmth embraced him.

"Got a whiff of the neighbour's cooking?" Dafred grinned. He offered Barnemit a hunk of bread he had half eaten. "Grab a bite of our grub."

Dafred and Woss were squatting on rocks between their tents and single idling pack donkey. Our druzhinnik questing party had camped in a small clearing off the forest road. Barnemit's friends had slept in their chain mail too, ensuring no surprise assault found the trio unarmoured or too deep in slumber. This precaution and rotating shifts of sentry duty left them ill rested. None of them had bothered keeping their nasal helms and Doneg tabards on, the armour was hot and uncomfortable enough on its own.

Barnemit sought the source of the heavenly aroma. Bart Castle's druzhinniks were not alone, sharing the camping ground was another cluster of 3 tents pitched beside a pair of horses and the wagon they drew. The wagon was stocked with sacks of food grain and travelling provisions. One tent was larger and more colourful than the two small affairs comparable to the druzhinniks' accommodation.

Flames chewed branches and twigs inside a ring of stones. Above the campfire, cuts of bacon sizzled in a pan. The cook extending the pan was a scrawny old man of grizzled brown hair, his cloak wrapped about him. Barnemit's youth and strength perceived no chill worth a cloak this sunny day. Opposite the cook sat a brute, his locks and beard flowed in layers of green and blue. He wore mismatched pieces of armour (a lone shoulder plate on the right, scale mail vest, sabatons on his feet) with a huge two-handed axe strapped to his back, plus the throwing knives his belt sported. The servant and the

bodyguard awaited their paymaster, a grain trader, still slumbering in the big tent.

The axeman was an obvious freelancer, operating apart from mercenary guilds such as the Dragoons, Chu Ko Nu and Petardiers. Having spoken to him yesterday, Barnemit knew this mercenary had fought the harpies in Skoss prior to his ‘quiet’ stint in the inner country province of Tarfelm.

“Sore morning Barn.” Woss greeted the lieutenant, “Wouldn’t it be fantastic to sleep out of armour behind a wall?”

The sight of his idiot companions annoyed Barnemit. How had Woss awoken before him? Adhering to druzhinnik discipline, the trio had maintained a watch during the night. Barnemit had taken the first shift, Woss the second and Dafred the third. Barnemit should have been up earlier.

The lieutenant granted his friends an unintelligible grunt.

“We’re half a day to Wildsong Woods.” Woss said, “I’m curious to meet this fae queen. I’ve heard her kind are so beautiful, men will betray kin and king for a mere kiss.”

Five days would have seen Barnemit to Pank Hit. Instead he had squandered two days in the opposite direction, reaching this point on a pointless quest. Hicussaw was finished, chained in Bart Castle’s dungeons at the mercy of Master Alders. Did it really matter what kind of cloning spell the heirloom cast on the jinxbait?

“Don’t be fooled, my buddy boy.” Dafred said, “The fae are monsters, their true faces are *supernatural* ugly. Her beauty’s an illusion, a jinxed spell.”

Woss held a different perspective, “Those scary tales are old wives’ lies I’ll bet. They don’t like the competition. A nymph will do things no mortal woman would even if she could.”

Dafred lapsed into silence, he and Woss were no doubt trying to picture the inhumanly delightful antics a fae seductress could engage them in. The fools! Barnemit thought. Nymphs would not touch a mortal unless he amused or served them. Any sane man would much prefer the comfort of the grave to being a toy of the fae. Barnemit did not voice his opinion, rather he steered the conversation onto a new course.

“Bread and bacon. Now that’s a decent breakfast.” Barnemit opened his mouth, “Ask our neighbours. If they won’t share the meat freely, buy with your coin or trade our ale for it.”

“Our ale?” Dafred didn’t favour the idea of reducing their supply of alcohol.

Woss presented a more thoughtful response. “They’re cooking the stuff, might cost us time. Shouldn’t we leave quick Barn, since you want to visit Pank Hit after this quest?”

Oh how considerate his buddies were! Barnemit said, “Wasting time is not your game? Then you dolts should have woken me. We’re late enough. Smell the bacon, it’s done. Get us some while I get ready.”

“Right ho. Sorry Barnemit.” Woss hastily rose to his feet and approached the trader’s camp.

“Dafred, water.” Barnemit demanded. He seized the goatskin container Dafred handed him. The lieutenant swallowed his fill of the precious liquid within.

Barnemit took off his hauberk of chain mail as well as the gambeson of cotton. Topless, he retreated to the surrounding trees. He picked a good spot, pulled down his trousers and braies, and proceeded to defecate. Barnemit was not among those who performed the process of elimination leisurely. His essential task complete, the lieutenant violated a nearby bush by stripping its leaves to wipe himself. The final act of abuse was urinating on the remnant of the bush.

From the party camp, Barnemit fetched his band’s shaving knife plus a sprig of mint. He strode to the spring a short distance beyond their clearing. The conveniently close water supply had made this vicinity a camping ground. Barnemit’s carelessly heavy and noisy tread scared a jackalope mid-drink. Close to five rits tall in a tabby coat of fur, the beast hopped away on powerful hind legs and a muscular tail. Long pointed ears accentuated a disproportionately small head bearing a petite pair of antlers.

First the lieutenant rinsed his mouth and rubbed mint leaves across his teeth. His maw thus cleansed, Barnemit got naked and washed his body. His skin dried, mostly, while he shaved the stubble his face had sprouted over the preceding day. The lieutenant wished there were kurns he could spare for soaking and drying the stinky garments he had sweated in all night. Jinxed barons provided perfumes to pisswet knights on their steeds not druzhinniks on their feet.

Barnemit donned his trousers and braies. He rejoined his comrades to find Dafred preparing bacon sandwiches. The neighbouring group’s sleepy trader was stretching in front of his tent, he waved at Barnemit.

The lieutenant waved his gratitude, common courtesy often made useful allies and sources of bacon. He ordered his friends, “Get in full uniform and pack up. We’ll eat on the move.”

The druzhinniks broke camp in under three kurns. Tents and bedrolls were loaded on the donkey, waterskins refilled from the spring, weapons hefted, and the potion stuffed kit belt was strapped across Barnemit’s waist outside his armour, easier to access and unhidden now that he wasn’t plotting in Bart Castle. They resumed their journey and breakfast on the road.

Trees had been hacked down ages ago to widen the way through the woods. Centuries of feet, hooves and wheels had ground the earth flat. Upon the barren dirt and dead leaves trod Barnemit and friends in their helmets, tabards and hauberks. Behind them walked the donkey bearing their supplies and camping equipment.

Dafred wielded a halberd, a polearm effective at fending off beasts and swatting fliers, pulling their riders off and hacking them to pieces on the ground. Dafred loved his halberd’s superior reach over a sword and lighter weight over a great axe or hammer. Woss carried a crossbow, a dagger and 25 bolts in a quiver, not to mention another 275 in the donkey’s bags. He insisted everyone call the ammunition by its proper name ‘quarrels’. Barnemit had a one-handed sword attached to his belt, a heater shield rested easy on his back.

“First inspection of Pank Hit we’ve missed in a long time.” Woss stuffed the last of the sandwiches in his mouth, savouring the taste of pig meat fried in its own fat.

“Two years. Twenty-six months, well, twenty-nine months really. A bit more than two years.” Dafred counted, “Every three months we did one.”

“Remember the first inspection of Pank Hit our band didn’t spend hiding in the fields.” Woss asked. “How we came to be the buggers doing the inspecting the next couple of years.”

“Don’t think we can forget. I thought Lord Lansam’s captain would never let us meet the rana’s lieutenant.” Dafred answered.

“Worse.” Barnemit said. “The pair of you were a breath short of pissing your trousers. Afraid Lieutenant Rigwick would send us to the dungeons instead of the training yard. I told you halfwits Captain Daw wouldn’t whisper a word of our past misdeeds.”

“Daw was glad to be rid of us troublemakers.” Woss recalled, “Enlisting was a brilliant idea, Barn. Give us the speech you gave Daw! My ears couldn’t believe what your lips were spewing.”

Barnemit repeated the lines that had won their chance at escaping Pank Hit. “You know you’ll have to arrest us sooner or later. We’re your bad day waiting to happen. Sure, you could thrash me and my buddy boys, imprison us. We stick to the petty stuff, bothering peasants, and the king’s law won’t keep us locked up long or condemn us to the rana’s dungeons. We’ll be free and at it again, a thorn pricking your every step. Why waste energy and time you could be using for things you don’t hate? If the Druzhina takes us, it means less problems you have to deal with.”

I saved us from the jinxed life of an outlaw, Barnemit said in his head. His foolish friends hadn’t understood how desperately they needed to become druzhinniks. They thought too simple, they had been scared of facing the men-at-arms supposed to protect the village against dire threats and scum like them. Barnemit knew better, he had realized how crugged he and his buddies were should nothing change. Years of thievery or fighting for hire, fearing the druzhinniks and all those above them, scraping a living off the bottom of society was not the future he aspired to. His young gang couldn’t remain village scoundrels, they had to get out, find a ladder to higher places, one they didn’t need money or noble blood to climb.

“The lord we serve buys us food and drink, bed and roof, armour and arms. We spend our days crushing dumb twerps beneath our boots. No risk of druzhinniks arresting us, seeing we’re on their side of the king’s law now.” Dafred said.

“Greatest job ever, my buddy boys.” Woss remarked.

“The look on Daw’s face seven months later when *we* were the inspection party, and Barnemit a Lieutenant of the Druzhina.” Dafred chuckled.

“The training yard...bunch of tough jinxbaits we met there.”

Woss’s sentence took Barnemit back, no, in truth he didn’t have to venture into some hidden vault of his mind. The memory lurked just under the surface of his thoughts.

King’s law mandated all druzhinnik recruits of a province be instructed in the same location, usually the stronghold of their rana. Once the initial training concluded, the

new men-at-arms in the Druzhina would be scattered among the provincial lords, save the very best who entered the service of the rana himself. Knights were free to choose their master, though only the overlord of an entire province or the ruler of a city could afford to house and equip a significant force of knights.

Fresh additions to the Druzhina from the far and near reaches of Tarfelm weren't trusted with expensive weaponry. Their combat practice involved wooden swords, staves and shields. As Barnemit trudged down the road towards Wildsong Woods, he relived those moments sweating in the dust their sparring matches kicked up. Again he heard the shouts of men fighting and the noise of their blunt weapons clashing. He felt the burn in his muscles, his will to succeed pushing through the fatigue day after day. Come the sweet relief of night, he fell asleep in an instant. The routine to break in novice druzhinniks was the most challenging and exhausting feat Barnemit had undertaken yet in his short brutal life.

Aged twenty closing on twenty-one, Barnemit came to triumph over the year's collection of recruits. A daring duel saw him almost defeat the veteran lieutenant conducting the training exercises. Noting Barnemit's progress, Captain Keant had recommended the monster of Pank Hit for the knighthood.

Dafred and Woss continued prattling in the background:

"Sweet unicorn farts! Remember the big jinxbait Narf? The number of hits he took to the head and didn't even flinch?"

"Or that lean bugger Fabsmit. Too fast, must have had fae blood or magic in him."

Their babble stirred the anger cooling in Barnemit's heart, always blazing or cooling, never dead. His idiot pisswet friends had cost him the knighthood. Unfortunately, Captain Keant wasn't the sole approval required to knight Barnemit. Knight Maksyer had also been observing the practice. He did not miss the fact Barnemit had lost half his matches against fellow Pank Hit recruits, Dafred and Woss. These were the majority of Barnemit's defeats at the hands of his comrades-in-training. On his part, Barnemit had predicted he wouldn't be leaving Bart Castle. He had to help Woss and Dafred look good, so his loyal minions weren't dispatched to some lesser baron, perhaps back to Lord Lansam of Pank Hit. Barnemit wanted to keep within shouting distance thugs he could rely upon, who would obey him without question.

“Barnemit of Pank Hit, I am convinced you shall rise to glory and lead the brave fighters of the Druzhina.” slimy jinxbait Maksyer’s words rang in Barnemit’s ears. Then, Barnemit had hated the fashion in which Maksyer spoke, as if every word was being written in a formal letter, the commonborn knight affected the noble manner of speech. Eventually, Barnemit would try it himself, at least in front of the influential personages who preferred it to the peasants’ rough diction.

Maksyer had lectured him, “...knighthood is held to a higher standard, combat skill is not the trait most prized...absolute dedication to fulfilling your assigned tasks, your lord’s wishes, is expected of a knight...your character is weak, your sense of honour is poor...concern for your friends has caused you to attempt deception under the very watch of your commanders...riding to war or questing on your own, can we trust you to not serve yourself and your friends first?”

“Is this it?” Dafred enquired, interrupting Barnemit’s reverie.

“The Dancing Tree.” Woss sounded awestruck, “Is it magic?”

They were approaching an ancient tree on the left. Beneath its leafy canopy, shimmering golden curves covered the circumference of its trunk, their arrangement suggestive of undoubtedly naked women at dance. The luminescent lines of their forms pulsed faintly, flashing a different set of poses each time.

“Craftsmanship of the Free Folk.” Barnemit explained. “They worked pixie dust to create the glow. The Dancing Tree has been here maybe six hundred years, marking the quickest path from the road to Wildsong Woods. No one knows whether the Free Folk who carved this were hired to guide questers by a baron or had a pact with the fae to lure mortal travellers into Wonderwhere.”

“Shame it isn’t night. Must be the brightest sight in the dark.” Woss commented.

“Did the Mistress of Spells teach you about the Tree, Barn?” Dafred asked.

“Mistress Estka told me what she thought we’d need to survive.” Barnemit replied, “Rather the little she could share in Lord Doneg’s hurry to send us off.”

The druzhinnik party abandoned the road, turning towards the Dancing Tree and the forest beyond. Any semblance of a trail was choked with vegetation. They had to navigate around obstructing trees and overgrown bushes.

“Not much of a path.” Dafred opined. His was the charge of steering their donkey by the bridle. “Free Folk or fae, somebody ought to be maintaining this trail.”

“The Dancing Tree showed us the way. Can’t complain.” Barnemit said, “We should find the crossing of Apner’s Vigil soon.”

Sticking to the path, which meant the direction they guessed it ran, brought them to the banks of the river Apner’s Vigil. The Vigil divided the fae enchanted Wildsong Woods from the realm of mortal man. Clear water, sparkling with reflected sunlight, rushed over rocks polished a smooth grey. The current frothed where it struck outcrops of stone.

“Here the Vigil is narrow and shallow.” Barnemit spoke, “The river flows slow and should stay calm if no pisswet fae casts a wicked spell.”

“Wildsong Woods.” Dafred said. “The dangerous stage of our quest begins, my buddy boys.”

On the opposite bank of the Vigil grew a wild tangle of trees and shrubbery. Somehow the forest there seemed denser, greener, more alive than the one behind the trio. Wildsong Woods felt alien, yet none of our party could deny an attraction to the promise of magical marvels they perceived awaiting them.

“What the jinx is that?” Dafred’s halberd pointed to flickers of something dazzling between the trees of Wildsong Woods.

“Pixies I’d say.” Woss answered.

They waded across the river, up to their knees in the cool water, and at points up to their waists. Twigs and leaves swirled around them in the careless tide. Traversing Apner’s Vigil proved uneventful, the druzhinniks and their donkey reached the other side safely.

Woss thought of the tales he had been hearing since childhood, all the names given to the realm of perilous marvels or marvellous perils, the home of the fae. The Changeless Change, the Shifting Realms, the Faerie, Wonderwhere. A plane of magic existing not in distant heavens or hells but within the spaces of the world. Clueless mortals and adventurous fae often slipped into the wrong reality, a consequence of the Shifting Realms scraping against the boring plane mortals occupied, rubbing thin the borders. Great gatherings of the fae and their magic could warp the land, causing the

Changeless Change to bleed into man's sober world, overwhelming and replacing it. Such a location Wildsong Woods was rumoured to be.

Setting foot upon the 'fae ruled' bank of Apner's Vigil, Woss hid his disappointment he was not transported to an unimaginably alien and wondrous landscape. Wildsong Woods appeared ordinary as the druzhinniks stood before its untamed vastness, poised to enter. The pixies had disappeared, assuming they had been the source of the now absent glitter. Woss listened to birds chirping and small animals scampering. He sucked in the wild air. Quite normal. Nothing magical about the sounds, smells and sights.

"No welcome." Dafred frowned, "Good or bad?"

"Be prepared." Barnemit warned, "The fae may play terrible tricks to addle your mind, steal your heart, break your body."

Bracing his crossbow against the ground, foot in the stirrup, Woss wound the crank and cocked the bowstring. He asked, "My lieutenant, what's the plan?"

"We head deeper." Barnemit decided, "Our quest is to seek an audience with Lady Silverglaze. We don't stop till we meet her."

Below the foliage of the trees and amidst the underbrush on the ground, Barnemit's band advanced. The mortal races-the thinking, civilizing creatures of flesh and blood-had never worn trails in this forest. Barnemit and his buddies encountered squirrels, rabbits, haggises, jackalopes, deer, even a bear. These did not flee the loud footfalls of man, an attitude unusual for wild critters neither in the habit nor mood for eating man. A few were curious, none were troubled enough to pause their foraging long. They lacked the experience to fear the scent of mortals on a hunt.

Barnemit took his group's donkey and the lead position. Gripping the beast's bridle, he kept an eye on the donkey in case its keener senses detected threats he missed. Dafred and Woss held their weapons ready to strike and loaded to fire respectively. Barnemit neither unsheathed his sword nor unslung his shield. Thus far the Faerie was not the inhuman nightmare Estka and folklore had prepared him for.

Changes crept up on him. It was the little things. First, the music of the forest. Whether it tweeted or squeaked, Barnemit's ears noticed new notes and subtleties of melody. He discerned a rhythm the creatures of the woods were composing together, the song of the wild. Kryter's the son! Was he going mad? The noise of beasts scurrying

through bushes could not be a secret tune, could it?

Next, Barnemit forgot how to tell the passage of time. Future and past lurked outside his concern, the present was an eternity. He beheld a tree perfectly still save the breeze rustling the leaves of its branches, a wind touching none of the other trees and shrubs near it. The tree and its breeze were frozen in their own moment. Barnemit knew the wind would always blow, the tree would neither grow nor wither, not a single leaf would fall. Nothing would ever change in that particular instance of time and space. Everything around him now dwelled in these frozen moments. Even himself. Barnemit was trapped in a moment without end, his march forward contained within his own bubble, unable to reach his destination. Halting simply created a new bubble, one in which his feet had never moved and would never move. Actual change was impossible... Sweet unicorn farts! Don't think about it! Barnemit told himself. Don't think about it!

Rays of the sun settled down on leaf and bark, tracing the patterns of leaf vein and wood grain. Such leys of light lifted off the surfaces they took their shape from. Beautiful beyond his words, they floated in front of Barnemit.

Jinx this! My mind won't survive Wildsong Woods trying to fight the magic. Barnemit gritted his teeth. Estka was right. What had she advised? Reason can shatter illusions and reveal the truth. Embrace the wonders your thoughts can't mould. Have the wisdom to enjoy your trip, fear will only send you to dark places.

A while later the lieutenant grasped he was alone. His friends and the supply donkey were gone. Barnemit couldn't remember when his hand had released the donkey's bridle.

For Woss, the transition came in big sudden leaps. First, massive monstrosities appeared, which the woodland creatures failed to notice in any way. The monsters' bodies were rounded forms 10 rits tall with a hole in the centre one could see the world through. Spindly arms and legs were attached to the top and bottom respectively. Colours coated, sprinkled, crossed and patterned them in multiple layers and varied designs. Black, brown, white, pink, yellow, orange, and many more.

Woss had not met this kind of being before. Fortunately, their odour helped him understand their nature. They smelled sweet, *delicious*. He matched scent to sight. The

torso was a circle of bread or dough. Sugar, honey, chocolate, custard, jam and similar substances of flavour were the garments they wore. *They were walking sweets.*

The sweet folk were drawn to Woss. He wasn't certain how to react to this peculiar crowd. They must be fae, creatures of flesh and blood didn't have custard for brains. Were they hostile or friendly? The question begged an answer as the living sweets encircled him. Would they offer themselves to his lips? Would they attack him to avenge their eaten brethren in the mortal world?

Woss couldn't believe the dilemma he was considering here, this was the kind of ridiculous suited to an outrageous tale not reality. Better to be safe than sorry he reckoned. Woss removed the quarrel from his crossbow. He returned it to the quiver belted around his tabard at the waist and selected fresh, enchanted, ammunition. Having not been fired yet, the crossbow was already cocked. As he fit the magicked quarrel onto his weapon, Woss silently thanked Lord Doneg, who had sanctioned their withdrawal of the expensive equipment from Bart's armoury for this quest.

A sweet being dressed in light brown chocolate adorned with zigzag lines of a much darker chocolate stepped closest. The central hole of its body squeezed shut and stretched wide open, in the manner of a mouth working words.

"Oh Noble Warrior of the Mortal Realms. Why have you come?" the thing's deep voice used flawless, unaccented Krit.

"I'm questing." Woss replied, "Who are you?"

"Call me Eryn Stripblack in your tongue. We are rollbulls."

"Isn't this Wildsong Woods?" Woss asked.

"These are the Dessert Domains of the Sweetlings."

"How did I get here?"

"Were you hungry?"

Woss thought back. "I was picturing the sort of lunch a fae queen might provide her guests. I came to the desserts..."

His guilt recalled he had fed his imagination memories of exotic sweets the trade caravans peddled. Rarely could he afford a taste.

“Ah, your hunger brought you here.”

“Barn, Dafred, can you believe this?” Woss spun around and discovered he was the sole human in sight.

“Who are you speaking to?”

“My friends? Where are they?”

“Perhaps they did not take the sweet turn on a hungry road.”

No Barnemit, no Dafred. Woss considered the situation. I’m crugged.

Woss’s world changed again. The forest fell silent, its noisy critters replaced. Instead of a squirrel on a tree or a deer in the underbrush, there swarmed the elves Woss had heard of in stories and occasionally believed he had glimpsed in real life. Two rits of height packed into tunic and trousers, caps pulled down tight above crisp brown faces, eyes like drops of brightly coloured candy. Their clothes were made of confectionary materials, colourful and diverse similar to the rollbulls’ garb. The elves walked down from trees and out of the shrubbery, congregating about Woss and the rollbulls in great numbers.

“Who are you?” questioned an elf wearing a green jelly cap, the only part of his outfit Woss recognized. The high pitched elf voices matched their young boyish faces.

“Is he the Devourer of Legend?” asked an elf in strawberry cream attire sprinkled with coloured bits of sugar.

The word Devourer suggested to Woss a dark terror in this candy paradise.

“Prophecy describes the Devourer, copious of girth and short of breath. This one is not the Devourer.” Stripblack said.

“Who is the Devourer?” Woss enquired, “Who are you elves?”

“The Devourer is a legendary mortal warrior who shall defeat the armies of the Gingerbread Prince.” explained an elf, “We are candy elves loyal to the Estar Bunny.”

“Gingerbread Prince? Estar Bunny?” Woss was confused.

“The Estar Bunny remains the last power of the Dessert Domains resisting the Gingerbread Prince. The Prince has won many victories, imprisoning Tsujiura Panya and

exiling Mithai Ganj, Hero of Us All.”

“This Gingerbread Prince is a villain?”

“Yes, he seeks to enslave the Dessert Domains and forbid the crafting of sweets other than gingerbread.”

“The horror of a future where all is gingerbread!” another elf cried, “Variety is the candy of eternity!”

GLAAURRRPH!

The wet roar startled Woss, he almost shot an elf in the face. Panicked elves unleashed a chorus of frightened squeaks. Woss spotted the source of the roar in the trees to the west, a rippling mass of mud. Despite its fluid form, the shape looked strong and muscled. The huge ‘mud being’ dragged itself on four legs, leaving a trail of liquid brown. Woss’s nose caught the strong aroma of rich chocolate. Could it be? Was this some sort of chocolate fae? Its ‘head’ was entirely snout, home to a melting mess of a mouth, forsaking eyes and other expected facial features.

“What the jinx?” Woss was stupefied. Druzhinnik training didn’t let shock stop his crossbow swinging towards the monster.

“A schokotier, scouting for the Gingerbread Prince’s hordes!” Stripblack boomed, “Rollbulls! Wrap and roll!”

Stripblack and his kin wrapped their limbs along the loops of their bodies, and literally rolled out. They smashed into the schokotier, splattering its chocolate mud on the trees and shrubs until then spared the schokotier’s dripping touch. Roaring its rage, the schokotier fled. Pursuing rollbulls bounced off trees and continued to knock the schokotier around.

A wave of change rolled over the landscape, turning trees and bushes into confections and candy. Rocks of sugared jelly? Wafer sticks you could suck chocolate out of? Mounds of cream and cake? Some were things Woss had witnessed at caravan stalls or upon the nobles’ table as a cook’s special preparation of the day. He couldn’t identify most of this bounty of sweet fae nature. The druzhinnik staggered, he checked the earth beneath his feet was still the grassy dirt of Wildsong Woods.

This whole episode was insane. Woss had a quest to fulfil. He had friends who

needed his sure shots covering them. Barnemit would thrash him if he didn't help them reach Lady Silverglaze.

"We have no Devourer, no hope of defeating the Gingerbread Prince." an elf mourned.

"I'm sorry, I have to go." Woss said, "I have to find my friends."

"Impossible now." Green Jelly Cap shook his head, "You are here, and here you shall remain forever."

The elf's declaration disturbed Woss. "What? I'm trapped?"

"But he is mortal, he *can* become the Devourer." an elf in red and white stripes protested, "He is made of the right stuff."

"You can eat cake, yes?" Strawberry Cream asked eagerly.

"Well, I could." Woss said.

"All of it?"

"Um, I don't-"

"See? He will fail." an elf dismissed Woss.

"With practice, his appetite and corpulence will grow." Red and White persisted.

"We can help you practice!" Green Jelly Cap perked up, "We shall feed you the finest delicacies this realm has to offer, until you are wide enough to challenge the Gingerbread Prince."

"Or until you burst. The great tragedy of the mortal body is the tiny amount of food it can hold. Will you perish or will you endure? Think of it as your test, the Test of the Devourer!" Red and White added.

Woss tried reason to calm the mad fae, "Eating shall diminish my hunger. I can't devour the Gingerbread Prince's fighters on a full belly can I?"

"One bite of our work and you will never stop craving the taste. The more you eat, the hungrier you get. Magic!" Green Jelly Cap splayed his fingers on both hands and shook them vigorously.

Woss you idiot. What nightmare did you stumble into? Woss heard his mind say. The

Dessert Domains of the Sweetlings, he answered.

Remember Wildsong Woods, you fool. Huh? He was being rather rude to himself, wasn't he? Of course he remembered. Picture it, you halfwit. Hold on, this wasn't his voice insulting and ordering himself, it was...

"Wildsong Woods!" Barnemit was shouting, "Trees! Very, very green jinxed trees! Me! Think of a very angry me!"

That did it. Barnemit shimmered into existence beside Woss, sword and shield in hand.

"Barnemit, my buddy boy!" Woss displayed the biggest grin.

"Who are you talking to?" Strawberry Cream looked around bewildered.

"The duty of the Devourer is a challenging challenge indeed." Red and White acknowledged, "I'm afraid the terror of his destiny is rending asunder our mortal hero's mind."

"The elves can't see you, Barn." Woss addressed his friend.

"I don't see them! Jinx those pointy eared twerps! They're in your sweetling domain, I'm in Wildsong Woods where you should be!"

"Sorry Barn." Woss said, "How do I get to you?"

"Focus on my words!" the lieutenant's sword pointed to Woss's feet, "You're standing in deer shit!"

Woss perceived the stench of feces, a sharp contrast to the mouth-watering fragrances of his sweet environment.

"Birds! Listen to those pisswet critters chirp!" Barnemit continued.

Woss heard bird and beast perform the music of the forest. He *felt* the magical nature of their melody. Every uttered cry and scampering sound reminded him of the green beauty the untamed woods flaunted. His world blurred, the Dessert Domains and their Sweetlings transforming into vegetation and critters. The bellow of a rollbull sounded faint, much farther away than the distance the sweet fae had rolled.

Several elves grabbed his legs. To Woss, their weight seemed a drag, anchoring him to their saccharine reality. The changing of the world slowed, it was stopping. The candy

elves pleaded with him desperately.

“Do not abandon us, mortal hero!”

“We believe in you!”

“You may not be the Devourer we prophesized, but you are the Devourer we need!”

Woss kicked them off. One clinger he bashed on the head with the crossbow to make him let go. Their squeals of pain were rather satisfying. Woss’s realm resumed shifting to Tarfelm forest. The candy landscape and its inhabitants warped out, their blur resolved itself into the trees and underbrush of Wildsong Woods. No beings, supernatural or natural, were crowding Woss. The woodland creatures were busy tending to their affairs.

Woss could have kissed his party’s donkey had it been there, “Bless your wimmy! You saved me Barn!”

Barnemit was less amiable, “Jinx you, you pisswet halfwit. We have to rescue Dafred!”

Dafred expected he would have to defend his life soon. He wasn’t certain when he had separated from the party. How and why the mistake had happened was also a mystery. A jinxed fae spell must be responsible.

Day had faded to night, a bright night, the moon and stars illuminating the twisted figures of trees withered and leafless. Each breath drew on the hopeless decay scenting the air. His tabard, armour and gambeson combined could not keep the chill at bay. Surprising, since this was no bone biting cold, merely an absence of warmth.

He had learnt to not let his eyes linger. Earlier his stare had perceived a dead tree staring back, its crooked trunk bending towards him and rotten branches reaching. Shifting his gaze banished the nightmare. Should he care to look, the earth beneath his boots expanded to a vast black desert, every giant step he took set him a thousand paces forward. He could tell distance covered by the new shapes of the trees alongside and the familiar forms of those far behind, or did the wretched deadwood jump about when he wasn’t watching?

Dafred strode on. He knew the evil hunting him through the dark forest. Many slept peacefully never fearing their grasp. Not his mother, she had lost a sister to them.

Before slumber she made him and his father and brothers search under the beds, in the cupboard and dark spaces of his family's peasant hut. He had to ensure they weren't waiting for the hearthfire to go out. They hated the heat of sun and flame. If he saw them first and shoved a burning light at them, his family had a chance to run. Well, tonight he had found them, in their cold domain. Now the invader himself, he wished their home had some place he could hide.

Boggarts. Cast vaguely in the shape of human men, they swung between the trees. Two arms, two legs. Dafred estimated the arms were 15 rits long, twice the length of their narrow torsos and lanky legs put together. He was not happy to confirm the stories describing these monsters as patchwork horrors. Rough scales, soft skin, furry hide. Cobold scalp and ears, human brow and eyes, a minotaur's nose and jaws. Boggarts didn't stick to a consistent aesthetic, individuals mixed the parts they liked best from victims of assorted races.

Tales of boggarts lying in wait might suggest they were silent stalkers of prey. An assumption Dafred's hunters proved did not hold true, on their home territory anyway. Dafred could hear the joy in their hooting. Their savage, bestial sounds destroyed the quiet created by other beings preferring not to roam a boggart infested forest.

The moment Barnemit had informed him of quest and destination, Dafred had suspected he would meet such fiends in the Faerie. He wished he had been wrong.

Something else did dwell here. Dafred discerned a great shadow dashing amongst trees and boggarts. He only caught fleeting edges of the dark form in the corner of his sight. The meagre glimpses brought to mind rows of gleaming white teeth. Could this be the Sack Man himself? The legendary ruler of all boggarts? Where was his sack?

Dafred pushed himself at a steady pace, afraid if he stopped moving so would his hunters. He did not think them the kind to loiter idle. Missing the thrill of the chase, they might just finish the hunt and tear him to pieces. He couldn't walk forever, or could he? Hunger and thirst did seem abstract concepts in this enchanted realm. The reasoning behind them he understood, but couldn't imagine craving food or drink as he had a few hours ago in the morning. His body's reserves of energy felt unlimited, weariness did not build in his muscles. Stranger things were possible in the Changeless Change. Then again, did he want to spend eternity fleeing boggarts in the star lit night?

Alright, you can do this. Dafred gripped his polearm tighter. You're a fully trained

man-at-arms of the Druzhina, being posted to Bart Castle means you're one of the best in Tarfelm. Barnemit made it possible though. Without Barnemit, am I still the best? Shut up! Can't dally pondering a question whose answer won't kill boggarts.

What did he know about his foes?

Weaknesses? He saw neither armour nor weapons on the boggarts, but the fae jinxbaits might conjure them from sheer air.

Strengths? Supernatural. Stories insisted a boggart once beat a man to death with his own leg. Oh, and the monsters numbered tens to his one, and he was on their home territory.

Dafred halted. Ahead, a boggart had moved directly into his path. This was it then. Confrontation. The bugger's fellow monsters became louder. Perhaps they were hooting encouragement. Maybe, they were arguing...would the boggarts fight each other to claim him? Dafred gave up the hope, the fiends in the trees were content to watch. Dafred did have two important advantages, his halberd and the spell his chain mail bore.

Dafred kicked his brain into the battle frame of mind the Druzhina had taught him.

Boggart arms, 15 rits. Dafred's halberd was 9 rits, close to his own height. Assuming he fully extended his arms holding the weapon's end and not the shaft, he could add another four and a half rits to his striking range, allowing him to almost match the monster's reach. He considered the negative effect of this move too. Such a weak grip would be clumsy wielding a polearm and could easily drop it, not very useful apart from brief thrusts and slashes.

The boggart's arms lunged. Dafred didn't think, didn't feel, he barely saw them coming. Hours of practice daily in the training yard had drilled the fighting instinct into him. His halberd reacted, a limb not a weapon. It shot forward, the axe blade cutting into the right arm. It jerked to the side, the blade's tail hook stabbing the left.

Dafred's foe shrieked his pain, yanking back both arms.

The halberd snapped into a two-handed grasp of its shaft, ready to strike again. Dafred glanced at the monster's black blood dripping off his weapon's steel. He looked to his foe, the right arm lay limp upon the earth. Dafred's halberd had nearly cleaved the arm through and through, only splintered bone and a few sinews kept it intact.

Round one, Dafred had won. He wondered whether destroying a boggart was even possible. Couldn't the buggers repair any damage with bits of a fresh victim?

Dafred you jinxbait. How far did you go?

Dafred, my buddy boy. Call to us.

Sweet unicorn farts! Those definitely weren't his thoughts. Barnemit? Woss? No, it couldn't be them. His desperate mind had to be deceiving him. Humans weren't one of those weird races that talked mind-to-mind. His friends didn't do magic either.

The hollering boggarts went deadly quiet. Branches rustled as the monsters dropped to the ground. Dafred reckoned these fae hunters didn't enjoy the challenge of prey fighting back. From all directions, the patchwork fiends advanced, arms dragging across the earth. Jinx them. Dafred whispered the command to invoke his armour's enchantment, "Cantrip Shield, on."

We're here. Focus on what we're saying. Remember our voices.

Next he could hear Barnemit gruff tone plainly. "Picture us, you dumb twerp. Let your mind's eye see us in Wildsong Woods."

Dafred's mouth hung agape in shock. His friends were speaking to him. They were invisible somehow, he had to *imagine* them to see them? In Wildsong Woods? What? Wasn't he in Wildsong Woods? Where-

The air around Dafred flashed pink, under the thud of impact his ears detected a distinct crackling. A boggart had attempted attacking from behind, the talons and fist had rebounded off the unseen cocoon of magical power enveloping Dafred. The crackle did not die, a worrying sign to Dafred. It got worse, the crackling became a very loud pop, pink waves rippled over Dafred and vanished.

"I can't! The boggarts are attacking! They burst my shield in one hit! I stop to daydream and I'll die!" Dafred spun in terror, his halberd slashing wide arcs.

"Fine, describe your realm to us." Barnemit bid him, "We'll come get you."

Dafred had been told the Cantrip Shield could endure an amount of punishment measured in three to five crossbow shots. A single boggart strike had exceeded the jinxed spell's limit, how strong were the monstrous body builders? Nine kurns were required to

recharge the shield for reuse. Dafred had lost a major advantage he was relying upon to stay alive. The halberd alone was left, a mistake in wielding it would give the boggarts an opening to rip him apart. Barnemit and Woss, he needed his friends. Barnemit could do it, defeat the boggarts, Dafred was sure.

“The trees grow tall and crooked! Dry and dead!” Dafred swung the halberd, severing the hands of a fresh assailant in a gout of foul black blood.

He ducked and rolled, several pairs of arms just missed grabbing him. “Grey! Grey shrouds the world!”

“The moon and the stars rule the heavens!” Dafred went flat on his back, his halberd scything through the air, forcing the hovering boggart arms to a safe distance.

“Boggarts surround me!” Dafred fought madly. While working the halberd’s cutting and stabbing end, he also used the shaft and bottom of the pole to swat sneaking appendages. The wooden pole he applied in quick blows lest the boggarts catch and crush it.

Dafred saw the leg, clad in trouser and boot, dribbling red over its top, dangling above him, in the clutches of a boggart. Drops splattering on his chest, he looked down and beheld the spurt of blood past his tabard. Dafred tried to kick, the right leg obeyed but the left he couldn’t feel. The nightmare was coming true. Awareness of his loss cracked the numbing walls shock had built. Overwhelming pain burst forth in a flood. The halberd’s adroit maneuvering finally stilled. Dafred screamed, pouring into his voice the vigour of all the days he would never live.

Ears filled with his death cry, he didn’t hear the soft thwep of a crossbow launching a bolt. An explosion of white frost engulfed the boggarts bunched beyond his right foot and bleeding stump. Icicles clung to the monsters’ hides. Their movements were laboured and painfully slow, their hodgepodge faces gradually contorting into malformed expressions of panic.

A familiar sword fell upon the boggart hand gripping Dafred’s leg, the parting blow was accompanied by the monster’s squeal. His own leg and the scaly hand that had torn it loose thumped into the arms of a disbelieving Dafred.

Dafred’s scream caught in his throat. He cast his gaze to his sides. There stood his friends, Woss toting a crossbow, Barnemit flaunting shield and black bloodied sword. The body building fiends halted their assault, uncertain what further harm the new humans

and their magic would wreak.

“Barn! Woss! Help me!” Dafred gasped.

“The gods weep! Barn, you have a potion to heal him?” Woss had begun cocking and reloading his crossbow.

Barnemit threw an ampoule upon the ground behind the druzhinnik trio. The glass tube smashed open, its contents and the air reacted rapidly, billowing a noxious gas. These sinister vapours coalesced into a yellow cloud wide and tall hovering close to the earth. An unfortunate boggart caught in the gas yelped. He flung himself back, skin and fur steaming and peeling where the fumes had touched him. The cloud covered a patch of ground the boggarts dared not enter.

Already, the lieutenant’s teeth were pulling the cork off a vial of azure liquid. He gulped down the potion, brown eyes glinting blue as the alchemical magic boosted his speed and reflexes to three or four times their normal level. Barnemit tossed away the empty vial. He spoke to Woss, “Your Frost Shot, my Peeling Gas, this Lightning Potion, they will end soon. We’re dead if we don’t leave this evil place. The pair of us know how, Dafred doesn’t. Teach our idiot.”

Lieutenant Barnemit put into practice principles the Druzhina had lectured him on. Wounded comrades were tended after the enemy was too dead or defeated to cause further harm. The most resilient defence was a relentless offence. Barnemit charged his frosted foes, a massive armoured blur chopping the limbs of boggarts struggling to react with haste.

Woss knelt at the shoulder of Dafred, his loaded crossbow he rested on its butt. Dafred lay dumbfounded, eyes transfixed by the man’s leg and monstrous clawed hand he was cradling. Forgotten was the halberd across his belly. Human and boggart blood stained his tabard. Beneath the hem of tabard and chain mail, severed arteries still squirted his life blood into an expanding pool.

Woss kept his right hand on his bow, his left removed the reptilian appendage from Dafred’s grasp and discarded the vile thing.

“Woss.” Dafred’s tone was low and weak. “My sight is fading. When we were children, I had nightmares about boggarts snatching me. Guess I was right all along.”

Woss's fingers curled around those of his friend and locked them in an iron grip. He might have been trying to anchor Dafred to the mortal plane. "No my buddy boy, you're wrong. You can see fine. Look, surrounding us, the trees of Wildsong Woods, green with life. The rotting husks of a dead forest are gone!"

Woss snapped to attention. Lifting his bow with both hands, he shot at one of the unfrosted boggarts moving suspiciously closer. Woss's broadhead entered the monster's eye and tore right through its head to disappear into the dark. The fiend cried out loud, falling back. Woss stood to cock and load another Frost Shot, the last his quiver held. Gods bless the Armoury Master who had permitted him two of the Frost Shots, a single one made training, equipping and feeding a druzhinnik look cheap.

Twenty-two, his ammunition reserve was reduced to twenty-two quarrels. Where the jinx was the stupid supply donkey? The sudden assault of magic and fierceness had shocked the boggarts into a cautious pause, fact was they could butcher him and Dafred in moments. Barnemit on a Lightning Potion was the only member of the druzhinnik party capable of seriously hurting them.

The lieutenant reviewed his tactical situation. Peeling Gas blocked any assault from the rear. Though thawing and regaining speed, the boggarts in the front were broken, they were withdrawing to survive the wrath of their prey. The left and right flanks of Barnemit's band remained a source of danger.

Barnemit flashed among the boggarts he still considered a threat. Arms dropped in parts. Heads rolled. Black blood sprayed. The monsters gave vent to their frustration with a cacophony of howls and screeches. Claws, talons, fingers and tentacles grabbed the air he had occupied a moment earlier. The headless and disarmed stumbled back to the deep woods, flailing silently or shrieking fearfully.

"Green?" Dafred coughed, his eyes became distant, gazing past Woss to the scenery a fae charmed imagination conjured. His voice rose in surprise, "I see them. Great trees and little bushes, green growing things, flowers even. But they are the dream of a memory. I hear the boggarts' calling for our death!"

"Ignore the fae! Hold the dream, the dream is real!" Woss shouted. He was screaming inside his head as well. Kryter's the son! They *had* to escape this crugged corner of the Faerie filled to the brim with body building boggarts. He *had* to convince his oldest friend they were back in Wildsong Woods. What the jinx could he say to make Dafred believe?

Think Woss, think! He recalled the training yard, and a callous form of instruction every druzhinnik came to obey blindly. Screamed Woss aloud, “Quit your whining! You’re a man-at-arms in the Druzhina of Kritland! Your comrades can’t return to Wildsong Woods without you! Are you going to betray Barn and me? Will you trap us in boggart country?”

“Forgive me, my buddy boys.” Dafred’s eyelids were drooping shut, “I’ve failed you...”

“Don’t you dare!” Woss railed, “You owe us!”

Dafred could not muster the strength or will to speak again.

The gods weep! Woss’s training yard manner wasn’t working. He feared Dafred would die before departing this dark realm. Dafred was wrong, Woss was the one failing his friend. A desperate Woss shouted to his lieutenant, “Barn, he’s bleeding a river! Can’t we give him a pot first?”

“Busy!” Barnemit paused to reply. The moment’s distraction nearly cost him his life. Too late to dodge a boggart blow, the lieutenant used his shield and blocked it instead. The force of the attack sent him reeling. He barely recovered his balance to hack at the monstrous arms reaching for him. The fiends Barnemit’s Peeling Gas had obstructed were coming around to the flanks of the druzhinnik band.

“We won’t survive this realm of horrors!” Barnemit managed to yell, “Wildsong Woods will save Dafred not some potion!”

Woss dropped to his knees beside Dafred, clutching the loaded crossbow firmly and watching Barnemit’s lonesome battle. Their last Frost Shot he would save for when the Lightning Potion expired. Then Barnemit would need the magical assistance if he didn’t want boggarts tearing him to pieces.

Woss resumed his efforts with Dafred, “Boggarts? Jinx them! The forest sings, Dafred! Listen! To the birds in the branches, the squirrels on the trunks, the rabbits and mice and jackalopes in the brush. Listen to their wild song!”

Dafred did. It amazed him to hear the flicking of a jackalope ear and the flutter of feathered wings above harsh boggart cries. The patter of tiny feet upon fallen leaves and twigs started drowning out the noisy monsters. He perceived a melody and rhythm behind chirps and squeaks. The picture of Wildsong Woods grew clearer, his eyes opened

wide to see it all. Yet there was no denying the chill his very bones felt.

“This vision is a lie.” Dafred said, “The cold whispers of truth, of death and boggarts.”

The Peeling Gas was thinning, soon it would dissipate entirely. Barnemit might have to fight on three fronts. Boggarts preferred to try the lightning fast lieutenant over the crossbowman prepared to fire a bolt stinking of powerful magic.

Despite the risk to himself, Barnemit took time between dodging and striking to speak.

“You jinxbait Dafred...can’t you feel...the touch of the sun?”

“I can’t.” Dafred said, “The sun does not shine here.”

Barnemit sidestepped a punching boggart arm, which his next blow dismembered. “Of course it does, can you imagine cold night creeping into Wildsong Woods, where pixies play and nymphs rule?”

“Never.” Dafred remembered the stories, “Pixies love dancing in the sun. Nymphs hate the dark and cold, where their beauty is hidden and passion frozen.”

“Where do you think we are?” Woss asked.

Dafred did not answer. His attention had been lost to a brightly coloured butterfly flitting about his face. Gossamer wings, orange with a black fringe dappled by white, beat the air. No creature of such delicate beauty would be found wandering the domain of boggarts and toothed shadows.

The azure brilliance died in Barnemit’s eyes, his Lightning Potion had come to the end of its duration. Barnemit’s blurred shape sharpened to a distinct, easily visible target. His combat vulked brain was almost instantly aware of seven boggarts looking for vengeance and intact enough to claim it. The lieutenant smoothly shifted stances from offensive to defensive while his speed diminished to the best a practiced mortal man was capable of.

“The sun shines!” Barnemit shouted.

“The sun shines!” Woss echoed.

“The sun shines!” Dafred believed.

The night sky erupted into glorious sunlight, filtered through the thick ever green foliage of living trees. Wailing boggarts leapt into the shadows shrinking to nothing.

Barnemit halted mid-swing of his sword, shield raised, legs tensed to jump aside. Boggart body parts littering the ground evaporated, their inky smoke fled the appearance of grass and shrubs. The only blood left was the black on Barnemit's sword and the red spreading under Dafred. A cheery sun killed the chill our party had suffered.

"We're safe!" Woss could have sobbed his relief, "Barn, Dafred needs a healing pot!"

Barnemit lowered his shield. "We'll use Doneg's potions from the armoury."

"The donkey was carrying them." Woss reminded him. He saw no trace of the animal and their baggage. "Weren't you leading it?"

"The crugged beast disappeared." Barnemit grunted his annoyance, "We should have worn backpacks."

Peeling Gas and Lightning. Twelve hundred and ninety-five silver reales. Eighteen and a half doubloons of solid gold. Barnemit had paid a heavy price to save Dafred's pisswet self. He wasn't done paying either. The fortune he had spent on the strongest healing potions would now be squandered on Dafred, a bit of it anyway. A Major Recuperative (Dafred didn't deserve an expensive Regenerative) would be another five doubloons. He should have stuck Doneg's potions in his belt, but there had been no room, the space went to Barnemit's private stock. Lord Doneg's potions were free, Barnemit would not miss them much. The troll alchemist's items were precious because the lieutenant may as well have bought them with his life.

"My...my leg." Dafred was whining, pawing his recently removed limb like a dog demanding affection. Pathetic.

Shouldn't the blood loss have striped the dislegged idiot of awareness or life already? Barnemit suspected the influence of the Changeless Change itself, somehow prolonging the process of bleeding out, allowing the retaining of consciousness.

Barnemit hoped Dafred would prove worth the cost of alchemy. His companions had failed to be the extra pair of weapons and shields he desired. Sweet unicorn farts! *He* had braved great danger to keep *them* alive. That wasn't how his little gang was supposed to work. His talent and resources defended the twerps for what reward?

Lieutenant Barnemit glanced at his heater shield. The coat of arms paint was scraped off where a deep dent had been pressed into the thin iron front, splintering the

wood underneath, splinters his leather glove shielded his hand from. It was the closest thing to a wound the boggarts could inflict on him. He had passed the test of his first real battle since his boy's fists fought a man. Encounters on patrol duty and Hicussaw's clones didn't count of course, they had never posed a serious threat to Barnemit's life.

Kneeling, he laid down his sword, and slipped the shield's enarmes or straps over his shoulders to rest the heater on his back. Barnemit ripped loose leaves, which he used for wiping his blade coated in boggart bodily fluid.

"Barn!" Woss spoke, "We-"

"Quiet." Barnemit commanded. Satisfied the sword was clean, he sheathed it. Then he produced a small bulb of a bottle. Woss and Dafred could see, through the vessel's glass, a potion the dark red of sweet cherries. "Don't know if this can fully restore a leg." Barnemit said, "Should stop you dying."

Barnemit administered the Recuperative, pouring the alchemical liquid to completely cover Dafred's stump. Tattered arteries and veins sealed themselves, leaking blood no more. The jagged end of broken bone grew shut over exposed marrow. New flesh sprang forward, wrapping bone and blood vessel. The bloody, torn stump became a clean, pinkish knob.

"Woss, get him on his feet, er, foot." Barnemit commanded. The lieutenant flailed a hand to drive away an irritating butterfly.

Slinging the crossbow across his back, Woss proceeded to assist his buddy. He took Dafred's arm upon his shoulders and put his own under Dafred's shoulders. Together they rose, the halberd slipping off an indifferent Dafred whose other arm gripped the leg he once didn't have to hold onto.

"Leave it Dafred. Barnemit healed you, you'll have a new one in a day." Woss said.

"Need two legs to walk." Dafred bent to place the foot of his detached limb on the ground. "Could use...something...to help me walk."

"I've got you, my buddy boy." Woss said. "If it's a walking stick you want, your halberd serves better."

"I-I don't know." Dafred said, focused on steadying the appendage. His face paled, eyes blazed terror. He gasped, "No, we're back!"

Woss said huh, “Huh?”

Dafred swung his gaze high and low, left and right. His expression changed to puzzlement. “Wildsong Woods? But I just saw...”

His eyes dropped to the severed limb, “Again I see it! My leg standing in the moonlight, on the black earth of the dead forest, where boggarts hunt!”

Barnemit stomped over to his friends. The leg causing nightmares he snatched out of Dafred’s grasp and hurled it into the bushes. Barnemit said, “Halfwits, we’re breathing magic. Don’t dwell on a thought or sight too long, unless you mean to lose yourself in a fae crughole.”

Anguish clouded Dafred’s face and voice, “I don’t understand. My leg-”

“Will feed the wolves.” Barnemit finished for him, “These are the Shifting Realms. The mind chooses the path the body walks. Your fear guided you to the boggarts. They were *your* jinxed fault.”

Barnemit lifted the halberd. He shoved the weapon into Dafred’s free hand, “Tell me, what good are you now, a crippled pisswet burden slowing our pace. Woss can’t aim or reload holding you up. Against the fae, do we lay you down and hope a blind monster steps on your blade?”

Dafred had no answers, he still had to give them. “I’m sorry Barn. I didn’t know...fought my hardest...I owe you my life...”

Barnemit’s expression suggested a full account of Dafred’s debts was coming. Woss tried buying Dafred a reprieve, “Barn, Lord Doneg must soon expect our triumphant return. Glory and Pank Hit await us. Time passes strangely here, by the old tales we may have already endured mere moments, many days, perhaps jinxed years. Shouldn’t we hasten, my lieutenant?”

The lieutenant’s glare threatened to consume Dafred. Woss was glad Barnemit had long ceased striking those he called friend. The Druzhina had trained the monster of Pank Hit to control himself. Barnemit said, “We move.”

“Which way?” Woss enquired.

“The direction doesn’t matter. Keep in mind where we are, where we ought to be, where

we wish to be.”

“How can we resist the tricks of the Changeless Change?” Woss worried, “So we aren’t parted?”

“Open your senses, calm your heart, enjoy the trip.” Barnemit turned from Dafred. Woss thought he could feel the lieutenant’s rage diminishing. Barnemit continued, “Let the wonders of this enchanted forest charm you and bind you to Wildsong Woods.”

Thus did the trio trudge on, exploring the marvels Wonderwhere offered. The fae state of existence they accepted as their new ‘normal’. The wild song was an eternal companion, a soothing melody the denizens of the forest never tired of playing.

When the eye rested on any object, the world changed. Between trees a mist appeared, feathery pollen rolling in great colourful waves, shifting moment to moment from violet through yellow to red among other shades. Sun beams descended, melting where they landed on branch and shrub and earth, dripping down and forming puddles of liquid light. Staring at a woodland critter trapped both viewer and subject, in a frozen moment neither could imagine escaping. Leaves scattered on the ground began wiggling happily as fat green worms.

“Um, is that a pixie?” Woss asked.

“Yes it is.” Barnemit said.

Dafred maintained silence. He shifted more of his weight to the halberd, preparing to release Woss in case his friend needed to shoot freely.

“Hello there, mortal travellers.” the pixie’s Krit was perfect, her tone joyous and laughing, a breath short of a giggling fit it seemed.

She was tiny, half a rit the length of her golden body, about two rits the span of her wings. The speed at which her wings beat rendered them a glittering blur. A little raiment of flower petals clothed her torso. She wielded the green stem of a flower, probably the same flower she was wearing. Her bald head tapered from broad base to pointy top in the shape of a falling drop.

“You may call me For Sure.” she told them.

“What can we call you for sure?” Woss asked.

“You *just* said my name, silly man! I was posted to watch the borders of this beautiful realm. What is your purpose in my happy home, you mortals who smell of dark dead lands?” she waved her stem spear.

Barnemit did not think the gesture a cute harmless one. The stem had to be a magically sharpened fae weapon. He suspected the jinxed point could pierce his chain mail. A greater danger was pixie dust. Inhaling a puff of the stuff would briefly strip a man of all desire to fight, presenting a perfect opportunity for the pixie or any lurking allies of hers to inflict serious damage.

“We survived the boggarts,” Barnemit took charge, “while on a quest to find Lady Silverglaze.”

“Ew! A boggart touched you?” she pointed to where Dafred should have had a leg.

“Ooh! You are on a quest?” she bobbed excitedly mid-air.

“Oh, you have come to see the queen?” she stilled.

“In the name of Lord Doneg, Rana of Tarfelm, we seek an audience with Lady Silverglaze, Queen of Wildsong Woods.”

“Hmm, it is not in my power to fulfil your request.” the pixie frowned, brightening a moment later, “I can introduce you to the queen’s most trusted advisor. Klaxie is the name mortals gave him centuries ago. He shall decide if you are worthy of the queen’s presence.”

Progress, Barnemit liked it. “Alright.”

“Follow me, new friends, to the palace of the queen!”

Barnemit did not relax his guard. His hand signalled caution to Woss and Dafred. The pixie only had to blow her dust in their faces and they would be doomed.

Woss swore the pixie cast a spell. How else could he explain, after hours of walking, the next few steps suddenly bringing his band to their destination? The sight of the fae queen’s palace left him speechless. The forest simply grew into it.

This isn’t a palace, Barnemit thought, it’s a jinxed town.

The entire structure or series of structures had been cultivated not constructed. Trees adopted the shape of walls, stairs and doorways. Entwined branches provided

platforms and bridges. A distinct absence of roofs ensured the sun was not blocked from any room or hall. No doors barred movement, though curtains of flowering vines obstructed vision at times. Shrubbery and rock were woven and cut to fill the role of tables, seats, and beds.

Fae crowded the palace. There were hordes of leshies, who reminded Dafred of grumpy old men. Craggy skin like bark, amber eyes, big leafy beards and mossy body hair. Many carried crude axes and spears, which were essentially short and long sticks having edged and pointed rocks lashed to one end.

Pixies fluttered everywhere. Alongside them were vaporous winged things made of the hues of the rainbow, hovering with slow measured flaps. Woss deduced these were the sprites the tales mentioned. Wood elves pranced at ground level, they appeared to be literal stick figures a couple of rits tall.

The song and dance, laughter and games paused as the fae beheld mortals entering their midst, not soon enough. Stray words and half-complete sentences reached the druzhinniks.

Reality flashed colours Barnemit, Woss and Dafred couldn't name. They heard musical tunes and rhythms they weren't sure were sounds. Bolts of emotion bounced off them and left deep impressions translated to human terms; the desire for a cup of ale after a long day, the annoyance in hunting a lost shoe, the satisfaction of punching a hated foe. Faen, the Shifting Tongue, Wonderword, Changespeak. A language of pure magic the fae were born speaking, a mystery utterly alien to mortals, whose own pathetic attempts at communication the lowliest fae mastered by instinct alone.

The fae resumed chatter once the humans and their pixie guide passed beyond the rather short range of the Shifting Tongue. Mortal ears unable to appreciate fae speech deserved not the pleasure of hearing its beauty.

Dryads were a rarer sight than leshies. The dryad form was womanly yet flat chested, they draped creeping and climbing vines about themselves. Woss reckoned their veiny green skin would be soft and papery to his fingers, similar to the texture of a leaf. Beneath a bush of actual leaves, eyes glowed green and small mouths pursed.

Barnemit spotted a towering monster slowly swinging both arms while plodding on legs thick as a leshy. Thirty rits aloft, twittering birds nested on the misshapen head. A

forest giant! It looked to Barnemit a mannish figure stitched together from several trees; bough and leaf, root and trunk.

For Sure stopped, her druzhinniks did the same. High walls of living wood crowned with foliage enclosed a great hall. A wood elf and his squad of five leshy guards protected the wide, curtained entrance.

“Klaxie!” For Sure called, “Questing mortals to see the queen!”

Facial features were carved into the slice of bark the elf had for a head. The eyes were black hollows, inside each of them glinted a speck of light. His boyish voice was heard but nothing on the face moved.

“Humans of Kritland. Druzhinniks of Tarfelm.” Klaxie appraised Barnemit’s party, “Recently wounded in battle. What is your quest?”

“The Rana of Tarfelm bid me to seek the wisdom of Lady Silverglaze, we must ask her of Doneg Windcharm, and of ancient evil imprisoned in a trinket.”

“First a vampyre is on the prowl, now an ancient evil has broken loose?”

“You know of the vampyre?” Barnemit was surprised.

“Of course. Every redcap in fifty octars has joined him. The blood elves declared the mortal magicker their lord, they sent an emissary offering an alliance to the queen on his behalf.”

Kryter’s the son! Redcaps, blood elves, fae allies of the vampyre! The blood drinking abomination was gathering an army. Wildsong Woods could be enemy territory! Barnemit’s hand eased onto the handle of his sword, “Did your queen accept?”

Klaxie did not miss the motion. Amused, he asked Barnemit, “Do you think you can battle a palace full of fae?”

The wild song played louder, despite the absence of forest creatures to produce it. Klaxie’s wooden face began stretching vertically, the black eyes becoming tall narrow doors into a dark void, their inner spark fading. Barnemit remembered to shift his gaze, a blink of his eyes reversed the change.

Griffins shit on my head! Woss expected he would be dead before he could unsling, aim and shoot his crossbow. Fae surrounded them, land and sky. He glanced to his side,

Dafred met his eye. His friend nodded to the halberd and jerked his head back. Woss understood, Barnemit had the front and Dafred could cover the rear, slashing legs on the ground. Under their protection, Woss might fire the Frost Shot. A desperate strategy winning them a few extra moments, Woss approved, best to die fighting the end with his friends.

Jinx Dafred, Barnemit fumed, jinx the Faerie! The lieutenant didn't know how many kurns it had been since the boggarts and the Lightning. Drinking another potion might not be safe. He had to avoid a fight, but if Lady Silverglaze was on the vampyre's side, the Wildsong fae wouldn't spare a druzhinnik party.

"We will defend ourselves." Barnemit stood firm and threatening he hoped, "We have magic and arms to make a fair mess of your pretty palace. Answer me elf, is the Queen of Wildsong Woods allied with the vampyre of Brin Dank?"

"Ask her yourself, mortal man." Klaxie dismissed his concern, "Can you prove your claim of service to the rana?"

"We had a letter bearing the seal of Rana Doneg of Tarfelm. The letter was in a bag, the bag on a donkey. The Shifting Realms stole our donkey and our letter." Barnemit did not bother keeping the bitterness out of his voice.

Master Iksub and the Changeless Change had crugged him. During the departure from Bart Castle, the Master of the Stable would not shut up about losing three stable hands in a single night, when he did, it was to reject Barnemit's request for horses. No hussar, knight or nobleman would give up their steed, and there were no spares either. Sitting atop a horse instead of dragging a donkey may have prevented a disappearance with their baggage. Jinx the pisswet knights, the pisswet barons, his pisswet friends, the pisswet jinxbait fae...

"I choose to believe your story." Klaxie decided, "Honestly, the queen would be greatly displeased should I deprive her of fresh toys."

Klaxie parted the vine curtains, "Go on then. You shall have your audience with Lady Silverglaze, Queen of Wildsong Woods."

Barnemit did not question the danger Klaxie's talk of toys implied, he led his band through.

Much of the hall sank into a pool, its waters clear under the sun, except the frothing centre where a fountain gushed. Invisible magic, not engineering ingenuity, pumped the fountain. Four nymphs were frolicking naked in the water, and by frolicking Barnemit meant very tenderly kissing and touching each other. Had they been real women, Barnemit would have described their bodies as crafted to perfection. Olive brown smoothness curved from face to shoulders, breasts to hips, thighs to toes.

Barnemit felt himself harden instantly, no slow stirring warned him, his wimpy snapped to attention almost painfully. Chain mail and tabard worked well to conceal the erection. The lieutenant wasn't twelve years old, he could largely control his wimpy now, a nymph spell had to be causing the irresistible reaction. He turned to his companions, the expressions on Woss and Dafred's faces told him their twigs were raised too, willing or not.

It took the lieutenant several moments to notice the pale blue unicorn. Gorgeous white hair trailed across the neck and spine of the magnificent, powerfully muscled horse-like being. Gold flakes dotted the black horn in the middle of its forehead. Barnemit was quite careful not to notice the fae beast's wimpy and whether nymph magic was affecting it.

"Halt!" Barnemit shouted. He did so to stop his party blindly wading deeper into the pool, towards the enticing spectacle of the nymphs.

The queen deigned to observe them, her gaze acknowledged the humans' presence... and demanded their attention. Barnemit, Dafred and Woss discovered the silver orbs set in the white of her eyes, framed by silver eyelashes. They were unable to look away. She disentangled herself from her fae sisters, standing to nine rits of height, glistening wet. Why mortals called her Lady Silverglaze was obvious. Her very skin possessed a grey sheen. Lustrous silvery tresses flowed down her back, with several strands slipping loose over her bosom. Soft and slight was the bow of her silver lips.

Dafred broke the druzhinniks' silence, "He's the queen? The Queen of Wildsong Woods is a king? The nymphs are men?"

"Are you raving mad?" Woss defended his queen, "Dog wag a tail! She's the greatest beauty I've ever known."

"Your friend sees what most arouses him to the act of love." the queen spoke. To human

ears, her voice was playful, soft, eager; the kind a man yearned to hear moan. It danced on the edges of their imagination, wiggled beneath their armour, clasped around their wimmies. It was also powerful, unhesitant, commanding; confident no man would disobey.

“Oh, oh, *oh*.” Woss reacted both to the import of the queen’s words and the caress of her tone. Surprise slackened the arm supporting Dafred, Woss recovered immediately to prevent his wounded comrade slipping.

“Sweet unicorn farts! You! A man-diddling freak?” Barnemit’s shock confronted Dafred. The lieutenant vaguely thought of the unicorn present, were the gases its arse expelled really so fragrant to inspire the Krit cuss?

“No! The nymphs, they lie!” Dafred gasped, “They cast a spell, making me see men! Trying to, pervert me!”

“Hold your tongue! I’ll deal with you later.” Barnemit barked. His attention returned to the queen, though truthfully his eyes never left her flawless form. His wimmy did not tingle, it throbbed. The gods weep!

Barnemit managed to string words together, “My Lady Silverglaze, we’re on a quest, for the Rana of Tarfelm, Lord Doneg. His ancestor, was Doneg Windcharm.”

“Doneg Windcharm? A mortal hero near a thousand years dead.”

“Treacherous stable hands, tried to steal, an ancient heirloom.” Barnemit struggled to speak, a fae force was pushing him to the brink of ecstasy and pulling him back before he burst. “A trinket of wood, was broken, a spell of shadow, and clones, was freed.”

“The demon is free?”

“Demon?” Barnemit breathed. The proper sense of dread such an evil merited could not surface in the deluge of sensation drowning him.

Two nymphs now approached the humans, one locking eyes with Woss and Dafred each. Barnemit’s will was succumbing to the fae seduction. The lieutenant’s armour grew hot and heavy. He ought to strip off his garb and join his body to the queen’s, wrapping his strength around her and filling her with his desire. No! He had to maintain control!

“Think of disgusting things!” Barnemit called to his fellow druzhinniks, “Tame your wimmies!”

“Oh come now.” the queen sounded amused, “Why deny yourselves the pleasures of our company? Your journey has been tiresome and perilous, your friend lost a leg. We can show you the healing power of love’s intercourse.”

“Picture the nymphs!” Woss suggested.

“I don’t need to!” Barnemit spat.

Woss continued, “As fat hairy men!”

“Won’t help Dafred!” Barnemit barked, “Dafred, get your own limp wimmy fantasy!”

A nymph assault could not prevent Barnemit mocking the lying jinxbait pervert his friend turned out to be.

Woss’s idea didn’t work for Barnemit either. Nymphs invaded his mental image of obese hirsute men, the men embraced them passionately, then the men became Barnemit and friends. Griffins shit on my head! That’s it, Barnemit switched pictures to griffins in the sky opening their arses and raining feces. Suddenly, nymphs were riding the griffins, they landed in a meadow where the nymphs began stroking themselves atop the great feathered monsters...the gods weep! Was there no vision nymph magic could not corrupt? Salvation struck him. His desperate query was answered.

Shit Face! Hicussaw’s friend! What was his name? Jams? Not even a nymph would diddle him. Barnemit held the shit face in his mind, placing his faith in its hideousness. The nymphs hung back, their hands and lips did not molest the repulsive visage of Jams. Barnemit perceived the soaring waves of pleasure diminish to a steady stream.

“Jams the Shit Face! Hicussaw’s buddy, ugliest man in Bart! Use him!” Barnemit spread the word.

“Ja-Jams?” Woss couldn’t move, a nymph had stepped well within his reach, her perky nipples a ritet short of his tabard.

Abreast of Woss’s fae seductress, the second nymph stood, fingers brushing lips, presenting to Dafred propped by Woss. “The stable hand, Hicussaw’s shit-faced friend!”

Dafred cried, “Yes, his face checks their charm!”

The queen focused on the lieutenant. She covered some of the distance separating them, too close and Barnemit’s sight would not catch the whole of her in an easy glance. His wimmy remained rock hard under his hauberk yet the face of Jams bought Barnemit room to form coherent thoughts. He doubted it was possible to resist the queen should she touch him. Jinx the rana! Lord Doneg ought to brave nymphs himself instead of sending druzhinniks to be enslaved. But the lieutenant could not abandon his quest, he had glory to win here, a future to advance, he wasn’t going to retreat from some pisswet fae whore!

“What of the demon, my lady?” Barnemit enquired, a lot less forcefully than he intended.

“To explain the demon, we remember the beginning.” the queen’s fingers and their gleaming silver nails slid between her legs. Barnemit observed her groin was shaven smooth the way he preferred it. Soft moans punctuated her speech. Barnemit pulled his gaze up, determined to look her in the eye, and only the eye.

“In the beginning, there was Thusa the Allmother, and she was alone. Craving a companion, she allowed a comet to enter her and bore a son-Harnan, First of Men and Fathers. The moment Thusa and Harnan beheld each other, their hearts were bonded. They became the first lovers. Harnan and Thusa explored the unfathomable depths of the void, drifting amidst the stars for countless ages. As time wore on, they were overwhelmed by the desire to express the love of their hearts in the embrace of their bodies. The lovers settled an empty barren world and through their passion brought life. Offspring were born to Thusa in great litters. First came the Ensir, the living things of lower order; the beasts and birds, trees and shrubs, bugs and fish. Next the Ensar, the mortal races; humans, satyrs, cobolds, harpies and many more. Last of all, the immortal Ensar, whom your kind worship as gods.

Once, in the throes of intercourse, Harnan wished to vent his pleasure in Thusa’s mouth. He withdrew from her woman’s cave but failed to control his urge, and spilled his seed upon the world. We, whom mortals call fae, are the Inubrien, the immortal children of Harnan alone, born of his seed. Much of our father’s seed still lies scattered and unspoilt, and from it, new fae are born, awakening to life in this beautiful world.”

“Where does the demon fit into this?” Barnemit asked sourly. His body ached pleasingly, delighting in her voice, ever aware of her perfect flesh despite his best efforts. He simply

had to step forward and take her, but Jams was his protection and his will stayed on task.

The queen smiled, “Thusa cared greatly for her offspring. Harnan grew jealous, he claimed Thusa’s affection to be his and no other’s. He struck down a number of their children. Thusa attacked the First Father to save her young ones. Enraged at her betrayal, Harnan fought back and ripped open Thusa’s belly. From her womb, sprang the Systarch-the great monsters your kind call titans, beings of power even the Ensar fear. The Systarch overwhelmed Harnan and slew him. Thusa mourned his ending, such was the strength of her love, though her motherly love for their children was stronger.

Thusa buried Harnan in the darkest depths below the realms of the world, with him the children he had struck-the Sysbrien. Thusa died of her wounds, in the company of the Ensar, who carried her to the stars and crafted the heavens from her body. The Sysbrien however, were not dead. Their ruined half-living spirits festered impotent in the hidden hells. Soon the Sysbrien discovered they could possess the Ensar and the Ensar, bonding to mortal souls and regaining the life Harnan destroyed. Your kind gave a name to the Sysbrien,” she moaned a pause, “demon.”

“Your perverted creation story tells nothing of Doneg Windcharm or the demon in the heirloom.” Barnemit said.

“Among these Sysbrien, were a few who had been Ensar, now they are great and terrible powers. Perhaps a thousand years ago, one such demonic master of shadow conquered the world west of the Lorrans Mountains. An alliance of gods, fae and mortals challenged the demon’s advance east. I was a soldier in that noble army, the archer Doneg Windcharm a hero of it.

We were taken by surprise, the hour of battle pressed upon us. Our best magickers hastened to craft a prison for the demon. Through the blood shed over long days, the darkness was defeated and the demon bound. His prison, I learnt later, was entrusted to mortal care. I believed it a dreadful folly, the prison was poorly made and easily broken. A new prison should have been prepared, unfortunately no one would risk the demon escaping during his move to another.”

Sweet unicorn farts! An ancient demon was possessing Hicussaw! Curiosity compelled Barnemit, “Does the demon have a name, this foe of Doneg Windcharm?”

“The conqueror was called Niltiar in mortal tongues.”

“The binding trinket has been undone, the demon set loose, it has possessed a thief of a man.” Barnemit informed Lady Silverglaze of current events in this millennium old story.

“So the world is doomed again.”

No, just waiting for a hero to prove his quality upon the shadow and flesh of a demonic Hicussaw. Barnemit asked, “How do I slay a demon?”

“You do not. Fae can die in battle and sickness. We may retire to slumber as the passing of ages wearies us. The almighty gods and demons however, they may be banished, imprisoned, weakened...never destroyed. Have you not heard the tale of Deradera?”

“I’ve heard it. A god whose enemies cut him to bits, which they hid across the world. His devoted followers took three thousand years to uncover the secret stashes and piece him together. Their god was reborn, his glory and power whole.”

“You understand then the challenge of breaking a demon? Yet hope overcomes despair. The demon has not had time to complete bonding with its host soul, it has not recovered its full strength. Should you force battle early enough, the demon will be weak.”

A moment’s consideration saw Barnemit rephrase his question, “Demon hosts, the vessel a demon possesses, they can be killed, right?”

“Destroying the host is key to binding or banishing a demon.” the queen said. Her fingers went to her silver lips, she sucked delectably on each finger in turn. “I foresee your valour and ambition shall become legends I recount to new heroes a thousand years hence. What is your name, brave hero?”

The action of her hand excited a part of him he was trying to calm down. The lieutenant pictured Jams Shitface and answered, “Barnemit of Pank Hit, Lieutenant in the Druzhina, posted to Bart Castle serving Lord Doneg.”

“A hero cannot leave us unburdened, you will bear a gift from me and my sisters. A souvenir to keep you safe fighting demons. Klaxie, fetch my shield Musveryl, Beauty To Turn Aside Malice.”

“I already have a shield.” Barnemit spoke of the dented heater strapped to his back. The wood elf burst forth on Barnemit’s right, staggering under the weight of a round shield bigger than he was, causing the lieutenant to half-draw his sword before realizing there was no threat. The shield was sturdy wood, silver rimmed it, on the surface were a pair of

eyes in silver silhouette. How had the elf obeyed her command this swiftly? Where had the shield been hidden? Jinxed fae magic at work!

“Yours is metal torn from the earth, forged in fire by the strength of men. I offer you the endurance of trees, given of their own will, shaped in magic by the love of nymphs. Blows denting your mortal made shield cannot scratch the labour of our hands. Indeed, you may find my gift is defence of a nature and power rare in the realms of humans.”

Barnemit’s right hand pushed his sword back down into its sheath. His left took on Musveryl. The lieutenant hefted his new fae enchanted shield, the light weight didn’t contradict his impression it wasn’t very tough. He would have preferred a gift weapon, still, rejecting a free enchanted item would be stupid. He could sell it to pay his debt or trade it for something more useful. Klaxie bowed and skittered back to his position guarding the entrance.

“I carry this shield with me, and your gaze.” Barnemit said.

The queen laughed high and joyously, “The eyes on the front? You think my magic is so simple? I gave you a gift, not my favour. My gaze follows my favour, my favour is reserved for my champion, and bestowed in a kiss.”

Her last word playing on those soft lips enthralled him. He knew his mouth embracing hers would be the end of his freedom, he would lose his soul to the rule of a nymph queen. “No.” Barnemit choked.

The queen frowned for a moment, Barnemit wanted to kiss the unhappiness off her face.

“My sisters and I granted you the pleasure of our company, knowledge of our memory and a gift of our ability. You refuse me this request? A request we would both revel in.”

“I won’t surrender my mind to you, my lady.” Barnemit declared. His heart clung to the image of Jams, whose shit face could repel the charms of nymphs.

“The price of your visit must be paid. You cannot take this much and give us nothing.”

Of course, the deceit of the nymphs’ friendliness was revealed. Jinx the fae and their stupid slimy customs, even the ones too polite to murder you on sight would trick you into owing them your life. “My lady, your Klaxie and you ought to have mentioned a charge when my party arrived.”

“We scarcely imagined a fine band of men-at-arms in the Druzhina would prove themselves ill-mannered scoundrels.” The queen’s disappointment triggered a sense of shame in Barnemit, he should comfort her with his lips and tongue and fingers and wimmy.

“Take your gift, I’ve no need of it.” Barnemit extended the Musveryl shield to the queen. He thought of grabbing her hand and pulling her into his arms when she reached for the shield. No, Shit Face save him, that’s what the fae whore wanted!

“Our lore and love you cannot return. How can I accept my shield back? It is a gift! To reclaim it, I must be as rude as you who refuses us a token of your own. We will not allow you to return to mortal lands with your debt to us unpaid.”

“I’ll pay a fair price, not my soul, not my will.” Barnemit insisted. The queen was growing hostile, feeling herself justified by her mad fae laws, she might imprison the druzhinniks to be her diddling slaves. Hmm, not a bad life for slaves of the fae, not a bad life for even the sons of barons.

The gods weep! Battling and slaying nymphs seemed impossible. He would be trying to kiss and stab them at the same time. Estka’s advice had stopped at not yielding to their seduction. The nymphs weren’t alone he remembered, though they alone could easily become his world. Lady Silverglaze was queen here. The army of fae in the palace would enforce her commands, Klaxie and his leshies, the dryads, the forest giant...

“Not your soul, one of your companions then?”

Barnemit hadn’t expected the queen’s proposal. Trade a friend and spare himself. What the jinx had Dafred and Woss been doing during this conversation anyway?

The lieutenant ripped his eyes off the queen and spun to check his friends behind him.

Woss’s eyes were closed. Sweet unicorn farts! Barnemit wouldn’t have believed Woss possessed the strength of will to do it. Dafred’s eyes were open, staring past the pair of nymphs tempting him and Woss, determined to watch Barnemit and await orders. The nymph duo now had their lips locked and their hands running free across each other’s bodies. Barnemit’s brain regretted turning to see this, his wimmy applauded the decision.

“Shit Face protects!” Dafred assured Barnemit of his resilience.

“We can do it! We’re resisting the nymphs!” Woss broke his silence, not his self-imposed blindness.

“Which one?” Barnemit enquired.

“Barn?” Woss asked, raising his eyelids.

“No...” Dafred’s face paled, dreading the queen’s answer.

The queen replied, “The wounded man. We can heal him.”

“I gave him a potion.”

“Alchemy is slow and painful. The touch of a nymph will mend him with speed and pleasure.”

“You’re asking me to sacrifice my oldest friends.” Barnemit said, no recovering my potion he thought, jinx my mercy!

“Sacrifice? Hardly. My sisters and I will keep him a few days of your mortal time. His every need and desire we shall tend to. Once we are bored of him, he may return to you, be it his choice.”

A few days, enough to ensure Dafred would prefer death over a moment apart from a nymph’s love. It wouldn’t do to voice his opinion aloud in this case.

“Barn, please!” Dafred begged.

“Don’t worry, Barn isn’t the sort to.” Woss said.

Barnemit stomped over to his friends, careful not to disturb or pay too much attention to the nymph twosome.

“You, stay!” Barnemit yelled in Dafred’s face, “Because you made yourself a helpless weight we have to bear. And you’re a stinking pervert who’s been lying to his buddies about being a pervert.”

“I’m sorry Barn.” Dafred said, “I know you lost the knighthood to get me and Woss posted at Bart. I know you deserve better from us, you’ve earned it. But I swear to you, I’ve not lied to you and Woss, I’ve never diddled a man.”

Barnemit was unforgiving. The queen's deal was too good to forego, he gained an enchanted shield and Lord Doneg's quest complete while ridding his party of a burden slowing them down. The lieutenant addressed Dafred, "You know nothing of what you cost me! I wasted a healing pot on your leg while the nymphs promise to take care of it. You can't fight for your buddy boys on one leg, but you can save them if you let the nymphs have you."

"Barn, you sure-" Woss began.

"It's the best path we could take." Barnemit cut him short.

Dafred swallowed, "You're right, Barn. It's not fair to you and Woss. You shouldn't suffer for my mistake."

"We can handle the fae. Barn, my jinxed tongue, you're a monster, you can-"

"No, Woss my buddy boy." Dafred interrupted, "I'll do this, my soul buys you two safe passage out of this king-forsaken fae crughole."

Woss stared at his crippled friend.

"Woss, let go." Dafred leaned on his halberd. The nymph duo moved to relieve Woss of Dafred.

Woss obeyed his friend. The nymphs supported Dafred, not by the shoulders and arm as Woss had done, their style was more intimate. One slipped a hand under his crotch and a second over his arse, the other held his head and put her lips to his. Dafred shut his eyes. The nymphs kept him upright effortlessly.

Barnemit desired very much to push Dafred aside and take the jinxbait's place between the nymphs. The sight of Woss stepping forward to join them woke Barnemit to reality. He thrust a hand to hold Woss back. The gods weep! Barnemit knew his deal wasn't worth spit if he and Woss surrendered to the nymphs of their own will.

Barnemit twisted his head to question the queen, "Are we done here?"

She granted him a sly silver smirk. "Yes. You and your last companion *can* walk free of my palace untouched and unfulfilled, Lieutenant Barnemit of Pank Hit. I wish you luck in whatever you decide."

Barnemit shook Woss's shoulder, "Woss! We need to leave!"

Woss obeyed his lieutenant.

They escaped, the druzhinnik party of three reduced to a band of two. Outside the fountain hall, the constant caress of the nymphs' charm ceased, allowing the men's wimmies to soften and their heads to clear of the pleasurable pressure.

The pixie had not waited, nobody bothered escorting them this time. As Barnemit and Woss traversed the palace of the queen, the fae crowd again attempted the insult of not speaking Wonderword around mortals, with their usual amount of success. Somehow Woss felt the effects of the Shifting Tongue were diminished. Waves of strange colours and sounds and sensations washed over him but the core of him was an immovable anchor, his thoughts lingering on the friend they had abandoned to Lady Silverglaze and her sisters.

Barnemit was concerned about the combat composition of his party. Two melee fighters, him and Dafred, could protect their ranged support reasonably well. Now Barnemit was the front, side and rear. Should they be attacked, the lieutenant would have to charge immediately, keeping the focus of their foes on him so Woss could fire his saving Frost Shots unhindered.

The druzhinniks passed beyond the throng of fae and the open, cultivated spaces of the queen's palace. Once more, they found themselves amidst the brush of an enchanted forest under the canopy of wild trees. Barnemit led the way.

"We shouldn't have given them Dafred." Woss tried starting a conversation.

Kryter's the son! Playing medicine man to Woss's bruised conscience was the last thing Barnemit wanted to do, "They took him, Woss. Wasn't our fate to pick."

"We remember it different." Woss stood his ground.

Woss's tone gave Barnemit pause, "What did you say?"

"I had my Frost Shot. You, you defeated the boggarts! Why didn't we fight?"

"You fae-brained dolt, we *survived* the boggarts, and barely! Boggarts Dafred brought down upon us. Listen to yourself Woss, us against a nymph queen and her army of magical monsters? I wouldn't bet on me."

"Dafred's our buddy boy from Pank Hit, our brother in arms in the Druzhina. It was

wrong to surrender him.”

Barnemit’s fist clenched, craving contact with Woss’s jaw. “You’re spewing this rubbish now, when we’re safe and away, safe thanks to my good sense and strong will.”

“I tried to speak out.”

“Why’d you shut up and walk then?”

“You made me! The jinxed nymphs were crugging my mind, I couldn’t think straight-”

“What a load of dung!” Barnemit advanced on Woss, “I’ll tell you why you didn’t defend Dafred. You didn’t want to die a nymph’s slave. You knew he was our only chance at getting free. So you held your tongue and followed me.”

Woss fell silent.

“Ask your whining heart if it’s brave enough to return to the queen’s palace.” Barnemit hammered on.

“There must have been something we could’ve done.”

“It was Dafred or us. He sacrificed himself and saved us. Dafred saw it was the right choice, why can’t you?”

“No, my mortal friends, you must not squabble, lest in anger you spill each other’s blood. Such a deed would be a terrible waste.” the words were uttered in a squeaky elf voice. Barnemit swore his heart skipped a beat. The lieutenant pivoted and directed his gaze towards the source, a blood elf who had seemingly sprung out of nowhere, which was not the least bit surprising in the Changeless Change.

The blood elf looked to be a frail thing made of dried, congealed blood. Barnemit recognized two liquid pools as eyes. The little monster was not alone. Redcaps poured forth from the shrubs and bushes.

These brutes were roughly four rits tall on stumpy little legs, half a common human man and twice an elf. Broad muscles bulged on their copper tanned arms. Beefy chests strained against the leather of their vests. They wore baggy masks over their heads, concealing their entire visage save a pair of eyes blazing red. Some were clad in metal; sleeveless chain mail or a breastplate, arms bare under enormous pauldrons, spiked helmets exposing only the eyes of course. Each arm was armed-hand axes, short swords,

daggers, flails, one-handed hammers and maces. Scarlet blood daubed their masks and helmets, perpetually moist and fresh.

The vampyre's allies! Jinx me, Barnemit felt the urge to kick himself. Smitten by Lady Silverglaze's charm he had forgotten to ask her about the blood elf emissary. There was no end to the crugging luck today. He had evaded a nymph queen's delicate grasp and stumbled into the clutches of a thirsty new vampyre.

A wet gash opened in the elf's face, moving in the manner of a mouth. "Our trip need not be a complete loss. The queen refused an alliance yet fate grants us an offering to please our lord."

"Too old. No virgins in that lot." a redcap commented in a deep tone.

"Blood is blood." the elf said.

Tens of redcaps closed in on the humans. Woss's crossbow was slung across his shoulder, Barnemit's sword was stuck in his sheath and the heater strapped to his back. Musveryl in the lieutenant's hands was the sole item the druzhinniks were ready to use. Barnemit's party had beaten the boggarts with surprise, magic and ferocity...all advantages their current foes enjoyed. A glance at Woss's hopeless countenance told Barnemit his companion would not be protesting the next couple of sentences he spoke.

"Stay your strike." Barnemit addressed the blood fae, "We mean no harm."

"Oh thank you for your mercy." the elvish emissary chuckled mischievously, "I wish we could return the favour."

Sweet unicorn farts! Barnemit's desire to survive confronted a challenge he could not conquer through strength and combat prowess. However, his cunning mind spotted a way forward leading not to undoubted destruction but merely the chance of it. The lieutenant seized his chance. Barnemit said, "We're seeking the vampyre of Brin Dank. Do you serve him?"

"Yes, it is our intent to feed you to our lord." the elf turned suspicious, "You are not one of those mad mortals chasing death by vampyre are you? They disturb me greatly."

"No." Barnemit assured him, "The redcap who spoke was wise, our blood is not pure. We've both shared our love and sweat with women. Fear not, bringing us to the vampyre remains your gain, he will learn we make better soldiers than meals."

“You hope to join the lord of blood.” the emissary understood.

“We came to betray our weakling noble lord, for the gifts a vampyre’s sorcery may bestow upon on us.” Barnemit’s gaze strayed to Woss, who quickly voiced agreement, “We’ve heard of blood spells empowering men to heal even while blows rend their flesh.”

“Let’s slay these fools and be done with them.” a redcap said. In honesty, Barnemit could not discern which of the midget brawlers was speaking.

“Hold.” the elf commanded, “Our lord is building a force to bleed dry the mortal realm. These men are druzhinnik soldiers, their skill at arms and knowledge of human defences would prove useful.”

“Can’t kill them ourselves. Can’t sacrifice them to the lord.” a redcap complained.

The elf clarified his stance, “We escort them to the lord. He shall decide, whether they are food or friend.”

“We ought to disarm our guests.” a redcap suggested. Barnemit was sure the monster wanted the druzhinniks to resist and start a fight. Him and Woss yielding their weapons went against the lieutenant’s deepest instincts. Yet this situation presented a poor choice, surrender their arms and become an easy kill or defend themselves and invite certain death.

“Do not touch their equipment.” the blood elf said, “They may need it to fulfil our lord’s will. If they serve no purpose, our lord shall award their items as he sees fit.”

“The blood lord will find us worthy of his service.” Barnemit vowed.

“Come then mortals.” the elf beckoned, “To face our lord. Pray to your gods he chooses the strength of your arms over the taste of your blood.”

“Is the lord near?” Barnemit enquired. The prospect of days of travel in the care of bloodthirsty redcaps did the opposite of delighting him.

“No, our lord is much too courteous to march his might in Wildsong Woods without the queen’s consent.” the emissary said, “Fret not about the journey, we shall reach the lord soon. There are paths in Wonderwhere cutting short time and distance to the mortal realm.”

The redcaps pressed together in a tight ring, leaving no gaps for the humans in their

centre to flee, herding Barnemit and Woss through the evergreen woods. This measure of caution was unnecessary, both druzhinniks knew they couldn't outrun fae in the Shifting Realms. The blood elf emissary disappeared into the vegetation beyond their line of vision.

Woss felt the world diminish. The impossible lurking on the edges of his perception slipped away, awaiting no longer the chance of his glance. Reality was real again, solid, unchanging. The music of the forest faded, each note falling fainter as melody broke down into a meaningless jumble of critter noises. No more did sun rays drape themselves across branch and trunk like lengths of gold silk. Time stopped taking odd turns and pauses, the flow of moments stuck to a steady pace. Foliage once slithering brightly green around the trees grew motionless and weathered in appearance.

In an instant, the group burst free of the woods, emerging under a clear sky shared with the vampyre's army. Barnemit and Woss beheld an encampment matching sound to its sights; the sharpening of blades on grindstones, the clash and clang of said weapons being tested in practice, the voices and cries of their wielders. Redcaps, blood elves, gargoyles, leshies...a great variety of supernatural life strutted and hovered. Fae aside, many mortals had rallied to serve the vampyre. Scruffy humans and furry little cobolds bustled about dirty tents and smoky campfires. Centaurs paced in ones, twos and threes. An occasional minotaur loomed or satyr glared. Woss reckoned hundreds were preparing to tear Tarfelm into pieces for their blood drinking abomination of a master.

The camp of the vampyre and his followers was set up in a vast clearing, further widened by hacking down the surrounding trees. Hewn stumps bore mute witness to the passing of Barnemit, Woss and their redcap escort.

This wasn't Wildsong Woods, Woss recognized the fact. The gods weep! How far had the redcaps brought them? The forest seemed to be Tarfelm, but then, he had never been outside the province to know any different. Didn't all forests look the same? The light was low...a twilight hour...was the sun setting or rising? He couldn't tell if it was the same day he and his friends entered Wildsong or the next morning, or...jinx the Faerie! If the stories were true it could be months later!

Jinx them all! From candy elves through boggarts to nymphs, now the pisswet halfbreed races! His was not the habit of reviling the strange, wicked, often disgusting creatures Tarfelm was home to, yet Woss needed a respite. He could not endure another

inhuman face promising him death and worse.

The elf emissary had preceded the arrival of his redcaps. Riding the shoulder of a centaur, he approached them. Woss got his first opportunity to examine a centaur at close range. An ugly crossing of human and equine, the beastman wore nothing save a belt around his waist, on which he hung a pair of spiked clubs. Where the neck of a horse should have been, a human torso arose. His black mane was pulled back, suitably enough in a ponytail style. The face was stretched top to bottom, the ears pointed and flexible, the nostrils wide, the jaw jutting, the teeth big, the facial and body hair sparse.

“Stay your feet!” the call seized Barnemit’s attention.

A crowd of humans in peasant garb moved to obstruct the druzhinnik and redcap group. The newcomers toted loaded crossbows and melee weapons in hand. Barnemit observed a woman wearing trousers among them. A man addressed the emissary, his youthful energy pushing through an unkempt and exhausted appearance. His voice marked him as the one who had demanded a halt. Lieutenant Barnemit noted his scraggly white beard and the white fringe hanging over his forehead, contrasting his purple locks. This had to be Fohl Walljumper, a leader of the local rebels Captain Keant had once described to Barnemit.

“Draks, druzhinnik prisoners belong to us.” Fohl said to the elf, “We’ll question them on the deeds and defences of their noble masters.”

Ah, Woss was relieved, finally a perfectly ordinary bunch of humans to deal with.

“After me and my boys have had our turn.” the fresh claim came from a second band of humans, larger than the first, shoving themselves into the scene.

These men weren’t dressed to the simple, patchwork standard of the rebels. Most went a notch higher on the fancy post, the cut and fabric of their raiment was more expensive, not to mention the ornaments, arms and armour some sported. Barnemit identified the new speaker by his brown hair and distinctive yellow eyes, a particularly hated bandit of Tarfelm named Hoip Fortycents. Fortycents was carrying an ornate axe with both hands and a crossbow on his back.

“You don’t get a turn. I know your plot.” Fohl said to Hoip, “Torture the men-at-arms till they point you to a poorly guarded pile of loot. That’s when your boys take off raiding and leave us to do the vampyre’s work.”

“We need supplies.” Hoip countered, “Food and equipment. Money to buy food and equipment. While you’re playing ‘tyrants versus freedom fighters’, somebody has to keep this army fighting fit.”

“Sell your excuses to Lord Senjdaq.” Fohl spat, “You’re thieving, raping, murdering scum. Can’t fool me.”

Rare was the bandit who treated insults gently, true as they may be. Several brandished their weapons and stepped aggressively towards the rebels. Likewise the rebels responded, building hostility in the air. Hmm, Barnemit’s heart kindled hope, bandits and rebels fighting each other should force the redcaps to intervene for peace’s sake. He and Woss could escape in the confusion.

Fohl tried reason, “The prisoners, my folk will put to the right use. We’ll make them spill noble secrets, help us prepare a plan of attack, deal a blow to break the barons’ power in Tarfelm. With a powerful blood lord leading us, we won’t be beaten. Fortycents, lend your men to our assault. There’s plenty of plunder to be had once the killing’s done.”

Draks squeaked up, “My prize is mine to decide. I shall present them to our lord.”

Both human factions shifted their gaze to his diminutive person. Fortycents shook his great head of brown hair and beard, “No. He’ll bleed them dry before they can breathe a word. Waste of a good catch.”

Fohl added, “These two can’t be virgins. Best we don’t risk their impure blood befouling Lord Senjdaq’s tongue.”

“Walljumper’s hit the mark.” Hoip said grudgingly, “Don’t want the blood lord thinking we’re idiots offering him any old rubbish we find. Besides, we’re bound to the same cause aren’t we? We ought to share our spoils.”

“Thank you Hoip. Share indeed,” Fohl agreed, “and judge carefully how we spend these soldiers of the enemy. Draks, you brought them in, Fortycents and I will handle the interrogation. We’ll squeeze every useful bit of knowledge out of their heads.”

Hoip’s tone and words turned more enthusiastic, “Their secrets can show us where to strike, how to cripple the noble lords who hunt us.”

Fohl approved, “Exactly. Let’s not forgot, any stronghold of the barons should also be rich for looting.”

Jinx me! Barnemit was amazed. Greedy bandits and righteous rebels were setting aside differences and working together just to crug him good and proper. It was time Barnemit corrected their misconception about his presence. The arguing parties had to learn he, and no others, determined his fate.

“Pardon me.” Barnemit began, “I’m Barnemit of Pank Hit, a Lieutenant of the Druzhina, and my comrade is Woss of Pank Hit. We aren’t prisoners. We’re here to join you, to pledge our service to the lord of blood.”

“You’re traitors to the barons?” Fohl asked, unable to hide the surprise in his voice, nor the hint of genuine pleasure.

“Draks, is he speaking the truth?” Fortycents was less trusting. “Or is this pisswet brute lying to save his blood.” the bandit hefted his axe in a menacing manner. A golden bracelet adorning Hoip’s left wrist jiggled loosely, drawing Barnemit’s eye to the runes inscribed on it. The young lieutenant considered the hoard of enchanted items and years of battle experience Hoip Fortycents must possess. Barnemit imagined defeating a villain of Forycents’ stature could earn him his own heroic title.

“Why do you think we’re still armed?” Barnemit questioned Hoip, “Would captured druzhinniks be allowed their weapons?”

“No pair of druzhinniks is escaping a whole bunch of redcaps.” Fortycents bared his yellowed teeth, “Easier to let prisoners carry their equipment to my camp than take it off them and bear it myself. It’s what I would’ve done, Lieutenant Barnemit.”

Barnemit realized a smile on Hoip’s face meant nothing pleasant to anybody. He supposed many in Tarfelm and Bart Castle thought the same of himself. Could Fortycents be his future had he never enlisted? Barnemit grinned back, “Smart. Should I ever be your prisoner, I’ll look forward to keeping my sword.”

Draks spoke, “I discovered the druzhinniks within a yearning of the queen’s palace in Wildsong Woods. The twosome surrendered at once. They confessed to me they were seeking our lord.”

“So no reason to believe they’re being honest.” Fortycents concluded.

“Lord Senjdaq will know what to do with them.” Fohl said, “Draks you were right. They must meet the lord of blood.”

“As we requested.” Barnemit reminded them.

“Then we dally not a moment further.” Draks said.

Draks on Centaur Twin Clubs guided the druzhinniks deeper into the base of operations for Tarfelm’s resident vampyre. Fortycents and Walljumper stuck to the sides of Barnemit and Woss, their bands dutifully behind them. While the fae of the queen’s palace had been content to gawk a few moments and return to their affairs, the vampyre’s followers, mortal and immortal, followed the new arrivals. Whispers of a bloody sacrifice and the vampyre’s thirst drifted after the druzhinniks in Krit, Lolbol and the Tauric of the halfbreeds. The swelling crowd did not take much time to reach the vampyre.

The heart of the camp was a horror even storytellers of nightmares would dread describing. Wooden stakes had been driven into the ground, forming a kind of wavy fence, with sections dipping inside and swinging outside. Impaled on these stakes were the naked bodies of human children, the stake entering between their legs through the anus and exiting through their gaping mouths. Barnemit wondered if the vampyre had drained the little twerps of blood and life before the impalement or during. It was the sort of death Barnemit would wish only on enemies he cared about, strangers merited no such effort.

The lieutenant pondered briefly the missing stench of rotting flesh. Visual signs of decomposition were barely perceptible. Most obviously the odour was masked, by the cloying scent of incense burning in braziers placed around the stakes. Blood magic could also be preserving the corpses.

Amidst this grotesque exhibition stood an expansive and extravagant construct of cloth and tent poles. A free gargoyle and a leshy guarded the entrance. The gargoyle used no equipment, stony claws his sole weapons. His fat round head had a snouted face resembling a bat’s hammered flat. His leshy partner wielded a shiny new steel axe, thanks to human allies in the vampyre’s service no doubt.

“Gifts for our lord.” Draks informed the guards.

The gargoyle nodded in response and lifted the cover flap of the tent. Draks dismounted his centaur, addressing the crowd in his boyish voice, “The men-at-arms alone may come in. The rest of you wait here.”

Barnemit caught Woss’s glance. Like his lieutenant, Woss hid his fear. The subtle

tension on his face went unnoticed to all eyes except Barnemit's, Barnemit who knew him over a lifetime from boyhood to Druzhina. The moment of reckoning was mere moments away. Salvation lay in the vampyre believing their tale and accepting their allegiance. Rejection would lead to their doom.

The interior of the blood lord's tent fulfilled the impression its exterior conveyed. It was well furnished with carpets, tapestries, stools, cushions, low tables and lanterns to illuminate the scene. The place was a palace compared to the shelters Bart Castle's druzhinniks and the vampyre's mortal servants slept in, which were sheets propped on sticks at best. Had the plunder of rebels and bandits provided this luxury? Barnemit questioned silently. Or did the vampyre have a wealthy benefactor buying his favour?

While the lord of blood's residence presented a pretty picture, it was left incomplete by the absence of the blood lord. Barnemit saw no trace of the vampyre. His gaze fell to the ground, where someone had needlessly spread a breadth of crimson silk over the carpeting. Barnemit felt the urge to press a grimy footprint upon the silk, stupid cloth was probably worth his boot's weight in silver.

"My lord, I beg an audience." Draks spoke.

Barnemit heard the crack of bones shifting. The silken spread before him retracted to a central point, winding into a figure rising tall and slender in a sinuous manner. The lieutenant beheld appendages slide out of the sleeves and collar. These were a wiggling mess of bones under stretched pale skin. The sleeve limbs formed long nailed fingers and hands. Watching the head being built, Woss wasn't certain whether vomiting in disgust or soiling his trousers in terror was the appropriate response. Eyes jumped into position as hairy patches moved up the back of the developing skull. Bones and skin took the shape of forehead, nose, cheeks, jaws...a face of soft features describing a mannish beauty. Staring at the finished head, Barnemit hated the black and curly hair it flaunted, he did not wish to hold any characteristic in common with an abomination.

The lieutenant remembered the folklore about vampyres, but hadn't expected the monster manipulating his body to this extent.

The vampyre straightened his twisted spine with a pop, reaching his full height a rit or so taller than Barnemit. The skin on his exposed hands, face and neck looked bright fair against his red robes. His hue Barnemit was certain belonged to the deadskins of No King's Country, not a Krit. Was the vampyre of Brin Dank a jinxed foreigner? No, a blood

drinking abomination could not have travelled this far south into Kritland unreported and untracked. The body morphing vampyre had to be a Krit who had chosen his current appearance.

“Lieutenant Barnemit of Pank Hit and Man-at-arms Woss of Pank Hit.” Draks announced, “I introduce to you the Lord of Blood in Tarfelm, Senjdaq the Star Prince, Whose Radiant Beauty Lights The Dark.”

Barnemit guessed the abomination had been born under a normal Krit name. The jinxbait must have picked his ridiculous title himself, demanding his followers use it, instead of earning a name on the tongues of those observing his deeds.

“Draks.” the monster drawled gently, “I was resting. Why do you wake me?”

His unaccented Krit confirmed Barnemit’s suspicion. He was no foreigner, though some magic may have granted him his fluency in the Krit language.

Draks responded, “My lord, I have just cause for your attention.”

“I hope these prisoners are not your reason. Their blood lacks the scent of purity. They are not fit to feed me. You should have taken care of them yourself.”

“They claim-” Draks started.

Barnemit cut him off, “We come of our own will, my lord, to betray our noble masters, to taste what power it pleases you to bestow on us.”

“You seek to serve me and enjoy the gifts I would award you.” Senjdaq the Star Prince shot forward, his smooth steps hidden in his robes, giving the illusion he was gliding... unless he was actually levitating, impossible, flight was not a vampyre ability Barnemit had heard of. Senjdaq’s colourless countenance halted half a rit short of Barnemit’s face.

The lieutenant did not flinch. He held the monster’s gaze, the scarlet depths of Senjdaq’s eyes put him in mind of an ocean of blood. “Yes my lord.” Barnemit said, “Me and my comrade offer you our knowledge of Bart Castle’s defences. We bring you victory over the rana!”

Senjdaq said nothing, he glided on past Barnemit, drawing a deep breath of air. Kryter’s the son! Could the monster smell a lie? Barnemit hoped not!

“Are both of you of the same desire?” Senjdaq stopped a couple of paces behind Woss.

Woss turned, “Often I’ve asked myself, why spend my life as a baron’s dog. For what? A pittance in pay, days of training away the hours, awaiting the moment one of the nobles’ many foes slays me...jinx the Druzhina! Jinx the rana! Under your power, Lord Senjdaq, I can survive the deadliest wounds, take what I want in plunder, live my days how I will. Why wouldn’t I choose you, my lord?”

“Reasonably spoken, soldier man.” Senjdaq said, “Though I scarcely require your aid to conquer Tarfelm, I shall welcome you nonetheless.”

“Thank you my lord.” Barnemit began eagerly, “We-“

“But how am I to trust the pair of you?” Senjdaq said, “Should I have blind faith you are not noble spies? What if you are heroes questing to destroy me, entering my service in falsehood, looking to make your name by stabbing me when my back is unguarded.”

Barnemit grasped an idea, a single solution soothing the vampyre’s disquiet and transporting him and Woss to locations significantly safer than the army base of a vampyre.

“My lord, send us on a quest against the barons.” Barnemit begged, “We will show you our intent in the blood of nobles, knights, and the men-at-arms we once called comrades!”

Woss saw the benefits too, “Unleash us upon your enemies, you will not be disappointed.”

“Let druzhinniks of suspect loyalty leave this camp knowing the strength and position of my army? No.” Senjdaq spun to face the duo from Bart Castle. The corners of his mouth twisted into a smile, “I have a better test.”

The gods weep! Barnemit abused in his head. Did everyone in this king-forsaken gathering express their malice through smiling?

“The two of you may fight to the death for the privilege, and the pleasure, of serving me.” Senjdaq said.

Silence swirled within the blood lord’s opulent tent. Woss held off on reacting to the vampyre’s suggestion, instead his eyes sought Barnemit. Barnemit maintained calm, the vampyre could not panick either of the druzhinniks.

“Forgive me, my lord, I didn’t hear.” Woss tried, “Who exactly may we fight?”

“Each other.” Senjdaq raised his voice a little, “You must duel.”

“My lord, the Star Prince, Lighting the Dark.” Barnemit said, “I don’t understand. You’re risking the loss of two soldiers to a bitter battle for your approval? Wouldn’t you rather use us on your enemies, at least our deaths won’t be squandered.”

Senjdaq explained himself, “At the moment, I have no proof of your true allegiance and can use neither of you. After you, Lieutenant, have slain your companion, or he has slain you, then I can be sure there is not a beat of a hero’s kind heart in the survivor.”

“My handsome lord.” Woss protested, “Aren’t there tests not needing death? In the Druzhina, we learnt to trust our comrades. They had us practice blindfolded with shield and sword against a veteran, only an open eyed fellow recruit telling us when and where to block and strike. Maybe we could do that?”

“Do you expect a lord of blood to abide your drivel wasting his time?” Senjdaq’s eyes went cold. His lips parted, revealing wicked fangs pearly white. Another grin capable of putting a grown man to flight. “Perhaps seeking me was not your wisest decision.”

Don’t anger the monster Woss! Barnemit said in his head. We won’t survive a vampyre’s rage. We won’t survive the army he’s built. In a subdued voice the lieutenant spoke, “We know we made the right choice, my lord. We will duel as you command.”

What? Woss couldn’t believe his ears! Barnemit submitting to *anyone* over *anything*! Common sense prevailed as he met Barnemit’s gaze. The lieutenant’s hardened expression told Woss the truth. Barnemit was playing the final move of his game, the only trick left to them. The duel was an opportunity to gain an advantage of surprise, enough to help them fight their way free.

“I accept your will, Lord Senjdaq.” Woss played along. “Barnemit, I’m glad you said it first. Crugged way to end a friendship, but I suppose both of us aren’t fated to live our dreams.”

Jinx this! Barnemit moved a hand onto the handle of his sword. Cutting down the vampyre would never work, his flesh would mend in a moment. It wasn’t even a choice, was it? “So, um, do we start?”

“Not in here!” Senjdaq was annoyed, “I do not want you bleeding everywhere and ruining the carpeting!”

“They can battle where your army may watch, my lord.” Draks spoke his part, “Will you

judge their match yourself?”

“Has the sun risen?” Senjdaq asked.

“It casts the whole light of a new day.” Draks replied.

Senjdaq grimaced, “I despise the day. Draks, you take care of this. Have these men duel and bring me the victor to receive my blood.”

Dog wag a tail! Woss was glad the vampyre would not observe them personally. Despise the day? Of course, legends mentioned sunlight weakening vampyres. Stuck in his tent for fear of the sun, the Star Prince wouldn’t be able to intervene when Woss and Barnemit escaped.

“Lord Senjdaq, your wish is my purpose.” Draks squeaked, “Lieutenant Barnemit, Man-at-arms Woss. Outside, now please.”

Barnemit uttered not a word. There was no hesitation in his step as he pushed through the flaps of the tent entrance, striding before the mass of the vampyre’s followers. Woss came next, then Draks. A scattering of clouds sailed across the great blue heavens, oblivious to the gathering storm of mortals and fae below.

The waiting crowd stirred. Witnessing the druzhinniks emerge unharmed from the vampyre’s abode, several groans and soft cheers went up alongside an exchange of coin. The jinxbaits had been betting on whether the blood lord would drink Barnemit and him, Woss realized.

“A match to win the right of serving our lord and enjoying his gifts.” Draks announced, “A duel to the last breath between two soldiers of the Krit barons. The winner joins us in the power of the Star Prince.”

Fortycents laughed, “Our lord does it again! He’s giving us a treat, boys, a good old deathmatch to warm our hearts.”

His bandits passed the laughter around. The rest of the crowd preferred quieter comments and jokes. Draks clambered up Centaur Twin Clubs and settled upon a burly shoulder.

“Make room!” Draks demanded.

Man, woman and immortal withdrew to the fence of impaled children, yielding

space to the two men condemned to kill each other. Woss took in the spectacle of the spectators. His gaze lingered on their faces. Some were eager, some curious. Most had a hunger to their eyes and the lines of their mouth. Was it the influence of the vampyre's thirsty blood magic? Or was it merely lust for the entertainment of blood sport?

Fohl Walljumper decided to raise his voice, "Crossbow against sword and shield. Is this fair?"

"My foe's first shot will hit nothing but shield." Barnemit responded, "He won't get a second."

Woss recognized the lie intended for their audience's conviction. Still, hearing Barnemit talk of duelling him to death sent the cold caress of dread down his spine. A scene flashed in Woss's mind, of the nymphs taking Dafred into their hands. Kryter's the son! Barnemit had already betrayed a friend. How far could Woss trust the monster of Pank Hit after all?

"The rebel's right. You're not a fair fight." Woss said.

He unslung his crossbow cocked and loaded with the last Frost Shot. Woss calmed down a bit. He controlled the outcome of this conflict. His Frost Shot could slow to a crawl his enemies, affording him time to reload and pick them off. The question worth his life concerned whom to shoot, the blood lord's minions or Barnemit?

"I'll keep to a decent range for your crossbow." Barnemit offered, stepping back from Woss. "Give you a friend's chance."

Woss appreciated the move. He also noted it placed Barnemit quite close to their bloodthirsty observers. Woss reckoned a sword swinging Barnemit determined to kill him would not be increasing the distance to reach his target. This indicated Barnemit had not turned traitor and the lieutenant's actual target remained the crowd preventing their escape.

"For me, my lieutenant?" Woss spoke in a mocking tone, "I'm sure you fear the nearer you stand, the easier my quarrel will pierce your fancy shield and you."

To be honest, Dafred was alive and healing in the care of a fae queen. Being a nymph's diddling slave was a fate many mortals pursued. Surrendering Dafred to Lady Silverglaze didn't count as true treachery did it? It was simply the best option for survival

the three of them had faced in the depths of the Shifting Realms.

The horde of watchers was thick and pressed together. Woss searched for easy gaps to flee through and saw none. Jinx each of these buggers, and everyone and everything they loved! It seemed impossible to evade the vast number he and Barnemit were in the centre of. Barnemit's show of bravado was necessary. They had to sell this farce to the crowd, ensuring no one was prepared to meet their assault.

"Barnemit, being your buddy boy has been fun." Woss yelled, "Too bad it wasn't longer." It had to be done, Barnemit knew, but would it really be so bad? "Could have finished sooner if you ask me." Barnemit committed to the act. He unsheathed his sword and raised Musveryl to defend.

Woss locked eyes with his dear friend, attempting to read the lieutenant's mind on his face. Barnemit looked to be tensing for combat, his body awaiting the cue to strike. The man was a monster, a monster of a fighter certainly, yet he wasn't the pure evil the twerps and weaklings of the world branded him. Barnemit would never prefer an existence subject to a blood drinking abomination over the lives of his buddy boys. What sane Krit would?

Barnemit fixed his gaze on Woss, his ever faithful friend. The lieutenant didn't feel much of anything. Did he care a toot about his so-called buddies? They had proven useful during his younger years, adding their fists to his strength, their legs to his errands, their eyes to his back. Dafred and Woss were even passable company when he did wish for it. Close to ten years he had fought and laughed by their side, seeing them at their best and worst, discovering their most honest selves. It disgusted Barnemit how *empty* Dafred and Woss were, possessing no desires beyond the day's merriment, content to merely survive at whatever new height he pushed them to, their incompetence rendering their loyalty almost a waste. They were barely real people. He could swap their names and it wouldn't make a difference. Ten years, about the useful life of a dog...oh well, time to find new friends.

Why wasn't Barnemit gulping a pot? Woss asked in his head. The druzhinniks' escape had a slim chance of success, to say the least. They needed the slightest advantage they could get. Aloud Woss called, "You think your potions can't save you. I see you've accepted my victory today."

“When I toss a deadly potion at you, you won’t see it coming.” Barnemit boasted.
“Remember the boggarts in Dafred’s nightmare.”

Woss could not miss the lieutenant’s signal. Relieved, he rejoiced silently. Barnemit had just confirmed being on his side and told him the plan. The two buddy boys of Pank Hit would battle the vampyre’s little army in a manner similar to their strategy of defeating Dafred’s boggarts. Woss would initiate by shooting his Frost Shot into their enemies, naturally its area of effect could not catch every jinxbait surrounding them. Barnemit would wield alchemy and sword to break the others and clear a path.

“On my mark, you duel.” Draks declared.

Doubting his old buddy was a mistake, Woss believed. The throng of the blood lord’s minions was soon to experience a very different fight than the one they were expecting, the first blood spilt would be their own.

Woss pointed his crossbow at Barnemit, “You ready jinxbait?”

“I am.” Barnemit answered, “You aren’t.”

Good, Woss grinned, *he* had trouble resisting the notion Barnemit meant to end his life. Everything about Barnemit screamed ‘I am going to kill you’. The vampyre’s followers ought to swallow this story right until they were dying to the druzhinniks. Their shock should leave most of them unable to react for precious moments. Bless your wimmy Barnemit, this escape might just succeed.

“Fight!” Draks shrieked.

Woss turned and fired. Icy cold burst amidst mortal and fae to the cries of both. The white mist settled into a layer of frost covering a large section of the audience. As Woss spun to shoot, his ears filled with the clink of chain mail from a charging Barnemit. When he did not see the lieutenant crash into the crowd, Woss turned again. The sound of rushing metallic doom built to a climax, Woss saw Barnemit an arm’s length away and felt the sword hit.

It was a blow taught in the training yard. A quick slash to the side, slicing the Doneg tabard Woss was clad in. While Barnemit’s blade did not cut Woss’s armour, its strike delivered the strength of Barnemit through hauberk and gambeson, splitting the skin and flesh beneath to wedge chain mail and cloth in the wound. Pain described the breaking of

a rib to Woss. In a simultaneous action, Barnemit slammed Musveryl down on Woss's crossbow, knocking it out of his hands.

The Frost Shot's detonation did surprise the unaffected spectators a moment or two. Not long enough. Their crossbows, bows and throwing weapons were swiftly aimed at the druzhinniks. "Hold your fire!" Walljumper croaked, "Look!"

"You!" Woss gasped into Barnemit's face, "How could you!"

Barnemit executed an upward thrust of his sword, piercing Woss's tabard. The blade penetrated a minuscule gap between links of chain mail, rending the gambeson underneath, and buried its tip in Woss's chest. Barnemit struggled to withdraw the sword stuck in armour, padding and flesh.

Woss seized the opportunity and his dagger, rage driving him despite the disabling injuries Barnemit had inflicted. Barnemit reacted fast, shoving the flat surface of Musveryl against the crook of Woss's arm. Woss's arm was trapped behind the shield, its range of motion reduced to the circumference of Musveryl, the dagger stabbing sheer air beyond the shield's edge. Barnemit threw his weight into Musveryl, pushing Woss back and yanking his blade free.

Barnemit pulled Musveryl off Woss's arm and stepped outside the reach of the enemy weapon. The greater length of his sword allowed Barnemit to strike the dagger hand from a safe distance. Woss shouted his pain, dropping the dagger and a couple of fingers.

Sloppy, Barnemit admitted, he should have attacked the unarmoured legs at the start. Woss bore no shield to block a strike there. However, the lieutenant had not used a blade to lethal effect on an armoured target before. And he got to test Musveryl in melee combat. He did appreciate the practice Woss was providing him.

Overcoming his agony, fury warped the face of Woss. "Barnemit the Traitor is your name! You crugged us Barn! You-"

The lieutenant swung low, catching the thighs of his comrade with the sword. Woss fell onto his back screaming. Barnemit knelt upon a single knee, his blade resting across the neck of the prone Woss.

"Jinx you!" Woss spat. His last measure of strength was spent lifting his head and

bringing the hatred of his gaze to bear on Barnemit's calm visage. "You jinxed, wimmy suck-"

"Die quietly." Barnemit concluded the contest. Hacking at Woss's face, careful not to hit the helmet's nasal barrier, he cleaved the skull.

Clean kill, Barnemit congratulated himself, not a drop of blood on his tabard, not that his pisswet lord of blood would want him wearing a baron's coat of arms he supposed. The lieutenant was especially glad the boggart line worked. Woss squandering his Frost Shot spared Barnemit defeat and death. No potions were necessary of course. As Barnemit predicted, his buddy boy Woss failed to pose a challenge.

Chapter VII

Today saw Hicussaw, Calgemo, Jams and Tellyn taking refuge in ancient ruins on a stretch of grassland. The ruins amounted to piles of rubble, stumps of crumbled staircases and surviving sections of fallen walls. Moss clung to every bit of worn stone it could. Overhead, the sun had just passed its highest point, casting an afternoon warmth on great puffy masses of white cloud and the vast green earth below.

“This is the problem of not walking a civilized route.” Calgemo complained, “The rana’s watch towers and patrols keep roads safe. We could have joined a caravan, or shared hours with rich buggers on a trip, enjoyed the company of their well equipped bodyguards.”

“Safe for us? Prisoners who escaped the rana’s dungeons?” Hicussaw countered, “The roads are full of law obeying travellers and law defending men-at-arms. We’d risk the sight of us reported to Lord Doneg’s soldiers tracking our course. Could get arrested if hussars already spread word of our misdeeds.”

“Here in the wilds, we could be robbed, raped, killed or eaten. Maybe all four, in that order supposing we’re lucky.”

“Didn’t we agree, dodging bandits is better than the chance of fighting common folk doing their jobs?” Hicussaw reminded, “Hold your whining tongue, Cal. Our journey’s been easy. Demonic senses helped us pass the perils unmet. Except them, they caught our scent and aren’t willing to let go.”

“You sure these rocks will hold them off?” Calgemo waved the sword in his hand, indicating the ruins.

“Sure as crows caw. They won’t set foot in this place.” Hicussaw said, “My demon tells me they’re too scared.”

The ‘they’ in this conversation referred to the cobolds brandishing clubs and blades of bone and stone, in the meadowy fields around the ruins. Eleven of them to be precise. Hicussaw and Calgemo, behind the remnants of a collapsed pillar, watched the furred fighters wagging their bushy tails angrily and yapping in a menacing tone. The cobolds wore short tight leather skirts and armour, armour consisting of a leather vest reinforced

by bones mortal and animal. Their fur colour presented a variety starting from dirty gold and ending with reddish brown. Pointed flexible ears, beady eyes and a flat snout described their faces. They had used a black sludge to paint dark bands about their eyes. Though they were currently standing five to six rits tall, the first cobolds Hicussaw and friends spotted had been sprinting towards them on clawed hands and feet. The Krits barely reached the ruins in time.

“Don’t you think their fear should worry us?” Calgemo put forth the question.

Beside Hicussaw, the shadow of himself he alone perceived spoke, “The evil here seems content to lie forgotten. There is no reason to believe it would seek us out.”

“I can feel a horde of very bad...*things* under our feet.” Hicussaw told Calgemo, “Just don’t dig them up and we’ll be fine.”

Hicussaw continued, “See the bugger who marked his mouth? He’s their shaman. His sorcery detects a terrible ancient power here. He doesn’t know what I know though. He’s warning his warriors against touching the stones right now.”

The cobold shaman had his muzzle painted black instead of the usual eye band. He was shaking his staff at either the Krits or the ruins sheltering them. The staff itself was a dreadful weapon, mounted on its head was a yellowed human skull clenching a rotting rabbit carcass in its jaws.

“Your father must be proud, despite the years you’ve lived among humans you remember your people’s tongue.” Calgemo said.

“Huh? What?”

“The cobold tongue, since you understand the shaman so well.”

“We grasp the meaning behind mortal speech. The particular choice of sounds does not matter.” Shadow Hicussaw said.

“My demon’s the spirit of a cobold then.” Hicussaw chuckled.

“Oh how amused we are to lie about our nature.” Shadow Hicussaw said dryly. He had experienced a mortal sense of humour in past possessions, but he considered the concept perverse and stupid.

“Can’t the shaman detect your demon?” Calgemo asked.

“No. He can’t tell the difference between a demon and what’s beneath us. The evil of these ruins hides me from magickers of low skill.”

“Magickers of low skill?” Calgemo whistled, “Compared to you, an expert magicker, my buddy boy?”

“We are indeed.” Shadow Hicussaw commented.

“My demon is, I guess that means I am too.” Hicussaw admitted.

“If there were fewer, we could take the buggers.” Calgemo contemplated their predicament.

“Put your sword away Cal. They look a fierce bunch.”

“We fought our way through four levels of Bart Castle’s dungeons packed with guards, abominations and Master Alders.” Calgemo reminded him, “I’d say we could handle ourselves in a battle.”

“He has a point. Maybe we can.” Hicussaw addressed his demonic self.

“We should not deceive ourself.” Shadow Hicussaw said, “Dungeon guards are trained to torture not fight. The Dungeon Master’s creations, their minds were broken in their making, their attacks were unthinking and countered easily.”

Hicussaw relayed the message. “We had numbers, a ghost and a demon on our side. Many dungeon guards had only ever used a weapon on prisoners in chains. You saw those wretched abominations, knowing to swing a weapon was the closest most of them got to holding a thought.”

“Sounds like escaping Bart’s dungeons was a stroll on your father’s farm.” Calgemo flashed sarcasm.

“No, it was a nightmare.” Hicussaw said, “But these cobolds have hunted men and beasts their whole lives. What are the chances we two and Jams could thrash ten veteran warriors and a killer shaman?”

“I’d bet an army of murder clones would push a battle in our favour.”

Shadow Hicussaw said, “Our bond has grown closer, our clones can now do more than stand and whisper, they can move and strike. Yet we lack the power to cast an army of shadows.”

“I can conjure maybe one or two strong enough to fight.” Hicussaw informed the orangehead.

“Your demon needs more time to recover eh? He spent himself at first touch and now we’re all waiting for him to try again. Is this how Tellyn feels when you two share a night?”

The next moment, the smirk vanished from Calgemo’s face as he ducked a flying knife, “Sweet unicorn farts!”

“The cobolds say you’re not funny.” Hicussaw remarked.

“Let’s get back to Jams and Tellyn, shall we? Maybe Jams met the evil of these ruins, cut a deal with it and found us another secret passage.” Calgemo thrust his sword in the shabby sheath on his belt. He had fashioned the sheath himself from the leather of his dungeon guard vest and some sewing thread Tellyn had packed.

The duo retreated deeper into the ruins, staying alert for fresh projectiles hurled their way. Hicussaw paused to pick up the knife he had labelled criticism of Calgemo’s joke. It was no more than a sharpened fragment of stone lashed to a wooden handle. Jinxed thing could wound or kill an unarmoured man as surely as a blade of metal could.

“You keeping that?” Calgemo asked.

“Yes.” Hicussaw decided.

“The dagger you used to slay Master Alders was forged steel. Against its memory, a pointy bit of rock fares poorly.”

“The dagger I had then is gone.”

“Hmm, I wonder how you lost such an excellent piece of Krit craftsmanship. A cunning thief must have stolen it.”

Jinx me, we’re repeating this argument, the bluehead sighed. “Cal, Potch had the greater need, Jams took his crossbow and ammunition. Potch must endure a dangerous journey too.”

Shadow Hicussaw said, “We should have destroyed our enemy when the woman Tellyn knocked him down. Instead we armed him.”

Calgemo reminded, “The same crossbow and bolts Potch wanted to shoot us with.”

“Stitches on his chest, same as you. Master Alders had him a lot longer. His torment must have broken him, he wasn’t making the best decisions.”

“Not just him, you chose wrong too. Tellyn prepared three backpacks for *you*, for you and your friends. You let Potch walk away carrying one.”

“Our supplies will last till we reach Pank Hit. Tellyn did a good job.”

“Why help the bugger who tried to murder us?”

“If everybody helped each other, nobody would need help. Potch helped us defeat Alders and escape Bart’s dungeons. We’re free because of the convicts who died for us. Potch deserved us helping him in turn, we didn’t. Don’t you remember, you were keen to leave the man bleeding to death. Suppose you were him, would you trust you Cal?”

“Jinx me for caring about my buddy boys, Hicussaw, not the jinxbait who threatened them.”

“You know where I stand on this matter. Why bring it up, Calgemo?”

“The foolish hope you’ll listen to me and won’t repeat your mistake.” Calgemo thought he got the last word.

Shadow Hicussaw snatched the opportunity, “Our friend is wise. Foes we show mercy shall merely wait to strike us in our weakest moment.”

Hicussaw strove to beat them both. He addressed his demon, “Nobody can surprise us. Forget hurting us. We see everything.”

“Ah, we love our power.” Shadow Hicussaw won.

The twosome came upon Tellyn and Jams. Jams stood a nervous guard, clutching his loaded crossbow, as a kneeling Tellyn rummaged in the band’s knapsacks. Redhead and backpacks rested on a blanket she had spread over the ground, covering the mess of weathered stone tiles sprouting grass through their cracks.

“The cobolds are screaming bloody murder.” Jams said, “Are they leaving now?”

Tellyn looked up, ““Is that their dagger? Did you fight them?”

“They’re not going anywhere.” Calgemo disappointed Jams.

“We didn’t fight. They did chuck a blade at us though.” Hicussaw waved the stone knife.

“Will they attack?” Tellyn enquired, “You said they wouldn’t dare disturb this place.”

“No, our furry foes won’t bother us here.” Hicussaw replied, “The wicked secrets of these ancient rocks frightens the buggers.”

“Won’t convince them to give up their human prey, do I reckon right?” Tellyn asked.

“They should tire of us, just give them a few hours.” Hicussaw offered hopefully.

“We’re stuck here then.” Tellyn relaxed to a seated position, folding her legs under her. She drew her hands from the knapsacks, producing bread and jerked beef. “At least we’re safe. Grab your lunch, boys.”

Hicussaw tucked his new knife in his belt. He accepted the food, “I’m sorry I can’t defeat the cobolds. Another day and I might gain the power.”

“It’s fine.” Calgemo collected his meal, “We can have ourselves an afternoon nap. There’s a luxury outlaws on the run don’t often get.”

“Calgemo’s not being an idiot this time, Hicussaw.” Tellyn said cheerfully, “You’ve got your demon under control and his magic’s kept us from harm. We’re doing great.”

Jams slung the crossbow over his shoulder, he did not take his bread and beef. “The cobolds have gathered at a single spot right? They’re not watching every side of these ruins. Maybe we can sneak out to the woods.”

“Across open ground? They’d chase us down on a sniff of our scent.” Calgemo chewed a strip of dried meat.

Jams wasn’t discouraged, “We have to be sneakier. Think you two should see this. Tellyn, tell them.”

Hicussaw was confused, “See what?”

“Jams and I had a look around before hunger made me unpack.” Tellyn grinned, “We found something creepy. Check if it’s safe to use.”

Hicussaw and Calgemo exchanged curious glances. Calgemo bit off a piece of bread and devoured it, “Alright Jams, lead us.”

The orangehead and the bluehead did not follow Jams far, he halted where a pair of partially tumbled walls joined to form a corner. Nestled in the corner was a descending

stairway. Broken stone steps slipped into the blinding black depths.

Said Jams, “Hic, your demon ought to scout this passage. We could discover an escape tunnel taking us past the cobolds.”

Calgemo whistled, “Didn’t I predict our Jams a kurn and a half ago, Hicussaw?”

“Bless your wimmy!” Hicussaw acknowledged, “I believe he hasn’t negotiated a deal yet.”

“Jams, have you been talking to the dead again?” Calgemo pressed, “Perhaps you’ve wagged tongues with creatures and beings of a rather inhuman nature?”

It was Jams’ turn to be confused, “No.”

“Glad to hear.” Hicussaw said.

“What do you see down these steps?” Jams resumed his original thread of conversation.

“Hold your tongue, Hic.” Calgemo intervened, “Jams, jinx the demon, you do understand this crughole you’ve wandered upon is a terrible idea. How are *you* not afraid of the deep dark?”

“I’m not a coward!” Jams declared, “I, I just thought exploring alone was stupid when we have demonic vision. And mine is a brilliant idea! My secret escape tunnel saved us in Bart Castle!”

Calgemo spoke, “Heed my wisdom, my castle bred bumpkin of a buddy boy. As crazy as it seems, there comes a time in every young bugger’s life when he must face his adventures without his favourite supernatural companion. Common sense will save you in the moments demons, ghosts and the like aren’t feeling too friendly.”

“What are you ranting about?” Jams demanded, he tried a forceful tone but it emerged quite a bit uncertain.

“Not sticking yourself in the unknown underground is no coward’s choice. It’s smart.” Calgemo said, “Ponder a moment, Jams. Hicussaw’s demon warned us of great evil dwelling in these ruins. Unless you’re a mighty hero, not the jinxed stable hands we are, the local den of evil isn’t the safest path to take.”

“Den of evil? How are you calling this a den of evil? It could be the cellars ancient folk stashed their hooch in.”

“Whatever this place was, civilization abandoned it for ages. A good hiding hole never stays empty long. Pick your nasty guess the manner and number of wicked things sheltering below us now.”

“Oh.” Jams said. He wasn’t entirely convinced though, “Hic, does Calgemo speak wisely?”

“He does. My demon senses the evil.” Hicussaw confirmed, “Going down there would prove the cobolds right to not hunt us inside the ruins.”

Hicussaw’s party was alive thanks to his shadow sight. Somehow his petty human vision had expanded to include things seen from even a hint of shade anywhere over an octar of distance. While the demon still had to describe details, Hicussaw could see shapes. Shutting his eyes did not block the sights. Each day the range of his demonic perception grew. At present, Hicussaw was ignoring the vague forms lurking deep under the shoes and boots of his party, spread over several levels of what could have been actual dungeons once.

“Enough prattling, my buddy boys!” Calgemo clapped Jams on the shoulder, “Your lunch won’t eat itself, Jams.”

The trio returned to Tellyn. She paused eating her meal to ask, “What happened?”

“Nothing useful.” Hicussaw replied.

“It looked scary to me too. We can’t leave with the cobolds outside. May as well make our wait comfortable.” Tellyn patted the blanket, “Sit and eat.”

Jams finally took the bread and meat from Tellyn. Calgemo and Jams settled next to the redhead on her blanket. Hicussaw preferred his arse resting upon the waist high top of a broken wall near their picnic spot.

“What if, there’s a secret tunnel?” Jams asserted through a mouthful of half chewed food.

“Sweet unicorn farts!” Calgemo swallowed his meat so he could whistle, “You almost died to a crossbow shot in Bart’s dungeons. Do you want to do that again?”

“No.” Jams said, “I want us to survive. Doesn’t seem to me those cobolds will depart soon. Our foes can see how the den of evil here isn’t hurting us, they could tire of holding off. Do we just wait and hope they don’t attack?”

“Jams, I’ll take care of it.” Hicussaw assured him, “They can’t kill me. I’ll draw them away

from you three and shadow walk, teleport, back. If we're not waiting, I can shadow walk us in twos to the forest."

"We should spend mana lightly." Shadow Hicussaw advised, "Consider the forces we must oppose to protect our companions, cobold and worse. Should a battle be forced, as we are in the habit of risking ourself for others, our full strength may be needed."

"It's better none of us risk a fight, Hicussaw." Tellyn spoke, "Even with a demon, a bad twist of luck could kill us."

"I agree, we should give the cobolds more time to relent." Hicussaw said.

"We have one healing potion, the one Potch tried to steal." Calgemo scratched his chest, "I'm not keeping my stitches and sparing our last potion just to waste the jinxed thing. We fight only when there's no room to run."

Calgemo continued, "Jams, your fears don't help us survive. Your magic would however."

"Huh?" Jams was baffled, "I'm not a magicker!"

"You conjured thunder orbs. You spoke to the dead, and the dead listened. Hicussaw and I heard the Mistress of Spells call you an unpolished gem of magic."

"I can't cast spells. That night, those thunder orbs, I don't know what happened. My ghost did most of the talking."

Tellyn had been told of the events, she offered a different perspective. "Didn't have to be Jams, Hicussaw's demon was there. Jams hasn't showed a spark of magic since."

"Hmm." Calgemo contemplated, "Jams, give Tellyn your weapon. Next time you're in trouble, yell 'crossbow' and let's see if thunder strikes again."

"I'm not giving up my crossbow. I'd be defenceless, I'd get wounded. You said we can't squander our one healing pot!"

"Your aim won't defend yourself or anybody else. Tellyn could shoot a charging cobold, rush him and swing her pan faster than it takes you to miss the same bugger lying asleep."

The blackhead had no reply to counter Calgemo.

Hicussaw thought the conversation could benefit from a less serious diversion. He posed

a question to his companions, “What do you do when you trip on a horse shoe?”

The three sane individuals simply stared at him.

“Watch out for the horse in his socks!” Hicussaw supplied.

“The gods weep!” Tellyn rolled her eyes.

“We are dumb this birth.” Shadow Hicussaw sighed.

“I’m with you, Hic.” Calgemo said, “Horses can kick a fierce punishment. Make it a horse who’s mastered the many uses of socks, I’d cower in a privy.”

“The uses of socks?” Tellyn had thus far learnt nothing of Calgemo’s strong beliefs regarding the versatility and utility of foot warmers.

His lunch finished, Calgemo seized the opportunity to educate the redhead. “I’ve got a fine pair of socks ready to demonstrate, thanks to your packing for our great escape.”

Jams appeared relieved he was no longer the centre of attention. He tore and ate his bread in a silence he alone perceived to be awkward.

Hicussaw observed his lover, she seemed to glow as the sun caressed her skin, her eyes and lips laughing as Calgemo stripped off his footwear and foot warmers to instruct her on uses one to six. Her bruises, though fading, left traces of discolour visible, this evidence of his own evil stirred guilt in Hicussaw’s heart.

“Bringing her is our mistake, supposing we truly do not wish her hurt.” Shadow Hicussaw spoke.

“Are you threatening my sweetheart?” Hicussaw felt the cold anger of his mind’s voice.

“We have lived better love than yours for Tellyn. She was your first in Bart Castle but a sense of duty, not passion, would make her the last in your life.”

“You sent the shadow to fetch her. She’s here because of you.”

“We expected her to reject us, even betray us to the castle’s soldiers. Thus would she break our bond with her.”

“What? You planned her treachery ruining our escape?”

“When we dispatched the messenger shade, we had the mana to walk the shadow roads to

safety.”

“Shadow walk and abandon my friends...you understand neither love nor loyalty.”

“We are aware of both, and their breaking points. The strength of the woman Tellyn’s courage and faith in her man surprised us, we shall regret harming her.”

“My gentle love would never knowingly hurt Tellyn, it’s you. You claim to not be a malicious monster, except you’re always calling me to desert my buddies and sweetheart. You insist you’ll attack her.”

“We think ourself gentle and kind. Yet we also speak honestly at moments.”

This private discussion was interrupted. Jams had gotten to his feet and approached the bluehead, “Hello Hicussaw.”

“Jams.”

“Are you, um, free? Sorry to bother you. I noticed you had your ‘demon chat time’ face on.”

“My ears always welcome the voice of a friend.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask. Can your demon sense the magic I possess?”

“Mortal sorcerers lack the raw magical nature of the supernatural. We cannot detect their presence save by the spells they cast and the enchantments they wield.” Shadow Hicussaw said.

“My demon perceives nothing special about you.” Hicussaw said to Jams.

“Then Calgemo’s wrong! I’m an ordinary mortal man?”

Hicussaw shrugged, “I saw you cast a thunder orb like it was magic. Remember, Bart Castle’s Mistress of Spells named the thing a Thunder Burst spell.”

“Maybe the demon is behind it, Tellyn thought so. Would you put the question to your demon?”

“When you worked your magic, the demon was trapped. I was holding his prison, an enchanted heirloom of Lord Doneg. Your thunder orb stunned me, made me drop the item. The fall broke his prison open.”

Hicussaw witnessed the colour drain from Jams' face. "I-I'm to blame for a sha-shadow de-demon possessing you?" Jams stammered, "I un-unleashed the demon!"

"Er, yes. Didn't you understand this?"

"I-I'm the cause, of our suf-suffering! I ruined our lives!"

Hicussaw sought to alleviate Jams' distress, "No, you're not. We were doomed to the dungeons the moment Barnemit caught us robbing the rana."

A horrified Jams continued contemplating the consequences of his actions, "My deed damned you."

Hicussaw pointed to the reality of their situation, "I'd say your Thunder Burst saved us. My demon and your ghost won our freedom. Demonic power has protected us beyond Bart's walls."

Jams visibly calmed. Hicussaw added, "Besides, Calgemo is the first reason we're fleeing to Pank Hit under the threat of death and torture."

Before Hicussaw's eyes, Jams' expression of shame morphed into anger as the bluehead's sentence sank in. "How the jinx did I forget?" Jams raised his voice, "Calgemo! You jinxbait!"

"Eh?" Calgemo threw attention towards them, his left hand whirling a rock-in-the-sock.

Hicussaw regretted his words, he tried to prevent a renewed argument. "Jams, for the sake of a peaceful kurn, don't start."

"What?" Calgemo ceased swinging the sock.

"You dumb twerp, your heirloom thievery brought us to this crughole besieged by cobolds in the untamed wilderness." Jams persisted.

"The fault is mine but aren't we past such a squabble?"

"Kryter's the son! You've been treating me something awful and you dare call your mistakes forgiven?"

"Yours is a problem of our survival today not our troubles yesterday!" Calgemo defended himself.

"Boys!" Tellyn's face and tone reflected her irritation.

“Who are they?” Hicussaw wondered aloud.

“Who?” Jams and Calgemo asked in unison.

“Must be another horse riddle.” Tellyn deduced, “Hic, your jesting merely gives their bickering a break, doesn’t end it.”

“My shadow senses reveal archers leaving the forest.” Hicussaw informed his companions.

Silence enjoyed a sudden dominion over the party of kitchen maid and stable hands. Jams toppled its reign with a softly voiced thought, “The cobolds summoned allies. They plan to storm the ruins.”

“These newcomers are human.” Hicussaw shoved his remaining food down his throat.

“So is Barnemit. Doesn’t mean we trust them.” Calgemo stated.

Jams unslung his crossbow, “Run or fight?”

The rock-in-a-sock Calgemo stuffed into a pocket of his trousers. He slipped his shoes back onto his feet, both socked and unsocked. The orangehead stood, “We take a look.”

“Quietly.” Hicussaw concurred, “Tellyn, prepare to move fast.”

The redhead consumed the last of her meal, while scooping up the blanket and packing their knapsacks. Hicussaw and his buddy boys hastened to the edge of the ruins, gradually reducing speed and picking up stealth. As they reached the scene of the action, the trio crouched behind heaps of mossy rubble, concealing themselves the best they could and lifting their heads for the view.

The cobolds had turned from their prey camping in the ancient ruins. Their growling and posturing was now directed at six scruffy humans, four bearded men and two women, clad in hooded cloaks, tunics and trousers of green and brown. The humans’ hands held short sized flatbows, one feathered arrow nocked upon their bowstrings and ready to let fly plus two between the fingers of the drawing hand. The newly arrived band made a steady cautious advance, eroding the distance to the cobold warriors.

“Free Folk.” Calgemo pronounced.

Jams had a query, “Hic, do you know if they know we’re here?”

“Not a clue.” said Hicussaw.

“The Free Folk could be hunting our cobolds, chasing them off their territory.” Calgemo opined.

“Suppose the cobolds charge the buggers,” Jams placed his crossbow in a position to shoot the furred warriors, “should we help the archers?”

“This isn’t our battle unless somebody attacks us.” Hicussaw said.

“Who the jinx are you?” Calgemo demanded of the bluehead.

“What?” Hicussaw reacted the only way he could.

“You’re not the real Hicussaw.” Calgemo insisted, “Am I talking to the demon? Have you conquered your host’s will, demon of Hicussaw?”

“Why the jinx are you babbling nonsense?” Hicussaw flashed his annoyance.

“If everybody helped each other, nobody would need help.” Jams quoted.

“Hic, you’re usually eager to get us killed over your pisswet hero’s desire to save people.” Calgemo reminded.

Hicussaw explained his stance, “Cobolds, Free Folk. Save them? You dolts think they need our help. This lot are skilled, experienced fighters. My demon detects both parties bear enchanted items. The cobolds have a magicker on their side.”

A bowwoman shouted out, her voice artfully mimicked the yowling of her furry foes.

“Humans can speak the cobold tongue?” Calgemo was impressed.

“Maybe the Free Folk aren’t human anymore.” Jams muttered, “I’ve heard the stories.”

The cobolds were replying. A conversation yapped back and forth, sounding very much like the chatter of enthusiastic dogs to the ears of the former stable hands. The archers ceased moving forward. Free Folk and cobolds held their ground.

“Hicussaw Demonhost, you can understand their speech?” Calgemo asked.

“She’s asking the cobolds who they’re hunting and why they’ve gathered outside the ruins.”

“The gods weep! Are the cobolds giving us away?” Jams enquired.

“Don’t seem to be. They say, she should be glad they’re not hunting Free Folk today.” Hicussaw replied.

“How are the Free Folk handling it?” Calgemo asked.

“She gave them a choice, leave or fight.” Hicussaw said, “She claims the Free Folk are guarding the ruins to prevent the escape of an ancient evil. She’s warning the cobolds they can’t linger, the Free Folk will attack if they try to stay.”

“The cobolds aren’t stupid.” Calgemo considered, “They know fighting six alert archers is going to cost them. There’s no cover near except the ruins they’re afraid of.”

“The archers have an advantage but that shaman can do terrible damage. If a battle occurs, even the winner will lose too many people.” Hicussaw said.

“Hope they wipe each other out.” Jams expressed.

“Us sharing the Free Folk’s race could concern the cobolds.” Calgemo reckoned, “The buggers might see a human trap, them caught between our band in the ruins and the archers in the open.”

The dialogue between cobold and Free Folk ended as the warriors and shaman began discussing amongst themselves in hushed tones. The shaman slammed his staff down on the grass a couple of times, no doubt emphasizing the point he was whining. An agreement was obviously reached when the cobolds strapped their weapons to their backs. Hicussaw and friends watched their would-be hunters drop to all fours and race across the green earth, disappearing into the tree line.

The negotiating archer shifted her gaze to the ruins. “Heads down!” Calgemo urged. The trio ducked beneath the top of the rubble.

In mildly accented Krit she called, “Hey ho! Anybody in there?”

“Jinx our fortune.” Jams abused.

“Speak softly.” Calgemo cautioned, “She mustn’t hear a suspect sound.”

The woman switched to Lolbol with a heavier accent, “We won’t hurt you, my friends. It isn’t safe behind those ancient rocks.”

“I don’t think she saw us.” Hicussaw said.

“What do we do, Hic?” Calgemo whispered.

“Can we ignore her?” Jams wondered, “We were doing it to the cobolds.”

She continued, “We followed human and cobold tracks to this evil place. Thought we’d lend our bows to a fight or loot the dead if we were too late to help.” she paused, “I see no human tracks returning to the forest. If you have wounded, we can tend to them.”

“Kryter’s the son!” Jams cussed, “No fooling her.”

“She’s lying.” Calgemo reasoned, “The Free Folk can’t have checked every rit of the grass already. They don’t know for sure. She seeks to trick us out of the ruins. The Free Folk could be frightened of the evil den here, just like the cobolds.”

“Not a word.” she mused, “I fear we must search the ruins for your corpses.”

The other five bowmen and woman stepped towards the remains of an accomplishment some long dead architect had laboured over years to build. From the shade of the trees, Hicussaw’s shadow sight observed the archers move.

“She has to be bluffing.” Calgemo insisted.

“Doesn’t look it to me.” Hicussaw said.

She spoke, “We would hate to be surprised. How horrible if we were startled into shooting someone who was no enemy of ours.”

Hicussaw raised his voice and his shoulders, standing erect. “We speak Krit fine.”

The Free Folk halted, their spokeswoman resumed in Hicussaw’s chosen language. “My name is Pralee, daughter of Pak. Who are you?”

The names she used were Krit though the style was foreign. The bluehead answered, “Hicussaw of Pank Hit.”

“Don’t tell them the truth.” Calgemo maintained a low tone that would not carry to Pralee, “They’ll sell us to the barons.”

“They’re humans who hate nobles enough to live in the wild.” Hicussaw whispered back, disputing the orangehead’s distrust.

“We tracked four of you.” Pralee stated.

Aloud Hicussaw said, “Yes. My buddy boys, introduce yourselves.”

“Calgemo of Brin Dank!” Calgemo jumped to his feet.

“Jams of Brin Dank!” Jams did the same.

Calgemo restrained himself from yelling: Sweet unicorn farts! Get your own fake name!

Hicussaw muttered, “Those won’t fool an idiot.”

“And the fourth?” Pralee asked, “Unexpected meetings often end in mistaken shootings.” Calgemo noticed the cobold talker’s grasp on her bow had not relaxed the slightest.

“Our fourth is packing up.” Hicussaw explained, “I expect her to join us once she’s done.”

“You’re either brave or stupid hiding where you are.” Pralee said, “I grew up around these parts. A great malice settled in the depths below before I was a kick in my mother’s womb.”

“We ran into nothing evil. Something did scare the cobolds off hunting us through the rocks though.” Hicussaw admitted.

“Their shaman didn’t wish to touch the dark magic he felt. Did any of you Krits sense it as well?”

“These Free Folk possess enchanted items capable of detecting magic.” Shadow Hicussaw informed his host. “However, they cannot determine the exact source of the magic strange to them. They may plot to counter our power, a wasted effort if their target is wrong. We can pretend Jams is the source.”

“Don’t mention my demon to these buggers. They might think me evil and attack.” Hicussaw whispered to his buddy boys.

“We’ve got a wizard.” Hicussaw addressed Pralee, “Me.”

“Brave it is.” Pralee decided.

Shadow Hicussaw shared a different opinion, “Stupid. To keep safe our companion, we endanger our ability to protect.”

Tellyn appearing a little distance behind the trio attracted Pralee’s attention. The redhead was wearing one knapsack and lugging the second. Seeing her three companions unconcealed, Tellyn did not bother adopting a stealthy approach. She asked pleasantly,

“Have we made friends with the local Free Folk then?”

“Yes. Tellyn of Brin Dank, meet Pralee, daughter of Pak.” Hicussaw lied about Tellyn’s name to impress upon her their group’s doubt of the Free Folk. Quieter he added, “Did you hear me, I’m a sorcerer, not possessed.”

“Got you.” Tellyn said softly. In a louder voice for the Free Folk she said, “Pralee, did your people get rid of the cobolds?”

“We gave them the message. They kindly choose to accept it.” Pralee replied.

“Thank you. You and your friends saved the lives of me and mine.” Tellyn said.

“A common courtesy.” Pralee’s smile did not reach her eyes, “Away from the shield of civilization, we ordinary humans must band together against the perils of this world.”

“Nobody to fight now. Take the bags, my buddy boys. It’s time we departed.” Hicussaw instructed his friends.

Jams slung his crossbow. He and Calgemo moved to relieve Tellyn of their backpacks. Weapons down, Hicussaw was offering a gesture of faith the Free Folk would not shoot.

“Hicussaw, what kind of sorcery do you practice?” Pralee enquired. Her bow remained a moment short of firing its arrow.

“Shadow spells.” Hicussaw answered.

“You’re getting me hot.”

“Thank you?” Hicussaw managed to say. Was Pralee flirting? She wasn’t bad looking. Hold the horses! Why the jinx had he thanked her! How was Tellyn reacting? Positioned at an angle to view both the Free Folk and Tellyn, he thought he saw the expression on the redhead’s face freeze. Her eyes seemed fixed on Pralee.

“Mortal mating instincts have confused us across many lifetimes.” Shadow Hicussaw sighed.

Pralee lowered her bow and returned her arrows to the quiver on her belt. She reached within her tunic, pulling out a grass necklace dangling a tiny wooden box. A single rune was carved onto the box. “My amulet warms to magic. Yours is powerful.”

“Me? I lack the strength to battle eleven cobold manhunters. I needed you to rescue my party.” Hicussaw dismissed her praise. Did he sound fond of Pralee? No, right? Yes? Kryter’s the son! Tellyn had switched her gaze to him. Was she angry? He couldn’t read her face. The gods weep!

Pralee tucked her wood pendant back in, “Are you casting a spell at this moment? Or do you wear any enchantments?”

“Can she recognize the difference between the supernatural and a mortal magicker?” Hicussaw asked his demon.

“We can only guess.” Shadow Hicussaw shrugged.

Pralee’s comrades were still alert and prepared to unleash a hail of fletched death. Hicussaw played safe, “No items, a spell of shadow sight. Grants me vision through shadows, not very clear but I can see trouble coming.”

“Oh I bet you can.” Pralee’s eyes laughed as her lips performed a naughty smile, “A spell you maintain without rest. You *are* strong.”

“He has those who love and care for him protecting him too.” Tellyn spoke up. Free of the backpacks Jams and Calgemo now bore, she took her place beside Hicussaw.

“Of course.” Pralee acknowledged, her playful smile lingered. “Where are you good folk headed? My people know this wild country, we can give you words of guidance, perhaps more than words if it’s on our way.”

Did ‘more than words’ suggest something romantic? Jinx the thought! Hicussaw cussed. The question demanded an answer. The question being whether he could trust the Free Folk not to betray his band of outlaws.

“Trusting others is the cause of treachery.” Shadow Hicussaw stated wisely.

“Nobody asked you.” Hicussaw reminded his demon.

Pralee’s attitude had felt hostile initially, but could the bluehead blame her? She was protecting her own party, while Hicussaw endangered his over heroism. In the untamed spaces civilization ignored, mortals with little in common teamed up to survive. Pralee had spoken of this necessity. She and her archers had driven off the cobolds. The Free Folk’s help could make the journey to Pank Hit significantly easier.

On the other hand, Hicussaw was certain Pralee would safeguard her people at the cost of his. Shouldn't he do the same? He didn't want to lose her assistance either. The bluehead picked the name of a village down the road in his childhood, the next civilized stop after Pank Hit in a not dissimilar direction.

"Sod Tin." Hicussaw announced.

Said Pralee, "Then you're going seven days south. Our own course lies between these ruins and Sod Tin. Why not join us for the night? We offer you fresh meat and the defence of our bows."

"A very generous deal to us, unfair to you." Tellyn spoke, "How do you benefit?"

"I would never cut an unfair deal." Pralee replied, "Your party has courage, arms and great magic. We'd all be safer together at least a little while. Don't forget we Free Folk are human, we would enjoy your company and the chance to hear news of the civilized world."

"Would you share our company the whole journey to Sod Tin?" Tellyn asked.

"Sadly no." Pralee sounded regretful, "Our paths part beyond a day's walk. We have no interest near Sod Tin."

"We'd be twerps to reject her." Calgemo whispered.

"Could use their bows guarding our backs." Jams' mutter concurred.

"Tellyn?" Hicussaw enquired softly.

"It's our best choice." the redhead consented in a low voice.

"Alright." Hicussaw told Pralee, "We four Krits camp with the Free Folk tonight."

"Great!" Pralee beamed at him, "Troop, stand a welcome for our fellow humans!"

Hicussaw's party stepped outside the ruins that had sheltered them from enemies. Free Folk spread their positions around the Krit outlaws. Pralee stuck close to the centre, alongside Hicussaw. Their enlarged band passed over the grasses of the open meadow. There was a brief halt upon entering the woods. Two of Pralee's men sprang up a tree in a quick and light manner bringing squirrels to mind. Into the waiting arms of their comrades, the climbers dropped knapsacks and a dead deer with hooves trussed for convenient carrying. Supplies and the day's kill had been hoisted onto the branches, a

precaution against theft, prior to engaging the cobolds.

The loose formation of archers and outlaws continued their march through the trees and brush. It was hard to spot the short bow wielding archers, they blended into the background of the forest almost perfectly. Calgemo supposed enchanted cloaks were responsible.

Tweets and hoots flitted between the Free Folk. Jams would not have believed it human communication had he not witnessed the lips of a Bowman work such a sound. The realization made him twitch at every stray noise of the wild, uncertain whether he was listening to a warning about foes, a call to murder the Krits or the genuine chatter of critters.

Hicussaw was impressed by the silent tread of the Free Folk. He remarked to his demon, "Never do they place a foot wrong yet they cover ground surprisingly fast. I'd slow to a crawl were I to check my shoes weren't crushing twigs and leaves."

Shadow Hicussaw said, "Our allies can read the movement of strangers in a blade of grass bent under heel or hoof. These signs they are careful not to leave themselves. We have seen this skill in another life."

Hicussaw spoke, "They steer clear of troublesome beasts on the prowl so well I could swear they had shadow sight too."

Pralee interrupted the internal discussion, "Hicussaw. Three from Brin Dank and you from Pank Hit, travelling off road to Sod Tin. Your party's story must be an interesting one, I would love to hear it."

"I've got a story for your pretty ears." Calgemo seized the initiative. Hicussaw did not object, he allowed his pace to falter. Tellyn matched her lover, the twosome falling behind Calgemo and Pralee.

The orangehead let loose his imagination, spinning the tale Pralee merited but not the truth she desired. He recounted his humble beginning, as a thief stalking the streets of Brin Dank. Daring to rob a wizard from some bumpkin village, he was caught in the act. Hicussaw gave Calgemo a choice, serve him or be handed to the druzhinniks.

The orangehead helped his new master recruit an awkward blackhead who always kept a crossbow loaded, and a redhead who could charm her way past the toughest

guards. Among the cases Hicussaw's band were hired to handle was the driving of boggarts out of a noblewoman's bedroom. Calgemo received her thanks in the very same bed he had fought the fae monsters under. Their most heroic deed was the defeat of an evil priest attempting a sacrifice, of his own followers, to summon a monstrous god. The four adventurers were currently employed by Lord Anrieslem, dispatched on a secret quest to Sod Tin, disguised as peasant farm hands seeking paying work. Was Pralee entertained? Definitely. Was she convinced Calgemo's narrative conveyed the facts? Unlikely.

Beneath the stars of the night, the forest had become a stage. Beasts, birds and bugs were loudly enacting the drama of life. There was scampering, fluttering, chirping, hooting, squeaking and growling. Predators chased and prey fled.

The humans had just devoured a delectable dinner of venison, flesh of the deer, cooked with forest herbs for flavour. Tellyn had helped, the preparation before the eating, learning a trick or two not taught in the kitchen of Bart Castle. A bonfire flung wavering light between the trees, inside the reaches of its illumination men and women sat or leaned against a trunk, animal skin vessels full of moonshine liquor easing the flow of conversation.

"Do your folk possess the power of talking to the beasts and birds?" Jams took a swig and gave his shinesskin to Mir, daughter of Massaw, the second female archer of the group.

She answered, "Honestly, I can't say. How much do mortals and lesser creatures understand of each other?"

"I think, I don't think critters are dumb, I mean they're quite stupid yes, but they're not rock-brained dumb."

Mir swallowed from the skin, "They have a sort of 'woods smarts', a working cleverness. They hunt, they hide, raise their offspring, speak in a fashion."

"Exactly. It can't all be...mindless instincts."

"They've got souls. It's a rare sight but I've seen the ghost of a squirrel."

Tog, son of Terik, spoke up. "I saw a battle of phantoms once, a boar and an axeman. The man kills the boar, dies of his wounds moments later. Their ghostly corpses fade, the two

spirits spawn unharmed on their feet, and the whole fight starts again.”

“Beast ghosts are uncommon,” Jams tried to explain, “because dumb creatures, they’ve got better instincts, they accept death, they understand it’s natural. Many mortals resist the end, insist their death was unfair, afraid of the unknown afterlife.”

“You were saying beasts aren’t creatures of instinct.” Mir offered Tog the shinesskin.

“No-yes.” Jams strove to clarify, “There’s a simple kind of mind. Their instincts are stronger than mortals I’m sure, no one disagrees, could be they feel more, as less thinking is crugging their heads.”

“Like the mind of a mortal baby.” Tog made an inspired declaration.

“Maybe.” Jams pondered while Tog drank.

“Do they have heart?” Mir wondered, “Do they love? Hate?”

“They must.” Tog passed the skin to Jams, “If their souls can turn into ghosts.”

Separate from Jams and company, Pralee was conducting her own line of inquiry. “Lords Doneg and Anrieslem remain opposed? I thought the marriage of Doneg’s sister ended their conflict years ago.”

Tellyn sipped of the moonshine in a skin, “A marriage arranged by the present Lord Doneg’s father, not the lord himself.”

“The rana has not given up his family’s contempt of the Anrieslems.”

“I’ve heard rumours. The Baron of Brin Dank paid a visit to Bart Castle, seeking a drink for friendship’s sake. Lord Doneg gave no warning, he attacked Lord Anrieslem.”

“What happened? Were either of the lords hurt?”

“Their guardsmen were ready for war. Lord Anrieslem saved Tarfelm, he kept his temper and departed Bart peacefully.”

“Isn’t the younger Anrieslem brother attending the king’s court in Osis Granem?” Pralee took the skin from Tellyn.

“He’s a cuirassier. On griffinback he fought under the king’s command, against the Duss, what was it, three years ago. He’s said to be a close friend of King Jorwyd.”

“Lord Doneg knows the House of Anrieslem is gaining favour with the king.” Pralee paused to imbibe the alcohol, “King Jorwyd might support the Anrieslems should they try to seize the rana’s title.”

“The Anrieslems first need to make a good claim Lord Doneg is a poor ruler, failing his duties. I don’t see a cause they could use.”

“A vampyre ravaging the province is a potent cause.” Pralee mused.

“A vampyre?” Tellyn was shocked, “What a curious idea. I remember, Brin Dank might have a blood drinker problem. Some children disappeared. It’s a mess on Anrieslem territory, not a concern of Lord Doneg’s.”

Pralee handed the shineskin to Tellyn, “It is now.”

“No, it isn’t.” Tellyn frowned, “I haven’t hear-” Her eyes widened, “The monster left Brin Dank? Kryter’s the son! You’re lying!”

“I wish I was.” Pralee said, “I didn’t learn of this abomination in Brin Dank. We Free Folk have been tracking a vampyre and his horde across the long octars of Tarfelm. His power is growing on heks of virgin blood.”

The skin of moonshine Tellyn clutched unheeded, she no longer desired to drink.

Calgemo was pestering Nyphy, son of Narf. “Is it true the Free Folk have secret names and a tongue of their invention, which they don’t reveal to foreigners?”

“If it’s secret, why would I tell you?” Nyphy lifted the mouth of a shineskin to his lips for several gulps.

“Hmm, you’re right, it’s a problem.” Calgemo acknowledged. He proposed a solution, “Were I to become Free Folk. You could teach me your ways then?”

“Er, somebody older and wiser could.”

“How would a man sick and weary of the civilized life go about joining the Free Folk?”

“Be born to a mother of the Free Folk.” Nyphy shoved the skin into the orangehead’s hands. “Here, drink.”

Calgemo did not immediately. He preferred talking, “Ah, yes. Imagine it’s a bit too late to do the birth thing. What would my best hope be?”

“Present yourself to our elders. Tell them you cannot abide another moment in the villages and towns and cities, the unnatural life you were trapped in sickens you. Confess your heart craves freedom; to roam the wild and sleep where and when your feet tire, to forage and hunt your need owing no tax to those who boast of ruling men and owning land. Convince them you grasp the foolishness of great buildings time will reduce to great ruins, while the beauty of the forests endures forever, as it has been since the world began.”

The orangehead had listened patiently, “I do this and I’m in, I’m one of you people?”

Nyphy eyed him suspiciously, “Pray to the gods that our elders do not judge you false.”

“How would they punish a man they find unworthy?” Calgemo persisted.

“A lucky man would be sold to a slave trader. An unlucky man would be fed to the wolves.”

“And should they decide my zeal merits their approval?”

“Spend the next ten years following the will and lessons of our mothers and fathers, no different from any newborn child of the Free Folk.”

Calgemo put the shinskin to his mouth and drank deeply. He lowered the skin to speak, “Do I get an enchanted cloak and a fine bow before or after the ten years?”

Hicussaw sat alone, nestled at the base of a tree, swilling moonshine and saying nothing. Dimly aware of the mortals and their inebriated interactions, he felt them a great distance away. He was lost in the vision shadow sight had bestowed upon him. For humans, darkness was usually a strange, blinding, frightful experience. Hicussaw possessed, or was possessed by, a perspective quite the opposite. He was witnessing a vast stretch of the world around him, not from the view of the heavens above but of the shade amidst the creatures, plants and rocks. The shadow of the night outlined to him every speck and form, every flutter and step. His mind wrestled with a living, moving, bustling portrait of the world; lines of lighter black dividing the dark into shapes he could roughly recognize...a bug, a bush, a bird, a man.

“Enjoying the moonshine eh?” Eswol, son of Edane, approached the bluehead.

“Hello Eswol.” Hicussaw focused a little on what his human eyes and ears perceived.

“You seem a brooding drunk.” Eswol said.

“His face is reason to brood.” Shadow Hicussaw said, “Let him know.”

Hicussaw sighed inside his head, “You told me alcohol doesn’t affect you.”

“It does not. Our mortal flesh is weak. Once we have bonded completely, we will be immune to intoxicants.”

“What you’re saying is, this could be my last drink?”

“Ridiculous, no force can stop us drinking our heart’s fill.”

“Could this be the last time the drinking helps?”

“Given our particular choice of words, yes.”

“Don’t care to talk, huh?” Eswol prodded.

“I’ve a terrible urge to drown my dark side.” Hicussaw replied.

“Hey! Do we mean an essential part of ourself we have come to cherish for its power and wisdom?” Shadow Hicussaw protested.

“I hear you brother.” Eswol said, “Tonight, I want to too.”

“Where is *his* demon?” Shadow Hicussaw scoffed.

“Why?” Hicussaw asked Eswol.

“We remember our mistakes.” Eswol wrapped his cloak tighter about himself, “The things we did wrong because we thought they were right. Can you pass the skin, brother?”

“He can get his own.” Shadow Hicussaw denied the request.

“This is good hooch.” Hicussaw extended his shinskin to Eswol.

“Thanks!” Eswol snuck an arm out of his cloak to accept it, “Brewed this batch myself.”

“He can *brew* his own!” Shadow Hicussaw was displeased.

“You did?” Hicussaw was interested.

“Ancient Free Folk technique.” Eswol elaborated, “The brew is opened to the moon every night it’s fermenting, captures the taste of moon beams dancing in the woods.”

“Moonlight tastes awful then.” Shadow Hicussaw commented, “His method sounds magical. Is this alchemy?”

“Explains the name.” Hicussaw said.

“Moonshine.” Eswol drank of the skin.

“What are the ingredients?” Hicussaw enquired.

“Sorry brother. Can’t be sharing such treasured secrets of the Free Folk.”

“There’s no sorcery is there?” Hicussaw pressed his query, “This isn’t a potion?”

Eswol chuckled, “Some would vow a moon goddess blesses the brew. I think it’s just the cool night air of the forest.”

“Friends!” Pralee gently, yet firmly, requested the attention of the gathering. “The hours wear on. We Free Folk must retire.”

“Sweet unicorn farts!” Calgemo ejaculated, “You buggers live a soldier’s discipline.”

Pralee’s gaze swung towards the orangehead, “Indeed we do, Calgemo of Brin Dank. Dwelling in the wild is building your home in enemy territory. No one is welcome here, man and beast fight to survive.”

“We have Hicussaw’s mighty magic, six of your archers, one of ours and myself, a proven swordsman.” Calgemo did not bother raising himself off the ground, “What danger ought we to fear?”

Tellyn groaned, “Don’t waste your breath on his prattling.” She stood up, “My friends and I thank you Free Folk. The food, drink and protection you provided us has been most kind.”

“It’s our delight, Tellyn.” Pralee said, “The night has ended for my people. You, our guests, are free to sleep when you wish. Finish your share of the moonshine. Hurry not, but be sure to put out the fire after you’re done. We rise at the dawn, and shall wake you before we part.”

Eswol returned the skin to Hicussaw, “Been fun trading words, my new wizard friend.”

“I thought your folk were free. Can’t disobey your mistress, can you?” Hicussaw questioned.

“No leader commands us.” Eswol answered, “We choose to keep our people’s rules.”

“They’re slaves to tradition!” Shadow Hicussaw sneered.

Hicussaw did not pursue the subject. Instead he offered a compliment, “You brewed the finest moonshine I ever drank.”

“Also the only moonshine you’ve tasted.” Eswol reminded, “Still, I accept your praise, it is no lie.”

“We rest in the branches on high.” Pralee said, “Should you need us, give a cry. Our bows will aid you.”

Pralee and her comrades retrieved their short bows which they had kept within an arm’s easy reach. Ever prepared to fire, they had not taken off the thumb rings and bracers shielding their thumbs and forearms against the snap of a bowstring launching an arrow. The Free Folk climbed the trees, disappearing into the canopy overhead. For a moment, mingling with the foliage they vanished from Hicussaw’s vision, human and demonic. Then his shadow sight detected their bodies weighing down the branches. Those cloaks did conceal them rather well.

“Just the four of us again.” Jams struggled to his feet. He shook his shinskin, “Mine’s near empty, how’s yours?”

Tellyn moved closer to the campfire. The light fell upon her face, and the bluehead’s eyes met the redhead’s. Hicussaw announced, “Tellyn and I would like a spot of privacy tonight.”

“Right ho!” Calgemo boomed, “I understand. You two haven’t, haven’t, how do I say this politely...diddled your wimmy and quinch sore since Bart Castle. This is the safest we’ve been in nights, go ahead my buddy boy and chummy girl.”

“Of course.” Jams staggered.

Hicussaw and Tellyn withdrew from the brightness of the flames. They went several trees beyond Hicussaw’s friends’ line of sight.

“Stay where we can hear you!” Calgemo called, “Do things I wouldn’t dare! Unleash your little demon, Hicussaw!”

“Um, won’t the Free Folk watch?” Jams pointed a finger upwards.

“I doubt they’d care.” Calgemo said.

“Who? The Free Folk or Hic and Tellyn.”

“Both. The past you stumbled across our buddy boy and his sweetheart in the stables. Didn’t Hic try to quietly talk you out while he thrust on?”

“Yes.” Jams visited fuzzy old memories, “I was drunk.”

“As you are now, come here.” the orangehead patted the earth next to him, “Hic has Tellyn and you have me Jams.”

“I got you.” Jams said hesitantly.

“I give you the love your mother never could.”

Jams took lurching steps to Calgemo and attempted to sit down, instead he collapsed onto his side and elbows. He said, “Two of us now. All those drunken nights we stable ha-”

“Sshh!” Calgemo whispered, “Remember the bunch of lies we fed Pralee. Don’t be loud about Bart.”

“Not five moments ago, didn’t you speak of me, Hic and Tellyn in the stables?”

Calgemo continued the low tone, “The way I told it, the story could have happened in any stable of Brin Dank.”

“Oh.” Jams collected his limbs and hip quiver, shifting into a more comfortable position.

“I wonder if it’s true. The tales of the cobold mothers. They give birth to litters. The babies are born biting. Girls and boys, their battle decides who suckles the mother’s teat and survives the hour.”

“Hold your pisswet tongue. Stop spewing the rubbish your fae brain swims in.” Calgemo resumed speaking normally, “Jams, I’ve got something important you should listen to. Jinx me, you could say I owe you these words.”

Jams asked, “What is it?”

“I’ve been far too hard on you.”

“No, Cal, I’m a twerp.” Jams confessed, “This crazy adventure of ours, I don’t know what the jinx I’m doing.”

“You’re not to blame, Jams.”

“I’m not?”

“Your birth ruined you.” Calgemo’s voice dipped, “You grew to manhood, your whole life stuck behind Bart’s walls, and that’s over. We’re running free in the big bad world you’re discovering for the first time. We aren’t going back.”

Jams allowed a moment of silence. He said, “My birthday was three months to this night.”

“I fixed you a celebration, didn’t I?” Calgemo grinned.

“Pork and mead. Bowlykd played his flute.”

“Fun night.” Calgemo recalled fondly, “Proved who loves you, my buddy boy.”

Jams spoke softly, “Nineteen years. Nineteen years, my eyes haven’t seen this much... grass, trees and bushes, octar upon octar, day after day. A world I, I had no idea I was missing, I’m glad to explore it with you and Hicussaw.”

“I’m happy having these fantastic adventures with you Jams.” Calgemo looked it too.

“I wish I was better.”

Calgemo swigged moonshine, “Eh, how?”

“I don’t want to be a coward, this helpless idiot who needs rescuing.”

“You’re alright Jams. You do you.”

“*Me* isn’t good enough.”

“It’s not, but what can you do? Be someone else? You’d fail there. We can’t change who we are.”

“Why not?”

“Hicussaw tried to kill his hero’s passion. He shut his mouth, worked his job, and cherished his woman. He couldn’t bear fitting in long, could he? He broke. The desire he believed was gone, brought us to our predicament today, where travelling the wild country is our safest choice.”

“Your thieving plot dragged us here kicking and screaming, you fae-brained pisswet

jinxbait.” Jams whispered.

Calgemo laughed, “I suppose it did.”

The orangehead lowered his voice, “I’m sorry I crugged us, Jams. We were losing our years treating steeds kinder and fancier than anyone’s even thought of us. I was going to win three jinxed stable hands a future, buy us commonborn buggers a place at the table of good living. I was certain, we had found our escape from wretched peasantry and the pisswet stables of Bart Castle.”

“You destroyed our lives Calgemo.” Jams said quietly, “You blind fool, you forgot *we* cared about us, *we* were gentle to our buddy boys. Barnemit’s bullying was our toughest problem. Not dying is the height of our hope now.”

Calgemo’s voice rose to ordinary levels, “I couldn’t change the scoundrel I am.”

Jams drained his shineskin.

“I’m proud of you.” Calgemo stated.

“On account of what?”

“You did your part to preserve our pitiful selves. Bless your wimmy! Exactly the sort of shenanigans I’d get up to. Centuries worth of ghostly buggers, they had to know the little details of the dungeons, every path in and out. Jinx me, I didn’t think to ask them before Master Alders cut me open.”

“My ghost.” Jams realized.

“You made allies of the dead.”

“One friend. Among a crowd of spiteful dead.”

“You persuaded a ghost to lend you his escape plan, my buddy boy, no easy deed.”

“Wasn’t the great feat you’re picturing it was.” Jams said, “I was lost inside my head, drowning in a storm of spirits.”

“Aren’t we all?” Calgemo drank.

“I wept. I cried; Help me! Please, somebody help me! I got lucky somebody answered. Of the mob seeking to control my mind, a single soul craved freedom. He offered me the deal.”

“How a dead man joined our party doesn’t matter. The end of it was your ghost and his secret tunnel saved us.” Calgemo placed the skin in Jams’ grasp, “An excellent reason to revel.”

“The ghost turning zombie won the battle against Master Alders.” Jams reminisced.

“Your brilliant idea defeated the vile villain barring our escape. Jams Ghostfriend I call you!” Calgemo clapped his friend’s shoulder, “Enjoy a drink on me!”

“I’m no hero.” Jams gulped moonshine, “You saved my life when the abomination shot me. Risked the convicts’ anger to heal my wound.”

“Hicussaw fetched the potions. He did the pouring too, I just held the stuff really.” Calgemo said.

“Kryter’s the son! Hicussaw was right!”

Said Calgemo, “The gods weep! My instinct tells me he isn’t.”

“If everybody helped each other, nobody would need help. It’s true! We three came to our own rescue. We helped each other, we didn’t need help anymore because together we saved us!”

Calgemo wasn’t confident he comprehended Jams’ inebriated musing, he definitely knew the appropriate reaction however. The orangehead seized the shinskin, “We celebrate with another drink!”

Perhaps two kurns earlier, Tellyn was telling Hicussaw: “Here’s fine. Not too far, the fire still reaches us, provides what light the moon and stars can’t push through the branches.”

Hicussaw would rather they stopped when his ears no longer picked up the less than quiet conversation of Calgemo and Jams, but he recognized Tellyn’s lack of shadow sight and her desire to avoid the dark.

He advised, “Speak low and my buddies shouldn’t catch a word to comment on. Wish they’d keep their voices down too.”

“Did you hear of the vampyre?” Tellyn asked, “Pralee said one stalks Tarfelm.”

Hicussaw was unconcerned. “Our shadow powers beat the strongest abominations blood magic can craft.”

“Preach!” Shadow Hicussaw cheered, “The fools of this world shall regret bending us off!”

Hicussaw’s arse dropped to the earth, his back he rested upon the stout trunk behind him.

Tellyn was less assured of their security. “Our shadow?”

The bluehead stared at her a moment. Flatly he said, “You know.”

“How much did you drink tonight, Hicussaw?”

Hicussaw gave his reply a measure of thought, “Been a while. Last taste of hooch I had was wine, the night I left you to rescue Calgemo and Jams from their fae-brained caper.” The hint of a smile twisted his lips, “I’m crafting a drunken occasion I won’t hate remembering.”

“Want more alcohol to fuel your memories?” she tossed him her skin.

“We should chug the lot!” Shadow Hicussaw urged, “Chug! Chug! Chug!”

“Not thirsty?” Hicussaw hefted the gifted vessel. “This is over half full.”

“Can’t stomach another drop. Tales of blood drinkers on a rampage do not bring a merry beat to my heart.” Tellyn explained.

“I could help you forget Pralee’s horrible talk and put you in a pleasurable mood.” Hicussaw grinned mischievously.

“Hic, we can’t share love’s caress on this journey. I didn’t think I’d be coming, didn’t pack the usual to resist your seed.”

“Poor foresight, Tell. What if I met a willing girl during my travels?”

Tellyn knelt in front of Hicussaw. Her palms on his thighs, she leaned forward a kiss short of his face. The redhead whispered, “A girl kind enough to diddle a man possessed by a demon?”

“Guess not.” Hicussaw acknowledged, “Only you could cherish me despite the deeds I’ve wrought.”

“Our love for ourself is far greater than hers!” Shadow Hicussaw protested.

“Now is the worst time to risk a child.” Tellyn’s voice fell to a tone Hicussaw considered seductively soft, “What with us being outlaws and your demonic corruption.”

“I’m imagining, the excitement of an adventure rouses your passion.”

“My love isn’t the fevered fantasy of a rutting storyteller.” Tellyn dismissed the notion.

“Mine might be.” Hicussaw’s black gaze penetrated the green depths of her eyes, “Not even a demon could stop me dreaming of your touch through slumber and wakefulness.”

Tellyn said nothing. She slipped into Hicussaw’s lap. The redhead rested her head across his shoulder, her brow brushing his cheek. The heat of her body warmed him flesh and soul. He could smell her breath...moonshine. Or was that him? They had both been drinking. She turned her face up to his. Eyes drooped shut as they kissed.

Hicussaw and Tellyn. They were ‘late children’. Krit tradition dictated the first son inherited the family home, herd, farm, title...any property of value while the younger sons had to labour under the eldest or earn their living elsewhere. The ‘best’ daughters married such an heir or were betrothed to marry one by sixteen years of age, certainly eighteen was the longest they could delay, though noblewomen often pushed it to twenty. The girls who did not attach themselves quickly to a firstborn man, they hunted paying jobs and a husband capable of providing for a wife and offspring. Of course, the daughters of barons could afford idle luxury while awaiting a suitable knight or nobleman.

Hicussaw’s mind wandered to the day he arrived at the gates of Lord Doneg’s fortress. Beholding the towers and grounds of Bart Castle, the bag on his back containing a single book and a change of clothes, the bluehead stepped forth. Those answering his queries pointed him to the Master of the Stable, thus did he present himself and request the humble position of stable hand.

Master Iksub was not particularly welcoming, “Bugger like you believes working the stables of Bart is something you can just walk in and ask for?”

“I haven’t heard a different way to go about it.” Hicussaw replied.

“There isn’t.” Iksub grunted, “Do you carry a letter from a baron or a druzhinnik officer promising you a job here? Are you hiding or being rewarded?”

“No, my master, I am a simple peasant seeking a chance to labour in Tarfelm’s best

stables.”

“At least you respect your betters. Wish I could say the same of the other youngsters these days.” Iksub softened, “Why should I hire you? Are you merely trying your luck?”

“I’ve tended the horses of Lord Lansam. Jepkel of Pank Hit, Master of the Stable, signed me a letter praising my skills.” Hicussaw produced the document from a pocket.

Iksub read the paper, “Master Jepkel writes this well?”

“Lord Lansam’s scribe did the writing.”

“Pank Hit.” Iksub folded the letter, “Master Jepkel’s word is hardly a concern to the rana’s Stable Master. You might be enough for a bumpkin village. Are you up to the quality Lord Doneg demands of his servants?”

“I am prepared to prove myself.” Hicussaw accepted the document Iksub was returning.

“See that big pile of hay there? And I don’t mean the orangehead who’s less useful.” Iksub indicated bales of straw lying outside the entrance of a stable. A stable hand, on a break Hicussaw guessed, reclined lazily atop them.

“Yes my master.”

“Take a bale or two behind the doors and cover the floor of the third stall on your left. You have a kurn to finish this deed.”

Hicussaw did not hesitate. He dumped his knapsack, picked up a bale and rushed inside the stable, much to the amusement of the orange haired stable hand. Master Iksub followed the bluehead. Hicussaw flung open the door of his assigned stall, stashed the straw on the clean ground, and ventured out to grab a second bale and a pitchfork.

“You’re clever, my master, but your trick question won’t fool me.” Hicussaw said. Both bales ready on the stall floor, he wielded the tines of his pitchfork to pull free the twine binding the straw.

“What?” Iksub was surprised.

“It’s not hay.” Hicussaw’s pitchfork began spreading an even layer of straw over the stall floor.

“Explain yourself.” Iksub demanded.

“Hay is green, grass or grain on the stalks, to feed the steeds. Straw has no grain, it’s comfortable bedding, mixing in a few days of dung makes it good manure.”

“Your letter reads true. I don’t have to waste time giving you lessons.” Iksub maintained a gruff tone, “Why did you leave Pank Hit?”

“Money.” an honest Hicussaw answered, “Lord Lansam divides too little pay amongst too many stable hands.”

“You thought Bart Castle would have fewer stable hands and higher wages.”

“I was told Lord Doneg’s Master of the Stable was fearsome strict, rejecting all men unfit to serve the knights and guests of the rana.” His straw strewing task complete, Hicussaw planted the pitchfork proudly beside himself. “Done, my master.”

Iksub wasn’t, “I’ve got a Lorrان dire goat a Skoss nobleman rode in upon. Let’s see you groom such a filthy monster of a mount. Maybe you’re worth the price you claim.”

“Ah, we had forsaken our destiny already.” Shadow Hicussaw observed.

“Quit it.” Hicussaw ordered within his mind.

“Interesting. As we kiss the woman Tellyn, we remember not a tender moment she and us shared, but the time we sacrificed our boyhood dream for a stable hand’s career.”

Their lips parted. Hicussaw took the opportunity to tease his sweetheart, “Pralee could have a seed ward on her. Should we make a request?”

Tellyn opened her eyes, “She chased off the cobolds. We don’t need her rescuing our diddling too.”

Hicussaw put his shinesskin to Tellyn’s mouth. The redhead swallowed. Tilting the container, he poured the remainder of its liquor down her throat. Hicussaw discarded the empty skin.

They cuddled. Her softness curled around his strength. Arms and legs were delightfully tangled. Every few moments she would squirm against the cold and him in a pleasing manner. Hicussaw uncorked the vessel he had received from Tellyn. The twosome wove sweet memory, gentle hope and simmering passion into charming sentences conveying nothing and everything. A fuzzy warmth called love melted their hearts and mixed the hot mess together blissfully. Short kisses punctuated their

conversation, longer lulls allowed sips of moonshine while they lay in their embrace contented.

Unfortunately for Tellyn, she was not the sole partner on Hicussaw's mind.

"We are aware this affair will end in disaster." Shadow Hicussaw sighed.

Hicussaw granted his demon responses when kissing and drinking paused his words to Tellyn. "Your lies won't sway me."

"We are not the man she offered her days and nights to. The sooner we accept this, the easier we shall endure the course of our future."

"I haven't changed. You're possessing me. And I'm not going to let you hurt her."

"We were only ever pretending to be her heart's desire. Her loyalty is her greatest strength and her worst foolishness. She knew it was wise to desert us yet she clings to our deception. The life and love she dreams of can never be."

"You're raving nonsense."

"If everybody helped each other, nobody would need help."

"Don't you dare judge me, demon! How could a powerless peasant help anybody? Even the pisswet school bully I could not defeat. Protecting myself was a challenge! Trying to save someone else...I spread the trouble to more people...endangered me and my friends."

"He who helps others, ends up needing help himself."

"Jinx you! For whom should I risk my peace? The twerps won't brave harsh words to aid a neighbour. Folk do no kindness and expect none, because who would risk being crushed under another's burden? This sort of thinking is why nobody helps in the first place! A heartless circle of stupidity and cowardice! Learnt my lesson, taking care of me was Hicussaw of Pank Hit's duty, nothing more."

Hicussaw stopped to address Tellyn. A handful of moments later, he resumed his silent speech. "I refused to linger, miserable, where my heart was broken. I sought a fresh dream, the life I saw my father had, one my friends spoke of wanting. Made them happy, should work for me too. A job to put food on my plate and shoes on my feet, a woman I could love, my seed in her womb spawning children who'd bear names we picked. Couldn't save the world but I could save myself from it. Was I so selfish?"

“We betrayed our destiny. We sought to deny who we were. We became a falsehood the woman Tellyn was looking to love.”

“What destiny? A boy’s passion is not a grown man’s purpose.”

“Few learn their purpose in childhood. We did. Fate brought our younger half to Bart Castle, defended us against Barnemit, led us to the heirloom imprisoning our older half. Our destiny united us.”

“Reaching you was a mistake. My dumb decision to follow Calgemo’s plan. Releasing you was an accident. Escaping Bart Castle was something rare in my life, luck. Lucky I found you. You empower me to perform a hero’s deeds.”

“We call it luck, some would call it destiny. A fateful tale written before we were born, choosing us to fulfil its story.”

“What about your destiny, demon?”

“Our destiny is shared. We had no goals when we were shadow alone. We are forever, and walk all paths of fate in due time. Our younger half provides us ambition.”

“I want the family and future I promised Tellyn.”

“That hope was always a lie. The true love of our heart we discovered in Pank Hit. No creature of flesh and blood we cherished, rather our heroic nature and a destiny of great deeds.”

“Tellyn is the first woman I gave my heart and wimmy. I’ve hardened to girls as a boy in Pank Hit, flirted with a few, kissed a couple. They don’t compare to Tellyn, she’s different, she’s my soul mate.”

“A very human idea, soul mate. Do we believe ourself mortal still?”

Hicussaw preferred not to reply, Shadow Hicussaw understood.

Calgemo gulped moonshine, “Can’t forget the jinxbait’s face or his scream.”

“Who?” Jams was confused.

“My murder victim. Never took a life till I laid a blade on him.”

“Er, didn’t we slaughter a dungeon full of guardsmen and abominations?” Jams whispered.

“The one our bloody rampage of an escape started on. The man we stole the keys off. He threw a lantern at Hicussaw.”

Jams presented wisdom. “Wasn’t it, a satyr king, a real mad dog killer he was, who said, you can remember a single face but not a thousand?”

“I reckon you’re right. The mob we slew after my first kill, they don’t bother me much, I was protecting myself.” Calgemo passed Jams the skin, “You know what’s terrible, Jams?”

“No, my buddy boy, tell me. Share your pain.”

“Didn’t have to murder the bugger. Hicussaw was holding him. Could’ve kicked him in the twig and berries, would’ve stopped his fighting nicely. Instead I stabbed his belly and slit his throat.”

“Sweet unicorn farts! Your crotch kick didn’t occur to me either.” Jams drank.

“I had a weapon and I used it. Didn’t think, I just...acted.”

“If it makes you feel better, most men would be glad of a dagger to the neck over a foot to the man-sack.”

“That’s an idiot’s speech perfect for a stage comedy.”

“Yes,” Jams conceded, “the thought sounds stupid aloud.”

“Maybe I got the instinct to slay. Is there such a thing? I’m a scoundrel, a dirty thieving rogue I’ll confess. But a killer? The kind of fiend who destroys lives on a whim, not in defence?”

“The three of us are killers now.” Jams stated solemnly.

“Have you taken a life yourself?” Calgemo kept his voice down, “I’m sure I didn’t see you stomp a bug through the dungeons. You did try though, the effort counts I guess?”

“Hey! My ghost-”

“Your dead friend possessing a corpse is not you ending a life by your own hand.”

“I can’t find a good weapon.” Jams complained, “None of them work proper in my hands.”

“No, Jams.” Calgemo squeezed Jams’ shoulder, “You’re the problem. I doubt you’d even hit me at a dagger’s distance with a sword.”

The blackhead ignored the orangehead. “The Free Folk’s bows, they look quicker to load than this self-cocking crossbow of mine.” Jams pointed to the crossbow he had propped against a tree nearby, “The cobolds weren’t going to survive their own charge, the Free Folk would’ve shot them down too fast. We ought to get a pair of those bows.”

“No, we don’t want a short bow.” Calgemo said.

“Why the jinx wouldn’t we?”

“Yours is point and shoot. Theirs needs training to use. There’s a lot to learn, the techniques of, real archery. How to nock an arrow on the bowstring, draw the bow, carry your ammunition in the draw hand, hold the entire jinxed affair steady while you aim. Last I checked, we’ve neither the practice in our past, nor the time for it in our present. Stick to crossbows Jams, you miss plenty enough already.”

Calgemo snatched the shinskin out of Jams’ grasp, “You should thank the gods you never met your father.”

“The gods weep! Where did this spring from?”

“My father’s last words to me.”

“This story again?” Jams groaned.

“Shut your hooch swilling mouth! It’s my time to whine!”

“Don’t come back, he said.” Calgemo spoke softly, “Rob the rana and be executed, or die cleaning horse dung, I don’t care. Your mother must think you’re safe, to soothe her heart I’m saving you. I thank the gods your brothers and sisters aren’t disappointments like you, your mother still has children she can be proud to call her children. The druzhinniks you sold the rebel letter for petty copper, I had to pay them solid silver for a letter of merit. Bought you a job in Bart Castle. Never show your face in this town again.”

“Have your drink so I can take mine. It’ll help me bear listening to you.”

Calgemo handed the skin to Jams. “I need a piss.”

The orangehead pulled himself to his feet. He stumbled a few steps, regained his sense of balance and confidently strode behind a tree.

“Can’t you go farther? I don’t wish the sound of your pissing soiling my ears.” Jams said.

Calgemo would have replied ‘enjoy my merry tune!’ and attempted drunkenly matching his whistling to his stream of urine. Would have, had he not found himself staring at a curious pair, a strange wild man and a member of the Free Folk.

The man was hairy and half naked. An unshaven, unkempt, stinking mess. Calgemo was certain unwashed days on the run had left his own scent no better. Tellyn’s thoughtful inclusion of a shaving blade in their provisions stopped her friends becoming too uncivilized. The wild man was furred below the waist, due to animal hide trousers and boots, not himself, Calgemo gratefully observed in the light of moon and bonfire filtering through branches and sneaking around tree trunks respectively.

“I didn’t notice you come down.” Calgemo told the cloaked back facing him, “Who’s your friend? Is this his usual raiment or did I catch you two sharing a tender moment?”

The Free Folk ignored the orangehead. Calgemo heard Pralee’s voice address the stranger, “Do you accept? Or would you like to watch them another kurn?”

“Grandfather Belo will knock loose my fangs should their blood lack enough moonshine. He favours a particular flavour.”

“Fine.” Pralee half turned towards Calgemo, the orangehead thought he could recognize her in the poor illumination. “You can explain your wait to this one.”

“No, these will do.” the wild man yielded.

“Four. We are no longer in your debt.” Pralee said.

“Agreed.” the wild man accepted.

“Who’s Grandfather Belo?” Calgemo asked, “Who are you?”

“The grandfather is my father. I am Father Tumpil.” the wild man yanked off his boots, followed swiftly by hopping out of his trousers.

“Who are you talking to?” Jams called.

“I think you should be wearing more clothes, not less.” Calgemo advised, “Tonight’s quite cold, though I guess all that hair warms you fairly.”

“Don’t want to ruin my stuff.” Tumpil grunted.

Pralee scampered up the tree she and her guest had used to conceal themselves quietly. “Where are you going?” Calgemo asked.

Father Tumpil began convulsing. A guttural grunt accompanied every tremor. His body twisted and contorted. Tumpil’s not inconsiderable muscles bulged further and his coat of dark hair grew denser, covering every last rit of him.

“Werewolf!” Calgemo shouted, his hand flying to the sword on his belt, fortunately he had not removed his weapon.

“What the jinx are you screaming?” yelled Jams a tree and a few bushes away, “I’m not falling for your fae-brained jokes. You can’t scare me!”

“Get your crossbow!” Calgemo called, “Start shooting!”

In the barest light, Calgemo watched a nose and jaw merge into a snout, ears stretch to points and fingers sprout claws. The wild stranger was swelling to twice the size Calgemo had first seen him. Even alcohol could not convince the orangehead he was capable of beating a werewolf in a fair fight.

Charge. He had to do it, seize the offensive initiative before the monster completed the transformation. Calgemo’s sole hope was to keep the beastman on the defensive, prevent his foe from thinking about attacking, maybe then the shape shifter wouldn’t kill him the very next instant.

Sword drawn, Calgemo rushed the man becoming a wolf. “Eat steel, you dog diddler!”

Hicussaw did not miss the cries of Calgemo and Jams. Neither did Tellyn. She lifted her head, “Is he jesting?”

“We’re surrounded!” Shadow Hicussaw screamed into the deepest recesses of his host’s consciousness.

“Griffins shit on my head! *You’re* panicking?” Hicussaw tried to focus his shadow sight, he distinguished the suspected lycanthropes moving amidst the forest of plants and critters. They felt wrong, too big, wolves walking in the manner of men or men dwelling in the shape of a wolf. How many? Hicussaw struggled to count the shadowy silhouettes. Four? Five? Six?

“You didn’t warn me? How did they get so close?” Hicussaw demanded of his demon. He

gently but quickly untied his limbs from a frightened and confused Tellyn.

Replied Shadow Hicussaw, “The moonshine befuddled us! We did not-”

“Jinx us! We weren’t alert!” Hicussaw stood shouting, “The woods are full of them! Pralee! We’re under attack!”

“I was afraid of vampyres stalking us, not werewolves!” said the redhead.

Swinging and slashing, Calgemo pushed forward. His blade caught the beastman a couple of times. The orangehead was proving his Bart Castle boasts of handling hooch the best, practically immune to any adverse effects he was. He ignored his strikes landing a little left or right, above or below where he intended, or his feet being a tad too quick to depart the earth. He was winning, wasn’t he? Father Tumpil yelped and scrambled away from the sword clumsily, failing at jumps and tripping over his own limbs. Tumpil’s ungraceful evasion led the orangehead on an erratic course, almost in a circle. As his monstrous form filled out, his movements seemed surer, a fact which would have displeased a Calgemo sober enough to notice.

“The Free Folk betrayed us!” Calgemo announced to the night, “Pralee is feeding our arses to the werewolves!”

“What?” Hicussaw voiced his shock aloud. Tellyn paled in front of him.

Terror. Terror overwhelming. Jams didn’t understand how he could endure the hammer of his heart beating frantically within his chest. He imagined the essential organ would explode and kill him any moment now. Where’s my jinxed crossbow? The blackhead got up, staggered to his weapon and snatched it off the ground. He pivoted, madly seeking a target in the flickering illumination their campfire cast on the dark woods.

Jams spotted the object of his search, and immediately wished he hadn’t. The lycanthropic beast was huge, a mass of fur and muscle, teeth and claws. The outline of its form, hunched with arms ready to hit the ground and sprint on fours, triggered Jams’ instincts, inspiring the dread of a vicious predator. Sniffing the air, its nose aimed at the blackhead. The monster’s paw (or was it called a foot or hand? Jams wondered) stepped towards Jams. Jams reacted, the crossbow fired.

His bolt vanished into the forest, careful to avoid the vicinity of its target in case it

gave offense. Why would being drunk better his accuracy? His enemy growled. Jams reloaded and fired a second shot, equally ineffective as the first. Jams checked his quiver, five broadheads left, a chance of survival. Didn't matter though. Calgemo was right, Jams was a failure, the blackhead was the problem. Hitting a target the height and width of a monster was beyond him. The gods weep! He was a disgusting excuse for a man!

If his bolts did find their mark, would the shots of a lightweight crossbow deal serious damage to a werewolf? Could they penetrate the monster's thick furry hide to the muscle beneath? Jams did not assume his luck would allow it. Was there any point in him trying to stop the lycanthrope? Obviously he was incapable of the feat. Those snarling jaws advanced.

Jams stumbled back. The monster reared up on its hindlegs. Was it going to pounce? Kryter's the son! Sweet unicorn farts! Jams was alone. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to be here. He wanted all this fear and doom to just disappear.

"THUNDER ORB!" Jams screamed and threw his crossbow.

Calgemo heard the distinctive yell of his dear friend, and the deafening explosion of the spell. His back to the point of detonation, the orangehead saw the night shrouded world around him light up bright and white. Tumpil froze in the flash. The moment of absolute blindness faded, Calgemo's vision began piecing dark reality together. A shrill tinnitus blocked his hearing. He tottered, the inebriated spirit in him would not tolerate this assault on his senses, it believed sinking down and shutting off was a fitting response. Calgemo vehemently resisted the notion.

Both the orangehead and Tumpil had escaped the full effect of Jams' Thunder Burst. The Free Folk, observing a werewolf on the verge of murdering Jams, had unwillingly exposed themselves to this particular talent of the blackhead. They suffered his magical might. Pralee and several others came crashing down through the branches, hitting the ground hard.

They fell behind the orangehead, whose ears, still ringing from Jams' thunder, did not comprehend the noise of their descent. Without bothering to turn, Calgemo shouted, "Dog wag a tail! Knew you had it in you, Jams!" He could hardly hear his own voice.

Though the trees, bushes and Calgemo had provided Tumpil a sufficient shield against Jams' stunning magic, the boom and flash made the werewolf pause, he had no

idea what had happened. Calgemo seized his opportunity and struck again. Tumpil dodged far too easily and slipped into a predatory posture, animal energy coiled and ready to spring. Gone was the awkward movement, Tumpil's transformation had concluded, giving him the body of a monster and the motor control to wield it. Tumpil didn't appear to mind much the shallow cuts received previously from Calgemo.

It looked to the orangehead he could delay the werewolf's lethal attack no longer, "Jinx me."

Hicussaw leapt out of the darkness, landing on the shoulders of Father Tumpil. How had the bluehead maneuvered undetected to the rear of Tumpil? Calgemo asked himself. Had he teleported? Wait. Calgemo watched Tumpil thrash about wildly, a desperate effort to dislodge the bluehead who was hugging the werewolf's furry throat tight with arms and legs. Not a speck of white did Hicussaw's eyes show, Calgemo realized, could be the darkness obscuring them, or perhaps the supernatural black he remembered from Bart Castle had returned. Hicussaw would have been yelling something, not riding Tumpil in this creepy wordlessness. The bugger had to be a clone, a shadow of the original.

Calgemo did not waste his demon given reprieve. He retreated a few paces, the tinnitus afflicting his ears started clearing. Human moaning caused him to swing around. Calgemo discovered at his feet a dazed Pralee lifting herself from the earth. Her bow was nowhere near to see. More Free Folk lay groaning in the night, recovering beneath the trees they had roosted on. The orangehead was reminded of an earlier experience, the aftermath of a similar Thunder Burst a few days ago.

"Jams, you magnificent man! Bless your wimmy!" Calgemo's boot delivered his righteous strength to Pralee's ribs.

Pralee gasped her pain and collapsed. Calgemo sheathed his blade. Reaching down, he unfastened the strings binding Pralee's cloak about her neck. Swiftly donning the cloak, the orangehead pulled up his hood. "Pralee, daughter of Pak, you disappoint me. We could've been sweethearts. I regret we can't be friends. I do accept your gift, soothes the sting of your treachery it does."

Tellyn beheld Hicussaw locked inside his head. She was alone, abandoned in the werewolf infested night. Staring past her, he spoke not a word, no doubt communicating silently with the horrific being he hosted. Even the thunderclap and lightning flash did

not disturb him, though she admitted distance and trees had largely limited the potency of Jams' magic. Herself, she had been shocked yet her senses survived uncrippled. She was guessing this was the blackhead's doing and not some new evil. Tellyn wasn't certain whether talking to her lover was a good idea. Would he answer her voice? Would her interruption anger the demon?

"What else can we do?" Hicussaw enquired of the one sharing his soul. His shadow sight was roving over the dark landscape, picking out lycanthropic forms and casting clones to tackle them. "Can we shadow walk my friends free of these monsters?"

"We have the power, but intoxicated, it is difficult, to steady our steps on the shadow roads, to hold a particular direction."

"Would a shadow walk risk their lives?"

"We, we cannot be sure. Carrying a mortal through the shadows, whole and unharmed, is itself a feat we could fail presently. Should they be delivered alive, we might land them two or three octars away from this battle. We may drop them many rits high in the sky or on top of a werewolf. Suppose we leave a companion to rescue another, and a foe threaten the friend we left, shadow walking back to the exact spot could prove... challenging, until we sober."

"Is the hooch why half our clones were summoned off their marks? They lost a few moments running to their targets."

"Yes."

"We'll gather our party by hand." Hicussaw told his demon as he grabbed Tellyn's arm.

"Hicussaw, are you there?" she asked.

"I'm fine." Hicussaw assured the redhead, "No werewolf clan can hurt those I protect."

"Be careful we are not simply collecting bait under a single tree." Shadow Hicussaw said, "If the werewolves are drawn together, their strength in numbers shall overcome us. We must keep the enemy apart."

"The clones can do it. Stop our foes ganging up on us."

"How long? Our shadows will perish soon. They cannot match the lycanthropes."

"Doesn't matter. We can conjure an army."

“We are yet weak. The shadows we craft cost mana. A horde would drain us.”

“We’ve been saving mana for days. This is the hour to spend the jinxed stuff!”

“Do not forget, the Dungeon Master was defeated by Jams and Calgemo when we were depleted. Do we wish to protect our friends, or become a burden they must save?”

“What do we do then?” Hicussaw demanded, “We’re wasting time! Tell me and I’ll do it!”

Shadow Hicussaw carefully considered their circumstances before presenting a solution.

“We can try shadow walking only ourself.”

“No! You damned jinxbai-”

“Hic?” Tellyn broke into the thought conversation of Hicussaw and his demon.

“I’m sorry.” said Hicussaw to his sweetheart, “Let’s find our friends. We’re escaping this trap.”

Griffins shit on my head! Jams cursed. He had done it again. Cast a spell, the Thunder Burst responsible for Hicussaw’s state of possession. His sight began returning, forming the imagery of his surroundings. First, the bonfire and every leaf, stem, branch and trunk its warm light touched blurred into view. Hearing was impossible. Not a scream could pierce through the pisswet tinnitus. The alcohol took every horrible effect his magic had on a body and made them worse! His vision was shaking, or was he shaking? Couldn’t focus! Getting up was hard! He tried hoisting himself, managed a rit and slumped back down.

Not the whole way, Jams thought, just a bit. He heaved. On his palms and knees, Jams raised his gaze, taking in the result of the spell he had wrought.

He saw the werewolf, a fearsome monster eager to pounce mere moments before, now a whimpering and crawling heap. The beastman was not a lone example of such distress, other struggling figures were strewn across the shrubbery. Free Folk! Liars! Traitors! Pralee, Tog, Mir...the lot of them were villains. None could he trust, except his buddy boys and Tellyn.

Hicussaw arrived, stepping around the crumpled lycanthrope. “Hic!” the blackhead called, his tinkling ears caught nothing of it. Jams didn’t think Hicussaw would hear either. The bluehead slipped hands under the beastman’s snout and pulled up the great

canine head. His right arm he freed to place punches upon the nose and jaw.

Sweet unicorn farts! Jams was amazed Hicussaw had walked into a werewolf's face. The possessed bluehead dared handle the monster so roughly!

The blackhead attempted standing. Fallen, he was an easy target. Peril filled the night, soon he would need to run or dodge or hide! He pushed his body off the ground onto his feet. Success. His sense of balance in shambles, Jams barely prevented himself toppling over.

Jams observed a couple of Free Folk rise along with him, their unsteadiness matched his wobbling. The gods weep! Would they shoot? It seemed they didn't have their weapons, which was good, since the blackhead was unarmed and defenceless. He had 'lost' his crossbow in the direction of the monster Hicussaw was pummelling. The yelping werewolf accepted punishing kicks to his fur clad twig and berries. Had he a choice, Jams was sure the beastman would refuse them. Hicussaw was definitely offering no kindness to people wanting him dead tonight.

A second Hicussaw entered the scene. Jinx my eyes! Am I seeing double? Jams questioned. Is this an effect of my spell? The new Hicussaw held the crude dagger taken from the cobolds. Hicussaw Two joined the first at the incapacitated werewolf. A casual drag of his stone blade tore open the shape shifter's throat. Hicussaw One kicked the brute's groin a final time while the blood gushed. Jams spotted Tellyn behind the Hicussaws and their victim. The bonfire illuminated the redhead looking aghast. Something about how she gazed upon the Hicussaws suggested they were frightening her worse than hungry werewolves and treacherous archers. Jams couldn't understand why this would be the case.

Hicussaw Two wiped the bloody blade on his trouser leg. He turned towards Jams. Approaching his friend, Hicussaw was uttering sounds the blackhead had trouble discerning. Hicussaw appeared to be repeating a sentence. As the ringing faded and his sense of hearing improved, Jams could recognize the words: "Jams! Are you alright?" "Sha-shadow clo-clones!" Jams stammered a response. He pointed to Hicussaw One, "That's a clone! You conjured your army!"

"Not an army." the real Hicussaw said, "But I've spawned us a war band to wallop this werewolf party."

Jams was impressed. Being possessed had its benefits, especially in dire plights like drunkenly battling a lycanthrope ambush prepared by Free Folk. Shouldn't have surprised him of all people, hadn't a ghost of his intimate acquaintance rescued them once already? Hmm, was there an easy means of hosting a demon? Or did you always have to rob ancient heirlooms and escape from abomination ruled dungeons, hoping you got lucky?

"Where's Calgemo?" Hicussaw asked.

"Right here! He was pissing behind the..." Jams faltered, "I, um, I don't know."

Tellyn hurried to the duo. She spoke her concern, "Is Calgemo safe? Dally not, we grab him and run."

"Kryter's the son!" Jams ejaculated, "Do they never quit?"

The sources of his frustration were the Free Folk who had regained their senses. A dishevelled pair of them, having hastily retrieved their arms and snatched a handful of arrows from their quivers, were currently nocking a missile on their bows. Jams swore the half dazed Mir was setting her aim on him. Hicussaw did not detect a trace of the previous friendliness in Eswol's cold determined expression.

The bluehead couldn't predict whether his foes intended to launch their deadly shots or demand surrender. Were their targets Tellyn, Jams, himself or his clone standing silent over the werewolf corpse? He wasn't taking a chance on the lives of his lover and friend.

"Shoot us before we slay you, you jinxbaits!" Hicussaw charged the archers. The fake Hicussaw started forward to match the original.

Hicussaw had not covered half the distance when Eswol cried out and went down. His nocked arrow misfired into a bush. Surprise halted the Hicussaws. Mir spun towards her stricken comrade, her speedy reaction veteran druzhinniks would have praised. A flying rock hit the bowwoman's belly, she buckled, sending her own shot to the earth. It was then that Hicussaw, Jams and Tellyn perceived Calgemo amidst the Free Folk, cloaked in the manner of the enemy. The orangehead had quietly snuck up on everyone. Calgemo reached Mir. "How are we doing?" he grinned at his companions, simultaneously punching Mir in her mouth. She fell.

“You!” shouted an Eswol agony rendered writhing and helpless. His vocal burst of rage earned him Calgemo’s rapid return. “One crotch kick wasn’t enough, eh?” Calgemo asked, “No need to answer.”

“Cal, where’d you get the cloak?” Hicussaw enquired.

“Pralee’s been very generous. I feel bad about the beating I gave her.” Calgemo explained, “The enchantment on this raiment is a marvel. Nobody sees me if I don’t look busy.”

Calgemo stomped the moonshine brewer’s man-sack again. He bent low and pried the bow from Eswol’s yet unrelenting fingers. The poor man’s face was a silent and terrifying portrayal of pain. Next, the orangehead backtracked to the unconscious Mir and took the bow she had released.

“I guess we’re surviving this particular predicament.” Calgemo confidently stated.

“You were pissing! Did you finish?” Jams didn’t think his was an inappropriate question given the moment.

“Emptied my bladder on Pralee.” Calgemo confessed, “Where’s your crossbow?”

“Er, I chucked it.” Jams said, “To cast a spell, I think.”

“Ah, quite the sorcerer you’re becoming. Hold your thunder orbs, Jams, lest they stun your buddies too. Try these instead.” the orangehead tossed Mir’s and Eswol’s bows to Jams. The blackhead fumbled the catch, letting both drop.

“You said I couldn’t wield this kind of bow.” Jams complained.

“Your idea of archery is throwing the bow and working magic.” Calgemo said, “You’ll do fine.”

“What of the rest? The Free Folk I mean.” Tellyn referred to the two she and her friends could see searching for their weapons, now awkwardly paused under the gaze of Hicussaw and Calgemo, and the others unseen in the woods.

“Pralee’s bow I broke.” Calgemo said, “She won’t be bothering us.”

“Four here. Pralee’s down. One is missing.” Hicussaw checked his shadow sight, “Wait, I see him.”

“Do not waste mana on the Free Folk.” Shadow Hicussaw advised, “We will need much

for the lycanthropes.”

“*They* don’t know it.” Hicussaw told his demon.

“Free Folk!” Hicussaw called to the standing duo, “Flee in peace or I’ll set my shadows on you too.”

“Let us have our people!” Tog asserted bravely, “We will fight you no longer.”

“You buggers are begging mercy?” Calgemo whistled, “This crugged mess is your fault.”

“You lied to us! Two magickers! Spells we’ve never heard of mortals wielding!”

“Oh, we’re to blame then. Were we true weaklings, you’d have murdered us without a fuss. Sorry we ruined your plot!” Calgemo mocked.

“Exactly!” Tog said. Hicussaw wondered how much refreshing honesty this conversation owed to the influence of liquor. Tellyn thought the whole exchange was ridiculous.

“Friends! Friends! Don’t bicker.” Jams intervened, “The drink stirred our passion, the night darkened our mood, things got wild. Mistakes happened, not the first for any of us I’ll bet. Nobody here wants a fight to the death. We can move past this.”

“What?” Calgemo, Tog and everybody else present gawked at the blackhead.

“Huh?” Jams was shocked, “I was joking, like Calgemo.”

“Sounded serious, Jams.” Tellyn muttered helpfully, “Used the wrong voice.”

“Take your comrades and go!” Hicussaw barked, “We keep their bows, you two leave yours wherever the jinx they fell.”

Calgemo commenced a protest, “Hic, you can’t forgive folk serving you to werewolves for dinner!”

“Cal, we’re not murderers. What would we do with them?”

“Don’t let them walk free! They can stay, maybe, feed their beastly friends themselves! Buy us running time.”

Said Hicussaw, “No, Cal. We defend our lives yes, but given a choice, we don’t put another’s in danger.”

The unarmed bowman who was not Tog spoke up, “Thank you, Hicussaw of Pank Hit, we

Free Folk will not forget this debt.”

Jams pondered how awkward it would be to request a name of the man not Tog. He regretted paying poor attention, during the initial exchange of names with the Free Folk, and the numerous repetitions in casual conversation.

“A debt you will fulfil in drunk travellers?” Calgemo asked, “I listened to Pralee’s talk of paying your dues to the werewolves.”

“Whatever you wish of us, be it within our knowledge and skill, we won’t deny you.” Tog replied.

“Perfect! I’ve a terrible need for professionals in the business of luring folk to their doom.” Calgemo’s tone was sarcastic.

“Where are the shape shifters?” Tellyn raised important questions above the chatter.

Hicussaw frowned, “Two clones have been destroyed. The werewolves aren’t attacking us though, they’re helping each other against us.”

“Not us, but us?” Jams was understandably confused.

“We humans are being ignored.” Hicussaw clarified, “The lycanthropes are battling our shadow clones, the demon and me, us.”

“You’re a demon host!” Tog deduced. The term ‘horrified’ described his reaction.

The man not Tog looked apprehensive, afraid of what the demon may will upon him. Turning his body slightly, he placed a step towards the cover of the nearest tree. Eswol’s expression was still pained thanks to Calgemo’s double crotch kick. The bloody mouthed Mir lay senseless.

“Yes! It is proper to fear our great power!” Shadow Hicussaw roared in a fashion not sober. Only Hicussaw heard him of course.

Hicussaw glanced at the shadow of himself idling nonchalantly. “Join the fight.” the bluehead thought. The clone switched from a motionless silence to racing rather noisily through the dark underbrush.

“We might scare the jinxbaits off.” Calgemo proposed, “Their noses can smell the blood of their own you spilt.”

“It’s a miracle!” Jams declared, “We’re not going to die!”

“It’s the magic of a demon on our side.” Calgemo corrected him.

“What’s that?” Hicussaw’s loud query quietened the crowd.

“Thus far we fought young wolves, now we meet their elder.” Shadow Hicussaw said ominously.

“Something big looms on the edge of our shadow sight.” Hicussaw informed his companions, “A lycanthrope, the size of...three or four of the beastman I just slew.”

The cry was cold, a primal thing unheard in the streets of civilization, piercing through the forest and its denizens. Long and deep it ran, ancient and experienced, yet somehow youthful and strong, the baying of a timeless soul. Raw power given voice; requiring no words to express an utter indifference towards life of lesser passion, cowing these inferior creatures into awaiting their slaughter. For how else would such strength regard their weakness?

“The monster howls!” Jams trembled, “The gods weep!”

“Hicussaw Demonhost, the Merciful. You see a werewolf patriarch.” the man not Tog spoke, “The head of the clan hunting you tonight.”

“Grandfather Belo.” Calgemo remembered, “He enjoys his meat seasoned with moonshine.”

Jams’ face as he comprehended Calgemo’s words was an entertaining watch. “We’re his meat?” he asked.

“Tales of shape shifters say the oldest are the most dangerous.” Tellyn strained to contain the fear in her voice, “Years of magic seep into their flesh and bones, growing their power beyond younger lycanthropes. Boys, we should leave now.”

“Grandfather Belo is the werewolves’ fastest, strongest and toughest fighter. He could challenge even you, Hicussaw Demonhost.” Tog added.

“Is this Grandfather Belo a problem?” Hicussaw put forth to his demon.

“Very much so. Our bond has yet to complete. We do not have full use of our abilities.” Shadow Hicussaw replied.

“Calgemo, how do you know Belo?” Hicussaw enquired.

“Almost pissed on a beastman naming himself Father Tumpil. He mentioned Belo being a bully.” Calgemo answered.

“Our clones are spent.” Hicussaw deadpanned an update, “The werewolves are moving again. One sprints our way.”

Six pairs of eyes swept the woods around them, over dark spaces the bonfire’s light brought visibility to, hoping they would see the attack coming. Jams thought his heart stopped at the glimpse of a large wolfish shape dashing between trees. A moment later, the thump of fleshy bulk slamming into hard trunk struck their ears. It was followed by a furious rustling of leaf and branch. The unmistakable scream of a female human rent the night.

“Pralee was trying to hide high, he climbed after her.” Hicussaw reported, “He’s dragging her off.”

“Ha! Your monster buddies turned on you!” Jams laughed in relief he wasn’t dead.

“We owe the clan our lives!” Eswol gasped from the ground. “They will collect this debt!”

“Suits me.” Calgemo remarked, “Hic, I agree with Tellyn, let’s depart this wretched stretch of the woods. The Free Folk and werewolves deserve some time together.”

“I think Pralee’s being taken to Grandfather Belo. She’s resisting no more.” Hicussaw said.

“The lycanthropes are regrouping. We fear they plan to unite for an assault.” Shadow Hicussaw warned.

“We can’t escape the werewolves!” Nyphy emerged. He spread his arms wide, bow held unthreateningly in one hand, “I seek peace, my friends!”

“Welcome Nyphy, never expected you to fight.” Calgemo sneered, “Your folk don’t have the courage to shoot a man in the back. Need monsters to do it for you.”

“Nyphy! You stayed out of the beastmen’s jaws just fine.” Hicussaw countered the bowman’s statement.

“I can be hard to detect. Fae magic hides my scent among many in a forest.” Nyphy said, “The orangehead shares our stealth. He wears our raiment.”

“Glad you noticed.” Calgemo spoke up, “Didn’t waste ten years getting it.”

“You stole Pralee’s cloak. She was captured because of you!”

“It was her or me. She chose her, I chose me.”

Hicussaw’s patience expired. He announced, “Me and my friends are leaving. You Free Folk retreat in the opposite direction.”

“Hold your horses.” Calgemo said, “First, you treacherous buggers give us your cloaks.”

“The werewolves would catch us in moments!” the man not Tog seized his turn to protest.

“Not my worry. I don’t want you jinxbaits sneaking after us, putting arrows in our knees and handing our crippled arses over to your monster friends.” Calgemo said.

“You have a demon!” Eswol cried. Tog was helping him sit up. He continued, “You think we can deceive his magic vision?”

“Calgemo of Brin Dank, the agreement between us and the werewolves is broken.” Nyphy said, “Our plot failed. The clan lost a brother, they will desire vengeance. They will hunt us all down!”

“The cloaks will still help my party escape.” Calgemo was adamant.

“Escape?” Eswol laughed, “Why won’t you understand? It’s beyond us to match their speed.”

“We can’t hide either.” Tog contributed, “If the lycanthropes push themselves, they can follow our human scents even through the enchantment of our cloaks. Grandfather Belo’s nose will not be fooled. Blessed if I know what you smell of, Hicussaw Demonhost, but they will track you too.”

“We do not fear beastmen pursuing us.” Hicussaw declared, “We cannot run or sneak away, so we will defeat Grandfather Belo.”

“Grandfather Belo *and* his pack?” Nyphy was incredulous.

“While I approve of our confidence, in this case it would be wise to shadow walk far from this place.” Shadow Hicussaw said his bit.

“No.” Hicussaw addressed his demonic self, “We battle Belo and end the threat he poses to my friends’ lives. At the very least, we draw the attention of the whole clan to us,

giving my buddy boys and Tellyn a chance to avoid the enemy.”

“Hicussaw, this is a bad idea.” Tellyn pleaded, “The werewolves aren’t here yet, we have time. Standing and fighting ought to be our last choice. A bunch of angry monsters are craving blood tonight, don’t become one of them.”

Hicussaw spoke, “Tellyn, Calgemo, Jams, get moving! Head for Pank Hit. I’ll be an hour or a couple behind you. Free Folk, flee my sight.”

“Great!” Jams enthused, “See you soon Hicussaw!”

“Alone?” Tellyn was not impressed, “Hicussaw, have you gone mad?”

“Hic, don’t be a hero.” Calgemo said, “A band of men fighting to the death walloped Master Alders, not you by yourself. We’ll beat Grandfather Belo together.”

“We are a demon host!” Hicussaw stated firmly, “These beastmen can’t kill me. They can hurt you my friends.”

“Our mana is lower than ideal for confronting an elder lycanthrope.” Shadow Hicussaw reminded.

“Er, yes, we won’t abandon you to werewolves, Hicussaw.” Jams looked ashamed of his initial reaction, “Can’t you teleport the lot of us out?”

“We are not ready to navigate the shadow roads.” Shadow Hicussaw said, “The risks remain.”

“Hooch has crugged our senses and skills.” Hicussaw explained, “Shadow walking is not a spell I can cast on you safely.”

“Too sozzled to teleport but you’re fit to fight the patriarch of a werewolf clan?” Tellyn questioned.

“I’m just the kind of drunk to fight.” Hicussaw insisted.

“Right there with you!” Calgemo supported his buddy boy.

“The Free Folk will aid you against our common foes this night.” Nyphy declared. Mir was stirring. Eswol sent Tog to her side.

“I don’t forgive your deceit.” Hicussaw addressed the archers. “But I can forget it. Save your lives. Run!”

“We are in your debt, Hicussaw Demonhost, the Merciful.” the man not Tog slowly picked up his bow, expecting a hostile reaction and receiving none. More confidently he continued, “In the wild, promises are coin. We must pay our dues.”

“Accept their offer.” Shadow Hicussaw communicated, “We are in no position to refuse help.”

“Hic.” Calgemo said, “Don’t trust these jinxbaits won’t attack us once the werewolves get here.”

“Free Folk keep their word.” Nyphy defended his honour.

“You owe the beastmen first.” Calgemo argued, “Will you not fulfil your deal with them?”

“You speak of an alliance *you* destroyed.” Tog was bitterly honest, “This was supposed to be an easy meal, civilized idiots strange to the wild, too drunk to fight. The clan will punish us for the lycanthrope you killed, they care fiercely for their kin. Merely feasting on your flesh will not quench Grandfather Belo’s rage.”

Nyphy concurred, “We’re in the same stew you Krits are. None shall be spared when the mood of the patriarch turns wrathful.”

“Supposed to believe you, am I?” Calgemo scoffed, “This shape shifter clan has us Krits outnumbered and a big bad grandfather to battle our demon host. In your place, I’d pick the side not getting eaten.”

“Maybe we’re less selfish than you.” Eswol claimed.

“Says the villain trading people to werewolves.” Calgemo responded, “Hicussaw, what do your magic demonic instincts tell you?”

“You got an answer?” Hicussaw asked the shadow of his soul.

Shadow Hicussaw examined their options, “Send the Free Folk away unharmed and nothing prevents their return. Letting them stay gives the werewolves more targets to chase, reduces the chances we will fight one on many. If the Free Folk betray us again, not being surprised is the best we can hope. Hold a portion of our mana in reserve for a last shadow walk, grab our human friends too at the moment of escape.”

“The Free Folk can share our battle, Cal. Plenty of monsters so nobody’s left idle.” Hicussaw decided, “Tellyn, take our provisions and walk clear of this. When you’re safe,

we can focus on protecting the others.”

“I think we *all* should get going.” Tellyn said, “But I understand, Hicussaw.”

“Jams, you’re escorting Tellyn, guard her!” Hicussaw barked.

The blackhead did not expect that, “You reckon I can handle the job?”

Calgemo spoke up, “Jams, your spell stops werewolves and demon clones, ask Hic.”

“I can’t control my magic.” Jams said.

“Don’t bother.” Calgemo dismissed, “Just throw and scream, or is it scream and throw? You know which.”

“Jams’ spells would be useful in the coming conflict.” Shadow Hicussaw commented.

“They affect us too, halfwit demon.” Hicussaw explained, “You want our power blinded and deafened?”

“My shadow sight watches over you two.” Hicussaw assured his lover and friend, “Anything tries to hurt you, Jams, cast a Thunder Burst. I’ll be there before you can rise to your feet.”

Jams nodded, “Alright. I’ll do it.”

“Boys.” Tellyn’s taut tone reflected the expression her face wore, her uncertainty and fear held down under a resolve to remain calm. “Don’t die.”

“Hic can’t.” Calgemo said helpfully.

“I love you, Tellyn of Dos Agg.” Hicussaw locked eyes with her, “I promise we will embrace free of peril in Pank Hit.”

“Dos Agg?” Tog said to Mir, “Thought she was Brin Dank. Lies upon lies!”

“Ugh! How disgusting we are, playing the heart of a gentle and caring woman!” Shadow Hicussaw complained, “Will our deceit never end?”

Urine. Sweat. Moonshine. Dread. Anger. Very minor bleeding. Her scent reeked of these things. No creature of flesh could conceal their secrets from the nose of Grandfather Belo. Any werewolf could discern the flavours comprising Pralee’s scent of

course, but Belo's senses were sharpened further. Long years had taught him to read minds in the odours of the body. Born and reared wild, he possessed little knowledge of the processes and secretions producing these aromas, and he required no such education. He had known, since his first sniffs of the world, what life was made of. Life was scented sacks of meat, warm and juicy, soft and tender, tough and chewy, with crunchy bits called bones.

Eat, mate, sleep. The three steps of a successful existence. Two rewarded the greatest hunter, whether it was enjoying a meal or diddling a pup into a womb, choice of prey determined the result.

Tumpil's furred beefy arms clutched the bruised Pralee's measly body, the contorted position she was forced into was uncomfortable to behold. Her neck lay delicately between his jaws. Good boy, Tumpil had learned Belo's lessons well. The grip of Tumpil's fangs was firm, piercing the skin slightly, letting her feel the points of his teeth inside her and understand they could push so much deeper.

Mmmhmm, Belo could smell the liquor coursing through Pralee. His belly yearned to feel her hot, intoxicating blood and flesh slide down his throat. She was strong of heart and will, he conceded. At the mercy of him and his clan, her natural predators, Pralee conducted herself unflinching and coherently answered his questions. Most prey descended into terror beyond uselessness. If only she had proved competent. Hours ago Belo had observed the sun's retreat behind the horizon, anticipating the feast this woman had offered, her part in a trade for the assistance of his clan. The deal he had accepted, the task his children had completed, and the agreed reward they had been waiting on Pralee's band to provide. The miserable mess the Free Folk had wrought did not 'disappoint' or 'enrage' Belo, he found words were unable to convey the full depth of his grief. No man should taste his grandson's dead meat on the currents of the night air.

Belo had concluded the interrogation. His nose detected no stink of deceit when Pralee uttered her responses. However, there was a worrisome scent spreading across the woods. Faint traces of human laced the distinctive aroma of a supernatural being. A wizard skilled in shadow magic she had said, this was who the wretched fool had chosen to lure. Pralee had failed the test of choice, the first mistake any hunter could commit was selecting the wrong prey.

Powerful magic added its own stench to the tangles of scent drifting over octars of

earth. The clones were darkness given solid form, Belo could credit them to Pralee's shadow sighted magicker. Fortunately, the thirsty idiot had drank himself oblivious to Belo's children prowling. Moonshine had probably spared the clan worse losses. The Thunder Burst spell Belo was familiar with, the travellers' second magicker scarcely posed a problem, his advantage of surprise was lost. But the shadow magicker was definitely not a sorcerer, the man's lie to Pralee hid the fact while he might have once been mortal, he was becoming something else.

This was no simple pounce job easily left to his sons. The enemy required his intervention, his children called for help, his grandson's corpse demanded revenge. The clan spawned of his loins surrounded Grandfather Belo. His sons had grown strong and fast and hardy. They were clever, yes, and wise to obey their elders. He spoke to them, using the language of the wild which lacked words yet carried meaning, by manner of movement and posture of body, by the tone of a growl and the change of scent. Tonight their prey was a challenge, the hunt would be celebrated in the clan's stories, their family would overcome this trial, their fallen would be avenged.

Belo ordered Father Tumpil to bear Pralee home where their daughters and wives faithfully guarded the pups. The women and young were expecting a meal, and risking the clan's oldest and second oldest male in the same battle was just stupid.

Tackling the mysterious and mighty foe would need a plan. Belo inhaled the night. Various odours combined to paint a stark picture in his mind, pointing out the location and condition of the humans. Hmmph, his nose could match the magical sight of this deceptive shadow master.

Grandfather Belo decided he would serve as the anvil, drawing enemy attention and assaults. It would take a large amount of arrows and sword blows to hurt him, even then he could heal with a shift of shape. Belo would charge the inhuman one, enticing the others to seize their chance and attack him together. Being huge and scary helped attract the efforts of men emboldened by weapons in hand. Their 'valour' always amused Belo, his claws and the strength of his arms were the only courage he needed. Belo's children would perform the role of the hammer smashing the enemy upon his anvil. They would spread, advancing stealthily on the flanks, and finally tear into the foes Belo would have distracted. Thus the enemy was to be encircled and destroyed. All this assumed Belo alone could not slaughter the magicker and his allies, a not unlikely possibility.

The grandfather called his sons to spend a moment of howling in memory of their slain brother. Belo did not participate, his voice would only drown his family's, besides he had said his piece earlier. Snouts raised to the moon, their baying rolled across the woods, seeding terror in prey creatures, a forecast of carnage reducing the weak willed to gibbering idiots.

Belo raced through the darkened forest. His children often walked on two legs, he preferred moving on four paws because his full height saw branches whack him in the eye. His body was a supernatural engine of muscle and energy, unleashing it an exercise of pure vivacious joy. Every breath he took, Belo bounded. Bushes were trampled underfoot. Trees seemed to jump aside though he was the one in motion.

He was alive! Heart pounding, arms and legs pumping, the air rushing over his fur. He felt it now, the insatiable impulse to pounce, bite, rip, kill...a hunger the prey dwelled in dread of and he lived to fulfil.

Speaking of which, where were the prey? He should be among them already. Their scents were somehow uncertain, difficult to distinguish. The Free Folk had to be going quiet under their cloaks. The runts thought they could hide! Fools, him concentrating on a single scent revealed its path winding between shrubs and trees despite the fae enchantment. No matter, they weren't worth the effort. The shadow magicker was the target, one who stank of power, an odour a wolf would have to be dead to miss. The scent was almost frightening. There! He sighted the inhuman, a blue haired skinny pole of a man.

Onwards Belo surged, momentum building his weight and strength into an unstoppable force. The magicker patiently waited to receive the werewolf patriarch. He made no attempt to dodge, flee or attack. Belo thought his perfectly still silence was eerie. Was the magicker frozen in fear like the common prey? Would a being of great magic succumb to fear? Belo leapt, claws and fangs eager to meet the man who had stolen a son from him.

Ow! Grandfather Belo's chest stung. The bluehead vanished, his scent flew past Belo, practically slapping the beastman's nose. The grandfather's instincts took notice, mid-air, his jaws snapped at thin scent. Belo landed heavily, the crushing mass of his charge wasted on the innocent ground. The bugger was teleporting! Pralee had not mentioned this, did she know? Why was his chest hurting?

Belo recognized the distinctive aroma of blood. *His* blood. He had expected wounds tonight, but it had been so very long since a foe dared strike him or succeeded against his speed. Belo lifted his arms off the earth, raising his chest to check, sure enough his grey fur was stained and dripping a red that darkness coloured black. Now he smelt, and saw, the cause. Behind the grandfather, a cloaked human grasping a sword was getting to his feet. He smelled familiar, his urine marked Pralee. The swordsman must have been crouching right beneath Belo's jump, he had simply raised his blade and held on as it stuck in Belo's underside soaring above. The magicker had baited Belo! At least the slash did not feel too deep. The bluehead stumbled left of the swordsman, one hand gripping a primitive dagger of sorts, he kept pressing closer to the grandfather. Hmm, was his teleportation spell short ranged? Or did the idiot intend on challenging the patriarch of a werewolf clan with a particularly pathetic cobold weapon?

Belo attacked. Turning did cost a moment but there were few powers capable of matching his swiftness. Belo's claws raked through the magicker's chest. Skin tore loose, bone splintered, muscle was shredded. The delicious scent of his opponent's blood filled his nostrils, as the life fluid itself splattered across his arm. It was done! Soon Belo's slaver mouth would explore the flavours the travellers' supernatural champion had to offer, magic or not, nothing rivalled the taste of meat well earned.

The bluehead melted into the air, leaving the patriarch to stare dumbfounded at his smoking claws, an effect of black vapours lingering a couple of moments.

No! Sweet unicorn farts! The magicker's scent shifted north. He had teleported. He did not smell wounded either. A self-healing jinxbait! The foe could take a hit and teleport to safety, why had he bothered enduring Belo's blow, unless...where was his companion? The swordsman was slinking off, trying to restore his enchanted stealth. Tricked again! Belo would not allow this escape!

Something sharp poked the grandfather's shoulder. Annoyed, Belo shook himself. The pricking sensation was repeated all over the bulk of his body. Arrows! The plan was working. The Free Folk had begun to shoot him. Good fools. Let them waste their ammunition on his hide. Every foe was engaged, struggling to bring Grandfather Belo down, a futile endeavour diverting attention better spent watching for his sons.

Argh! He had lost track of the swordsman, curse those fae worked cloaks.

Forget the twerp. It was hammer time. By now, Belo's children should have marked

where each scent lay. No enemy could trust their concealment to protect them. Belo tilted his head back and howled, while arrows continued planting themselves in his flesh. His chilling cry shut the jaws of his clan's trap.

“Werewolves incoming!” a man shouted, “He summoned the others!”

Ears and nose seeking the source, Belo twisted his head towards the warning, which he perceived had come down the stream of the magicker's odour. Jinx the shadow sight. The bluehead would not be deceived. He was observing the rest of the lycanthrope clan too. The Free Folk had ceased fire. Were they now aiming at Belo's sons?

Belo needed to regain the terror werewolves usually commanded. True, victory was assured, the prey could not survive the entire clan. Still, he appreciated the prey's own fear encumbering and slowing them in thought and deed. Few prey encountered an elder lycanthrope and lived to tell the tale. Those who did get away, had started running on the merest suspicion of trouble. Humans were scarcely aware, at Belo's age his bestial throat and tongue could perform the nuances of mortal speech.

Grandfather Belo boomed a deep, harsh guttural tone. “Hicussaw of Pank Hit! I squeezed your name out of Pralee, daughter of Pak. No wizard you are! You reek of damnation. My nose reveals to me your nature.”

“The monster speaks Krit in wolf form!”

New voice? The swordsman's scent grew clearer a brief instant, convincing Belo it was he who had spoken. What? There was a second current of the bluehead's scent, fresh as the first, but flowing along a different direction. Now a third appeared, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth...Belo's nose was discovering multiple Hicussaws scattered far apart. Clones had been conjured.

Thumps and crashes alerted Belo to forms big and small dashing and thrashing amidst trees and underbrush. His sons' fainter growls and yelps accompanied the flurry. Were the clones battling the clan? Belo heard bows release their arrows. The clones had become the anvil, upon which Free Folk up in the trees were hammering the beastmen. This was wrong! His children were supposed to stalk the humans undetected and finish them in moments, not enter prolonged combat with clones and archers. Fortunately, a handful of arrows were incapable of inflicting permanent damage on an adult werewolf. Belo did not doubt the strength of his family, he hated the unnecessary risk to his

children though.

Could he persuade the Free Folk to switch sides?

“Free Folk!” Belo roared, “Have you forgotten our pact? My clan will spare you if you give us the travellers!”

“Put some octars between us and we won’t kill your whole jinxed clan!” the swordsman yelled, “Can’t call yourself grandfather when your grandsons are dead and gone!”

Fool was piercing holes in his cloak’s enchantment. The patriarch caught the swordsman’s line of scent. Grandfather Belo’s massive bestial body sprang forth, covering distance at a pace measured by blinks of an eye, following the odour to its origin. His target became visible, a man cloaked and carrying a sword. Belo was furious to smell his own blood on the blade. What gladdened his belly and spurred him forward was the fear suddenly flavouring the swordsman’s scent.

Darkness coalesced and took the shape of a staggering man not five octets off the course of Grandfather Belo. Belo smelled first and saw a moment later, the dagger armed magicker jumping into his path. No spare instant to think, Belo instinctively pounced upon his sudden foe. The bluehead sank to the earth as shadow would, merging with the dark. Once more, Belo savaged empty air. His charge had been halted and the swordsman saved for now. Yet the scent of the magicker remained perilously close, had the jinxbait not teleported?

Belo’s hairy hide perceived neither an unusual weight nor warmth nor cold, only the cool evening air. His nose sensed the scent moving and his eyes witnessed parts of himself go darker than the night. Shadow crawled onto his paws, up his forelegs, and over his shoulders.

The magicker possessed a shadow form! The gods weep! Had the dagger been transformed too? Belo began tossing and plunging about frantically, he could not stay still, he had to detach the shadow or fling the magicker away when the bluehead did materialize. Shadow wrapped around his neck could easily become a solid arm clutching a dagger. A sharpened bit of stone cutting Belo’s throat would end the decades of his existence. The stink of magical power was overwhelming his sensitive nostrils, this Hicussaw was ancient beyond anything the grandfather had tasted before.

Belo slammed against a tree, attempting to scrape the shadow off, in the process

snapping the shafts of several arrows embedded in his side. The shadow gaining weight indicated to Belo a transformation back into a man. Belo redoubled his efforts, the violence of his bucking shook loose the magicker. Belo felt the stone graze his throat, stripping a layer of furred skin. The bluehead was hurled upon a bush. Hicussaw of Pank Hit picked himself up unhurried, straightened his posture and brought a silent stare to bear on Grandfather Belo. The rags of tunic barely covering Hicussaw's intact chest reminded of Belo's failure to slay.

Defeating the shadow magicker in a fair fight seemed impossible. Belo accepted this, denying reality was not a trait that survived as many battles as he had. The bluehead could teleport, heal himself, spawn clones, and change to pure shadow. Had the mighty patriarch of a werewolf clan bitten more than he could swallow? Curse Pralee and her disaster of a deal! Belo needed to exploit a weakness, he needed to find...the girl. Hicussaw carried her scent, not long had passed since the pair had been intertwined. Did Belo have a chance of reaching her? Perhaps. The magicker's teleportation spell was lacking precision. On his previous uses, a physical Hicussaw had moved some octets to where he wanted to be. Could he not choose the destination accurately or was the moonshine ruining his aim? Outrunning a misplaced teleport lingered within Belo's ability.

Grandfather Belo conceived of hope. Seize the bluehead's mate and hold her life in his jaws. Maybe he could force a surrender, or convince the magicker not to interfere while his children dragged a few of the others to the clan den.

Belo sprinted, chasing down the scent of Hicussaw's woman. Clever girl had departed early, thus she escaped the ring of his sons focused on those attacking their grandfather. Bless their wimmies! Belo swore he would deliver his devoted children from the nightmare Pralee had drawn them into.

Hah! The lazy bluehead gave no pursuit. Did he believe Belo was fleeing? Approaching the girl, Belo inhaled the fear and alcohol laden scent of a male human behind her. Had Hicussaw assigned her a guard? A reasonable precaution but ultimately doomed, an ordinary mortal could not defend against an elder lycanthrope. Belo would have killed the twerp first had he a couple of moments to waste. His priority was snatching Hicussaw's lover quickly lest Hicussaw teleport in and rescue her.

The duo were in his sights now, the magicker's scent nowhere near. She was a slim

young thing, beside her a man smelling of sweat and wielding a lightweight crossbow, his weapon practically harmless to lycanthropes even younger and weaker than a patriarch. Should the blackhead open fire, Belo doubted he would feel the bolts. Both man and woman wore knapsacks emitting the odour of food, not to be confused with the aroma of their fresh living meat.

Belo expected the girl to scream, instead the man did. “Thunder orb!” A call for aid? An attack? How could Belo forget, Pralee had described an ugly crossbowman of black and white hair, he was the travellers’ second magicker! Spotting a throwing gesture, the grandfather flung himself aside to dodge whatever magic had been cast his way. Hold the horses, the idiot had chucked his sole weapon. Nothing happened. No spell. Was the shout only a meaningless panicked cry? The very mortal crossbowman, who had disarmed himself, was drowning in fear. Belo smelt the blackhead’s terror spreading through the air.

The moment of reckoning had arrived. Yes, not a sniff of Hicussaw close enough to help, Grandfather Belo just might succeed at beating the shadow magicker to this target. One leap would put the redhead firmly in his claws.

Huh? An object, soft, squishy, about the weight of a human, landed on the patriarch’s back. Oh no. It stank of Hicussaw’s dreaded scent, though somewhat diminished. Belo perceived arms and legs clinging to his fur. No, no. More Hicussaws were bursting from the darkness and hurling themselves upon the werewolf patriarch.

Shadow clones swarmed Belo, punching and kicking. They were annoying. Their hands yanked the arrows free of his hide, then stabbed him with them, again and again and again. The gods weep! They were getting dangerous. Grandfather Belo had hunted fae under the brightest sun, chewed the plate armour of knights, slaughtered the crew manning a ballista after their bolt hit him...would he succumb to death by the shadow of a knifeman?

The redhead grabbed the blackhead’s arm, she pulled him into a run. No! Belo had come so close! The crossbowman’s fake spell had delayed his pounce, providing Hicussaw time to conjure the shadow clones.

Youch! Belo yelped, a sound he had not uttered in years. His left eye shut to blinding pain as an arrowhead obliterated it, luckily the hand behind the metal did not push further to the brain. Belo would not give another opportunity. He bucked, angry

and afraid. A determined clone could force an arrow's point through to his heart or across his throat. Shifting to a feeble human body for healing wounds was a fatal mistake during combat, especially facing this mob. Made no difference really. Regenerating an organ or limb, a feat entirely beyond a lesser lycanthrope, would demand days of the patriarch.

A couple of clones were tossed free, the rest held onto his fur and sank their arrows deeper in his sinews. Belo's jaws closed on a detached clone, the shadow evaporated between his teeth. New clones spawned to jump his flailing form. Belo knew the struggle was hopeless, he could not overpower this opponent.

Shadow stirred in front of Belo, gathering itself into the shape of Hicussaw. Belo's nose told him here was the original, the scent of magic far too strong to be anything else. Hicussaw neither spoke nor moved. The bluehead's hand hung at his side, grasping stiffly the dagger.

Belo heard his children bark. Wolves did not bark, save to express distress or warn their kin. His sons were yielding and begging retreat. The patriarch did not blame the clan for their failure, he thanked the gods they suffered no fresh deaths. Their enemy had remained defensive this whole time, showing not the slightest inclination towards aggression, almost inviting Grandfather Belo to test his chances. He ceased his thrashing. The Hicussaws matched him, pausing their stabbing and beating. The bunch of clones continued clinging to his body quietly, awaiting a reason to resume. Not three rits separated shadow magicker and elder lycanthrope.

Belo's gaze took in the visage of Hicussaw. The shadow concealing the bluehead's face possessed a sinister depth, convincing Belo he stared into an abyss of blackness. Kryter's the son! Was this no ordinary demon host? Belo had smelt their foul possessed kind before, tasted their unholy tainted meat. This one was different, Belo had initially suspected a shaitan or a pret. His guess had been wrong. Such a mighty and terrible evil he had never met.

Well, Belo had not lived to be a grandfather by not running from a fight he was losing.

"Abandon the hunt!" Belo bellowed to his children, "Fall back!"

The patriarch turned away from the shadow magicker. Clones slid off a bounding Belo, making no further attempt to stay on. He barked as he sprinted. His weary sons

heard their grandfather echoing their troubles. One by one, the werewolves stopped fighting and fled their foes, retreating to the deep night, tails low and hides still displaying arrows. Their pace transported them rather swiftly outside the range of Hicussaw's shadow sight.

"Not enough mana! Cannot cast spells!" the demon was shrieking, "Need more mana!"

"No-no, we don't." Hicussaw's voice shook, a note of triumph floated in a flood of relief.

"We-we made it. *We made it!* Grandfather Belo, he broke first."

Chapter VIII

Below a cloudy blue sky, the stone tower and leafy tree sat atop Lone Oak Hill, rising above waves of ripe wheat in the fields. Parties of men and boys in peasant raiment were wearing down the yellow tide, backs bent and sickles slashing. Harvested grain was tied in sheaves, and once acceptably dry, loaded onto waiting carts drawn by horse and ox, to be stored in the local baron's barns. Such was the busy view afforded to those approaching the village through the thick forest of the north. The ancient oak naming the hill, and its companion tower, had dominated the green summit for an eternity to his memory. He could scarcely imagine either would ever come down.

He was watching this vista afar yet he saw himself amidst the wheat stalks, running between the fields, climbing the grassy slope of Lone Oak Hill, careful not to cross the path of Lord Lansam's druzhinniks, mocking Gronks in the daily lessons, thinking up any reason to loiter and avoid heading to work or no reason at all. He and his buddy boys, his gang, always a moment short of mischief. The morning they stomped Romfer's face and took his tooth for a trophy when he tried to resist them emptying his pockets. It could have happened yesterday. The afternoon old man Cupber left a couple of heks of pork in his cart unguarded. Days' worth of good eating. The time they caught Jenka after sunset, nobody close to hear her cry, and cry she did. Dog wag a tail! The village had treated their gang fine over the years.

His sister's laughing, beaming face greeted his return home. Every single day. He brought her gifts, food and toys and clothes, anything he could nick. Her grin had been a constant in his life, and he never missed a day of sharing with her his loot, until he departed.

He visited her, often as he could manage, he would not desert her to the moods of their father. Worry nibbled the edges of his mind, he was late, an unusual delay that might cost his sister a terrible price. Having finally arrived, he was delivering no trinkets or snacks just devastation. His gang was gone, true, but maybe his new allies could help keep her safe in a more permanent fashion.

His eyes yearned to lay upon his sister's smiling countenance again. Reaching her was a risky endeavour however. It would have to start by sneaking past the watch tower

and the peasants going about their work, without them spotting his armed and armoured self. Musveryl on his back had replaced the standard heater shields the Druzhina issued. His Doneg tabard had been discarded at Senjdaq's insistence and he had obediently painted Woss's blood on his nasal helmet. The pisswet vampyre rejected the strategy of playing a ruse wearing the enemy's tabard. Jinx the Star Prince's wimmy! The condition of his uniform would draw comment and suspicion from Pank Hit's residents the moment they saw it.

The chance of finding his sister alone was slim. She would be home or near their hut, within sight and hearing of their mother. What if their father was there? Supposing the jinxbait wasn't, his mother could still slip away and alert his father, who would surely inform the druzhinniks. Dragging his sister and parents to the woods would also lead to an alarm being raised. All it took was his parents releasing a shout or a stray gaze catching him in the act. He could conceive of no means to meet his sister while diminishing the danger of exposing himself to Pank Hit's defenders. Kryter's the son!

On his part, he owed his allies a debt of distance and time. From the blood lord's army camp to the borders of Pank Hit, a journey of nine days on foot and off road was completed in under two days. His first experience riding a centaur. The hardy beastman had maintained a fast gallop despite carrying a human on his hindquarters and an elf on his shoulder, but the secret of their speed was the shortcuts they ran through the Faerie, racing from point to point where the Changeless Change and the mortal plane merged.

"Convinced I've set no ambush?" Barnemit asked.

"This is the village you spoke of." the blood elf named Draks squeaked. He was mounted on Centaur Twin Clubs, Barnemit had stepped down earlier.

"I'm not leading you into a trap. Do your fae senses detect Baron Lansam's soldiers awaiting my signal?" Barnemit persisted.

"No. You are honest and your service to our lord is sincere." Draks conceded, "How do you know the village?"

"Pank Hit." Barnemit replied, "I grew to manhood in this place, I've seen their defences inside and outside. Plenty of children to suit the Star Prince's taste."

"When did you leave?"

“I was last here three months ago. I did the inspection.”

“Inspection?”

“King’s law mandates the rana of a province dispatch a druzhinnik party to inspect every village, town and city he rules, at least once in three months. I earned my captain’s favour. Nabbed the duty for Pank Hit.”

“What is the purpose of these inspections?”

“Check the local lord’s state of affairs. Is all as it should be? Pick up any prisoners he’d sentenced to the dungeons of Bart Castle. Escort the clerks of Doneg’s Coin Master collecting the rana’s share of local taxes. Listen to reports of trouble or odd happenings, though news and messages truly important, a hussar would have already delivered to the proper ears.”

“You were sworn to protect these people, Barnemit the Traitor. Those who birthed and reared you are among them.”

“I prize my life over loyalty to some noble safe in his castle and peasants too cowardly to fight for themselves.”

“And your friend? The one you murdered to win our lord’s gift.”

“Comrade. The Druzhina forced us together.” Barnemit lied.

“I begin to think you shall be a perfect and ruthless servant of our lord.” Draks laughed heartily. It sounded like the high pitched laughter of a little boy mingled with gurgling blood.

“Where is the raiding force?” Barnemit enquired, he hid his impatience to enter the village quite well.

“A day behind us. Perhaps a day and a half.”

“You can tell them Pank Hit is exactly what I said it was.”

“Cejora will.”

“Yes.” Centaur Twin Clubs’ gruff tone confirmed in Lolbol.

Barnemit grasped the implication, “We two aren’t joining the war band?”

“We shall, when they come to Pank Hit.” Draks answered.

“Why not go to them?” Barnemit demanded, “What good is our idling here?”

“We watch the village and ensure the druzhinniks have no surprises for our raid.” Draks explained, “Much may change in even our short absence.”

“The gods weep! You won’t trust me! How do I change your mind? Must I drink my father’s blood before your eyes, say the word and I will!”

“You are not being doubted. I simply uphold the practice many years have proven to me. This is not the first mortal settlement I have scouted and raided. Remember, our lord is younger than I am.”

Barnemit did not wish to hang around Pank Hit impotent to protect his sister, restraining himself till the moment the vampyre’s fighters started their assault. “You can wait. I’m riding with Cejora to the raiders. I’ll prepare a plan of attack on the way back. Save us an hour or two.”

“Stay by my side. In case we uncover trouble or are discovered, I could use your sword and shield.”

“You’re fae! The village has nothing your magic can’t escape!”

“The Star Prince commanded you to follow my lead. Are you itching to betray your new lord so soon, Barnemit Oathbreaker, the Traitor of Pank Hit?” Draks jumped off Cejora’s shoulder, the thick clotted blood of his tiny feet squished wetly on the ground.

Barnemit gritted his teeth, “You’re ordering me to waste time?”

“The Druzhina does not teach its soldiers obedience?” Draks’ childish voice adopted a stern tone, “You will learn from me then.”

The Krit hamlet named Pank Hit was typical of the human nations covering the Evergreen East. Its villagers were considered tenants, their annual taxes to a baron bought them the right to live and work upon his land. Worn paths of dirt and dust crisscrossed the village, linking clusters of hedge and bush grown around cruck houses. These dwellings were built of crucks, simple wooden frames, supporting thatched roofs and walls of wattles. Wattles being lattices of entwined wooden strips, daubed with a

moist mixture of mud, straw and manure eventually hardened by drying. Excretory functions were conducted within privies constructed outside the abode. Sheds adjacent to the houses sheltered livestock. The peasants too poor to pay the shed tax, they hosted their animals in their homes at night, lest thieves or wild beasts took them. Women laboured over hearthfires under chimneys and in the gardens on their doorsteps. Men left at dawn to farm the land and graze the herds, returning after dusk.

As the sun continued its mid-day shining, one ordinary domicile was about to witness a rather extraordinary happening. The garden had a fifteen year old girl on her knees, the trowel in her hand busy loosening soil and spreading a layer of mulch, prior to scattering the contents of her bag of turnip seeds. Her tresses were a pale ley of blue and pink, resembling colours blending in water, retaining their distinct shades and refusing to merge completely. Her questionably greenish skirt would not notice the grass stains and worse the earth pressed onto it. Around her stalked a cat, its coat brown and white, its eyes hunting the bugs her trowel disturbed into the open, its paws pouncing and mouth crunching down on the little treats.

The girl was performing her task with a certain industriousness, when she heard speech emanating from the shed nearby, which was weird since oxen don't talk and furthermore the beast was working the fields today. She knew the sounds were not her imagination, the cat turned its head to the shed too.

She paused, listening but unable to discern the precise details of the conversation. She rose to her feet, clutching the trowel. The right thing to do was to quietly fetch her mother who would, again rightfully, not dare open the shed and instead send her off to summon a druzhinnik. Yet curiosity is as curiosity does, and somehow, she did not feel threatened.

She approached the wattle and daub walls of the shed, her feline companion padding stealthily beside her. The voices grew louder and clearer.

"This is where you lived your boyhood?" a man was asking, "Cramped isn't it? Stinks. Poor lighting, not one window to welcome a party of sun beams. Was this your bed? Rather wet."

"This is a shed, where sleeps Draghoof, the ox of the family. And that's the family tub, the water's for our bathing and Draghoof's drinking."

The new voice was very familiar, he knew Draghoof too. Who was he?

“Um, lot of odd looking things here.” another man spoke, “Why does this shovel have such a long handle and such a bent blade?”

“That’s a hoe.” said the acquaintance of Draghoof, “Have you honestly never seen one?”

Argh! It was stupid not recognizing him, her instincts insisted she ought to. He seemed a part of her oldest memories, this wasn’t her first time listening to his voice. Maybe he was a friend of her parents or elder siblings? Did Softpaw recognize him? She looked to the cat, who had arched his back and was staring down the shed door, fur raised stiff. Why was Softpaw afraid?

“I was born in Bart.” the third man stated.

Bart Castle? *He* was there, wasn’t he?

“I’m a towner not a country bumpkin like you!” the first man said.

“You boys are idiots.” a woman sighed, “Hicussaw, why the shed?”

Hicussaw! Of course, his voice! How could she forget?

“I picked a place we wouldn’t be surprised.” Hicussaw answered the woman, “I just shadow walked four people over a longer distance than I’ve done before. Can’t believe I made it without a stop. Give me a moment to check my shadow si-”

Our girl gardener was lifting the thin bar of timber holding shut the shed’s double door.

“Gest!” Hicussaw called her name. Sweet unicorn farts! Her brother couldn’t possibly see her through the doors!

Gest pulled the shed doors wide open. Daylight exposed to her three grown men and a single woman. The orangehead boasted a sheathed sword on his hip and the blackhead a small crossbow strapped to his back. The man she remembered to be her brother and the red haired woman were wearing a pair of knapsacks, her brother had a stone bladed dagger tucked in his belt. The band was sharing Draghoof’s usual spot, in front of a sturdy tub fitting one adult human, amidst the assorted tools and implements stashed in the shed.

“Hic?” Gest said slowly, “It’s really you.”

Hicussaw rushed his sister. He embraced her, raising her off her feet. “Gest! Three years put some rits on you, you little twerp!”

Softpaw hissed angrily, catching Hicussaw’s gaze, but undertook no further aggression. Hicussaw’s companions also exited onto open ground.

“This is the cat of my father’s house, Softpaw, and my sister, Gest.” Hicussaw conducted introductions, his pointing hand matched names to faces. “Gest, these are my friends. Calgemo of Mos Wren, Jams of Bart, Tellyn of Dos Agg.”

The orangehead observed Gest’s expression, “Pleased to see Hicussaw’s shenanigans stun folk he grew up with same as they do me.”

“I’m Hicussaw’s sweetheart.” the redhead offered a consoling smile to Hicussaw’s sister.

“Hello, I’m Jams of Bart.” the blackhead repeated his name awkwardly.

“What? How?” Gest reacted, “Hic, I don’t understand. You were in the shed? You should be in Bart.”

“Let’s get inside.” Hicussaw said softly, “Mother is home?”

Gest replied, “And Ifona.”

Hicussaw took the lead, his arm around his sister’s shoulders. His companions followed them towards the entrance of his family home. Softpaw preferred lingering in the garden.

The bluehead’s gentle push swung the unlocked door inward. The house consisted of one moderately sized hall. Flimsy wooden partitions sequestered the beds and separated the children’s from their parents’, these did not block sound Hicussaw remembered. Hinged shutters on the windows hung open this sunny day, to be tugged shut against wind, rain and snow. Shelves on the walls bore crockery like pots and jars, cutlery like knives and spoons. In a corner stood a cupboard where clothing and yarn was kept. A ladle rested on the lid of a barrel, which Hicussaw knew contained water.

Upon a stool sat a woman Calgemo judged near his own age, a few years older than Hicussaw, wielding needle and thread on torn trousers. She was positioned beside the light of a window, her belly bulging pregnant against the fabric of her plain dress. Red roamed across the yellow strands of her hair. There were five more stools, a chair, a chair

with armrests, and a table, occupying the middle of the hall.

“Hicussaw!” the sewing woman gasped.

“Ifona.” Hicussaw acknowledged. He directed his gaze to the back of the house. “My mother.”

The elder woman Hicussaw had addressed, she froze partway through sliding chopped carrots off a platter, their pieces dropping into a cauldron suspended over the crackling hearthfire. Her blue hair matched the shade of Hicussaw’s. Above the hearth, the lower mouth of a chimney drew smoke to the top end and spewed it beyond the roof.

As Hicussaw and company moved indoors, they treaded on mats woven of rushes, long stemmed plants similar to grass, covering an earthen floor. Fragrant herbs were strewn over the mats, their scent reminding Hicussaw of home, a bizarre bout of nostalgia given the fact he was actually home.

The shock on the face of Hicussaw’s mother melted into annoyance. “Oh, it’s you is it?”

“Yes.” Hicussaw said gingerly, “I’m back.”

“Did you forget how to write? Or never learnt? I always thought Gronks couldn’t teach pixies to fly.”

Hicussaw’s mouth opened uncertainly, no words emerged.

“If you can’t write, you could have spent a few coppers on a scribe and a couple more on a hussar travelling this way.”

Hicussaw chose the route of defending his literacy, “No! I can write, and I read! Books!”

His mother did not seem to care, “Three and a half years, no visit and no letter.”

She lifted her platter and resumed dumping the carrots, “Twice I messaged you. The hussar I paid for delivery, I sought him out on his next stop in Pank Hit, he said he handed you my letters in Bart and you gave him no reply. I wrote of Krat marrying Yardonk, I suppose your oldest sister’s wedding wasn’t worth a few days’ trip or a few words’ prosperous wishes.”

“I was busy.” Hicussaw tried weakly, “I’m sorry.”

Meanwhile, Ifona posed a questioning look to Gest, whose response was a helpless shrug

and casting her gaze on their mother.

The carrots added to the cauldron, forementioned mother continued berating Hicussaw, “Not a hint of news. You might have been eaten by some adventurer’s monster steed. Would I hear of it?”

Calgemo whistled, “Hicussaw of Pank Hit. It’s shameful you never messaged your mother. My good woman, should your son have fallen in the practice of his stable duties, I would’ve made the journey to Pank Hit and told you myself.”

“What?” was the best Hicussaw could do.

The eyes of Hicussaw’s mother narrowed at the orangehead, “Who are you?”

“Calgemo of Mos Wren. Friend to your son.”

“Lyt of Pank Hit, mother of Hicussaw, wife of Fabsmit. Did my son bring the bunch of you to see his family?”

“Tellyn of Dos Agg.” Tellyn flashed her most charming smile, “Hicussaw’s lover.”

Lyt’s expression changed to surprise again, “Hicussaw, you’re getting married? That’s why you came home, to show your mother your wife to be?”

Hicussaw wished he could avoid catching Tellyn in the corner of his vision, “No. Things aren’t so easy.”

Gest spoke up, “My mother, wait. Hicussaw, how did you appear in the shed? All of you. I saw no one enter...” her voice faltered as an explanation occurred to her, “Was it magic?”

Hicussaw sighed, “The tale behind my return is long to tell, frightening to hear, and begs a decision on the future of me and my friends. Let father, Pulner and Nikoff get home first, I’ll reveal the truth then.”

“Shed? What’s your sister talking about, Hicussaw?” Lyt asked her son, “You did magic?”

“Not me, my...” Hicussaw paused to consider his next words, “Yes, it was me. Jams can too.”

“Who?”

“Er, me.” the blackhead raised a hand, “Not much, to be honest. I can’t cast-”

“You’re a sorcerer?” Ifona blurted out, “Hicussaw, he and you and have magic powers?”

“Can we please wait till father is here?” Hicussaw pleaded.

Lyt restored order, “Alright, Hicussaw. You spill your secrets when the whole family is together under this roof.”

“Thank you my mother.” Hicussaw wasn’t finished, “I need you to...don’t accept any guests, or speak to others of my presence, even Krat. The Druzhina shouldn’t learn my friends and I are in Pank Hit.”

“You boys are well armed.” Lyt’s eyes became beacons of pity lighting a face of worry, “Hicussaw, what kind of peril are you in?”

“I’ll clear the mystery tonight, I promise.” Hicussaw said, “Right now, I’m happy to be home and safe.”

Hicussaw watched from a window, shadows lengthening in the wake of the setting sun. Fingers of darkness crept across the houses and gardens of the village. The work day was ending, sending men and livestock to their nightly shelter. Hicussaw backed away every time a peasant or a herd and its human guides neared the family residence, he would not risk being seen. His mother and sisters on occasion stepped out for a quick greeting, a chat and a goodbye.

Calgemo joined him. The orangehead enquired in a low tone, “How far can your shadow sight see?”

Hicussaw spoke equally soft, “Stops at Lone Oak Hill to the north and Lord Lansam’s manor to the east, the ox mill to the west and Mednib’s orchard to the south. Nobody can sneak up on us. Sure we’re surrounded by folk who could report us to the thirty-seven soldiers the manor hosts, or the ten manning the Lone Oak tower, or the five at the mill, but we’ll be warned of foes before they hit us.”

“Nice place this is, Hic. Great family.”

“I know.”

“Why didn’t you keep in touch?”

“Life and dreams I left to forget.” Hicussaw whispered, “Cal, wanted to be alone a moment

right now.”

“Ah, just you and the demon riding your soul?”

“Jinx you.”

Hicussaw’s family and friends had passed the wait for sundown pleasantly enough. Hicussaw, Calgemo and Jams laid their weapons upon a shelf, they had not felt safe to disarm in what seemed long years. Lyt, Ifona and Gest braved the initial discomfort between close blood turned complete strangers and between those who were simply strangers. Mother, sister-in-law and sister were determined to extract the details of Hicussaw’s life apart from them. In exchange, they freely offered the joys, sorrows and annoyances of their own lives in Pank Hit Hicussaw had missed. Hicussaw, Calgemo and Tellyn recounted stories of Bart Castle, where they witnessed nobles and knights and heroes come and go, and heard rumours of the events behind such distinguished personages’ activities. Even Jams contributed. Hicussaw’s kin learnt of his relationship with Tellyn, his friendship with fellow stable hands Calgemo and Jams, the entirety of his existence in Bart, except Barnemit and the disaster of trying to rob Lord Doneg’s heirlooms. The cat had eventually entered his familiar home, he hissed off Hicussaw’s attempt to pet him, prompting a ‘Softpaw, how could you forget Hic?’ comment from Gest. He did not resist Jams and Tellyn stroking him though, which added to Gest’s confusion and Lyt’s disquiet.

Hicussaw pivoted from the window. His gaze shifted to the interior of his home. He absorbed the scene of friends and family united, a spectacle novel to him.

Gest was interrogating Jams in a corner. How had the blackhead met Hicussaw, what was his favourite spell, how many years had he been employed in Bart’s stables, had he taught Hicussaw sorcery, had he ever spoken to Lord Doneg, was he born casting magic or did he learn it. Keeping up his side of the conversation, Jams did provide some answers but mumbled around her questions poking at recent history. He avoided, rather clumsily, his bursts of magic and the crazy circumstances triggering his ability through dungeons and wilderness.

Tellyn was helping Hicussaw’s mother and Ifona lay dinner on the table. The women had finished savouring the elements of his and her romance; the moment each first saw the other, the early days hunting excuses to share hours together, surrendering to the first embrace and the first kiss...thankfully no mention of distracting the thugs of

your lover's bully while he battled the bully, surviving his murderous demonic clone and joining him on the run from the Rana of Tarfelm. Currently, they were discussing the craft of cooking. Tellyn's professional experience as a kitchen maid of Bart supplied her plenty to talk about.

"Almost here." Hicussaw announced aloud, referring to his father and brothers.

The house fell silent. Hicussaw withdrew to the table, facing the door. Calgemo did the same. Jams was disinclined to abandon his corner.

Hicussaw's father, brothers and Draghoof the ox had sweated a whole day mowing hay in fields planted specifically for such a purpose. The feed Draghoof required during winter would be stored in Lord Lansam's barns where the family rented room. Their surplus they would sell to merchants, the baron himself and landless peasants rearing livestock.

"Gest, Ifona! Had a good day?" the door opened. Fabsmit, father of Hicussaw, husband of Lyt, only managed a single step. The left half of his hair was slate grey and the right an emerald green. This same ley split the colouring of the thick moustache he maintained too. He halted on the threshold of his home. "Hicussaw?"

"Hey ho, my father." Hicussaw greeted, "I've returned."

"Dog wag a tail!" a broad grin seized Fabsmit's face, "The sight of you warms my heart!"

"It's nice to be home." Hicussaw agreed.

Fabsmit strode forward and hugged his son. "Why didn't you girls tell me your brother was back?"

Lyt said, "Fab, Hicussaw asked us to wait."

"Plotted a surprise eh?" Fabsmit laughed, "Well, you succeeded. I'd love to see your brothers' faces when they set their eyes upon you Hicussaw!"

Fabsmit stepped away from Hicussaw and called out the door, "Pulner, Nikoff! Are you done putting Draghoof in the shed?"

Hicussaw listened to the replies in voices he had heard every day for over a decade and then not a moment for years:

"Give us a kurn!"

“Hold your horses, my father!”

“We’ve got guests!” Fabsmit yelled, “Don’t dally!”

Hicussaw’s brothers responded:

“Not Lasmenler again I hope!”

“Las! If it’s you, hasten the wedding plans! Move Gest to your bed under your roof! She can’t wait to bear your children!”

Gest dashed to a window and shouted, “I’ll be glad not waking up to you two! Four years and Lasmenler will have saved the coin to build our own house!”

“I’m counting the days till you’re gone, Gest! This house could use the room, I’m planning my second child gets your bed!” Nikoff’s voice boomed.

“Boys, dinner’s getting cold!” Fabsmit hollered, “And trust me, you won’t believe who your mother found!”

Fabsmit chuckled to Hicussaw, “That will quiet them. They’ll try guessing who it could be.”

Fabsmit regarded the three individuals not related to him, “Hicussaw, these fine folk are friends you made in Bart Castle?”

Hicussaw named his companions, “Fabsmit, my father, meet Calgemo of Mos Wren and Jams of Bart, and my sweetheart, Tellyn of Dos Agg.”

Fabsmit’s eyes widened. His gaze took in Tellyn properly, “You know Hicussaw and yet you desire his company? This bluehaired weed of a man standing in front of me?”

“Body and soul.” Tellyn said, “For two years now.”

“You must be a brave woman to endure my youngest son.” Fabsmit joked.

“Father of Hicussaw, you have no idea how right you are.” Tellyn smiled mischievously. Hicussaw wondered whether he was the only one who felt her sentence carried a note of sadness.

“Hic!” Nikoff stood at the door. A band of green ringed his black hair on the level of his ears.

“Sweet unicorn farts!” Pulner cried behind him, “Our little brother is home again!” Pulner’s silver hair sported flecks of deep blue.

Nikoff turned to Pulner, “You owe me five cents.”

“You didn’t reckon it was Hicussaw.” Pulner pushed past the elder Nikoff.

“You bet on Shwets, I said it wasn’t her.” Nikoff rejected Pulner’s denial, “She thinks you’re ‘weird funny’ not ‘charming funny’.”

“There’s a difference?” Pulner scoffed.

“My brothers.” Hicussaw said stiffly.

“Hic, didn’t you miss us?” Nikoff asked, “You’ve been gone ages. You don’t write, you don’t visit.”

“Free time was scarce.” Hicussaw said.

“Do you boys accept his excuse?” Lyt posed the query to her sons.

“No, my mother.” Pulner laughed, “Hic fulfilled his quest to win a job in fancy Bart Castle. Snatched himself a new life serving the rana and forgot about us peasants in bumpkin Pank Hit.”

“Hey! I’d never think of my blood so coarsely!” Hicussaw protested.

“Does grooming Lord Doneg’s favourite steed award you a knighthood, Hicussaw?” Nikoff teased.

“Haha, very funny.” Hicussaw’s tone indicated a sentiment contradicting his words, “Great talent. You two should travel to Brin Dank and play a comedy on a stage.”

“Who’s your pretty red friend?” Pulner grinned at Tellyn.

Their father intervened, “Too late, she’s chosen Hicussaw. Impossible to believe but true.”

Pulner was shocked, “Sweet unicorn farts! You’re Hicussaw’s woman? Hic’s got a lover!”

Nikoff addressed Tellyn in a sombre voice, “Forgive my brother, Pulner and my brother, Hicussaw. Should Hicussaw disappoint you or hurt you, slip me a whisper and I’ll give him a thrashing, I mean, talking to.”

Calgemo whistled, "I'd pay to watch you try."

"I don't think you could beat him." Tellyn said.

Pulner thought their reactions odd, "Nonsense!"

"Where's Krat? My mother, shouldn't we have summoned her to meet Hicussaw?" Nikoff wondered.

"Hicussaw wouldn't allow us." Lyt clarified.

"We can send for her now!" Fabsmit said, "What brings you back to our village, my son? You and Tellyn decided on a wedding? Came to share the good news with your dear mother and father?"

"No." Hicussaw answered rather solemnly.

"Haven't lost your job, have you?" Fabsmit's voice did not lose its cheer.

"Sort of. Better you listen to my story before you call Krat."

There was a perceptible change of atmosphere. Pulner and Nikoff gawked. Fabsmit's expression and tone grew serious, "Do you need paying work?" His gaze shifted to Calgemo and then Jams, "Why did these men follow you home?"

Jams opened his mouth, "We were stable hands. Together. Tended the steeds of Bart Castle. We, uh, crugged ourselves. You see, we tried to better our lives, instead things got worse."

The black and white haired friend of Hicussaw drew Fabsmit's dumbfounded stare. Hicussaw ignored Jams and confessed, "We're hiding, my father."

Fabsmit did not waste time, "Does this endanger our family?"

"It will." Hicussaw said.

Fabsmit quietened. The rest of the house dared not break his silence.

"I've a lot to explain." Hicussaw began, "The mess start-"

Fabsmit cut him short, "Are our lives at risk right now?"

"No, we're safe. But, the Druzhina will attack if we are discovered here."

Hicussaw's father uttered no sound for a long moment or two of contemplation. Finally he spoke, "Then let us not spoil this happy occasion of our gathering. We shall enjoy this delightful meal your mother, Ifona and Gest have prepared. Once the eating is done, Hicussaw, you and me, we go out to the garden in the dark. You will tell me of your troubles."

He was obeyed. Candles were lit to ward off the night and warm the house beyond the limited range of the hearthfire. Sweaty and dusty from their field work, Fabsmit and Hicussaw's brothers took turns bathing in the cool water of the shed's tub. Hicussaw, Calgemo, Jams and Tellyn were invited to clean up too, an invitation they gratefully accepted, crossing the garden to the shed under cover of the night. After washing and towelling dry and putting on a fresh set of clothes, Hicussaw, his companions and his family sat down to dinner.

A thin stew, light on the beef, heavy on the carrots and potatoes, was ladled into their bowls. Water was poured in their cups and a platter of bread laid on the table for all to partake. Tellyn had added to the platter her bread and a chunk of cheese, the surviving portion of the provisions she had packed on the day of Hicussaw's dungeon escape.

Fabsmit's armrest chair was head of the table, nearest the door. His children took the stools, the boys were positioned next to him, the girls seating themselves towards the end opposite him where Lyt claimed the second chair. Tellyn receiving the single spare stool left Calgemo and Jams to consume their meal standing.

Mother Lyt would brook at her table neither a gloomy face nor jaws that did nothing save chew, especially not when her children were dining in the same house after years of separation. She prodded her sons, daughter, daughter-in-law and guests; a comment here, a question there, sometimes a gentle instruction to elaborate on so-and-so happening and such-and-such person. Her efforts led to banter rolling across the table. Hicussaw performed another round of introductions for the benefit of Nikoff and Pulner. His brothers pulled up stories of their boyhood with Hicussaw, in particular the ones most embarrassing to him, new to the ears of Tellyn, Calgemo and Jams. Hicussaw, Tellyn and Calgemo answered their queries concerning life in Bart Castle. Copying Lyt's example, Gest and Ifona ushered Fabsmit into the rounds of conversation.

It could not last forever. Their bellies filled eventually and the food was reduced to bowls of crumbs and dregs. Lyt got off her chair and extinguished the hearthfire, assisted

by Nikoff. Ifona, Gest and Tellyn undertook the cleaning of the table and washing of the crockery.

Fabsmit drained his cup. Placing the empty vessel down, he rose to his feet. Hicussaw, who had been watching his father, stood as well.

“Need a smoke.” Fabsmit declared.

From his pockets he extracted his pipe and a tobacco pouch, which he laid on the table. His fingers opened the pouch, removed generous pinches of tobacco flakes and packed them in the pipe’s bowl, pressing down firmly. Fabsmit grabbed a candle, its flame caressed the bowl’s open surface, igniting its contents.

Hicussaw and his father went through the doorway. The moon and stars set in the blackness overhead drizzled the faintest light upon the earth. Closer to the duo were greater points of illumination, fires and candles brightening the windows of houses their own and their neighbours’, and much further afar the lights of the Lone Oak tower and Lord Lansam’s manor.

Fabsmit smoked his pipe, drawing and puffing repeatedly. Darkness rendered the fumes invisible, except to a certain demonic observer, shadow perfectly delineated the vapours twisting away. Suddenly, Fabsmit stopped and threw his gaze back. Candlelight revealed the faces of his children at a window.

“Boys! Girls!” Fabsmit spoke as loudly as he could while not reaching a shout, “Leave us be please.”

Hicussaw’s siblings swiftly shrank within the confines of the house and relinquished their line of sight. Fabsmit and Hicussaw pressed on to the hedge bordering their family’s residential property.

“My son, would you lie to your father?” Fabsmit took a draw on his pipe.

Hicussaw did not hesitate, “Never.”

Fabsmit puffed, “I must hear everything. Do not spare me the least of your mistakes, the vilest of your deeds.”

“I promise I won’t.” Hicussaw said.

Hicussaw Demonhost commenced his tale. He narrated the night Calgemo

conspired to steal Lord Doneg's heirlooms. He omitted not the root cause of three stable hands attempting this insane caper, his own unhappiness, his yearning for a heroic life pushing himself and his friends past any doubts reason could muster. Words gushed forth, a seemingly endless stream Hicussaw discovered was easiest to continue. Pausing was harder. The assault on Umfeb, sneaking to the heirloom vault, the demonic possession, tortured in chains, the desperate fighting escape from Bart's dungeons and Master Alders, the treachery of Free Folk and terror of werewolves.

Describing the trials he had suffered recently, an immense relief flooded Hicussaw. Composing this account helped him collect the memories, view his experiences from a place of peace and comfort, link emotions to thoughts, trace the direction his life had been driving towards perhaps from the very beginning.

"I don't suppose you're about to say this story is a terribly long and poorly conceived joke?" Fabsmit produced a little tamping rod, with which he compacted the burning tobacco in the bowl of his pipe.

Hicussaw scarcely believed what his shadow sight detected. His father's hands quivered, an instance of weakness Hicussaw could not recall witnessing the like of before. The bluehead said, "I'm sorry I'm not."

"The gods weep! You-you have a demon inside you...am I speaking to my son or the shadow of evil?" fear shook Fabsmit's voice.

"My father, it is me. The same Hicussaw who couldn't go a couple of days without being beaten by bullies, the same boy you had to break free of a pot stuck on his head, the same son who would neglect the present to wander the daydreams of his imagination."

"This demon does talk to you? Each day you live, each moment you breathe, even now?"

"Our father is handling the truth kindlier than we expected. We are surprised he has not taken a torch to us and dispatched our brothers to summon the baron's soldiers." Shadow Hicussaw remarked.

"Yes." Hicussaw shut his eyes, the image of his demonic clone simply shifted from his side in the dark to the infinite space of his mind. His lowered eyelids were irrelevant to his vision, shadow sight showed him the night clear as the day. "I can't block him, can't hide, can't flee. He knows every hint of a thought and seed of a feeling I have. His speech I hear in my ears."

“Then, what I say to you, is said to your demon too?”

Hicussaw uncovered his eyes, “You speak to us both.”

“Is my son dead?”

“I’m alive, my father. Had the demon destroyed me, would I have returned to you, to my home and blood, to mortal bonds meaningless to an immortal?”

“Perhaps playing your kin false would amuse a demon’s wicked heart, Hicussaw. A demonic will, may seek perverse pleasures.”

“Demon he is, but he shares my soul.” Hicussaw found himself defending Shadow Hicussaw, “He’s me, a more honest me.”

“What?”

“In the old stories, demons are the highest power of evil, rivalling the gods of the heavens. I’m hosting a demon, and the truth of the possession is different. I suspect the villainy folk remember and whisper about was the doing of the mortals possessed, the blame doesn’t belong to the demons alone.”

“What-what do you mean?”

“The shadow of my soul advises me to a selfishness almost cruel, his only wish being our protection. I’m in charge though, I lead us, I decide our will. He hasn’t betrayed a single choice I made. I’ve listened to his wisdom, he sees the depths of my heart and says what I was afraid to admit, what I was too weak to do.”

“Do you trust your demon?”

“I have faith he safeguards us, us and those we care for. We’ve proven my hero’s passion and goodwill keeps us from wreaking evil.”

“Hicussaw, you...*befriended*, this demon? He-it uses your flesh and soul. You embrace a life as its vessel in the world?”

“United, we are strong. We’ve survived the deadliest perils. Time deepens our bond and grows our power.”

“Your mastery of shadow magic advances?”

“I can teleport, conjure clones, become shadow, my mind sees all that shade and darkness

touches for octars around me.”

“Were you standing in my shoes today, would you believe a word of how harmless a demon possessing a man is, from the mouth of the demon?”

“No.” said Hicussaw, “I wouldn’t be quick to judge the demon host either.”

“You’re acting righteous?” Fabsmit nearly spat his pipe out, yanking it clear of his lips to rant freely. “How could you do something this stupid? Robbing the lord you serve, the rana no less?”

“Chasing a future worthy of my dreams.” Hicussaw yielded to a faint smile.

“I taught you to be smarter, Hicussaw!”

“Forgive me, my father.” Hicussaw bowed his head, “I couldn’t resist the temptation.”

“Your friends are jinxed twerps, their fae-brained thievery has ruined your life. Why would you join them?”

“They needed my aid.”

“He who helps others ends up needing help himself. A simple lesson saves lives!”

“Helping them in their crazed caper, helped me grasp what I was missing.”

“The excitement and honour of Bart Castle, a beautiful woman, good wages. What was your life lacking?”

“The purpose I tried forgetting.” Hicussaw said, “A destiny I was shirking, to better the world I was born into.”

“A demon with the heart of a hero, that’s what you think you are? This sounds the raving of a madman.”

“I know.” Hicussaw acknowledged.

“Can you remember your brother Ackwil?” Fabsmit puffed on his pipe.

“Barely.” Hicussaw answered.

“You were very young when he was taken from us.”

“Did it happen in a rebel or bandit raid?” Hicussaw asked, “Sorry, the details forsake me.”

“Rebels, bandits. Does it make a difference who killed him?” Fabsmit paused, “First time I lost a son.”

Hicussaw inferred this night was the second. “I understand.” he said the words before he accepted them.

“I’m not sure you do. The world isn’t grey, Hicussaw, it’s black and white. Should good meet bad, one wins and the other must lose. I reared you to choose the safer good. But you thought you knew better, you let a demon enter you, inside you, devouring your soul.”

“The possession was an accident, one I’m using to my advantage. The end of this misadventure may be the best fate I’d ever hoped for.”

“Accident or not, a disaster remains a disaster. A dog catches the wrath fever, goes biting mad. Doesn’t matter you grew up with him, played with him, earned your living every single day of your life with him by your side. You do what you have to, you stick him with the pitchfork till he stops whimpering, before he can hurt good folk. It’s not fair, it simply is.”

Hicussaw spoke, “We’re not monsters. My father, please listen to-”

“No! You and your friends, the poor girl whose love blinds her, you’re outlaws now. Noble lords and real heroes will hunt you the rest of your days. And not just in Kritland. Where would a demon host find sanctuary except among those desiring demonic allies? Are they the kind of people who want a better world?”

Hicussaw had no response.

“Our father is wise.” Shadow Hicussaw’s tone was soft, “The mortals drawn to our company would be of a villainous mind.”

“I’ve spent my life providing for my family, protecting them against the bad. I put food and drink on our table, clothes on our back, shoes on our feet, the roof over our heads. I paid our taxes so the druzhinniks defend us instead of molesting us. Then you show up, dragging a demon to our house, the home I kept safe for you and your siblings all these years. Each step you take carries the evil powers of a demon. Right behind you is the hatred and fear of mortals, fae and gods. Your presence endangers your family, your brothers and sisters, your mother. Your brother’s about to rear his firstborn child. The

longer you are here, the greater the risk to us.”

Hicussaw saw the tears roll down Fabsmit’s face, nothing could hide within the shadow. Strange, watching his father cry, a month ago he would have thought such a scene an impossible nightmare. In the moment, the sight did not disturb him the way he imagined it should. This felt normal, a part of the existence a frightful mistake or an inevitable destiny had conferred on him.

“I can’t help you Hicussaw. What you’ve done, the predicament you’re in, your problem will destroy our family.”

Fabsmit could see little beyond Hicussaw’s silence, no demon enhanced his vision.

“What do you want me to do, my son? What do you want me to do?”

Hicussaw did the responsible thing, “Take care of my sisters and my brothers and my mother. I’ll manage myself and my companions.”

Thus came Fabsmit’s turn of being unable to speak.

“We will leave the morning after tomorrow night.” Hicussaw said, “I only ask for a day to sort out my affairs here, and provisions to feed us on the journey.”

“Hicussaw, thank you.” Fabsmit said, “We’ll give you what we can my son.”

“Are you going to tell mother?” Hicussaw asked.

“I’m glad you didn’t. She shouldn’t hear this.”

“I think the same.”

They lingered in the dark, the nightly chitter of insects emphasizing the quietness of the twosome. Fabsmit finished his smoke, squeezing his turmoil of mind and heart under the lid of a father’s duty to be strong. Father and son headed indoors, seeking shelter from the cold reasoning and terrible secrets of the night, in the warmth and light of a loving household.

“Hicussaw will stay another night.” a dry eyed Fabsmit announced, “We’ll help him pack. Idiot boy bent off the rana, we can expect the Druzhina bothering him about the affair. Won’t take smarts to guess he’d try hiding where his kin are. Hicussaw must move on lest they find him.”

Gest started, “Is Hicussaw a sorcerer? Did he learn the casting of spells?”

Pulner said, “Don’t we get the whole story?”

“We don’t need to know more.” Fabsmit replied.

Lyt gently chided her husband, “Surely Fab. We’re blood. We deserve the truth.”

Hicussaw intervened, “Father’s right. You know what’s happening, the why isn’t important. I’ll be fine. A couple of nights in Pank Hit to recover my strength is enough.”

“Will Krat ever learn of her youngest brother’s fate?” Lyt asked.

“Not while Hicussaw’s in Pank Hit.” Fabsmit answered.

Lyt cast a fierce gaze upon her husband. Hicussaw reckoned his father would have to suffer months of her displeasure. Fabsmit’s eyes met hers firmly. Lyt looked to her son, she asked softly, “Hicussaw, where are you travelling next?”

‘No idea’ didn’t seem a calming answer to Hicussaw. Instead he said, “My secret, my mother. Can’t have you sending me letters there, either the delivering hussar betrays me or Lord Doneg’s soldiers follow your messenger.”

“You’re certain this is what you want, Hicussaw?” Lyt pressed, “I’d never hate you, no matter the crime. I may not approve of your misdeeds, but I love you through the good and the bad you do.”

“My mother. Me leaving is not because I fear you hating and abandoning me, I’ve no doubt you couldn’t. My friends and I, we’re hunted by the Rana of Tarfelm. We shouldn’t be here when the druzhinniks search Pank Hit.”

Lyt pursed her lips, “As you say my son.”

“Hic, don’t wonder if you can ask us for anything.” Nikoff said, “You can.”

“Terrible news.” Pulner added. His eyes caught Hicussaw’s, the demon host’s face was blank, yielding no clue to Hicussaw’s thoughts and emotions. Pulner conceded, “Hate to see you go, my brother.”

“Hicussaw.” Gest protested, “You told father everything and us nothing? We won’t sell you to the Druzhina.”

“No more questioning your brother.” Fabsmit enforced his decision, “A new day of hard work awaits us tomorrow. Hicussaw, you’re no stranger to the spare bed, though you

haven't slept in it since your boyhood. Wasn't so spare then. Your sweetheart is welcome to join you."

"Tellyn and I will keep our friends company on the floor." Hicussaw said.

"Er, can I have the bed?" Jams asked.

Pulner and Gest, their expressions might have been identical, would they soon receive a chance to quiz a sleepy Jams isolated from Hicussaw?

The palm of Calgemo's hand whacked the back of Jams' head, "Shut your mouth Jams! You're with me."

Family and guests blew out the candles and settled down to slumber. Hicussaw's kin withdrew behind the thin partition panels. The rush mats provided Hicussaw and friends a layer of separation from the raw dirt of the ground. Tellyn declined Lyt's offer of quilts, the redhead retrieved the blankets their knapsacks held and laid them atop the rushes. Hicussaw picked his and Tellyn's spot under the moonlight streaming through a window. Calgemo and Jams reposed near the door. The former Bart residents fell asleep readily, it was their first night safe after Hicussaw's possession, the culmination of an exhausting journey not merely physical but mental. In contrast, the occupants of the beds whispered eagerly, which Lyt was compelled to hush; "Boys! Girls! Sleep, now!"

Restraining her tongue, closing her eyes against her siblings, Gest gradually surrendered to the weariness of her daily labour. Not once did she ever remember the moment she ceased conscious thought and submerged into the void of slumber.

An immeasurable amount of time later, too short or too long, the sound of Krit speech yanked her cruelly to wakefulness. "Gest, wake up."

"Mmm." Gest murmured incoherently.

"Gest, it's me." the man's voice urged in her ear. His hand gently squeezed her shoulder. She did not repeat past failures, recognizing the speaker immediately. Gest half raised her eyelids, her sight adjusting to the unlit night best it could. She mumbled, "Hic, what are you-"

"Sshh. Keep your voice down, sister. I'm whispering to you alone."

"Oh." Gest swung her gaze, perceiving the shapes of Ifona and Nikoff sharing their bed on

her left and Pulner unaccompanied in his own on her right. Shadow hid much of Hicussaw kneeling at the side of hers.

“I’m asking a favour.” Hicussaw said.

“What favour?” Gest’s low tone demanded.

Hicussaw said, “Tomorrow, are you fetching the day’s water?”

“Me and mother.” Gest informed him. Where was this going?

“Mother, hmm. You could take time to yourself on the walk there. Say you were meeting a friend.”

“Why do you care?”

“You can visit the manor, carry a message to Urchesk for me.”

“Huck’s son?” Gest frowned, “Your old friend.”

“I wish to speak with him.”

Gest was offended, “You trust Urchesk over your blood?”

“Gest, it’s difficult. I’m sorry I can’t explain.”

Gest sighed, “I suppose I could.” Her eyes narrowed, “Do I get a reward?”

“Name your price.”

“An answer to a question. Why is the rana pursuing you?”

“Gest...”

“A bit of the truth then. Show me some magic.”

Hicussaw paused to consider her request. He was perfectly frozen, his sister began to suspect he was a statue. She was about to tap him when he spoke, “I can cast you a spell. You see me now?”

“Yes, I’m talking to you aren’t I?”

“Sort of, I’m still with Tellyn. Don’t want to move and risk ruining her sweet sleep. This is a shadow.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t scream.”

“I’m not a screamer.” Gest declared confidently, her tone a little excited.

In a moment, she proved her claim, her jaw hanging open dumbfounded. Gest witnessed Hicussaw melt and become a puff of the blackest smoke. His figure reformed close to instantly, “You won’t breathe a word of our chat and my magic, will you? Not to mother, father, our brothers, Ifona, Krat or Lasmenler?”

“Sweet unicorn farts!” Gest exclaimed softly, “I’ll hold your secrets, Hic.”

“We have a deal?”

“Sure as crows caw.” said Gest, “What’s the message?”

Hicussaw gave her a time and a place.

The early hours before sunrise saw Fabsmit’s household already bustling. All Hicussaw, Calgemo and Jams could do was get out of the family’s way, and avoid windows to ensure they weren’t spotted by villagers hurrying about their chores and field work. Hicussaw’s father and brothers washed faces at the tub and shaved as per individual preference. Ifona, Gest and Tellyn assisted Lyt’s cooking over the reignited hearthfire, served breakfast and packed lunch for the men. Then the women and girl of the house bathed themselves, while laundering the previous day’s worth of the family’s sweated and slept in clothing.

The men harnessed Draghoof to a mowing device, their ox they drove towards the fields. Hicussaw’s sister and mother left on a daily quest, lugging buckets of water back from the village well to refill the barrel in the house and the tub in the shed. A task requiring a couple of trips. Lyt was seen again first, Gest came later. When his sister arrived, Hicussaw paid Gest a questioning gaze, which she answered with a nod of confirmation. Hicussaw thanked his mother, telling her he would be away till lunch. He gathered his companions into the vacant shed, closed the doors and shadow walked the entire group to a wooded location.

Sunlight painted cheer onto the canvas of brown trees, their rich green foliage and the underbrush. Immediately drawing the band’s attention was a massive mound of stone. Moss and leafy vines obscured the vaguely facial features of its form.

“Where are we?” Calgemo enquired, “What’s the rock?”

Hicussaw answered, “Bowlykd’s Doom, half an octar beyond Mednib’s orchard.”

“Is it too quiet here?” Jams voiced his concern, “I may be a castle bumpkin, but we’ve usually heard birds and critters where there’s trees growing wild.”

“This stone landmark is called Bowlykd’s Doom? Doesn’t sound friendly.” Tellyn said.

“It’s cursed. Folk keep their distance, which is perfect for us. Should anyone unwelcome wander near, my shadow sight will warn us and we can hide or shadow walk.”

“Cursed how?” Calgemo sought the essential information.

“The moment the Doom slips inside even the corners of your vision, your eyes must stick to the stone. You see it, it sees you. You can’t blink or look aside. The Doom’s line of sight has to break first or both of yours together. To leave this place alive, try walking so you get another body, maybe a tree, between you and the Doom, then turn your back and run.”

“I’ve already blinked!” Jams panicked.

“Only one pair of eyes needs to be watching the Doom at a time. No chance of us all blinking in the same moment.” Hicussaw reassured the blackhead.

“What happens if you can’t see it but it sees you?” Calgemo pushed.

“The dead could say.” Hicussaw visibly shuddered, “When a man alone or an unlucky bunch fail the staring challenge, the loner and the whole group are never found again, no corpses and not a scent dogs could track.”

“You’re convinced the curse is real?” Tellyn asked.

“Scariest story we children were taught. A forgotten god cursed his own shrine, punishing a priest named Bowlykd, the poor bugger let his eyes shut and dozed off during a ritual prayer. No reason to think the tale false, my demon senses the Doom bears a powerful enchantment.”

“And you think bringing us here is safe?” Tellyn questioned Hicussaw’s judgement.

Calgemo whistled, “Brilliant idea leaving my sword and magic cloak behind. Thanks Hic, nothing to fight indeed!”

“We can teleport, and my clones won’t break their gaze for an eternity.” Hicussaw dismissed their fears.

A new Hicussaw coalesced and adopted a position staring down the Doom. Tellyn’s expression was definitely disturbed at the sudden appearance of her sweetheart’s creepy silent clone.

“Good enough I guess.” Calgemo shrugged, “Glad to be out of your house, Hicussaw. Tired of minding my words around your kin, don’t mean to offend.”

“I’m happy we can talk freely too.” Hicussaw said.

“This Urchesk of yours. You’re certain he won’t betray us.” Calgemo began.

“He’s smart, and a loyal friend. I’ll explain things to him properly. His advice can help us plan where we’re going.” Hicussaw said.

The demon spoke to his host, “We should have dispatched a shadow to the manor at night, so Urchesk could have met us at dawn itself.”

“We don’t want Urchesk frightened.” Hicussaw told him.

“We understand our reasoning, but Tellyn did not flee our messenger.”

“You thought she would!”

“We were wrong. We must have faith in ourself and the allies our destiny has granted us.”

“You were right! Tellyn loves me, and she was no stranger to our clones. The whole castle saw them. Urchesk might think our shadow a ghost. We’re not risking him reporting us to Lord Lansam’s Master of Spells.”

“I believe you Hic.” Jams voiced support.

“If you think we can trust him, I will.” Tellyn added.

“Hope Urchesk is more help than Fabsmit, eh? I’m not surprised your father’s abandoning you to demons and druzhinniks.” Calgemo said.

“Cal, you don’t know my father, he’s protecting my mother and siblings.” Hicussaw defended Fabsmit, “What else could he do?”

“His duty to his son.” Calgemo laughed, “Sorry I’m asking a lot.”

Tellyn intervened, “Calgemo, we can’t judge folk who choose not to get mixed up with a demon host and his enemies. Would we be different?”

“Stupid, Tellyn.” Calgemo countered, “We *did*, you *did*.”

“I’m not dragging my family into the mess your heirloom stealing scheme wreaked, Cal.” Hicussaw said.

Jams switched the subject of their conversation, “I am very surprised. I’ve travelled octars, met Free Folk, fought werewolves, spent the night in a village...and the cushiest bed I’ve slept on was the straw of Bart’s stables.”

Calgemo allowed himself to be diverted, he ceased the glare he and Hicussaw had been casting against each other. “That why you were craving to test Hic’s bed last night, Jams? Straw’s been your bedding a lifetime, my buddy boy, maybe you can’t enjoy any other.”

Hicussaw accepted the trivial topic, “The mattresses of my humble household’s beds are stuffed with straw, the feel of them matches the bales we used in the stables, though you’d not be brushing straw off yourself come the morning.”

“Jams, you should have laid on the rana’s bed. Soft and firm. Pillows to rest your head, like the comfort of a woman’s bosom. Wool stuffed mattress and feather in the pillows.” Calgemo reminisced.

“You’ve been to Lord Doneg’s bedroom?” Tellyn was incredulous.

“One of the guest rooms.” Calgemo admitted, “Noble bedrooms are furnished the same, give or take a closet or tapestry. Begged a girl to join me, she was afraid Lord Doneg would catch us sharing the bed.”

“You have to be jesting.” Tellyn said.

“I’ve heard Cal’s story, called him a liar.” Hicussaw recalled, “Bugger fetched a maid who worked the nobles’ floor of the keep. She cussed Calgemo, said she had repaid a favour she owed him by unlocking a certain bedroom door. She also swore she wouldn’t diddle Calgemo if he was the last man in Bart.”

“Bart not Tarfelm.” Calgemo emphasized, “My back rested on quality bedding, I should’ve slept like a baby in his mother’s arms. Couldn’t shut my eyes, listening for footsteps of a

baron's boots. I got up and snuck away after a kurn."

Several moments of a pleasant quiet passed. The orangehead turned slightly serious, "While talking of our happier days is fun, we ought to look a bit forward."

"We're waiting on Hicussaw's boyhood friend and his wisdom." Tellyn said.

"Not what's on my mind." Calgemo's gaze surveyed their environment, "We've got ground to play. You can practice your magic, Jams. Miscasting on Grandfather Belo nearly cost us you and Tellyn, Hicussaw saved your lives."

"He's right. Jams, your lack of control is dangerous." Hicussaw agreed, "We need you casting spells at will, not on accident."

"I know." Jams said, "I ought to train, somehow, what do I do? Can you teach me, Hicussaw?"

"Our very nature is magic. Can a man instruct a snake how one lifts a foot to walk? Spells are our limbs, we do not study them, we *are* them. The craft of sorcery is a mystery to us." Shadow Hicussaw said.

"I'm supernatural. My demon does my spells, I don't have a clue about mortal magicking myself." Hicussaw disappointed Jams.

"Kryter's the son!" ejaculated Calgemo, "How hard can magic be? Jams can spring a winner of a spell and Hic is wielding his demonic powers just fine."

"You got ideas, Rock-In-A-Sock Man?" Hicussaw nudged Calgemo.

"Number three of the many purposes of socks. I perfected the crotch kick too." Calgemo boasted of his genius, "Jams, repeat what you did to Barnemit and the werewolf, except aim clear of us."

"I can't, I don't know how I did it then." Jams was frustrated.

"Chuck the old thunder orb around a bit. Throw and scream." Calgemo's arm made a hurling motion.

"Didn't work on Grandfather Belo." Jams said miserably.

"Try." Tellyn urged, "When I started as a kitchen maid, I didn't cook egged toast different from eggs on toast. Today, my sleepy morning head could ready batches of both

flawlessly.”

The blackhead inhaled deeply. He faced the trees opposite of where Tellyn, Calgemo and Hicussaw were standing. His arm flung air, “Thunder orb!”

“See?” Jams referred to the absence of a lightning flash and a thunderous bang.

“Thunder Burst.” Hicussaw pondered, “Might help using the name Estka said sorcerers call it.”

Jams performed his move again, “Thunder Burst!”

Jams’ spellcasting practice dragged on, futile attempt following futile attempt. Tellyn offered encouragement while Hicussaw and Calgemo thought up tips to assist Jams’ effort, including conjuring a clone to act the part of a target and pretending this second shadow of Hicussaw was an angry Barnemit. Progress on Jams’ magical ability appeared non-existent, though the conversation did establish that Bart’s Kitchen Master had to be watering down the ale he sold ‘under a bridge’ to Bart’s labourers, everybody had heard rumours of Mistress Estka’s temper but none of those present had witnessed her rage, and Bowlykd the stable hand had pledged his love to both Hittel and Nams while informing neither of the other.

“Urchesk is half a kurn out.” Hicussaw said, “I’ll speak to him in privacy.”

“How far can we go?” Calgemo asked.

“Just enough to let me and Urchesk discuss the matter alone, and for the danger of Bowlykd’s Doom to ward off villagers.”

“What if he decides to spill our secrets to the Druzhina?” Calgemo pressed.

Hicussaw was not unprepared, “My clones will hold him at the Doom unharmed till we’ve left Pank Hit.”

“I won’t wish you good luck, Hicussaw.” Tellyn said, “Because you don’t need it.”

Jams, Tellyn and Calgemo gave Hicussaw his requested space, they ventured farther into the woods, gaining distance their mortal senses could not cover. Hicussaw waited a few moments, his gaze steady in the direction the shadows displayed Urchesk approaching. Then Hicussaw’s human eyes caught the brownhead, rather richly attired in a bright silken tunic cinched around the waist by an embroidered leather belt, though his

trousers and shoes were within the range of what a peasant could afford. He bore a satchel slung over his shoulder. The man Urchesk had been a boy the last time he and Hicussaw met. The two of them had survived and ended their childhood together, beginning their adult professions at Bart Castle and Pank Hit's manor. Urchesk had barely changed, he had grown meatier and put some weight on his bones, and his raiment did evidence his increased wealth. The bluehead wondered how he himself had changed. Did he look older too? Probably. Tired and battered? Possibly. Poor? Yes. What about demonic?

"Hey ho! Is anyone here?" Urchesk called. His pace was slow and his eyes were closed, avoiding the risk of exposure to Bowlykd's Doom.

"Urchesk, my buddy boy." Hicussaw greeted.

Urchesk's head turned towards the sound of Hicussaw's voice, "Hicussaw? Hic the Potwit? Is it really you?"

"Potwit? A stupid name owed to a dumb accident over ten years ago! When will you twerps let the pisswet joke go?"

"Gest wasn't lying, Hicussaw in the flesh!" Urchesk grinned blindly, "I wasn't sure I could believe your sister's tale of a secret return."

Hicussaw calmed, "Gladdens my heart to see you, Urchesk. I wish you'd renewed our friendship with a better choice of words."

"Pleasure to hear you again, Hic."

"Scribing treats you well. Your garb tells me this."

"My career is merely on the first rung of the ladder." Urchesk said, "I answer to Lord Lansam's Master of the Library, officially, but the older scribe Idwiller still gets to give me orders."

"Your career is the reason I won mine. The letter you wrote me and I got Master Jepkel to sign, it helped me nab the job at Bart Castle."

"That wasn't a favour. The months you spent working for Master Jepkel earned you his recommendation. He could've asked Idwiller to write it."

"Idwiller wouldn't call me 'descended from the heavens to groom horses', would he?"

“I was honest...and helping a friend.”

“And taking pity on a poor stable hand. I reckon a scribe serving a village baron sleeps better than a stable hand serving the rana.”

“Lord Lansam grants a bedroom to his Library Master and the library floor to his scribes. Too hard for my delicate tastes, so I sleep in my father’s house, a benefit of working where I was born.”

“If you want to stay nights in the manor, try the straw bales in the stables.” Hicussaw suggested, “My friends and I just finished deciding those bales are decent bedding.”

“Haven’t quite befriended the stable hands to allow me the privilege of sharing their bed, not since you left.” Urchesk chuckled, “You found new friends in Bart Castle.”

“Yes I did, couldn’t take my old ones there.”

“Gest didn’t mention you had come alone.”

“You’re right, I didn’t. We should talk first, only us two buddy boys.”

“Are your Bart friends here? My eyes are shut.”

“No. It’s you and me.”

“Why the sneaking, Hic? Why would you depart Bart Castle and hide in your family home? Did you break the king’s law or displease the rana something fierce? Did Barnemit get you in trouble? The monster enlisting in the Druzhina and being awarded a lieutenant’s rank is a fact I wouldn’t want to believe. In Pank Hit, he doesn’t bother us for months, but you must have seen him every day. And he saw you.”

“Can’t trust the folk of my own village.” Hicussaw said, “Urchesk, you’re not them. Of all Pank Hit, you’ve known the truth of my heart and hopes the longest.”

“Do I? Haven’t heard a ‘hello’ from you in three years.”

“You could have messaged me.” Hicussaw shifted blame.

“Would you reply to mine, or ignore them like your mother’s.”

“Oh, you learnt of my...silence.”

“I asked your family about you. Judging the guilt in your voice, I guess you never cared to

seek any news of Pank Hit.” Urchesk paused, “Shall we go where we can keep our eyes open.”

“Open yours now.”

“What? The Doom-”

“Is taken care of. We need not fear, Urchesk, you can trust me.”

The lids of Urchesk’s eyes lifted hesitantly, revealing the piercing blue orbs Hicussaw remembered. Shock widened the brownhead’s eyes, staring past one Hicussaw to the other Hicussaw holding an unblinking guard against Bowlykd’s Doom.

“The gods weep!” Urchesk stumbled back, “A doppelganger? No, doppelgangers kill the original. What is this?”

“A shadow clone I conjured and control.”

“Magic! Are you using an enchanted item or working sorcery?”

“Got no magic item.”

“I’ve read humans can’t study sorcery unless they possess a trait rare among mortals, the instinct for magic. Our whole boyhood, you never showed a hint of such talent.”

“I’m not a sorcerer, I’m a demon host.”

Urchesk froze. Horror seized his face. The brownhead swallowed his terror, impressively he managed to speak. “Is this the moment before you slay me?”

“We’re safe, the demon and I.” Hicussaw assured him, “You’re our friend, Urchesk.”

“Don’t have a choice, do I? I’m your friend or I’m dead.”

“We wouldn’t murder you.”

“Your demonic powers can do worse, I’m guessing.”

Hicussaw considered the notion, “Not sure.”

Urchesk realized Hicussaw actually didn’t know, “How did this happen?”

“I always imagined Barnemit would tire of playing and set his mind to end me, I was wrong. I destroyed myself.” Hicussaw proceeded to recount the misadventure of the

stable hands' larcenous caper, Barnemit arresting them, and his demonic possession. Hicussaw continued, into the adventure of their escape from Bart's dungeons and journey to Pank Hit. Urchesk did not listen quietly as Hicussaw's father had done, he inserted his queries, extracting details and clarifications. Hicussaw's confession to Fabsmit concluded the tale.

"A lot to unload on me, Hicussaw." Urchesk said, "Return after a week and I may speak of your predicament with words other than 'sweet unicorn farts'."

"I gave you the short and quick of it. I'm gone tomorrow morning. Whatever you have to say, now's the time."

"My best friend became a demon host. His demon desires a speech of me. Should I declare my love or my fright?"

"Why do humans ride horses?"

"Huh?"

"Why do humans ride horses?"

"Horses are faster?" Urchesk tried.

"They're too heavy to carry."

"A horse riddle, from the book I gifted you the day of your departure." Urchesk's memory was refreshed.

"The one book I've read front to back. I'm still your best friend who grew to manhood alongside you."

"Hicussaw, chatting up old buddies is a joy, but you're hiding from the rana. Why meet me and share these terrible things? What if I run scared to Lord Lansam's men-at-arms?"

"You won't betray me, not you Urchesk."

"Why take the risk? How do you think I can help you?"

"An old friend needs your smarts."

"My advice? Flee Pank Hit."

"Not the wisdom I'm looking for." Hicussaw said, "You understood me best before Bart

Castle and the demon. You just heard my story. Is this me, Hicussaw of Pank Hit, son of Fabsmit and Lyt? Is this how I'd be, what I'd do?"

Urchesk grasped the nature of Hicussaw's question, "Are you the boy who befriended me, the man who abandoned Pank Hit or the mocking creation of a demon?"

"I'm asking you for the answer." Hicussaw said.

"Surprised you're not protesting." Hicussaw communicated to his demon, "Urchesk might discover you've twisted my mind."

Shadow Hicussaw shrugged, "We are receiving the counsel of a trusted ally. We believe Urchesk can mark clearly the path of our destiny and free us of our doubt."

"Listening to your account, I gathered you and your demon are of one soul. In your head, there are no secrets, neither of you can conceal a feeling or a thought. Am I correct?" Urchesk asked.

"Close. Our minds stand apart, the joining of mortal and immortal is not complete. My shadow reads my thoughts and explores my memories. He says, given time, we shall be one in the manner you describe."

"Can you see his memories and read his thoughts?"

"He speaks his mind to me."

"Do you sense his thinking yourself? Or must you wait for what he chooses to say?"

"I hear what he wishes me to hear." Hicussaw admitted.

"We would not lie to ourself." Shadow Hicussaw insisted, "Such a barrier of untruthfulness would divide our thoughts and intent, delay our bonding. Any deceit would be undone as our mortal half comes to know entirely our immortal half without restriction. The dishonesty could drive us mad when our minds are united."

"Why can't you read the demon? He won't allow you?" Urchesk probed.

"Until our bond deepens, our human nature lacks the strength to endure our many lives, they stretch through ages the mortal races do not remember." Shadow Hicussaw said.

Hicussaw replied to Urchesk, "Peeking at a demon's memory could shatter a tiny human mind. Were I exposed to the whole being of my shadow too early, his immortal demonic

spirit would drown Hicussaw and send me into oblivion. Once we are joined in both body and mind, I won't have to read him and he won't read me, I'll *be* him and he'll be me."

"In your future, the demon completing his possession of you, will you think like him?" Urchesk pressed, "Or will the demon think and feel like you?"

"We would be much the same way we are now."

"Who decides your deeds today and before? You or the demon? Does one of you take the lead most of the time, or all the time? Perhaps it's an even split?"

"Together, we judge the world and how we should deal with it. I, our mortal half, gets the choice to act."

"The demon fights you?"

"Our will is not a contest. Our immortal half has his own ideas but he bows to the guidance of our mortal half."

"Alright." Urchesk contemplated the bluehead's state of mind. The brownhead demanded, "Hicussaw, tell me the reason you went to Bart Castle."

"We wanted more wages. Maybe meet a pleasant girl we could love and marry."

"This is the lie you told everyone, even yourself. The truth was plain to my thinking."

"How so?"

"Within a month of Nikoff wedding Ifona, you were gone. You thought you saw a happiness to soothe the misery of your broken dreams, and you chased it."

"I was running." Hicussaw acknowledged.

"From what?"

"Barnemit and this village."

"An excuse, Hicussaw. You were escaping your failure."

"Couldn't escape."

"Made the effort, didn't you? The only life you cherished was the new one Bart Castle granted. Ignored your family and friends to forget the old life Pank Hit provided."

“I’m sorry Urchesk. I tried burying my passion in the past. You guessed then I was hurting, the deeds my heart was convinced were mine lay forever beyond my reach. I needed a fresh beginning.”

“You can’t flee a desire of the kind afflicting you Hicussaw. Who you are follows you everywhere, your ambition is the reason you grabbed a thread of the slightest hope, rode a steed of bad choices down to demonic possession.” Urchesk lectured.

“Yes, our halves finding each other was our fate.” Shadow Hicussaw remarked.

“An enemy of the world, a monster pursued by the rana, you dropped into your father’s house, and last night, called yourself a hero in front of the man who spawned you.” Urchesk continued, “A hero demon sounds a ridiculous fiction. A character out of a comedy, no, a tragedy.”

“A role we were meant to play.” Hicussaw said, “Our heart is content striving towards the dream of my boyish days, no matter the cost, dying on this road is welcome over the pisswet peace we had. Working a fair job, eating and drinking, revelling in the company of friends, loving Tellyn, feels utterly *wrong*. How can we put words to our suffering? My *soul* ached. Not anymore. I’m fulfilling the destiny I was born to live.”

“Dreaming is easy, doing is tough. The demon’s magic supports your heroism.”

“Power an army of heroes would struggle against.” Hicussaw’s voice was cold, “An opportunity perfect for my purpose.”

“Your purpose.” Urchesk laughed, “If everybody helped each other, nobody would need help. How will murder clones and teleportation make your favourite sentence something greater than a mere fantasy?”

Hicussaw paused, “We haven’t had a spare moment to ponder our future.”

“What’s been keeping you busy?”

“Survival.” Hicussaw spat bitterness.

“Isn’t that what you did in Bart’s stables? One day to the next. Waste of a demon I reckon.”

Hicussaw thought swiftly and spoke earnestly, “I’ll pick up hero’s quests. The world has plenty of monsters and villains to fight.”

“The rana and most beneath him brand you a villain and monster.”

“What are you saying?” anguish contorted Hicussaw’s face, “Am I doomed to be a villain, endangering the people I seek to save? Battling the heroes and soldiers who deserve my aid? You believe this my fate?”

A silent Urchesk stared long and hard, his gaze transfixing the eyes of his pained best friend.

“Urchesk?” Hicussaw pleaded.

Urchesk opened his mouth, “You’ve safeguarded the lives of your companions, rescued a backstabbing convict, forgiven Free Folk who plotted your death and protected those same jinxbaits from hungry werewolves. I don’t know if everybody will help each other, but you’re helping everybody you can, even those you shouldn’t.”

“Our ally’s vision pierces through confusion to the truth.” Shadow Hicussaw said softly.

“You’re impressed?” Hicussaw asked his shadow.

“Very.” Shadow Hicussaw said.

“You *are* a hero,” Urchesk stated firmly, “a source of change, turning the world a little less deadly.”

“I am a hero demon then? Not a raving madman losing himself to evil?”

“How far the demon influences your will, I’m no fit judge. I wouldn’t trust my answer.” Urchesk said, “Ask me of your character, of who you are right now talking to me...I think, the boy who was my best friend, has a chance to be the man he wished he could grow into.”

“Thank you Urchesk.” emotion weighed Hicussaw’s tone.

“Barnemit caught you robbing noble heirlooms. Thank your shadow. Had the demon not possessed you, you’d be chained and tortured in Bart’s dungeons.”

Shadow Hicussaw said, “We understand why this man is beloved to us.”

“Where are you going Hicussaw?” Urchesk asked, “You can’t remain in Pank Hit, your family risks the wrath of the barons and their druzhinniks.”

“Haven’t done the planning.” Hicussaw appeared embarrassed, “We must stay ahead of

the rana. Worst case I can imagine, Lord Doneg assigns Barnemit the task of tracking us.”

“I nicked this. Reasoned you were on the run, thought you could use it.” Urchesk reached inside his satchel and drew a lengthy scroll of yellowing paper. Hicussaw moved closer. Urchesk untied the string binding the scroll. The fastener, woven through metal hoops in the ends of the paper, dangled loosely as Urchesk unfurled the document.

“Central Selmarr.” Hicussaw uttered, his eyes roving over the population centres, names and landmarks inked onto the paper.

“Dussopo, No King’s Country, the Lorrان Mountains, Lanish Commonwealth.” Urchesk tapped the countries and regions he was naming, “We’re here, Pank Hit, province of Tarfelm, Kingdom of Kritland.”

“Where would we be safe?”

“There’s the challenge.” Urchesk said, “Most places won’t treat a demon host warm and friendly.”

“Looking at a fifth of a continent and no destination in sight.”

“Not a fifth of the octars. Some scholars work on measuring Selmarr coast to coast. They agree Central Selmarr is really a seventh of the octars, the North and South are a lot larger.”

“Urchesk, did they check how keen folk are on hunting demons? Maybe note where they aren’t? Otherwise, I don’t think their scholarship is important for our goals.”

Suggested Urchesk, “My bet is No King’s Country. The barbarians wouldn’t love you, but neither would they bother attacking and driving you out of their territory. Stick to yourself and you should have peace.”

“Not much of a hero if we’re hiding in a king-forsaken corner of the world, those lands give the words ‘king-forsaken’ meaning.”

“Saving people while they’re trying to slay you is what I’d call stupid and you’d call difficult.” Urchesk said, “*I* know you’re a hero, the world you’re speaking about doesn’t.”

Hicussaw sighed, “We’ll take the map. We depart Pank Hit tomorrow, dawn.”

“Guess this is the last I see of you.” Urchesk’s words seemed to linger in the air.

The bluehead hesitated, uncertain of his response. Like Urchesk, Hicussaw felt the ‘not quite pain’ of their reunion ending and separation resuming. A sadness dulled because both had already moved on, having accepted the necessity, this was not their first time either. Hicussaw attempted humour, “Until I stumble into another life changing predicament and return seeking your advice, Urchesk the Smart.”

Focus, Jams commanded himself, he could do it. Twice previously he had cast the spell. Something primal in him was behind the magic, reacting when he faced peril. He had to trigger his sleeping instinct, convince the bestial unthinking parts of his mind the threat was real.

The fist connected somewhere below his ribs. Agony exploded in his gut, Jams gasped for air, “Thun-thunder Burst!”

Calgemo had punched him, lightly or so he had claimed he would.

“I’m fine.” Jams wheezed.

“No magic.” the orangehead observed, “Hmm. Shall we try a crotch kick?”

“Kryter’s the son!” Jams ejaculated, “Is that your answer to all problems?”

“If it works on everybody swinging a twig and berries, yes!”

“No, jinx you!”

“Doesn’t hurt too bad, Barnemit-”

“I’m a man, not a monster.”

Tellyn intervened, “Thrashing Jams isn’t improving his spellcasting, Calgemo. Jams, you don’t have to try each of Calgemo’s fae-brained ideas.”

“I think,” Jams breathed, “I need a break.”

Hicussaw materialized in their midst, clutching the scroll fastened shut.

“Urchesk got you a welcome gift?” Calgemo enquired.

“Your friend left?” Tellyn asked gently.

“He’s gone. But he gave us this.” Hicussaw patted his scroll, “A map of Central Selmarr.

We can plot our course on it.”

“Did he help you decide where we’re off to?”

Hicussaw said, “I’m tired of the sneaking and running and fighting, I want to go home. But I’m already home and there’s nowhere else to go.”

“Um, Hic? Are you alright?” Jams was concerned.

“Dos Agg.” Tellyn proposed, “My father would not bid me to flee my home, he’d keep us a secret under his roof.”

The bluehead suspected an unspoken criticism of his own parent’s behaviour.

Shadow Hicussaw lashed out, “She can’t guarantee her father’s loyalty. Did he sign a contract by the king’s law? Ask her.”

Hicussaw preferred not mentioning his demon’s sentiment, “The town of Dos Agg is small. The Druzhina knows you’re missing, they will learn we were lovers. Dos Agg and Pank Hit would be first on their list of places to search.”

“Brin Dank?” Calgemo ventured, “We failed Lord Anrieslem’s quest, and the whole shadow demon affair would make him our enemy, but the city is big. We stay away from trouble and we’d be hard to track.”

“Urchesk was saying No King’s Country.” Hicussaw raised the notion.

“An uncivilized land, full of savage men and beasts.” Tellyn said, “We should settle in a place we won’t be noticed or hunted. Calgemo’s talk of a city sounds good, we could get lost among the crowds and still lead a normal life. Maybe Osis Granem, not Brin Dank.”

“Our life will never be normal. We’ll never have the peace to breed a family.” said Hicussaw.

“Aren’t we family?” Jams asserted, “After the trials we’ve endured together-”

“Jams, no.” Calgemo softly hushed his black and white haired friend.

“Hicussaw, then what’s the end of this nightmare?” Tellyn demanded, “When do we stop running?”

“Tell. If you want to continue the meaningless lives we had before my possession, you shouldn’t have joined us.” Hicussaw expressed.

“What?” Tellyn was shocked.

“Courage! Now we shall unleash the truth!” Shadow Hicussaw spoke, “How often have we thrust her into the jaws of death? She would be safe and happy in Bart Castle had she not followed us. And for what? The reward she pursues is a lie! We love being a hero, it is not peace or her we crave, despite our deceit. We will not drag her after us as we fulfil our heart’s ambition!”

“Our shadow magic grants us opportunities to shape our destiny. We can’t ignore the chance to do good in this horrible world we were born into.” Hicussaw said aloud.

“Destiny?” Tellyn questioned, “Is not the embrace of your arms my destiny? And the kiss of my lips yours?”

“My shadow and I are two halves of a single soul. Our fate was to unite, and complete the heroic quest our mortal half accepted while a mere child.”

“You’re my soul mate! Doesn’t the bond between our souls matter? I can’t just give up on what we have.”

“We shared a passion I would only sacrifice to spare you the pain I’m causing now. Tell, my life is heading where I’ve always dreamed, a journey you think a nightmare. We must walk different paths.”

“Argetch pleaded with me,” Tellyn’s voice was strained, “to desert you. Her reasoning held no flaw, yet I couldn’t! Couldn’t forsake the feelings you stirred in my heart.”

“Argetch was your best friend at Bart. Listening to her was right. Coming back to us the night we left Bart Castle was a mistake.”

“You made me, Hicussaw, the very thought of you! You-I, I remembered the joy we gave each other! I cherished our romance! You promised me your hero nonsense was finished! Against wisdom I believed you, because it was my deepest wish! I love you Hicussaw! You love me! We’re two sweethearts in love!”

Calgemo and Jams were trying to fade into the background, expressionless and quiet, except their trade of worried glances botched the effort. They were obvious to Hicussaw’s shadow sight, to his human eyes and to Tellyn’s probably. The gods weep! Hicussaw regretted not waiting and conversing with his sweetheart in privacy. Such a simple courtesy, the least he owed her, and he had denied her. Unfortunately, the door of

this crugged discussion had been unlocked and no retreat was possible. Jinx his stupidity, jinx his cowardice! He should never have summoned her during their dungeon escape! Said Hicussaw, “We’re sorry, Tellyn. We ought to have been honest to you and ourself. The blame rests upon us.”

“Who chooses your words? This isn’t you.” Tellyn said, “The demon’s changed you.”

“The shadow has aided me.”

“You scare your sweetheart, Hicussaw. The evil dwelling in your body and soul grows stronger. Sometimes I look in your eyes and see the darkness. These days and nights, I’m not sure whether I speak to the man I love or a demon.”

The bluehead declared, “The demon is me. I am him. We are Hicussaw.”

“Jinx me.” Jams muttered.

“You can fight its vile power, you convinced me you would.” Tellyn pushed bravely.

Hicussaw laughed dryly, “Has there ever been a tale of a man reclaiming his soul from a possessing demon?”

Tellyn stared. Jinx us! Hicussaw cussed, watching her grieve. Sorrow and confusion twisted her face almost painfully. Did her eyes hint at terror? How well he had mastered the art of reading his lover! The bruises his rogue shadow had placed upon her throat were finally gone, taking his relationship it seemed. Tears streaked her cheeks, “Hicussaw, how could you?”

Calgemo would bear no longer the unfolding disaster of Hicussaw and Tellyn’s romance. He said, “Hold your horses, my buddy boy and chummy girl.”

Hicussaw intended to silence the orangehead, “Calgemo, please-”

“The pair of you aren’t seeing straight! Hicussaw, Tellyn, this is not an end to anything.” Calgemo insisted.

Tellyn could not manage another word. Hicussaw’s tone was reproachful, “Cal, what are you babbling?”

Calgemo ignored the bluehead. He stomped in front of Tellyn, “Hicussaw fought dungeon abominations, Free Folk and a werewolf patriarch. His demon doesn’t endanger us, his shadow magic is the reason we’re alive.”

Tellyn's weepy eyes yielded their attention to Calgemo. He continued, "We've been thinking about this wrong. Hicussaw's power advances every passing day. We've heard the old tales of mighty demons and the fantastic deeds heroes wrought for the hope of defeating them. Ask yourself, how could we safer than near Hicussaw Demonhost?"

Jams sought an answer, "Um, if we had a bunch of gods on our side, but they won't be since we're the friends of a demon host..." Jams comprehended the fact he wasn't helping Calgemo's argument.

Calgemo spun towards the blackhead, "Hasn't Hicussaw proved his goodwill, his noble heart? The demon can't corrupt him, Hic is converting the demon to his gentle ways!"

"Yes!" Jams was eager to remedy the previous error, "Hicussaw wouldn't even hurt a rat unless the rat bit him first."

Calgemo preached on, "The future before us is unlike any story we've been told. We get to decide how it goes. Tellyn, there's no reason you and Hicussaw can't remain lovers. We'll have an army of clones defending us. We can live how we want, where we want. No force of the world can break us apart."

Hicussaw resisted, "Calgemo, it's not the same. My demonic possession and heroic adventuring is not the life Tellyn and I desired together."

"The fantasy you two pictured while stable hand and kitchen maid can't come true? Great! You can't imagine how much better the years ahead will be!"

"We won't ruin innocent lives by branding them demon friend in the reckoning of all good hearted folk. Not our family and not the woman we love."

Calgemo smirked and addressed Tellyn, "The love isn't gone, is it?"

He did not await her response, instead Calgemo spoke to the bluehead. "Hicussaw, I'm sorry I played you, using your sozzled speech to dear friends, just to win your aid in my thievery. I took advantage of our friendship. My selfish deeds ask your forgiveness."

"You feeling bad about anything you do is rare." Hicussaw was visibly astonished, "None of us bear you a grudge, me or Tell or Jams."

"Now thank me for rescuing your destiny from the stables of Bart. One could say I led you to the demon."

Hicussaw gritted his teeth, “Cal, us not strangling you, doesn’t mean your friends are happy you robbed them of the peace every commoner enjoys.”

“Who do you think you’re fooling? Peasants are stuck scraping a living off the boots of noble masters. We four have the whole world open to us. Pick a quest, Hicussaw. We can free the halfbreed races the harpies enslaved or destroy the Bloody Horde threatening the satyrs. Which will it be?”

Hicussaw replied, “The village. What’s happening?”

“Huh?” said Calgemo.

The weak shade of gardens and cruck houses in the daylight allowed Hicussaw glimpses of women and girls abandoning their homes. Elders, grown men and pets were running too. Were they shouting? He wished his shadow sight could deliver their sound to his ears. Wait, were those armed strangers barging into people’s houses?

“Pank Hit is under attack!” Hicussaw cried.

“Dispatch a shadow to warn Urchesk, he’s not reached the village yet.” Hicussaw instructed his demon.

“What the jinx?” Calgemo reacted.

“Lord Doneg!” Jams concluded, “He found us!”

“Why would the rana harm his own subjects?” Tellyn spoke up, her voice calmer, “He wouldn’t slaughter a village because he tracked a demon here.”

“Did Grandfather Belo follow our scent?” Calgemo wondered, “A surprise attack around noon and lunch is the kind of strategy the jinxbait would favour.”

“The enemy aren’t shape shifters and they’re not wearing druzhinnik uniforms!” Hicussaw informed his companions, “There are foreign races among their number.”

“An invading army?” Jams feared.

“No standard equipment, few are armoured, bandits or rebels is my guess.” Hicussaw said.

“Sweet unicorn farts!” Calgemo abused rather excitedly, “Hic! Saving the village will prove you’re a hero! You can show the world the truth of your possession.”

“Tellyn and Jams, stay near the Doom but out of its line of sight. Suppose a foe gets past the Doom, Jams, I trust you to do your thing.” Hicussaw said.

“I don’t have my crossbow!” Jams protested.

“Our arms and my cloak are stashed in your house!” Calgemo reminded the bluehead.

“Bowlykd’s Doom is far from the village.” Tellyn said, “I’ll be safe, Jams you can accompany Hic and Cal.”

Jams paled at the thought of heading towards battle. He swallowed his terror and asked, “My buddy boys, you’re sure I can fight?”

“Jams, you don’t have to.” Hicussaw answered.

“The Thunder Burst works when you’re staring down death, exactly the moment your spell could save us.” Calgemo said, “We could use your help.”

“Didn’t do anything to Belo.” Jams recalled.

“A werewolf running scared of Hicussaw, your magic knew you weren’t in danger.” Calgemo went on, “But now you could be, and your spell will do its job, I bet my life on it.”

“Right.” Jams was nervous, “I’ll join you then.”

Calgemo grinned, “My buddy boy. Hicussaw can’t die, me and you aren’t as tough, you guard my back and I’ll guard yours.”

“Hicussaw.” Tellyn called.

Hicussaw paused his internal dialogue of man and demon, directing his gaze upon the woman he once considered his.

The redhead’s hand wiped her tears, Hicussaw perceived a certain strength in the firm manner of her gesture. She said, “Protect your family, live your destiny, be the hero of your dreams. Calgemo, Jams, don’t get killed over this idiot.”

“We won’t.” Calgemo assured her, “We start building Hicussaw’s heroic reputation today. You’ll see our lives aren’t done.”

Hicussaw returned to conversation with his shadow, “Why can’t Calgemo understand? Tellyn does not care to abide our hero’s dream.”

“Calgemo is not our present concern.” Shadow Hicussaw said, “These unknown foes are too many.”

“This time we’re not drunk on moonshine!” Calgemo declared, “We can beat these jinxbaits, whoever they are.”

Chapter IX

Shadows deposited Hicussaw, Calgemo and Jams inside the four wattle and daub walls of Hicussaw's family home. The three had their backs to the door, which was barricaded by the table family and guests had once dined upon. A woman's scream greeted their appearance. Hicussaw recognized his mother's shriek. Lyt stood awkwardly clutching Calgemo's sword, behind her was the pregnant Ifona brandishing a stool and Gest wielding Jams' crossbow which she had loaded herself. At Lyt's feet, Softpaw hissed.

"Mother, don't strike!" Gest squeezed Lyt's arm, "It's Hicussaw!"

"Sorcery!" Ifona gasped.

"Hic-Hicussaw?" Lyt trembled, "Did-did you teleport?"

"Mother, we have no extra moments to explain my powers." Hicussaw appraised their situation, "What are you doing? Why haven't you left for the manor?"

"I saw the bloodshed outside, it's not safe!" Lyt pronounced, "We might not survive the distance to Lord Lansam's gate!"

"You can't stay, they're breaking down doors!" Hicussaw said, "I'll teleport you!"

"We can carry everyone to the manor, can't we?" Hicussaw proposed to his demon, "Not my blood alone."

"Be mindful of our mana." Shadow Hicussaw cautioned, "Teleporting a village worth of men, women and children would drain us. We could not fight or heal afterwards."

"So we abandon them to die?"

"We battle and distract the enemy, giving the peasants a chance to reach the manor." Shadow Hicussaw said.

"I'll take my sword, Mother Lyt." Calgemo relieved Lyt of the weapon.

"Er, this is mine." Jams gingerly took his crossbow from Gest's hands, "Ah, you loaded the bolt but didn't cock the bow."

"I'm such a halfwit!" Gest cussed, "The bow wouldn't shoot then?"

“No, the bolt is just lying there.” Jams cocked the crossbow, “Now it can fire.”

“My son, where are your father and brothers?” Lyt asked, her voice and face anxious to confirm their place among the living.

Hicussaw’s shadow sight extended from himself as centre. Shifting to his home had brought more of the village within his range, plus Lone Oak hill and Baron Lansam’s manor, though the bright sun was limiting his demonic vision. He glanced at a familiar figure repeatedly. The size and shape fit. Chain mail, lacking a tabard. Could it be? Nasal helmet, a strange wooden shield and a sword in hand. The shadows showed Hicussaw no colour. Was the man here on his scheduled inspection? Had he been pursuing Hicussaw’s band from Bart Castle? Where were his friends, had he risked combat without his thugs’ support? Why did he not attack the fighters devastating Pank Hit? He was running besides them in an incomplete druzhinnik uniform. They were not accosting him either. A traitor? Had the monster turned traitor? Barnemit the Monster, was there no end to his wicked deeds?

Hicussaw spotted an object of his search. Nikoff! It was his eldest brother, wasn’t it? And Pulner! Where was Fabsmit? The bluehead sent a pair of clones to escort his brothers.

“On their way back!” Hicussaw answered Lyt, “I’ll teleport them too, first you three!”

“How do you know they’re fine?” Lyt was not comforted.

“A spell, please don’t question me!” Hicussaw pleaded, he seized his mother’s wrist.

“What of your sister Krat?” Lyt asked.

“She’s unhurt, I’ll get her next! Ifona, drop the stool! Hold my hand, all of you!”

Hicussaw ordered them. Ifona complied, Gest first picked up Softpaw then grabbed her brother’s forearm.

“Jams, Cal. Prepare to fight!” Hicussaw and the women of his household vanished in a puff of dark smoke.

Calgemo and Jams recovered their cloak and ammunition respectively from the shelves. The orangehead drew the hood of his stealth cloak over his head. A loud crash splintered the door, the blood stained edge of an axe blade sticking through. The duo of former stable hands heard angry grunting on the other side. The axe was wrenched free.

“A window.” Calgemo whispered to Jams, “Try shooting the bugger.”

Jams nodded wordlessly, he moved to the closest window set in the same wall as the door, its shutters open and ready. The axe struck the door again, penetrating further and widening the crack before twisting loose. Carefully Jams positioned himself to avoid being visible to their assailant. The blackhead raised his self-cocking crossbow, took aim, and pulled the trigger. A roar of rage followed the release of Jams’ bolt.

“The gods weep!” Jams shrank from the window, “I missed! He saw me!”

“Jinx this!” Calgemo began heaving at the table blocking the door, “Jams, reload!”

The axehead broke cleanly through the door. Calgemo had shoved the table off, he gripped the door by its iron latch and yanked it open, the axe still caught in it. Calgemo beheld their opponent. A satyr man (Calgemo guessed by his trousers), ears sticking tall and pointed out of flowing dark tresses, chinstrap beard framing the dusty red skin of his long face. He was clad in a gambeson, trousers and iron hoofshoes. Suddenly disarmed, their foe’s surprise did not slow him much. He successfully dodged the slash of Calgemo’s sword, and unsheathed the dagger his belt bore. His quick reflexes launched a kick at Calgemo’s shin.

“Ow!” Calgemo buckled, collapsing onto his knees and instinctively propping himself up with his sword, defenceless against their foe. Jams seized his friend’s cloak and hauled him back barely in time to escape the stabbing dagger.

The man grabbed his axe. Jams shot him, the broadhead piercing his chest. The bolt did not look to have sunk deep, caught in his gambeson’s quilted layers. It did give their enemy pause. Lightweight self-cocking crossbows fired and loaded significantly easier, great for Jams who required multiple shots to hit a mark, but their armour piercing power was negligible compared to a war crossbow. Calgemo wasted not their reprieve, he scrambled to his feet. The foe flung his dagger, both orangehead and blackhead ducked, the blade flying over their heads.

The enemy yanked out Jams’ bolt, chucking it at Calgemo’s face. Calgemo’s sword batted it aside, a feat the orangehead felt a pang of pride about.

The man advanced, axe swinging. Calgemo met him blade to blade. Steel tasted steel, clanging and grinding viciously. Calgemo and the enemy waged personal combat; axe chops dodged and parried, sword thrusts and slashes blocked. The orangehead was

forced on the defensive and losing ground. Jams hastily reloaded, he left two bolts in his quiver. He dared not fire, his aim was terrible when he had a clear shot, and currently he could hit Calgemo.

A fourth individual jumped into the battle, the odds of two on one changed, to three on one. Hicussaw tackled their foe from behind. The man bellowed frustration, axe above his head, Hicussaw restraining his arms.

“No!” he screamed in Lolbol, “Cowards! Fight fair!”

Calgemo saw in their opponent’s eyes the certainty of doom, a prediction the orangehead fulfilled. Swiftly did the sword of Calgemo plunge into the man’s belly. The enemy groaned, his struggling ceased, and his axe thudded to the ground. Calgemo withdrew his blade. Hicussaw let their stricken enemy crumple upon the rush covered floor, his own blood pooling around him. Calgemo’s nose detected urine and feces, either the dying man’s muscles were no longer concerned about holding in excretory substances or the sword had ruptured bladder and intestines.

Jams and Calgemo knew the odd manner of movement Hicussaw was employing, the perfect stillness between actions and his persistent silence. This Hicussaw was a clone summoned to their aid. The bluehead bent towards their foe’s axe.

“Shadow of Hicussaw, may I have the axe?” Jams asked, “My quiver’s near empty.”

Hicussaw ignored Jams, hefting the weapon Jams wanted. The bluehead pivoted and strode off, presumably to find another victim.

“Reckon the clones can’t understand requests, Jams.” Calgemo’s foot nudged their fallen enemy who moaned weakly in response. Said the orangehead, “You best take this poor twerp’s dagger. Hic’s cobold knife is here too.”

Draks and Cejora had led the charge, while Barnemit chose to receive their orders as a common member of the vampyre’s raiders. First, the mass of fighters assaulted Lone Oak Hill and the harvesting farmers. Cejora remained there, managing the raiders’ effort to enter the tower and slay the garrison. Draks pressed on to the village. The former Lieutenant of the Druzhina thanked the gods Lord Senjdaq’s raiding force was largely disorganized, following their commanders in the loosest sense, they possessed none of the discipline the training yard of Bart Castle had drilled into him. Nobody noticed

Barnemit was not wetting his blade with the blood of Pank Hit's residents.

Resistance had been minor. A minority of the peasant men attempted fighting back, using the tools of their labour. A couple of Lansam's soldiers had been caught on patrol, outnumbered and destroyed. Were it not for Barnemit's quick thinking and good fortune, he and Woss and Dafred could have suffered the fate of those patrols.

Barnemit had presented to Draks the problem of leaving the tower's garrison intact to attack their rear. Accepting Barnemit's advice, Draks began the raid of Pank Hit on Lone Oak Hill. Thus Lone Oak Hill's tragedy alerted Pank Hit's herdsman to the danger, granting them and their dogs an opportunity to abandon the livestock animals and flee.

Barnemit ran amidst the noise of a village sounding very much in its death throes. Screamed dread and dogs barking, cries and yelps of pain, triumphant roaring and laughter, incoherent weeping, the crash of doors forced open, pleas for mercy, cries of pain. Whether cornered and unable to escape or too slow and unable to outrun, some villagers fought a last stand. Men, dogs, even women and cats, defended themselves and their families. Bravery bought their lives a few more moments.

Virgins were the prize Lord Senjdaq craved. The raiders snatched every boy and girl who appeared below the age of puberty or just above it, dragging and carrying them to the village square where Draks was having captives bound for transport. These children were the unfortunate survivors, those older were simply killed. This did not mean the raiders were entirely disinterested in loot, plenty paused to rob corpses and households, stealing coin and items they valued and bites of food. They might have taken prisoners for their own pleasure had Draks allowed them.

Barnemit could put names to many of the village's frenetic faces and the dead ones. Did they recognize he was Barnemit the Monster, flaunting a despoiled uniform and fae crafted shield? Did they care? They hated him when he had been a mere boy and later a druzhinnik officer. He doubted their attitudes could worsen greatly. Barnemit's sight arrived at the cruck house that had sheltered him prior to Bart Castle's barracks. Door and windows hung open. He was confident stepping inside would tell him the place was empty.

Barnemit raced, he did not bother setting foot in the garden of his family home. They were on the move, and he had to find them before a servant of the vampyre nabbed Skera.

Yes! Heading down a dirt road were several peasant families, a pair of human raiders giving chase. Barnemit joined the pursuit, he was not speedy enough to reach the warriors as they caught the closest family. Sword and mace hacked and bashed the shouting adults, the vampyre's fighters barely slowing their stride, their true targets were still running, the older boy toting a puppy under one arm and having grabbed his little brother's hand. Tough young bugger, Barnemit thought. The children were scooped up, kicking and crying, in the arms of the men who had murdered their parents and elder siblings. Light blows from the handles of the raiders' weapons subdued their pathetic squirming and dropped the yipping puppy to be stomped on.

Hooves thundered in Barnemit's ears, a centaur wearing a leather chestpiece and clutching a spear overtook him. This third raider trotted between the successful duo, aiming for the next in line, a smaller family composed of man, woman and girl. Barnemit was right behind the tauric spearman. The former lieutenant reduced his pace, Skera satisfied the key demand of Lord Senjdaq, the jinxed beastman wouldn't kill her.

Barnemit watched. Hearing the cries of the villagers to his rear, the father of the family turned. A mistake, Barnemit was sure, not that an ordinary human had the slightest possibility of outdistancing a centaur. The father was a big man visibly worn thin of body and spirit. Fear animated his haggard, bearded face. Seeing the raider did not spur him faster, rather he tripped and fell, his endeavour to lift himself cut short by the spear striking his back. The tip emerged in his chest, his mouth spewed blood. The mother shrieked, pushing forward the daughter horror had frozen. The spear was pulled free and thrust the mother's way next, she grabbed it, and held on as the spearhead pierced her bosom.

Barnemit was surprised how little he felt. The result was expected, indeed part of the plan he improvised during the wait for the Star Prince's raiders. But he had not pictured the death of his parents, he had thought he would react to the gruesome spectacle, any reaction... Barnemit spun, his gaze covering every direction. No additional raiders were running this path, those who had dismembered the first family were bearing their captives to Draks. The families ahead were certain of escape, except Skera.

"Don't move girl!" the spearman yelled Lolbol at the daughter, extracting his weapon from her prone mother. "Hold your feet like you are."

He died instantly, Barnemit's sword cleaving the back of his skull. The halfbreed of

man and horse toppled over.

Barnemit surveyed his surroundings again. Had the jinxed raiders witnessed his betrayal? Chaos ruled the day, the vampyre's bloodthirsty warriors were occupied with ravaging the rest of the village. Dog wag a tail! Convinced they had a moment of peace, Barnemit addressed his sister, "Skera! You're safe!"

More terrified than in all her twelve years, Skera could scarcely utter a word, "Barn-Barnemit?" The dark brown of her long wavy tresses yielded hints of a brighter orange close to her skin. Shock widened her grey eyes.

"I swore I'd protect you." Barnemit said, "I didn't break my oath, I'm here."

"Barnemit, mother, father...they..." Skera had difficulty voicing what she had seen.

"I'll check." said Barnemit.

Skera's big brother examined the bodies of their parents laid upon the earth. The Druzhina taught only the basics of anatomy to train better killers, practitioners of medicine and particular schools of magic had to learn the details since their task was repairing and manipulating the organs, not simply knowing where to stick something sharp. Barnemit's mother was dead. He guessed the spear had stabbed her heart. Father yet drew breath, coughing blood, a lung was punctured, nonetheless he clung to dear life. Of course, the jinxbait was hard to slay.

Barnemit knelt beside his father, leaning close to the man's ear. His father rasped, "Barn...you...you came."

"Did you hope something nasty had happened to me?" Barnemit asked, his tone low, Skera did not need to listen. "I must thank you, my father, before you go. You showed me the truth about the world. The weak have no choice but to fulfil the desires of the strong. Because of you, I know who I am, what I must fight to be every moment of my life; *strong*."

Barnemit looked up briefly in case a raider would disturb them. No such peril loomed. His head dipped low and he whispered his last words to his father, "Die quietly."

Barnemit's heart embraced a grim joy. He could perceive the comprehension even in his father's agonized expression. The man's final thoughts were the words he shouted when his fists battered wife and son, 'sleep quietly!'. Father sucked air, a tortured rattling

sound, then he was incapable of remembering the past or collecting new memories.

Skera's brother had secured custody of her. His next step was escaping both Pank Hit and the child murdering vampyre's followers. Once they snuck away, Lord Senjdaq's attack did make disappearing easier. No one would waste time and resources looking for Barnemit and Skera in the aftermath of Pank Hit's devastation, the Druzhina would have a vampyre to fight and the vampyre an enemy strong enough to challenge him. The bankers Barnemit owed his potions were not the kind to accept a loss under any circumstances, though the incorrect name he had brilliantly supplied might set them after Hicussaw. His skills, alchemy and blood magic empowering him, Barnemit could earn a fair living as an adventurer, perhaps a freelance mercenary. Should his debt pose a threat, repaying it was very achievable.

Shadows burst into the form of a human man roughly two octets left of Skera. "Barnemit the Monster!" this man boomed.

The dung eater, Barnemit thought, the pisswet dung eater must have escaped Master Alders and the dungeons of Bart Castle! Given the knowledge won from Lady Silverglaze, Barnemit was not enthused about facing the speaker. Skera moved slowly to her brother's side, eyes still locked on the teleporting bluehead.

"Hicussaw." Barnemit spoke, "If you seek to destroy the village, a vampyre is stealing your fun."

"What the jinx?" Hicussaw abused, "Why would we attack Pank Hit?"

The 'we' confused Barnemit at first, he quickly grasped the twin minds he was talking to. He said, "Hicussaw the Demonhost. I know you're possessed."

Skera retreated behind her elder brother, her lips pursed tight lest she let slip any noise. Contributing to her distress displeased Hicussaw. He spoke to Skera, "Little girl, we won't hurt you."

"Can't blame her for not believing a demon, Hic." Barnemit said.

"Barnemit, how is it you know of us?" Hicussaw asked coldly.

"Lord Doneg dispatched me on a quest to solve the mystery of your shadow clones. I discovered the answer."

“Harming the innocent people of Pank Hit is not why we stand before you now.”

“Your revenge against me?” Barnemit guessed, “My sister saw these raiders slay our parents, I was lucky to save her. Will you condemn her to witness her brother’s death at the hands of a demon?”

“We’re curious.” Hicussaw said, “Who told you a vampyre is leading this raid. We do not sense a being of its foul nature near.”

Barnemit did not hesitate, “Some of the raiders bear a vampyre’s gifts. His magic enchants their blood, I’ve fought them.”

“You think we are blind to your garb? Your bloodied helmet, your missing tabard? Did Lord Doneg’s armoury issue you the pretty eyed shield? Your hauberk can’t hide the potion belt around your waist, not from our shadow sight.”

Not in Skera’s presence! The jinxbait and his demon had grown far too powerful. Barnemit said, “The quest had a cost and rewards.”

“We have been watching you. You did not use your blade till this centaur.”

Barnemit gritted his teeth and pleaded, “Hic, please! Protecting my sister, Skera, is most important.”

Hicussaw said, “My seventeenth year I thought I had escaped you. But you followed me to Bart Castle, I celebrated one birthday without dreading the moment our paths would cross. Your arrest of my friends and I in the vaults ended the life Bart gave me. Now you chased us to Pank Hit.”

“I was doing my job, Hicussaw. You and your buddies were breaking the king’s law.”

“Do you claim righteousness today? This raid on Pank Hit is your doing, isn’t it?”

Could the dolt not understand a hint? Her parents butchered and world destroyed, Skera was already fragile, she should not learn the extent of her brother’s deeds. Barnemit was desperate to change the topic, “Niltsiar, I beg you! Tarrying here endangers my sister’s life!”

“What did you call us?”

Good. Hicussaw’s demon crugged mind could be diverted. Barnemit continued, “Your demon’s name. The nymphs of Wildsong Woods revealed it to me.”

“You have a name?” Hicussaw questioned his shadow.

“Our name is our name.” Shadow Hicussaw replied.

“Barnemit lies!” Hicussaw inferred.

“No, Niltsiar is also our name.”

“We have another name?” Hicussaw asked.

“We take the name of the mortals who become us and who we become.” Shadow Hicussaw’s clarification only confused Hicussaw.

Barnemit acted to push Hicussaw further off point, “Hic, can you teleport bodies not your own? You must carry Skera and me to the manor.”

Hicussaw returned to the conversation outside his head, “You’re a monster, you can rescue your kin alone. We have to defend the whole village.”

Barnemit did not receive these words lightly. Hicussaw, the vessel of a greater demon, was combating the raiders. The defeat of Lord Senjdaq’s minions appeared a successful prospect. Barnemit sniffed an opportunity to win a hero’s glory and redeem his reputation in civilized eyes. He and Skera may not have to spend their lives avoiding the Druzhina’s attention.

“I will help you save Pank Hit.” Barnemit stated.

“You’re saying we need your help? What would you do that our demonic powers could not?”

“I have a plan.”

“Tell us.” Hicussaw’s tone brooked no negotiation.

“The blood elf gathering prisoners. The centaur trying to conquer Lone Oak Hill. Those two are in charge of this raid. We kill the jinxbaits and break the enemy.”

“You know them, don’t you Barnemit?” Hicussaw pressed.

“We can talk later Hicussaw. Think of my sister.” Barnemit’s tone and eyes begged.

Hicussaw was observing simultaneously both Barnemit’s face and Draks ordering raiders about the village square, a benefit of shadow sight. The raiders’ captives were

young, exactly the virginal age a bloodthirsty vampyre required to grow his strength. A few were unconscious, some bawling, others wept softly or endured in stunned silence. Their limbs were being trussed like prey to be tossed over a shoulder and borne to an abomination's king-forsaken den. Preventing the vampyre from feeding on the children was the highest priority now, dealing with Barnemit could wait. Hicussaw addressed Skera's brother, "Fine."

Sweet unicorn farts! Calgemo cursed mentally. The raiders include sorcerers! Between the garden ringed houses, a curious scene played. Ice encased Hicussaw, the bluehead vaguely visible under the cloudy white surface of his prison. A second Hicussaw, frosted, was plodding forward. Waves of white energy spreading half the breadth of his chest struck him successively, creating minor explosions of snowy mist. Calgemo thought this Hicussaw's body looked to have taken brutal punishment, it was not hard to imagine snapping off a frozen wimmy. The gods weep! There was a painful notion! The clones' durability had improved, not so much their intelligence.

Spamming the offensive spells was a male human. His robes were hooded and the hood pulled over his head. Silver threaded embroidery lent his dark blue raiment a certain splendour, which an ugly pouch laden kit belt ruined. He was vigorously swinging his wand, a knobbly stick to be more descriptive, firing blasts of pure cold. The sorcerer stayed comfortably ahead of the chilled Hicussaw. Calgemo, Jams and the axe armed clone of Hicussaw were approaching his rear unseen.

"Jams, shoot." Calgemo whispered, they did not want to alert their foe. Hicussaw the Axeman was wordlessly charging the magicker. The orangehead expected the axeman would finish the fight before Jams could release a bolt.

Hicussaw's axe came down. Its descent should have split the enemy from scalp to neck. The impact produced a clonk, a flash of pink and, was that a crackle Calgemo heard? Did the blade actually bounce a bit? A shield enchantment, Calgemo deduced. The magicker stumbled to the side and spun, showing his new opponents a bushy peach coloured beard, whilst blasting the axeman. Hicussaw the Axeman stiffened as the cold hit him and left a patch of his tunic a frozen sheet. His figure glinted slightly due to the minuscule ice crystals clinging to fabric, skin and hair.

"Jams, don't spend a bolt, a spell protects the bugger!" Calgemo advised. No further point

to speaking quietly.

Peach Beard was moving to keep all his enemies in his sight. Hicussaw the Axeman would not relent, he pursued the backstepping sorcerer, the slowing effect of the wand blasts did help Peach Beard gain distance.

A growling mass of fur either burst out of a nearby hedge or jumped over it. Calgemo's gaze did not catch the event quick enough to be sure how the cobold emerged. The bone and leather armoured warrior held in his claws a pair of crude weapons, also bone, were they supposed to be blades or clubs Calgemo could not discern. Cobold Hedgerunner paused, his eyes darting from Calgemo to Peach Beard to the Hicussaws, settling on Jams and the crossbow the blackhead toted. Jams was the sole enemy using a ranged weapon. Hedgerunner sprinted, hands and feet skittering across the earth, bone weapons grasped tight. Calgemo saw the cobold heading straight for Jams.

Calgemo dashed to intercept, he blocked the cobold's path and attempted to bring his sword upon the hurtling ball of death. Hedgerunner darted around him easily, Calgemo twisting to land a blow and his blade missing the target by a wide margin.

Hedgerunner leapt to cover the last octets, weapons aloft and ready to slash Jams open. Jams lifted his crossbow and put a bolt in Hedgerunner's snarling face. The flying warrior crashed against Jams, taking the blackhead to the earth.

"Jams!" Calgemo was shocked, "Did you just hit your mark on the first try?"

Jams pushed the dead cobold off himself. Jams' expression told of his disbelief, "Point blank!"

Calgemo whistled, "Glad you can't fail a point blank shot!"

The second of the unarmed Hicussaws, the frosted one, now ignored by Peach Beard, was thawing and recovering speed. Peach Beard directed a cold blast at him, dissipating Hicussaw into black vapour. Even a demonic shadow clone's endurance had limits.

Low pitched cracking noises drew the eyes of Calgemo and Jams to the ice prison, which was disintegrating loudly. An unfrozen Hicussaw staggered free, his feet avoided tripping over the pile of ice chunks melting rapidly into a puddle of water. The clone shivered, his clothes and hair icy. He pivoted wildly on the spot, steadying when his sight

found Peach Beard blasting Axeman Hicussaw. Unfrozen Hicussaw began a wobbling walk in the direction of the sorcerer on the move.

“Griffins shit on my head!” Peach Beard cursed in Krit.

“Jams, reload.” Calgemo said, hefting his sword, “We’ve got a wizard to beat.”

Calgemo ran toward Peach Beard, who noticed the additional Hicussaw and orangehead advancing. Peach Beard cast a cold blast Calgemo’s way, Calgemo dodged. Three more swift spells sent Calgemo scurrying off course to evade them. Peach Beard halted his feet, his wand waving ceased. His hands came together shaping a sphere, a snow white brilliance filled the cradle of his fingers, icicles appeared to be forming inside.

A volley of four piercing sharp ice shards was launched, the chilling glow ceasing immediately after, Peach Beard’s hands a little frosted for the effort.

Calgemo threw himself flat in the dirt, a frozen missile shooting above him. Jams was fortunately nowhere within range of the shards. The Hicussaws did not bother dropping. Axeman Hicussaw caught a shard in his stomach, and Unfrozen Hicussaw in his shoulder. The cloth of their tunics and the muscle beneath was rent. Instead of red or pink, their wounds were black. Instead of bleeding, they smoked.

Standing tall, Jams fired, his bolt travelling left of Peach Beard harmlessly.

“Jinx me!” Jams abused himself, hand reaching to his belt quiver.

Hedgerunner jumped, returned to life, his legs folding around Jams’ waist, sticking both his weapons deep in Jams’ flesh.

“Jams, no!” Calgemo called.

Peach Beard cheered, “Jinx you Jams!”

Calgemo was distracted, the Hicussaws however would not be diverted from their objective. Peach Beard resumed his ‘two steps back, fire a blast’ strategy of handling the Hicussaws lest they grow faster and closer.

Jams witnessed the cobold stab him, though he could have sworn he suffered a couple of punches not a penetration of his person. Getting shot during the escape from Bart’s dungeons had been the same. His sides seemed numb, no pain. The crossbow was not important, it slipped through his grip down to the ground. His skin sensed the

wetness of his own blood trickling out. Not again, Jams moaned in his mind, mortally wounded again!

Hedgerunner let go of his blades and started tugging the bolt skewering his snout. Jams' broadhead was buried up to its tail yet the cobold heaved on the shaft, yowling agony the whole time. Jams tottered, the cobold clinging to him.

Calgemo rushed to his friend's aid. He trusted the Hicussaws with occupying Peach Beard's attention.

Couldn't allow the cobold to attack Calgemo, Jams knew. Hugging his foe, Jams collapsed onto his front, the pain of motion stung but the result was his body pinning the cobold. Twisting and squirming, Hedgerunner shifted his head and arms free of the weakening Jams. The face bolt was only partially extracted. Calgemo dropped, kneeling just short of the fallen pair. Hedgerunner was aware of the danger. He managed to yank loose one of his weapons. No longer corked, Jams' stab wound streamed copious blood. The pain was suddenly, terribly worse. The blackhead gasped, he could feel the depth to which Hedgerunner's bone blade had sunk, and the breadth it tore coming out.

Hedgerunner flailed his bloody sword-club, endeavouring to fend off Calgemo. A futile defence. Jams trapped him, Hedgerunner could not reach the orangehead, whom height and the length of his sword gave a superior range. Calgemo's sword rained blows upon Hedgerunner. The cobold did deflect and block some of the strikes. Calgemo hacked Hedgerunner's arms to the bone, disabling them. Hedgerunner's miraculous survival of Jams' point blank shot was explained; Calgemo saw the injured limbs' bloody and shredded sinews merging and mending, the exposed flesh receding behind skin and fur as they regrew.

"Pisswet self-healing jinxbait!" Calgemo screamed.

The orangehead tossed away the cobold sword-club. While Hedgerunner's arms were regenerating and still deprived of function, Calgemo applied his sword to the cobold's neck, and sawed. Hedgerunner's fearful pained yaps were cut gurgling short.

Jams heard an infant crying. Feet stamped the earth, a woman panted for breath, a man grunted angrily. Across his vision pounded a peasant father whose one arm clasped a baby to his chest and second arm was leading a terrified woman by her arm. At their back ran another adult man of the village, carrying a shovel, probably related to the

parents and child. Some distance behind them chased a raider, an unkempt male human flaunting a loaded crossbow, croaking his annoyance. In place of quiver and tunic, belts of ammunition wrapped his torso. A sheathed sword shook at his waist. This particular story of prey and predator raced past the drama of Hicussaws, Peach Beard, Calgemo, Jams and Hedgerunner.

Back and forth Calgemo worked his blade, blood gushed over his fingers and sword. Hedgerunner's eyes shut. Calgemo did not stop till he perceived the blade pressing into the soil.

There was an expanding mess of blood, Jams' and the cobold's, mingled together. Calgemo flicked his sword, causing the head of Hedgerunner to roll maybe half an octet. "Don't worry." Calgemo used a soothing tone, "Got your pot."

The orangehead removed the sword-club left in Jams and fumbled about his pockets, withdrawing the bulbous glass vessel containing their band's remaining healing potion. Calgemo turned Jams to face the sky. He eased his friend's head across his lap. Twin wounds on either side of Jams bled profusely. One potion, where should he pour it? Jams struggled to speak, "I'll drink."

"Like you and Hic saved me after Alders did his thing." Calgemo said.

Calgemo opened the bottle and inserted the mouth between Jams' lips, raising the bottle as the contents drained into Jams' throat. The gods weep! Even a demon protecting them could not prevent another jinxed near death experience! Peach Beard! Calgemo swung his head to check on the Hicussaws and their wizard foe.

Unfrozen Hicussaw was gone, destroyed Calgemo supposed. Axeman Hicussaw was walking, frosted and slow. No additional ice shards were embedded in the clone. Good, though Hicussaw appeared close to a freezing death. Calgemo watched a cold blast hit him.

"Sorry I wasted our last pot." said Jams. His tunic was blood soaked and ripped below the armpits, the visible skin and flesh now intact.

"On your feet, hurry!" Calgemo urged in a low tone. Battling Hicussaw, Peach Beard did not consider Jams and Calgemo a threat, quite correctly.

Calgemo stood, pulling the blackhead to his height. Axeman Hicussaw flung his axe, Peach Beard pulsed pink and crackled, the tossed weapon thunking and rebounding off the sorcerer's enchantment. Hicussaw took laborious steps to retrieve the axe.

"You're done here. Go to the manor where it's safest." Calgemo instructed Jams.

"And you?" Jams asked, "You're not fighting on, are you?"

"I possess a stealth cloak of the Free Folk. Sneaking and hiding among these jinxbaits is a stroll on your father's farm." Calgemo picked up Jams' self-cocking crossbow. His hand went to the quiver on Jams' hip and he loaded the final broadhead bolt it held.

Another cold blast connected, the formerly Axeman Hicussaw evaporated. Hicussaw never reclaimed the satyr's axe.

"Run, Jams, run!" Calgemo shoved his buddy boy. Himself, he backed away in the opposite direction.

"Hey ho Peach Beard!" Calgemo hollered. His aim sent the bolt to the sorcerer's shield. The bolt was deflected with an audible pop and a burst of unusually bright pink. Peach Beard's displeased expression convinced Calgemo of the truth. The shield had broken! Why were there no clones to exploit this opening?

Peach Beard's hands enclosed a magical white energy again. Jams had obeyed, he was running. Calgemo and Jams were well apart. One volley of Peach Beard's frozen missiles couldn't hit them both. Calgemo discarded Jams' crossbow and awaited the spell cast. When the ice flew, the spread of the shards was narrow, focused on a single target. The majority of the frozen missiles would have impaled Calgemo, had the orangehead not been prepared. Calgemo dodged the volley, plus a following blast from Peach Beard's wand.

The orangehead sprinted and dove over the nearest hedge, hoping it would provide cover, and also a moment of quiet idleness to trigger the cloak's stealth. Shrubs shielding him shivered, an icy film encrusted their leaves, tiny snowflakes drifted in the air. The hedge had blocked a cold blast. Calgemo was no fool to assume frozen missiles would fare as poorly or that Peach Beard could not walk around obstacles. The orangehead moved low, traversing the garden, thinking: Hicussaw, where the jinx are you?

The manor of Pank Hit's baron was definitely not a castle. Stone walls two floors tall enclosed a stable, barracks and a three floor keep. There was no room for the smithy, dungeons, aviary, grand towers and more Bart boasted. Battlements and watch turrets lined the walls. These the manor's garrison of druzhinniks manned. The open space between the three internal structures was fast filling due to a stream of peasant men, women and children, bearing or leading their family pets, pouring through the single gate. The curtain walls were not sufficiently wide to contain a trespasser under murder holes. A number of Lord Lansam's men-at-arms stood guard several osts beyond the entryway's thick double door, which they kept unbarred to the village's refugees.

Hicussaw's family was huddled together near the barracks. Lyt, Ifona, Gest, Pulner, Nikoff. They were mustering words of comfort against the uncertainty of hope and life. Softpaw had been let loose but he stuck close to their legs. Their voices died as Hicussaw materialized at their side, he was not alone, his teleportation also produced Barnemit and Skera. This time the cat did not hiss.

"Barnemit?" Pulner's tone expressed surprise, plus the hostility Skera's brother usually drew.

Lyt didn't care, "Hic, where's Krat and your father?"

"Krat would not leave her husband's kin. I conjured my shadows to protect them." Hicussaw explained, "Ifona, my clones aid your blood too. You should see both families passing the gate soon."

"Thank you Hicussaw." Ifona said. Her brother-in-law was grateful she did not ask why he had teleported Barnemit and not their relatives.

Barnemit took Skera's hand in his, "We-I owe you, Hicussaw."

Hicussaw said, "Tend to Skera, you do not have long. You shall help me battle the enemy."

"My son, your father, did you find him?" Lyt's voice was low, struggling to restrain a wave of sorrow.

Hicussaw's eyes met his brothers', he determined they could not bring themselves to utter the most probable answer. When Hicussaw teleported them to their mother and sisters in the manor, they had shared the tale of their father's courage. Fabsmit had

lingered behind, fighting the raiders and buying his sons precious escape time. Hicussaw had promised their mother he would search for their father.

“We can recover his body after we’ve gotten rid of the raiders.” Hicussaw was honest.

Lyt’s hand shielded her mouth, grief twisted her features, “No! Not-not like this!”

She would have collapsed had Nikoff not caught her. The eldest son cradled their sobbing mother.

“The wicked folk can’t hurt you in the manor, right?” Barnemit spoke softly to his sister.

Skera managed a nod.

“You’ll stay here, won’t you?”

“Where are you going?” Skera squeaked, “Nobody can harm me if you’re there!”

“I have to play gillywhack with the wicked folk, and they’re the gilly.” Barnemit flashed her a winning grin, “You understand my meaning?”

“Yes! Mother, father-you can avenge their, their death!” Skera spurted enthusiasm, “You’ll wallop those nasty buggers good and proper! Crug the jinxbaits!”

Barnemit chuckled, “My sister, you’d scare the raiders worse than I ever could.”

Hicussaw remained apart, he did not participate in his siblings mourning their father or managing their anguished mother. His shadow sight maintained a constant view of the violence in the village.

“Gest! You made it!” a teenaged boy dashed towards their group, nearly smashing into Hicussaw.

“Lasmenler!” Gest ran the steps dividing her from him and hugged the boy, “My heart rejoices to see you’re alive!”

“Jams is dead!” Hicussaw close to shouted the thought.

“Merely wounded.” Shadow Hicussaw said, “Calgemo has the healing potion and two of our shadows protect them.”

“There were three.” Hicussaw spoke to the demon, “Send them a fresh three.”

“We are spawning no new clones.” Shadow Hicussaw refused, “Our friends will survive.”

“What the jinx?”

“Calgemo is slaying the blood magicked cobold. We should trust our buddies to defend themselves.”

“Why leave them unaccompanied in a battle?” asked Hicussaw.

“We cannot afford the mana. Our shadows are being slaughtered. A few have captured weapons but many die swiftly. This strategy is draining our power.”

Based on the same shadow sight, Hicussaw concluded differently, “It’s delaying the raiders. Conjure more. We defeated an entire clan of werewolves.”

“We count eighty-four raiders this far. Do not forget, Grandfather Belo and his sons were not seven foes, *they* cost us thirty-one clones and all our mana.”

“Why do we never have mana? Aren’t we stronger since Belo?”

“Yes, our greater power allows us to cast, and continue casting, the number of clones we have. However, we are achieving nothing, and our mana will not last long if spent this recklessly.”

“The cold wizard killed the last clone! We won’t abide our friends fighting for their lives alone!”

“Our buddy boys are fleeing not fighting. To help them, we must end this raid.”

Hicussaw turned to his oldest foe, “Barnemit, we shall speak to Captain Daw.”

“We need to move fast.” Barnemit agreed, his eyes would not abandon his sister yet. He squeezed Skera’s hand, “Goodbye, my sister. You know I’ll be back.”

A moment’s shadow walk landed Barnemit on the ramparts. Hicussaw next to him was calling a rank and a name, “Captain Daw.”

The captain wearing full druzhinnik uniform lowered the handheld telescope through which he had been studying the small army raiding Pank Hit. Men-at-arms around him immediately swung their crossbows to target the teleporting duo. The soldiers’ tabards displayed a silver crescent moon over a background of diagonal yellow and black stripes, the Lansam coat of arms.

“Hicussaw the Blue, Fabsmit’s son.” Daw pronounced. His was a stern and aging face,

shaven clean meticulously every day as his discipline demanded.

“We have reports of you, a lot of you. My own report too.” Daw shook his telescope, “These days, does Bart Castle train stable hands in grooming steeds or sorcery?”

“Does it matter how I earned my magic powers?” Hicussaw responded, “You’ve witnessed my strength defending our people. Working together we can repel the raiders.”

Daw said nothing to the bluehead, instead addressing Hicussaw’s companion, “Lieutenant Barnemit, or is it Barnemit the Traitor now? The look of you befits a deserter from the Druzhina. A stranger would guess you belonged among the fighters murdering and looting in the village.”

“I completed a quest for Lord Doneg. Was heading to Pank Hit when the raiders captured me.” Barnemit explained, “I learnt their intentions, stole a bunch of their equipment and escaped. Tried to get here first, but they beat me.”

“Great story, pity we can’t ask the rana about it before the raid’s done.” Daw said, “I’ve always suspected you’d end a villain, Barnemit. And you Hicussaw, am I supposed to believe a magicker of mysterious origin, arrives exactly during Pank Hit’s hour of need, by mere chance? What’s the plot you two? Did the raiders promise you a share of the spoils if your lies misled us? Or are you their spies?”

“My captain, we are not your enemy!” Hicussaw spoke forcefully, “Barnemit can be trusted. The blood on his blade is a centaur’s, one of the raiders. I will share the secret of my magic once the village is safe and we have the time. Surely your scope saw them binding Pank Hit’s children, we don’t have even a kurn to squander!”

“Hicussaw, is all of you talking to me? Some of you is still battling out there.” Daw would not relent, “Barnemit, you and your friends spent a fair bit of your young lives molesting the good folk of Pank Hit. Now you want to help them?”

“My parents were slain.” Barnemit said simply, “Hicussaw rescued me and my sister. He teleported us to the manor where the raiders can’t touch her. My captain, we face a common foe.”

“Captain Daw! Who are you entertaining?” yelled a man’s voice, “Do we not have a raid to break? A village to save?” Lord Lansam himself, the Baron of Pank Hit, strode up the stairs and onto the ramparts in a suit of plate armour, visored helmet in hand, his black

and violet locks combed neatly back. He was not young, nor was he particularly old, perhaps ten years short of Daw.

“My lord, where is Knight Lorrick and Master Yusser?” Daw enquired, “Should our best knight and Master of Spells not be present in deciding a strategy?”

“Master Yusser says he detected a frightening amount of shadow magic cast about the village. He is preparing himself and the knights to handle this threat. They are ransacking our armoury, grabbing items and potions they think will give them an advantage.”

“Lord Lansam, the shadow magic is mine.” Hicussaw spoke, “My clones are defending the villagers not assaulting them.”

That astonished Lansam, “You are the terrible magicker Master Yusser fears?”

Said Daw, “My lord, I introduce you to Hicussaw of Pank Hit, an old stable hand of ours, he’s become a caster of powerful spells.”

“My lord,” Hicussaw appealed to the higher authority, “the raiders serve a vampyre, they are kidnapping virgins to feed his power. We can’t let them take the children!”

“Vampyre?” Lansam paled, “Captain, is this true?”

“Might be, my lord.” Daw answered, “You must judge the claims of Barnemit and Hicussaw.”

“My lord. Why else are the raiders capturing children?” Barnemit requested the baron to consider.

“Lieutenant Barnemit, you I know.” Lansam said, “Is there a reason you’re dressed in such a vile manner?”

“I was the vampyre’s prisoner.” Barnemit said, “In my escape, I seized arms and armour from their stock.”

“Captain, what is the enemy’s strength?” Lansam asked.

“Close to a hundred.” Daw provided his best estimate.

“Have we spotted the vampyre?”

“No. I doubt the abomination is real.” Daw stated.

Lansam said, “What?”

“Blood Lord Senjdaq, the Star Prince, did not leave the camp of his followers.” Barnemit supplied the neglected details, “An elf and a beastman command his raiders.”

“My lord, I warn you.” said Daw, “We can’t trust these two. I recommend arresting them.”

“The gods weep!” Hicussaw expressed angrily, “We should be attacking the raiders not each other!”

Barnemit kept his mouth shut. The idiot Hicussaw in his demonic strength was forgetting his place, the ‘speak when spoken to’ courtesy nobles thought the commonborn owed them. Being rude to Lord Lansam would not persuade the noble twerp to believe a sorcerous peasant and possibly rogue druzhinnik.

Lansam gawked at Hicussaw. His gaze shifted to his captain, “Daw, why do you advise me so?”

“Where’s the proof of Barnemit’s tale?” Daw asserted his stance, “How did a stable hand gain magic?”

Jinx you Daw! Barnemit’s fist felt the urge to knock Daw off his feet. Conversing with the captain and baron was pointless. Barnemit had no evidence and Hicussaw’s demonic possession would convince nobody he was friendly. Maybe he and Hicussaw ought to charge the square on their twosome, counting Hicussaw and clones as one. The spectacle could end Daw’s suspicion and inspire Lansam to deploy men-at-arms in support of the duo.

“Did Barnemit and Hicussaw offer us aid against the raiders?” Lansam raised a question.

“They did.” Daw admitted.

“These men are blood of Pank Hit. Pank Hit could use any help it can get.” Lansam declared.

Bless your wimmy! Barnemit silently praised the baron. This was a stroke of luck. Lansam was not a halfwit.

“Bless your wimmy!” Hicussaw ejaculated aloud.

Daw ignored the bluehead, “Yes my lord. However, my instincts do not accept their account. They are deceiving us.”

“Your objection is noted.” Lansam said, “Lieutenant Barnemit, Hicussaw. Since you know our foes, I welcome your ideas on defeating them.”

“Humans, taurics, cobolds...our enemy is not united.” Barnemit said, “Every band has its own leaders, the two holding the whole raid together are the blood elf Draks and the centaur Cejora. Should Draks and Cejora die, the rest will forsake discipline. My bet is they break and flee. Some may try fighting, but they’ll attack us alone or in smaller groups, wasting the benefit of their numbers.”

“They could also scatter, giving us a choice.” Daw said, “We allow them to run wild or split our soldiers to hunt them. We don’t have enough men for one on one combat.”

“Either result is better than challenging their collected might under an experienced commander.” Barnemit established.

“Captain, what is our position?” Lansam asked.

“The Lone Oak tower stands untaken, its garrison steadfast. The mill has not been assaulted. A few men-at-arms were lost at the tower and on patrol. Thankfully, the majority of our casualties have been peasants.”

“You’re glad to say such a thing?” Hicussaw reacted.

“Hicussaw, it means more fighters for the counterattack.” Barnemit explained.

Hicussaw’s shadow sight confirmed the arrival of Ifona’s relatives, her and Krat’s families were now safely inside the manor. Jams would be too, Calgemo had left the cold wizard behind him.

“The raiders won’t advance to the manor or the mill.” Barnemit continued, “The village has the children they’re hunting. Draks knows capturing the manor will cost him time and lives despite the larger size of his force. Our walls are easily defended. Besides, their blood lord desires virgins not manors.”

Daw realized, “We must go on the offensive.”

“Myself, my brother and the knights makes six cataphracts.” Lansam said, “The four hussars stabled here, I shall hire them to fight. Put Master Yusser on a horse. The eleven of us form a shock troop possessing deadliness and speed.”

“A tiny band of cavalry is a poor threat to the skilled warriors and magickers swelling the

raiders' ranks." Daw cautioned.

"Pank Hit wields Hicussaw and me." Barnemit boasted, 'Hicussaw the Demonhost' he wished to add.

"You are one mere man, Barnemit." Daw was unimpressed. His tone changed, "Hicussaw, your horde of clones, is a spell I wouldn't believe had I not witnessed it. You think you're as big a difference Barnemit imagines?"

"I guarantee it." Hicussaw asserted.

Duel me Daw, Barnemit raged quietly, I'll show you how little of a man you are.

"We do not match these foes man to man." Lansam argued, "Cavalry acts the hammer crushing them against the anvil of our infantry."

"The enemy seeing us move is a problem." Daw predicted, "In an extra kurn, they could raise a tough defence."

"While we speak, my clones are harassing the raiders. Can't beat the veterans on their own, distracts them though. I'll increase my attacks, maybe Draks and Cejora will be too busy to notice your soldiers." Hicussaw contributed.

"Don't bother." Barnemit dismissed the bluehead's suggestion.

"Do you have a better idea?" Hicussaw demanded.

"Of course I do." Barnemit bared his teeth, "You teleport us, every man we have, right on top of Draks."

"Is it possible?" Hicussaw wondered to his demon.

"Our mana, our mana..." Shadow Hicussaw groaned, "This deed will deplete the energy remaining in our reserve. Shadow walking folk and conjuring a mob of shadows took a heavy toll."

"A teleporting assault! I missed the obvious, I'm an idiot!" Daw sounded awestruck, "The raiders would be slain before they understood what happened."

"Can you perform this feat?" Lansam asked Hicussaw.

"There are limits to my power." replied the bluehead.

“Lord Lansam mentioned the potions of his armoury. Could alchemy give us energy?” Hicussaw queried his shadow.

“Drinking potions are crafted to magick mortal creatures not supernatural beings. They may affect us in horribly undesirable ways or not at all.” Shadow Hicussaw said.

“We will set a group of a size you can manage.” Daw encouraged.

“Dispatch the cavalry to ride a long route around the village. They can relieve Lone Oak’s garrison.” Barnemit proposed, “Timed perfectly, the cavalry reaches the hill at the moment we attack Draks. If the vampyre lovers retreat the same way they came, our cavalry and the tower garrison would cut off their escape.”

“Excellent Lieutenant!” Lansam exclaimed, “Hicussaw, you need deliver only the druzhinniks.”

Barnemit, Daw and Lansam. Monster, Captain of the Druzhina and Baron of Pank Hit. The gaze of the three was focused upon himself. Not just them, the men-at-arms within listening distance were awaiting his answer. His stable hand and commoner days were finally over. The survival of a village’s young depended on his effort. He was a hero.

“This could grant a quick victory,” Shadow Hicussaw pondered, “and render us unable to cast a spell for want of mana. We shall be powerless during the peril of a battle.”

“Barnemit’s plan is the greatest of surprise attacks. It has to work.” said Hicussaw to Shadow Hicussaw.

“We hope. In our lives, we remember cleverer tricks and stronger fighters failing.”

Hicussaw made a decision. He announced to his audience, “I’ll do it.”

Calgemo bent low, treading cautiously, a slow approach to the rear of a cruck house. His steps had to be light. Not a whisper from his lips. If he could stop breathing, he would. A single mistake drawing attention to him would end his existence. The sword he was grasping seemed a waste in his hands, the notion of matching his foes’ fighting skills was a joke even if he wasn’t surrounded and outnumbered. The only aid he hoped for was the Free Folk cloak, assuming his very careful sneaking triggered the stealth enchantment.

Boisterous conversation in Lolbol knocked on his ears. Calgemo understood the speakers were debating the merits of a flock of sheep, whose baaing supplied an audible background to their chat. The point of discussion was a decision, which of the sheep were fattest and weighed enough to feed several grown mortals of different races. Winning choices would be hauled off and served for meals. The raiders did not care a toot about being overheard. And why should they? The village was theirs, last Calgemo had seen of resistance was a redcap and a cobold thrashing a Hicussaw clone. Thankfully, the orangehead had slipped by the duo undetected.

He halted at the wall of the house, gazing back not on the path of his progress but the garden's dense hedge boundary. There was more enemy that way, though he had eluded their notice. Good, nobody was coming up behind him. His eyes returned to the peasant abode. Every window he could see had its shutters unclosed. Calgemo peeked into one. He spotted neither blood nor corpses, the residents must have departed prior to the raiders tossing their home into a state of disarray. A cupboard stood open, empty. Beds and tables were upturned. Clothes and assorted items, which Calgemo guessed once sat on shelves now vacant, littered the rushes of the floor. The raiders had finished their looting here.

Calgemo proceeded gingerly along the house's side, the raiders' voices and the sheep's agitation were impossible to ignore. Crouched quiet, he looked around the corner of the cruck house. Three humans and two centaurs, five armed and four armoured, were goading sheep out of the shed. The size of this shed exceeded Draghoof's shelter Hicussaw's family had built, forget Draghoof, it appeared bigger than the dwelling of its human owners. A couple of sacks, bulging, with plunder Calgemo was certain, were dumped upon the thinly grassed earth, near the feet of the raiders.

Had Jams reached the manor? Calgemo certainly hoped. Bumbling bugger stood no chance of surviving the village. Hicussaw's clones better be escorting their buddy boy in case he tripped onto a raider or down a dark tunnel and his magic failed him. Kryter's the son! Hicussaw had pretty much disappeared! Did he drain his mana, like had happened with Potch? Is that why they were receiving no help from the bluehead? Jinxbait had to know abandoning Jams was a bad idea. Calgemo could handle himself, just barely, considering his predicament of slinking amidst bloodthirsty foes, some of whom regenerated all save the worst damage.

Calgemo had to keep himself alive. Nothing he could do for Jams or Hic. What

should his next move be? Wait here or sneak off? Thus far, the orangehead had avoided open ground, sticking to gardens and houses. They provided him excellent cover, he may not have escaped the chilling Peach Beard otherwise.

The cloak's stealth ought to be working now. How long had he remained unobserved? Dare he test the magic? Stride in front of the raiders? See if the buggers reacted?

Calgemo heard a door creak open. Jinx me. The orangehead turned his head, he saw a human exit the privy, belting her trousers. Ah, the privy he had ignored and thoughtlessly crept past. A tiny cramped space of a thatched roof, thin wooden door, and three wattle and daub walls, able to fit and seat a single adult while he or she emptied bowels and bladder.

The woman, of unattractive features he might add, sported a sleeveless leather jacket atop a gambeson, a crossbow slung over her shoulder, twin daggers sheathed and a quiver mounted on the belt she was buckling. Her black hair was tied tight in a bun.

He was invisible to her, wasn't he? The jinxed stealth enchantment should be blinding people to his presence. The cloak must be concealing his form.

Calgemo got his answer, when she yelled in Lolbol, "Village man stalking us!"

Calgemo's legs launched him away from the raiders and the flock, the privy and the murderous woman.

Griffins shit on my head! Why didn't the cloak hide him? The gods weep! Had he *ever* seen it affect anyone outside of the woods? The Free Folk had been visible advancing on the cobolds at the ruins, had they wanted to be or was their fae magic weak on terrain lacking clustered trees?

The orangehead darted across the back of the house. He could still escape this ridiculous plight! The raiders picking sheep shouted obscenities after him, it didn't matter, loud words could not bleed him, weapons did.

A broadhead bolt sped onwards left of him. Jinx the privy and the jinxbait using it! The laws of nature were wise to make hitting a running target no easy shot! Calgemo took a flying leap over the bushes of the garden's border. He could sprint to the residence a few ocs down the road, rush through their garden and immediately move on to another

peasant domicile. Decently ahead of his pursuers, he had a hope of losing them.

The orangehead froze, literally. In an instant, temperatures dropped, achieving a low utterly alien to his senses. The sudden cold enveloping Calgemo felt a hammer blow. Before his gaze, the air surrounding his body became solid, ice materializing and holding him in place, the thick cloudy layer of his prison obscured his view of the world.

Calgemo expected seeing and hearing and smelling and feeling and thinking and being to freeze and cease. Death's slumber deep and endless. Not quite. His eyes continued their function of watching. Limbs twisted awkwardly, the orangehead's running pose was captured in ice. How was he breathing? Alive and conscious? The spell had frozen him yet his flesh wasn't a frostbitten ruin? His blood flowed warm, well, for the moment. A painful chill was sinking down to his very bones.

There! His line of sight was invaded by the unforgettable form of a peach bearded man in blue. Who else could be responsible...the gods weep! Brrr! So cooold...had Peach Beard never abandoned his search? Or did a cruel accident of fate send Calgemo fleeing towards the wizard?

The frigid prison was a nightmare. Unbearable cold forced Calgemo to what he perceived as the brink of death. Enduring the agony was impossible. It was pushing him over the edge of oblivion. But it stopped short.

The mass of ice filtered and muffled laughter and cheers, of the raiders Calgemo had thought he could escape. They strolled about him, affording his trapped head ice-blurred glimpses of their menacing armed shapes.

Despite the brain freezing temperature, a jumble of thoughts and images flashed. Hicussaw's frozen clone! Peach Beard's prison spell...not permanent! The ice would break! Enemies...Calgemo caught in the middle...chilled to a crawl.

Protection! He needed...the satyr's gambeson! A bit stabbed and bloodied...would help! Should have taken...Hedgerunner's armour...Jams! He's safe...should have told him stay...Thunder Burst could save...stun Peach Beard and raiders...no! Focus! On the now...think...how to survive...Hicussaw!

A rumbling sound? He beheld the ice fracturing. Free soon...sword! Cloak! The ice cracked and split. Great big hunks slid off and tiny fragments crumbled. Wet! His prison was melting. Cloak...no good...no hiding...Hicussaw!

Calgemo lurched, narrowly restraining his legs from collapsing. His frozen garments stuck to him. Alright...free...can move...no Hicussaw...got my sword...there was a chance...huh? What was...oh...didn't hurt...cold had numbed...oh, again...wait...

A flat expanse of ground, wide and dusty, the village well sunk in its centre, its borders gave rise to a series of structures constructed sturdier than the cheap and easy, wattle and daub of peasant houses. Walls comprised heavy timber or stone and mortar. Roofs were shingled similar to what could be found in a manor or castle or a city, unlike the thatched roofs of poorer folk in the rest of village.

These expensive durable buildings included the tavern, a store stocking goods for various purposes, and artisan workshops such as the carpenter's, the stonemason's, the brewer's, the blacksmith and his forge, the tailor who worked everything from shoes to leather armour. This was the village square, sometimes called the village market or market road.

Home may be where the family ate and slept but the village square was the heart of Pank Hit. Here gathered the peasants claiming their day's water. Here the commoners spent their meagre coin on necessities and trinkets. Here travellers not guests of the baron could buy a meal, a drink and a bed. Here merchants negotiated deals for the produce of the village, be it grain or meat, wool or linen, alcohol or milk, or anything else they could resell to cities, towns and castles. Here trade caravans pitched their tents and peddled their wares.

Presently, the square was devoid of adult villagers, unless counting corpses. In their stead had gathered the greater portion of the hundred or so raiders, numbering perhaps fifty. Cejora was commanding between twenty and thirty at Lone Oak Hill. Others were looting across the village. Occasionally, they stumbled upon peasants who preferred hiding to running, their reaction was to kill or kidnap as Draks had demanded.

The blood elf was watching the children. Little toddlers, and pubescent boys and girls, bound hand and foot. Draks had ordered sacks fetched from the village store to dump babies in, after poking a few breathing holes of course. Lord Senjdaq thirsted for blood living and liquid, not dead and clotted dry. A few kurns would see the raiders departing, bearing away prisoners and plunder.

“Cavalry incoming.” the Lolbol cry was passed along the raiders.

Draks frowned. He raised his squeaky voice, “A counterattack? How many?”

“Eleven against hundred!” the joke echoed off the lips of the vampyre’s fighters.

“Form a ring! Our captives in the centre! Spears and polearms on the frontline!” Draks yelled shrilly.

“They’re not entering the village!” Draks received the shouted news.

Is the baron fleeing and taking an escort of fighters his village needed? Draks contemplated. A coward and an idiot! The raid had demonstrated no interest regarding his noble life.

The raiders shared Draks’ opinion. In Lolbol, Krit, Tauric and the yapping cobold tongue, jests of cowardice and taunts and challenges were roared. Wait, were some cobolds arguing with their non-cobold comrades? Hmm, Draks observed a disagreement over loot. The humans and taurics believed ‘first sight is a keeper’, and the cobolds insisted the one desiring an item the most could claim it, murder being a reasonable response to the protest of those currently holding the goods. Whether said protestor was the enemy or the ally they were battling alongside scarcely mattered to their thieving minds. The fact that non-cobolds largely failed to understand or speak cobold speech was not reducing tensions.

Vicious and deadly fighters the cobolds were, excellent friends in combat, but honestly, tauric beastmen could be more civilized and less bestial than the nimble furry mortals.

The blood elf pointed a filamentous finger at a duo of redcaps, “You two! Keep an eye on the cavalry!”

“The rest of you, make ready to leave!” Draks squeaked to the square, “On behalf of Lord Senjdaq, I will distribute fairly the treasures won today, once we return to camp.”

The squabbling parties grudgingly gave up their quarrel. Unnecessary violence had been avoided, none of the vampyre’s servants would be wasted bickering over a handful of coin and a comfortable pair of shoes.

Draks was quite satisfied. This whole operation could not have gone smoother.

They had harvested tens of virgins and the local defenders mounted no effective response.

The appearance of shadow clones had been worrisome early on, the blood elf sensed powerful magic and was unable to identify the source. He was not concerned long. Unarmed, the clones were significantly disadvantaged. Despite scoring several kills, the damage they did to the raid was minimal, Lord Senjdaq's warriors destroyed them without a significant amount of trouble. The clones ceased spawning. Perhaps their creator had consumed the entirety of his mana or abandoned an obviously futile endeavour.

The disappearance of Barnemit was strange. Had he been killed? The raiders Draks commanded to search had reported neither the man nor his corpse. Could the treacherous human have retrieved his kin and escaped?

Oh well. Casualties were to be expected, indeed, the total injuries and deaths the raiding force suffered were low. Barnemit's sacrifice of his home village profited the servants of the Star Prince greatly. Whatever his fate, losing the former druzhinnik was a pity.

Huh? Something changed-did a multitude of shield and sword equipped soldiers of the Druzhina just burst onto the scene? Draks felt his head cave and a great weight plunge through the gooey centre.

"Die quietly." Barnemit breathed behind Draks, his left hand holding Musveryl while his right was shoving his sword into the blood elf.

Skera's big brother was not alone. Several octets on his right, Hicussaw was stabbing the chest of a scar faced human raider too surprised to swing his spiked mace. The bluehead's kite shield and sword were borrowed from Lord Lansam's stockpile. Hicussaw's shadow walk had transported himself, Barnemit and thirty druzhinniks to precise positions close to their foes, affording the enemy no reaction time. These unfortunate victims were felled within a moment or two of the defenders' arrival. Half of the remaining raiders went down in the next few moments before the survivors started fighting or running.

"Barnemit the Traitor!" Draks shrieked. The blood elf's viscous mass somehow disentangled Barnemit's blade and slopped off. His body composed itself, the shape of Draks' head was restored.

Blood fae would not succumb easily to physical damage. Barnemit had hoped a devastating strike, his blow to the head, would work. He had underestimated the blood elf's strength. When Lord Doneg informed Barnemit of Wildsong Woods and Lady Silverglaze, the lieutenant had expected fae magic to pose grave peril, which is why he had scoured Bart Castle's armoury and chosen a specific sword.

Barnemit's thumb depressed a button on the hilt of his weapon, triggering the Cantrip Silence enchantment. The tip of the blade was directed towards the blood elf.

Draks' maw gaped in shock. Barnemit charged. The blood elf was powerless, Barnemit's weapon spell prevented him casting magic, not forever, but Barnemit did not require forever. Tiny Draks scrambled to escape the lieutenant.

A bellowing redcap rushed Barnemit, his right hand swinging a hammer and the left clutching a dagger. The rectangular block head of the hammer would have smashed Barnemit's knee. Skera's brother lowered Musveryl to protect his person, hammer thudding against wood. The shield did not splinter or dent, Barnemit was glad Dafred had bought him a particularly tough piece of equipment.

So, this fae was spared death teleporting upon his lucky self. One redcap? Barnemit actually chuckled. The delay of Draks' doom would be short. A midget warrior was no threat for his combat prowess.

Barnemit's sword struck from above, the blade slamming to a stop on the redcap's dagger. What? How could a dagger parry a sword? The sword's mass and momentum should have batted the dagger aside. His was not the poorly executed strike of an untrained dolt. The kind of strength the fae must possess to accomplish such a feat! Yet the hammer's impact on Musveryl had sent merely a light quiver up his arm! Barnemit gained new appreciation of nymph craftsmanship and redcap muscle.

Hicussaw's childhood bully did not fear. The redcap's stunted legs ought to limit his speed and Barnemit had the advantage of longer reach. Barnemit circled the fae warrior, Musveryl shielding him from the redcap's forceful assault, his sword thrusting or swinging whenever he thought he discerned an opening in the redcap's defence. Barnemit was wrong about those vulnerable moments, sure the redcap's legs were the opposite of fast but his arms were sufficiently swift. Bugger never bothered evading, his supernatural strength (and fae made weapons, Barnemit suspected) allowed him to effectively fend off attacks a creature of his size should not have been able to.

Either Barnemit made a mistake or the redcap proved his superiority. After dealing a blow, Barnemit was slightly too slow to withdraw the blocked blade, the jinxed redcap trapped the sword between the head of his hammer and the flat of his dagger. Draks' fae saviour roared in triumph. Barnemit strained against the redcap's strength to free his weapon, an effort yielding no success.

Barnemit wasn't done. His mind and body were vulked, senses alert to every twitch and whisper, instincts ready to omit thought and snap into action. Barnemit recognized the redcap's arms were busy containing the sword, which meant the enemy could not defend himself. Barnemit's boot lashed, kicking out the redcap's legs. The dolt fell comically onto his front, Barnemit finally pulling his sword clear. Skera's big brother immediately impaled the back of his foe's neck, severing the connection between brain and spine a mortal resembling fae should possess.

Barnemit extracted a blade dripping with scarlet blood, both Draks' and the redcap. The redcap lay motionless. Barnemit guessed his breed of fae lacked the resilience of blood elves. At the very least, a quick recovery did not appear to be a trait of redcaps.

Ow! Barnemit's arm hurt, as if an invisible force had raked the flesh. But how? The lieutenant was armoured, the chain mail intact...was that blood dripping down his glove? The trickle of precious bodily fluid joining the fae blood wetting his blade.

Barnemit looked up, Draks was on his feet, angry, not running. His thin, frail fingers swiped the air. The sensation of skin and sinew tearing was repeated on Barnemit's arm. Despite the pain, Barnemit did not drop his blade, he clutched the weapon tighter and retreated, raising Musveryl to his defence. The sword's silence spell must have worn off. Reusing it was impossible for several kurns.

"I have you, Barnemit the Traitor!" Draks screamed.

A spell had lacerated the arm of Skera's big brother twice. Draks' magic was completely ignoring his druzhinnik armour, Barnemit could have been naked and the lack of chain mail's weight would have helped him more. Could Musveryl obstruct the blood magic? Draks clawed nothing again, Barnemit moved his feet, dodging the spell. It did not hit him, would the jinxed thing go on to strike someone else? Jinx them, he had problems of his own, his weapon arm was in terrible condition. He doubted he could swing the jinxed sword. Avoiding Draks' spells till his injuries healed was an unlikely hope.

What the jinx was the elf fiend conjuring? A ball of thick half-congealed blood spun into existence in front of Draks. The blood ball swelled to the size of a human head, dripping blood generously. Was Draks' mockery of a fleshy creature's mouth grinning? Barnemit awaited the shot. The ball zoomed forward, the lieutenant was glad the jinxed thing had a leisurely pace. Barnemit sidestepped, the lacerate spell had been a greater challenge, and he was promptly knocked sideways to the ground *hard*.

Kryter's the son! Barnemit swore the blood ball turned mid-air, veering off the course Draks had set it on, tracking his movement. The jinxed thing hit his wounded sword arm!

Barnemit was down. The dark substance of the blood ball had splattered him. Barnemit wasted not a moment trying to stand, the next spell had to be coming. No dodging this one. He had retained hold of his sword and shield. Soon, the lieutenant would learn how well a nymph shield endured blood elf spells.

"Your blood shall boil!" spat Draks.

Barnemit lifted Musveryl, desperately shifting his body so the shield was the largest portion of him facing Draks. Musveryl shuddered a little, though Barnemit's eyes saw nothing. Draks flipped over, landing in a convulsing heap. The bloody mass of his body was steaming and bubbling.

Did Musveryl reflect the spell? Lady Silverglaze, bless your paplons!

Now was his opportunity, he could finish the elf squalling in agony. Barnemit struggled to his feet, the blood ball's material sticking to his limbs rendered any kind of motion difficult. Human forged steel was a poor weapon to destroy Draks, alchemy on the other hand, might do some damage. Barnemit dragged a hand to his kit belt, his fingers knew the pouch he sought, the ampoule of acid, the Tincture of Dissolution.

Skera's big brother pushed himself, hobbling across the distance Draks had initially fled. The blood elf tried crawling from his enemy, the pace he managed was pathetic and sluggish. Barnemit paused, Draks squealing below him. He crushed the head of the ampoule and dropped the vessel, watched it sink into the boiling body of the blood elf. Draks thrashed, Barnemit stepped back. The fae fiend's pulpy flesh began turning to liquid instead of boiling away vaporously. As limbs broke down and dissolved, the writhing and wailing died to a still silence. The blood elf was steadily reduced to smoking

burnt-black chunks of gore and a dark red liquid making mud of the dirt.

Barnemit straightened his posture, the blood ball's glop was losing its restraining adhesiveness. Sweet unicorn farts! Barnemit cursed mentally. Almost a defeat! Had the pisswet elf lacerated his face first and denied him sight...was the jinxbait that afraid of his sword? A blood ball or boiling blood earlier would have undone Barnemit too, assuming Musveryl did not block them. Hah! Draks got exactly the crugging the halfwit deserved.

The lieutenant surveyed the village square around him, beholding the results of his genius plan. Hicussaw's blade was busy bloodily cutting out the intestines of a screaming man. Barnemit's boyhood victim was not the sole defender of Pank Hit engaging in gruesome butchery. The raiders who had survived the teleporting onslaught, through their own skills or the vampyre's gift, demanded greater labour to die. Baron Lansam's druzhinniks met the challenge admirably.

"The children are safe!" Captain Daw barked, "Lieutenant Edane, your squad stays here to guard them. Everyone else, form ranks! We march to aid our lord at the Lone Oak tower!"

"My captain!" Barnemit called, "What of the cowards abandoning their comrades? The raiders escaping west and south?"

"After we've ensured Cejora is dead and the raid is ended!" Daw shouted, "Or you and your sorcerous friend can hunt them!"

Sorcerous friend? Barnemit's gaze swung to Hicussaw. The gods weep! What a day this had been. He replied, "My captain, perhaps I'll chase a few of the runners!"

Barnemit strode over to the bluehead. Convinced his target had truly given up on the whole life thing, Hicussaw stood panting and half bent.

"Not a lot of practice taking a sword to folk, eh?" Barnemit asked.

Hicussaw flinched, he spun, shield and sword ready.

"We're fighting on the same side, Hicussaw." Barnemit reminded. He knelt at the feet of the corpse Hicussaw had created. Barnemit set Musveryl to rest against his hip. The dead man stank of urine but it had pooled around his groin, leaving a trouser leg clean, no blood on the cloth either. Barnemit rubbed his blade on the trouser fabric, adding blood stains where they were none and cleaning his sword.

“For the moment.” said Hicussaw, “You only helped quell the fire you started.”

“Hic, wipe your blade before you sheathe it. You don’t want blood rotting and rusting useful steel.”

“Your glove is soaked.” Hicussaw observed, “Is your arm bleeding out? The blood elf wounded Barnemit the Monster?”

“The blood isn’t fresh. I’m healing.” Barnemit replaced his sword in its sheath.

Hicussaw understood, “The vampyre.”

Barnemit confirmed, “Yes.”

“We are going to talk.” Hicussaw declared, “You owe me the truth of you becoming a vampyre’s champion, bringing his raid upon Pank Hit.”

“No more magic Hic? Why not?” Barnemit flexed his sword arm. He could wield a weapon to the full extent of his skill again. The blood of his lacerated arm had drenched his gambeson’s sleeve though, and the blood ball’s gore covered more of him. He would have to wash his things properly. While he was dirty, he might attend to other messy tasks now rather than later.

“Wasn’t needed.” said Hicussaw, “The druzhinniks were winning. And I wouldn’t complain about the blood elf killing you.”

“You’re breaking my heart, my buddy boy.” Barnemit grinned, “I’ve noticed you cast nothing since the mass teleport. Drained your strength, did it?”

“I’m always dangerous to you.” Hicussaw brandished his sword.

Barnemit laughed, “No, you’re really no good unless shadow magic is your weapon.”

Skera’s big brother laid his bloody gloved hand on the hilt of the Cantrip Silence sword, “Hate to wet my blade so soon. Just cleaned it, you saw.”

“You would murder me here? In sight of the druzhinniks?”

Barnemit’s voice dropped low, “I’ll tell them of Niltsiar, your demon. No one is going to call destroying a demon host murder.”

“Ah, we are sorry.” Shadow Hicussaw said to his host, “We have no mana to protect ourself.”

“Shut your mouth.” Hicussaw said aloud. He tensed his body, gripping sword and shield tighter. To his demon, he whispered, “We can beat him. Remember our destiny. We’re the hero of this story, he’s the villain.”

Barnemit took his hand off the hilt, “My buddy boy, Hic, you should see your face! I would never hurt you *seriously*. Not when working together profits us both.”

Chapter X

“Close your eyes.” said the woman coldly, “Shut out the confusing colour of the world. Pay no heed to its meaningless noise crying for attention.”

Jams followed her instructions. He couldn't quite dismiss the notion his training was Mistress Estka's idea of humour and she would burn him the moment his eyelids shut.

“As I taught you, remember the times you cast your Thunder Burst.”

“The terror of the enemy, the distrust of myself, the urge to live.”

“And?” Estka did not change her dry tone.

“I reach past the fear and doubt. They cloud the vision of my mind.”

“Do you see it? Same as you did before?”

“Yes. The thing I conjured at every cast of my spell.”

A weave of mixed energies, a delicate arrangement he felt in his soul rather than observed with his mind's eye, though straining his imagination he could just about perceive its glimmering lines.

The sensation of this ley was terribly faint, he had failed to notice it on the two occasions the Thunder Burst sprang to his lips. This was the essence of the spell stunning Barnemit and Barnemit's buddies, Hicussaw and Calgemo, demonic shadows and werewolves.

“What do you do?”

“I use the memory, trace a new ley atop the old frame. Refine the details.”

The fingers of his will reached to the raw ‘stuff’ the world was made of, and began ‘spinning thread’, the best way Jams could describe the act. He spun threads of different sources or materials, Estka called them elements. These strands he ‘wove’ together, shaping purpose and a strange beauty, work he reckoned not dissimilar to stitching embroidery or building a chair. Hmm, did those tasks have much in common? He crafted a kind of ley, a word Krit children first learnt to name the colourful variety of hair

patterns humans grew.

Jams said, "It's ready."

"Then?"

"My magical energy fills the ley. Sorry! I mean my mana!"

Estka responded to neither his commoner's manner of speech nor his correction to the proper term. Jams carried on. Within himself, he found the well of energy. Akin to an exhausted man's sheer willpower boosting his stamina. But the force Jams sought to apply was not his own resolve, the strength of his own soul, it was a peculiar 'substance' alien to mortals yet a soul's influence could stir it to motion and nudge it in new directions. *Mana*. Estka had explained this power. He was among the lucky few fleshy creatures capable of sensing and manipulating mana. Jams guided the mana energy into the construct of his spell. His magical design 'brightened', mana coursing down the threads, its stream shifting the elements and bearing them along. His ley became a flow of several energies, an animated structure. The pulsing 'radiance' Jams' very soul experienced.

Jams declared, "I got it."

"Go ahead." Estka permitted a release.

"THUNDER BURST!" Jams shouted. He ensured his arm did not try throwing air.

Lightning white flashed blindingly. Thunder clapped deafeningly. Jams and Estka stood unshaken. Jams wished the page boy was also unaffected. He lay upon the dusty ground, moaning and covering his ears, amidst training dummies stuffed with straw and mounted on poles. The open yard of Lord Lansam's manor was where the baron's knights and druzhinniks drilled in the absence of a dedicated training yard. A fair number of onlookers (druzhinniks both on and off duty, plus manor staff) idled near, watching their closest thing to entertainment this afternoon; the antics of the apprentice to a visiting wizardess.

Jams had successfully performed sorcery, the technique which allowed mortals the power of magic.

"Sorry!" Jams apologized to the target Lansam's Mistress of the Household had assigned him and Estka. "Are you alright?" the blackhead asked of the boy.

Jams received no answer, as the boy could not hear him. Previously Jams had informed the boy they did not require the dummies, usually stored out of people's path, but the boy insisted on setting them up according to his mistress's orders lest she punish him or cut his meagre pay.

Who was he? Asking would be horribly rude, wouldn't it? Jams hoped the child had been serving Lord Lansam a while, and was not one of those young ones surviving the vampyre's raid bereft of parents. Should the fresh orphans lack blood who were both willing and could afford to take them in, their best future was employment with a baron, craftsman or trader. Failing which, they might be sent to a city on a quest for a living to earn, perhaps even a mining camp where they wouldn't have to search.

"An excellent improvement today." Estka assessed, "You did not stun anyone apart from your foe."

"Maybe my magic can handle a battle now?" Jams questioned.

"For combat? You must be faster."

"I was." Jams hesitated, "When I didn't think of the spell's ley and my life faced peril, I cast instantly."

"Because instinct is quicker than thought." said Estka, "Practice prepares your instincts to cast spells at your command."

Jams nodded, "Yes my mistress. Not a day I'll not train."

"I am curious, Jams. Is silent casting utterly beyond you?"

"I beg your pardon, my mistress." Jams said, "My mouth just, sort of, yells names. Next spell, I'll hold my tongue."

"Do you read aloud too?"

"Don't know to read or write well." Jams admitted, "Had no schooling. I'm not a dolt, I picked up a little, and my friends showed me stuff. I can do names, words small not big. Sentences are hard."

"I shall teach you written speech. An apprentice of mine will have to read my collection of books on magic."

"Thank you my mistress!" Jams beamed. "Bless your-" he dared not speak casually, "-ah,

thanks!”

“Cast the Thunder Burst again.”

Jams frowned, “My mistress. You told me it couldn’t be done.”

“Test my teaching for yourself.”

Jams was an obedient student. Reforming the design, the ley, of the Thunder Burst was no challenge. He was getting familiar with this technique. Mana reacted to the caress of his soul. The problem was, despite Jams’ initially gentle coaxing and ultimately strenuous pushing, mana would not flow into his constructed spell.

“Can’t.” Jams said, “Mana won’t touch the ley.”

“Expected. Powerful spells cannot be repeated easily. The reason is a mystery, mana does not return to a ley in your mind that has been cast. Not at once. When a period of waiting has passed, mana may fuel a used ley.”

“The ley does feel hot.” Jams noted, “Perhaps it has to cool first?”

“The greater the spell, the longer your reuse of it is delayed. The delay is usually a fixed duration, you should learn the exact wait of all your spells.”

“Magickers lose their magic between casts of a spell.” Jams pondered.

“I have heard legends of compelling mana into casting a spell over and over, free of pauses.”

“Legends...so us *common* sorcerers, to use our magic, risk being caught defenceless?”

“Depends on how clever you are.” Estka stated coldly, “What strategy would you choose?”

“I could be real careful about casting. Don’t use a spell till it’s certain to save a life or defeat an enemy.”

“What if you are mistaken? If you hesitate when you ought not to? If you are too slow to defend or attack.”

“Um.” Jams considered Estka’s argument, “You’re saying it’s smarter to cast my strongest spells at the start. Unleash my whole power and hope the enemy is beaten?”

“Is it? What if your foes are many? If they are equipped to resist your magic? If your

target was weak or a decoy tempting your strike, and you waste spells you would need against greater threats merely a few moments later.”

Jams was confused, “Is there a right answer?”

“Depends on the particular plight. You may pick a different approach to every peril you meet. Your survival or death will tell you whether you were right or wrong.”

“Oh.” Jams fell quiet a while. “I’ve seen a wizard spam a cold spell. Shot after shot and not a stop. He must have been one of those legendary magickers.”

“We were discussing the restriction on powerful spells. This wizard was casting from an item, was he not? A wand or a staff?”

“A wand.”

“Talisman enchantments.”

“Er, my mistress? Aren’t talismans just powerful, magicked items?”

“No.” said Estka. “Masters of enchanting possess the skill to work talisman spells into items. These enchantments need magical ability to use. Compared to the spells your mind holds, they are weaker and cost little mana. Should you desire, you can spam the spell of a talisman item for hours, provided you don’t empty your mana reserve.”

“If the talisman spells are weak, why can’t a magicker learn to cast them himself, no items?”

“They may be of lesser power but their leys are far more complex. Mortal minds do not grasp them. Supernatural beings, and sometimes the unnatural, cast them on instinct solely. A large portion of enchanting, especially talismans, consumes materials of a supernatural or unnatural origin.”

“Do you carry talismans?”

Estka stared blankly. Her dress was a delightful affair of pale grey silk. She would have presented a picture of a beautiful dainty thing, were she not weighed down neck to hands with a collection of jewellery Jams now realized had to be enchanted. Sticking to magicked clothing explained why her dress was the same he last saw her wearing. Sweet unicorn farts! How could he miss the obvious? He heard her clinking everywhere! Her soft, slow pace he thought a deliberate advance of death in no hurry, was probably

intended to keep the noise low.

Jams was embarrassed, “I’m stupid, please don’t hurt me.” He did gather his courage and venture, “I have a question.”

“Ask.”

“I saw a man, a shadow clone really, but he was very like a man, magic imprisoned him in ice. Wouldn’t the freezing kill a man?”

“Magic breaks the order of the world and imposes the will of its users, this twisting of reality has consequences, changes things we are accustomed to.”

Jams seized her point, “You mean magical cold doesn’t hurt?”

“The Ice Prison spell you witnessed might not. The laws of nature do not govern our power. A ley freezing air could leave flesh unharmed.”

“My mistress, you said, as your apprentice, I’d cast an arsenal of spells.”

“True.”

“You taught me control of my Thunder Burst. I’ve been thinking, my unthinking instincts showed me this spell’s ley, how do I discover new leys?”

“You have not mastered your Thunder Burst, yet you speak of other spells?” Estka’s voice was her usual blandness.

Jams still perceived or imagined her angry. He suppressed his legs’ sudden yearning to run. He said, “Forgive me, my mistress!”

“You can cast the Thunder Burst again, can’t you?”

“Er, I’ll check.”

“Why were you not already trying?”

“Because we were talking?” Jams hoped his answer satisfied her.

“I thought you were marking the length of your Thunder Burst’s reuse delay. Your foolishness and love of squandering time made me wrong.”

Estka’s mood, pleasant seeming through their conversation, in a ‘I will not kill you this kurn’ way, had turned foul rather abruptly. Or had it? Who could tell? Jams knew

her perennially calm face and voice could not be relied upon to judge her state of mind. He did not like the sentences Mistress Estka spoke. Bart Castle had whispered stories of her rage fit for his nightmares.

Jams focused his willpower and began drawing his spell's ley. The unfortunate target boy saw the nasty magickers returning their attention to his person. Brave boy planted his feet firmly, lifted his shoulders and stood resolute. The scrunched expression and half-closed eyes of his face betrayed fear. Jams imagined wilting under the gaze of a mighty sorcerer and apprentice practicing magic on himself. He pitied the boy enduring a bunch of Thunder Bursts. He was glad of Mistress Estka's assurance that Thunder Bursts almost never dealt permanent damage. And the fact remained, Jams needed a live target.

The black and white haired sorcerer-in-training did wish there were less cruel means. He hadn't spotted Hicussaw recently to request a clone, ought to ask him when they met, though Hicussaw was a scarce sight with the bluehead wandering off alone these days. Jams could nearly feel the target boy's suffering, having been a victim of his own Thunder Bursts, and having been in a similar position, first as a page boy and then a stable hand, enjoying the luxury of choice between fulfilling his masters' demands or giving up the job feeding and clothing him.

Peasantry was Jams' past now. The services of wizards were hired at high prices. A spectacular career he was embarking upon, five days since the Blood Raid of Pank Hit. Three days ago Lord Doneg's Mistress of Spells and her druzhinnik escort had arrived, hunting Bart Castle's escaped prisoners. Estka's plan had involved searching the home settlements of the outlaws. Hicussaw's Pank Hit, Calgemo's Mos Wren, Potch's Nug Fentuck, Tellyn's disappearance and her Dos Agg was not overlooked either. Thus Estka came to Pank Hit, before Mos Wren and Dos Agg and Nug Fentuck, she sought the village where dwelled the family of her deadliest prey.

Yesterday, Lord Anrieslem's Master of Spells and a twenty man mercenary squad marched into the Lansam manor. Word spread they had been tracking a vampyre, investigating reports of missing children. Estka confirmed the rumours to Jams. Yes, likely the same abomination who raided Pank Hit. Brin Dank had a vanishing virgin problem grown out of Baron Anrieslem's control and city borders. The lord's priority was ending this scandalous failure and protecting his House's reputation, hence he gave his trusted wizard a vampyre slaying quest. The Anrieslem party was not far when Free Folk sold them news about the attack on Pank Hit. Mentions of blood magic brought them

here.

Everything had changed. Two weeks prior to the day, Calgemo had offered Jams a promise of gold and a life free of Bart's walls. The cost had been an arguable amount of risk, a caper they were sure to succeed in should the three buddy boys put their heads together. Calgemo. Well, at least Jams was achieving the dream, he had paid horror and blood and grief for the jinxed future.

Lord Doneg could have dispatched Mistress Estka to recapture his Dungeon Master murdering prisoners sooner, or Estka might have left immediately, possibly getting to Pank Hit early and battling the vampyre's servants. Perhaps, such a quickening of events would prevent a pair of former stable hands fighting the raiders. Then Calgemo would not be...

"THUNDER BURST!" Jams boomed. Jinx my tongue! He had said he wasn't going to shout.

Lone Oak Hill stood grassy green as ever, watching over ripe yellow fields turning earthen brown, thanks to the efforts of village men and boys. Back at work they were, putting their crop to the sickle and the scythe, taking in the harvest. Vampyre raids did not remove the need to gather grain and store it properly so it would not spoil. The essential task of not starving to death continued.

Repairs had begun on the tower crowning the hill. Not in the literal sense, the process had simply been initiated. Carpenter and mason, having examined the damage inflicted, agreed on a plan of labour and presented to the baron their requirements and cost, including construction materials and the service of an enchanting professional. The job was currently pending Baron Lansam's acquisition of the necessities.

Till then, the tower displayed signs of the confrontation it had endured. The door barring its single point of ingress was hardwood four ritets thick and magicked stronger too. Cejora and his fighters had tested the thing quite thoroughly. Their endeavour left marks; the door was cut, pierced, charred and outright broken, a jagged hole indicated something had burst through the left side. Scorch marks clustered on the tower's stone, around a window halfway up where a loaded ballista's lethal end was visible, and upon the battlement ringed top open to the sky, where a pair of druzhinniks leaned and sat on

the crenellated edge.

Lone Oak tower had given the raiders a tough fight, even farmers armed with their harvesting tools had taken refuge there and aided the soldier garrison best they could.

Mildly interesting, the lone oak tree beside the tower remained untouched. Here Hicussaw of Pank Hit waited, beneath its foliage and benefiting from its generous shade. The day was cheerfully sunny, unlike the bluehead. Three men-at-arms reposed on stools, just outside the tower's threshold. Occasionally, one of them would throw a curious glance at the shadow wizard who had saved their village. For the large part, they stuck to their game of cards, Captain Daw had forbidden them alcohol. He wanted their eyes alert to the horizon, a precaution against the vampyre's raiders returning regrouped and reinforced. Seven additional druzhinniks rested inside the tower, including two manning the ballista and the pair occupying the terrace.

Should a threat loom, the doorstep trio would retreat behind the door, shutting it and pushing into place a readied barricade of tables to block the hole. The terrace duo would raise an alarm, informing the manor by the language of flashing daytime mirrors and nighttime lanterns. This was the garrison's first duty, their second goal was obstructing the attack to the limit of their strength.

"Barnemit speaks to his sister." Shadow Hicussaw said.

"We see them, we share shadow sight. Is he telling her about our demonic nature?" Hicussaw fretted silently.

"Doubtful. He had five days, the humans are not trying to harm us, which is fair proof he has not spilled our secret. Why would he do so today?"

"We can't hear them. They could be plotting our doom!"

"The girl is not what we fear."

"No, Barnemit! He-"

"Dread of her brother is driving us mad."

"He knows!"

"Him we can battle, we can destroy. Should a demon be afraid of a mortal?"

"If he reveals our truth-"

“To Mistress Estka, Baron Lansam and his Master Yusser, Baron Anrieslem’s Master Roltted. To our brothers and sisters and the rest of our blood. That is our great fear.”

“Yes.”

“We had the opportunity to explain our magic before Baron Lansam, Master Yusser and Captain Daw. The captain disliked us, but the baron seemed friendly. He had accepted the sudden appearance of both ourself and Barnemit during the worst disaster his village suffered in years. He was willing to trust us. We ought to have been honest, told them of our bonded souls and our ambition to do good not evil.”

“The ‘hero demon’ story is crazy to mortal ears! The jinxed talk of our fate would get us arrested. Our family would think of us and feel terror not love!”

“Cowardice was our reason to lie. We lacked the faith our destiny demands of us.”

“It worked, didn’t it? They believed us. An ill schemed theft and an ancient enchanted heirloom granted a stable hand great shadow magic. We added a dash of falsehood to the truth, the mixture was convincing enough. Estka did not question the tale when she came calling.”

“Barnemit was there.”

“Barnemit did not challenge us! Our chat after the raid, he promised he would not breathe a word of the nymphs’ knowledge. Meeting Lansam and Daw and Yusser, Barnemit let us speak first. His turn, he quoted the fae queen saying the heirloom awarded mastery of darkness to any mortal it judged worthy.”

“We remember advising ourself in favour of the sincere facts over a cunning fiction. We did not listen.”

“A decision we won’t shut our mouth about!”

“Our lie gives Barnemit power. We dwell with the humans of Pank Hit at his mercy. His sword of truth dangles above the thread of our peace. If he drops the blade...”

“We were busy discussing our future when our father fell! Calgemo is gone! Tellyn who loved us dearly we spurned! Following our jinxed destiny led us to this crugged end! We couldn’t lose everybody else! Couldn’t risk good ordinary folk attacking us.”

“Our plight is our fault. To your good folk we cannot reveal our supernatural being, not

only are we a demon, we have now deceived them. How could they believe our goodwill is not a pretense too? Why did we lie unless we are working a wicked purpose the stories insist all demons seek?”

“Urchesk can help! We should have asked him earlier! He’s on his way!”

“He is here.” Shadow Hicussaw announced.

“I can see him, mortal and immortal senses.” Hicussaw snapped in his head.

Lansam’s soldiers sighted Urchesk treading up the hill. Their eyes tracked him approaching the shadow wizard, then one reminded the others the scribe was a boyhood friend of the former stable hand, and their gaze focused on the cards again.

“I got your summons.” Urchesk addressed Hicussaw, his tone sounded strained.

“Are you alright?” Hicussaw asked.

Urchesk’s response was an expression mingling disgust and disbelief. “What do you think, Hic? My older brother, his wife and his son grown to manhood are dead. They left three young children to rear.”

“We heard. We’re sorry.”

“Why didn’t you warn them?”

“What?” Hicussaw did not understand.

“You warned me, saved my life.” Urchesk said, “Was it late for them? Had the raiders reached my family?”

Hicussaw understood. His voice went guilty soft, “Perhaps. We did not check.”

“You teleported your kin to the manor’s safety.” Urchesk continued, “Why not my blood?”

“We did not think of them, we’re sorry.”

“You thought of Barnemit the Monster and his sister, not your buddy boy’s family.”

“No. We were going to fight Barnemit.”

“Fight him? While the village was being raided?”

“We suspected...never mind. We were wrong.”

“You *rescued* him from the raiders. If this is your idea of a fight, I’d love to be your enemy.”

“We didn’t have the spare mana.” Hicussaw tried, “The magical energy to-”

“Because you spent it on Barnemit instead of folk who aren’t monsters.”

“We are sorry Urchesk, we have no excuses.”

“Maybe my mistake was being your friend. I should have been your foe and treated you nasty, would you save my family then?”

Said Hicussaw, “We can’t explain, we’re not sure ourself how it happened.”

“Hicussaw, I want, be honest. This raid, did you bring the tragedy upon Pank Hit?”

“Urchesk!” Hicussaw paused. Urchesk did not deserve crude treatment and importantly, raised voices would travel across the brief distance parting their conversation from the ears of soldiers guarding the tower’s entrance. The bluehead lowered his tone to one lacking anger. “What the jinx gives you the idea to blame a vampyre on us?”

“You showed your demon possessed face and the raiders struck. Your hero’s heart wields a villain’s power. You *are* a demon host, evil people and things desire to ally with you. Did your presence attract the vampyre?”

“The vampyre was kidnapping virgins. I bet you’ve read the lore on these abominations and the pisswet blood magic making them a hard kill.”

Urchesk hung his head, “I have. I know, I’m sorry Hic.”

“No, we’re sorry Ur. Our failure cost you the lives of your kin.”

“Is shame the reason you’ve been avoiding me? Not merely me, but your sorcerer buddy and Bart Castle sweetheart too, the girl you dragged to Pank Hit and abandoned.”

“You’ve spoken to them.”

“You ditched Tellyn after our talk. No dallying.”

“You helped us see the path we had to walk.”

“I don’t remember telling you to leave her. I feel horrible on her account. For you, she condemned herself in the eyes of the king’s law, twice, aiding your dungeon escape and

now covering your lie to Lord Lansam.”

“We could never keep her safe and happy.”

“No, you couldn’t.” Urchesk sighed, “The gods weep! This is a mess!”

“Doubt the gods would cry over a demon host’s troubles.”

“I don’t suppose your demon can change time, carry us a week back so we warn the baron and you can ambush the raiders?”

“Shadow is where our skill lies.”

“Guess we’re crugged good and proper.” Urchesk said, “Why did you send a shadow asking me to meet you on Lone Oak Hill?”

“This view is nice. The harvest is hard, honest work. You sow the seed and reap the crop. It’s simple.”

“Ah, you find the labour of others a soothing spectacle when you’re lazing about?”

“Calgemo.”

“Huh?”

“Your words describe the exact sort of time wasting he’d enjoy.”

“Why am I here Hic? The pleasure of my company?”

“I wished to speak with you. I need your wisdom.”

“Again? Have you collected fresh deeds I must judge good or evil? Ones I’m not aware of?”

“Calgemo.”

“You said him already. You didn’t protect him either.”

“Your family was an accident, Calgemo was our choice.”

“What?”

“Barnemit thought up a teleporting assault. I was to shadow walk Lord Lansam’s druzhinniks to the position of the raiders, they would never spot us coming.”

“Your feat is no secret. Wait a month, the tale will be on wagging tongues in Osis Granem. A druzhinnik lieutenant and shadow empowered stable hand saving an entire village from the thirst of a vampyre.”

“Did you know of my shadow sight? I can see things beyond the range of human vision.”

“It’s news to me.”

“We watched Calgemo die.”

Urchesk held his silence.

“We did nothing.”

“No Hicussaw. You would have saved him if you could. You were busy fighting, weren’t you?”

“We were in the manor. Waiting on Lord Lansam and Captain Daw to prepare their forces.”

“You were free?” Urchesk struggled to grasp the notion, “You, you let the raiders slay your buddy?”

“Yes.”

“Not you. The demon must have seized control. Hicussaw of Pank Hit would never allow a death he could prevent.”

“It was us together, human and demon. We both decided not to intervene. Had our mortal heart commanded us to rescue Calgemo, we would have.”

“Hicussaw, why?”

“Our wretched mana reserve.”

“The stuff magickers use to cast spells.” Urchesk recalled his reading, “Like an ordinary man’s energy, his arm gets too tired to swing his blade, your mana gets too low to work magic.”

“Smart Urchesk.”

“But you teleported nearly a whole company of soldiers! You had mana!”

“Not much. Spending mana on Calgemo would diminish the number of men-at-arms we

could teleport.”

“Kryter’s the son!”

“The raiders had a lot more fighters than us, every defender Pank Hit was able to muster counted. We had to pick Calgemo or the village.”

“You sacrificed your buddy boy to rescue Pank Hit’s children.”

“We suffered such a nightmare of a choice. We did what we believed was the greater good.”

“Did it matter? The extra druzhinniks you carried?”

“Blessed if we know!” Hicussaw’s frustration could be heard in his voice and seen on his face. “Battling the blood magicked buggers who healed themselves, maybe we wouldn’t have won had we paid the price of defending Calgemo. Maybe our surprise attack was a guaranteed victory whether we had thirty-two men or less.”

“Calgemo’s death was perhaps pointless. You might have rescued him *and* defeated the raiders.”

“We were not going to risk the children.”

“You didn’t. You saved them Hicussaw.”

“We threw away our friend’s life. Were we wrong? Did we take the evil road?”

“You, the evil road?” Urchesk laughed madly, “I’d say the opposite is true.”

Urchesk’s mirth worried Hicussaw, “Urchesk?”

Urchesk calmed, “You did what a real hero would do, sacrifice your own to save the innocent.”

“If our act befits a hero, why do we feel a cold heartless villain?”

“Not a villain, just an awful friend.” Urchesk’s stare seized his buddy boy’s gaze and refused to release it, “A friend would not have surrendered his buddy boy to bloodthirsty servants of a vampyre.”

“Jinx us.” Hicussaw said softly.

“Your ambition is a lonely duty to place the interests of strangers above yours and your

beloved's."

"We can't keep company that can't fight, people we'd have to protect."

"Depart Pank Hit, Hicussaw. There's not another hero I'd wish defending me, but I can name better friends, brothers, sons."

"Jinx you and your honest words."

"I have a favour to request of you."

Hicussaw was surprised, "Go ahead."

"Let's not do this again."

"Do what?"

"First time you asked me for advice, I was flattered. Since our childhood, you've thought me wise. You've become a mighty demon host, maybe a hero demon, yet you still desire my judgement."

"You're the closest we got to a wise old mentor teaching and advising heroes in the stories." Hicussaw said.

"Am I your hero's compass? You check me when you're uncertain your deeds are pointing in the direction you want?"

"Thank you Ur."

"Don't forget what happens to ordinary folk in adventurous tales of good versus evil. Horrible stuff, they get beaten and raped and killed. You know the fate awarded to the powerless people the hero cares about, they're tormented worst of all."

Hicussaw did not respond.

"I can't stay tangled with your life Hic, it's not safe."

"We will miss you."

"I have a job to return to." said Urchesk, "I suggest you quit shunning those you love, talk to them before you abandon them. Do them the courtesy of a proper goodbye."

"Shall we not ask our friend how we may handle the threat of Barnemit spilling the truth?" Shadow Hicussaw reminded.

“No need to. Urchesk gave us the answer.” Hicussaw told his demon.

“He did?” Shadow Hicussaw could not remember receiving the advice.

Urchesk walked off, Hicussaw silently questioning how proper a goodbye this was.

To the shadow of his soul, the bluehead said, “We leave. We leave everyone and hold on to nothing Barnemit can take from us. Our friends and family may believe the worst of our demonic possession but they will be safe.”

“We left our romance unfinished, we did not deal the killing blow.” Shadow Hicussaw said.

“Oh, our demonic self claims to understand the joys and sorrows of a human man and woman loving each other.”

“We have lived many lives among the mortal races. Mating is no mystery to us.”

“We drew Tellyn the picture of our future rather rudely. She could not mistake our intent.”

“Calgemo intervened.”

“He won’t try to fix my romance now, will he?” Hicussaw chuckled dryly, “We made sure he wouldn’t.”

“Where is Tellyn?”

“Looks like she’s helping our mother cook.”

“Why does she linger in Pank Hit, content to be sheltered by her lost lover’s blood?”

“Our demonic self is strangely concerned for the well-being of people our mortal self must desert.”

“We are who we wish to be.”

“Hah! Jinx our coward’s heart! We shall face Tellyn and our mother!” Hicussaw teleported.

He appeared in the home of his family, where he had learnt to walk and talk and dream. Open windows welcomed the daylight. Five beds stood, the one spare would eventually gift Nikoff’s first child many nights of slumber, and Mother Lyt was no longer

sharing hers. Shelves on the walls were quite bare. Furnishings, crockery and items wrecked by the raiders had been cleared; chopped up as firewood, discarded or sold to anyone thinking up a use. The only partition panel still intact maintained the privacy of Nikoff and Ifona's bed. The cupboard's door had been removed, revealing stacks of neatly folded clothing.

The table, chairs and stools, cauldron and water barrel had survived the raiders' rough handling. Lyt and Tellyn were chaired and chatting over the table, which was accommodating two platters laden with uncooked vegetables and beef. The women were preparing a meal, their knives slicing and dicing their ingredients. At the moment, the cauldron sat idle next to the stone circle of the unlit hearth. Charred scraps of wood clumped amidst the hearth's ashes resembled bits of the cupboard door to Hicussaw's mind. Was recognizing them even possible?

An axeman had rammed his blade through the door barring the house's sole entrance, a couple of planks were nailed to cover the hole. A stopgap solution from Hicussaw's brothers. The ruined door definitely had to be replaced.

His shadow sight identified Ifona and Gest visiting the household of Ifona's parents. His human eyes beheld his mother and former sweetheart.

"Hicussaw." Lyt sounded weary, devoid of life and joy.

"Mother." Hicussaw was no different. His gaze dropped down to Softpaw silently weaving between his legs. The cat had finally stopped considering the demon host a threat to his home. Hicussaw could have laughed, he now felt himself a greater danger to those he loved than ever before.

"My son, how are you feeling?" Lyt offered him a weak smile.

"Fine. We're-I'm fine." Hicussaw said. Tellyn's eye caught his gaze. "What are you two chummy girls up to?"

"Tonight's dinner." his mother replied.

Tellyn was friendlier, "I was telling your mother the recipe for bread pudding."

"Delicious. You brought me some, back in Bart Castle." Hicussaw searched his memory, "Don't you bake the pudding? We've got no fancy castle kitchen, no oven."

“We can rent the baker’s oven.” Tellyn said.

“Baker will charge a piece of copper.” Lyt complained, “Sorry Tellyn, our family must wait to taste your bread pudding. Once we sell what we’ve planted and reaped, paying the baron’s taxes comes first. Second, we’ll spend our coin repairing the house and buying new plates. Can’t take turns every night eating on the few dishes the raiders didn’t break.”

“We’ve never been this short of money.” Hicussaw frowned, “The past harvests, those I missed while working Bart’s stables, they weren’t poor were they?”

“No,” Lyt replied, “the raid’s done us bad. Raiders got the coin in the lockbox. Thank the gods they didn’t hurt or steal Draghoof. We can’t afford a new ox this year.”

“Father deposited all our savings with the banking guild. We can withdraw from our family account. Have you spoken to the banker Derwyn?”

“Nikoff did. Derwyn is not faring well himself. He says raiders robbed the bank empty. Their sudden attack was too swift, he didn’t have time to cart the bank’s chest to Lord Lansam’s manor.”

“I thought the chest the banking guild sent was enchanted, Derwyn’s key alone could hope to open the thing.”

“Word is, the chest was discovered half destroyed in the village square, just outside the bank.”

“And the money?”

“Derwyn insists either the raiders who escaped grabbed most or thieving druzhinniks and villagers pocketed the coin. The amount Captain Daw returned to him won’t cover the families seeking withdrawals.”

“Urchesk knows this banking stuff best. He told me a banking guild guaranteed their accounts against disasters. It’s the reason putting your money in the bank is a good idea.”

“Nikoff asked Derwyn about that. Our banker’s sorting the numbers, guild rules want the exact loss. Problem is Derwyn claims some of his records were damaged or can’t be found since the raid, he’s unsure how much money his customers had in their accounts.”

“Kryter’s the son! We pay the bankers their charges to hold our money and they do

nothing when they lose it!”

“My son, breathe easy.” Lyt bid Hicussaw, “Your eldest brother is managing our affairs. He fulfils his duty, you fail yours.”

Hicussaw’s face conveyed the shock his tongue was unable to. Which of his failures was his mother mentioning?

“I speak of your sweetheart. Look at Tellyn, the woman cherishes you enough to stay through a vampyre’s raid, and where is her man to comfort her? She’s been eating and sleeping in your home, where are you?”

“Mother Lyt, I don’t merit your praise.” Tellyn did not blush, her voice was softly sad.

“Haven’t been hungry or sleepy much.” Hicussaw answered his mother.

“Benefits of our nature.” Shadow Hicussaw commented proudly.

“Hicussaw, will you share our dinner tonight?” Lyt asked.

“No. I shadow walked home because I wanted to be alone with Tellyn.”

“Ah, dreams of using your old bed brought you home, not love of your mother. You can’t wait till the night, when your brothers are back.”

“Mother!” Hicussaw gritted his teeth, “I mean talking to her.”

Tellyn restricted herself to a mournful quietness.

“Oh quit whining, your father would have taunted you worse.” Lyt’s voice was sombre.

Hicussaw calmed, his mouth relaxed towards a faint smile. “Lucky me, Nikoff and Pulner aren’t around to piss in my shoes too. Unless the pair of you beautiful women are very busy cooking, may I have Tellyn?”

“Go!” Lyt commanded, “I’ve been cooking meals by myself before you were born. Tellyn, do squeeze a bit of fun out of my boring son.”

“A challenge.” Tellyn said, her tone more her usual cheer. She grasped Hicussaw’s extended hand, “See you later, Mother Lyt.”

“Try convincing your lover to join his blood for a meal.” Lyt urged her.

The duo of Hicussaw and Tellyn vanished, re-appearing under the foliage of a forest.

Tellyn shut her eyes immediately, “Bowlykd’s Doom again?”

“East of the village this time. Lone Oak Hill is west of us.” Hicussaw pointed, the forementioned landmark lying beyond lines of trees and human sight. “We’re not hiding anymore.”

Tellyn unclosed her eyes, “But you desire little chance of anybody disturbing our conversation.”

“You didn’t tell my mother of our bond’s breaking.” Hicussaw started.

“*Your* mother, Hicussaw, I thought you should. I warned her our romance may not endure the trials inflicted upon us. She insisted I was welcome in her house.”

“You accepted.” Hicussaw’s tone implied no question despite him feeling one.

Tellyn did not require hearing his thoughts to answer. “Where else am I to go, Hic? You shirked informing your family we were...ended. And I don’t think I can. The manor would keep me sitting idle and fuelling the servants’ gossip, your family lets me work and help.”

“Our shame and sorrow led us to shun everyone.” Hicussaw admitted, “We will remedy this mistake. Those we hold dear will not be left believing we abandoned them recklessly and easily.”

“I understand, I’m nothing special to you, one of many you fear you’re wronging.”

“We never stopped loving you Tellyn.”

“‘We’, you and the demon.”

“There isn’t a lot of difference between us now.”

“Can’t say it doesn’t hurt you chose demonic possession over my love. Then I think, what woman could protect a man against damnation?”

“Remember our first meeting?”

“Doubt I’d ever forget, Calgemo was showing you Bart’s kitchen, teaching you to beg a maid for a bite of a noble’s meal.”

“You fed me a strip of honeyed bacon.”

“You promised to repay me with a kiss.” Tellyn couldn’t suppress the pleasant memory brightening her face, “Even Calgemo was impressed. Barely set foot in the castle kitchen and you had begun flirting.”

“The kiss wasn’t planned. We thought yours was the prettiest grin we’d seen in all our years, and we *may* have been caught imagining you naked when you asked what favour a stable hand could do you. My answer just *happened*.”

Tellyn laughed, “I learnt you, body and soul. You were not the same among men. You cared, the kindest of hearts, you were someone folk trusted to sacrifice his time and effort helping them. The more I learnt, the more I loved.”

“We are fulfilling our nature, the demon’s power allows us feats an ordinary man could not dare.”

“I know Hicussaw, you’re only being yourself.” said Tellyn, “I picked you, followed you after your demon clone nearly killed me. My decisions are why I’m suffering.”

“The blame is ours. We, man and woman, were a pair happy and whole together, until we went and became a demon host.”

“I destroyed my quiet and safe career of serving the rana, ran from everything so I wouldn’t live a day not hearing or touching you.”

“Tellyn, your future awaits you, the life and home you dream of is still yours, but we are not the man you build it with. Our heart is pained. Sorry we’re not the lover you need.”

“Ditched Argetch, my best friend, rejected her advice, chased my passion blind. Should have stuck to my brain and walked away. Jinx me and my weak heart.”

“Honestly, a jinxbait like ourself who chooses an idle boyhood dream over a girl in our arms...we don’t deserve the smart brained and kind hearted sweetheart you are.”

“We’re much the same, Hicussaw, I was a fool to choose loving you over wisdom.”

“To be fair, rare is the girl who can resist us.”

Tellyn ignored the tease, “Guess we both crugged ourselves.”

“Sure as crows caw.”

“We were great, weren’t we?”

“We were pretty perfect.” Hicussaw paused, “An awful pity we can’t continue.”

“Hicussaw Demonhost!” Tellyn’s tone shook off any trace of a parting sorrow, “What shall you do in your new life, free of nagging sweethearts holding you back?”

Hicussaw sighed, “Tell, you speak too poorly of our romance, we treasure it a fond memory. We are comforted, bitterness does not fill the void between you and ourself, the last words we will share are sure to be friendly.”

“Where are you headed?”

“Saving Pank Hit was a beginning. A hero’s duty compels me to hunt a vampyre. A friend’s love begs me to avenge his death.”

“Not alone though. Your companions will be strong, you won’t have to defend them, *they* might save *you* a time or two.”

“Lord Doneg’s Mistress Estka and her soldiers, Lord Anrieslem’s Master Rollted and his dreaded mercenaries, perhaps Lord Lansam’s wizard and knights. We even expect adventurers joining us, we’re living a hero’s tale.”

“Mistress Estka, she met me.”

“Summoned you. Lord Lansam’s druzhinniks escorted you to the manor. We saw.”

“Did you listen to her?”

“No. The sorceress did not seem hostile.” Hicussaw did not bother clarifying his shadow sight was not shadow hearing.

“Mistress Estka said she could persuade the rana to forgive my treachery, and cancel the order for my arrest. What she can’t change is me being banished from Bart Castle. None of Bart’s masters can trust a peasant girl who aided a dungeon escape.”

“When do you leave Pank Hit?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“You’re not planning on dwelling long under the roof of our family, are you?” Hicussaw reacted. Was she hoping to await a calmer moment of his future? Was she unable to move past their dead romance? “Tellyn, you must not-”

“Hicussaw! Sweet unicorn farts!” Tellyn ejaculated, “I’ve just sacrificed my Bart Castle

job to keep you who doesn't want me. I survived a journey through Free Folk, werewolves and a vampyre's minions. Haven't seen my own blood in years. Letter I sent them a month and half ago, I was earning well and set on marrying a fine sweetheart. How do I explain me losing wages and man? What do I do next? Can't I get a few days' rest? To think of my future. You certainly took your time."

"Sorry, we didn't mean to upset you."

"I'll return to Dos Agg soon enough. You know I had a life before your jinxed halfwit face *and* Bart Castle."

"We are stupid." Shadow Hicussaw remarked.

"Er, we're an idiot." Hicussaw conceded to Tellyn, "Forgive us."

"You want me away from Pank Hit? I've a better claim to your family than you!" Tellyn reminded, "I was helping your kin restore some order in their lives after a disaster, where the jinx were you?"

"We had matters of importance to consider and discuss." Hicussaw presented his excuses, "Had to check Mistress Estka wasn't deceiving or crugging Jams about training him."

"You've been staying at the manor with Jams...and Barnemit?"

Barnemit was commed out of uniform. The brightly coloured tunic clothing his torso and the studded belt around his waist did not suit his tastes. A dark leather jacket covered his embarrassment to an extent. Unfortunately, neither tunic nor jacket were a proper fit, the sleeves ended short and his hands were bare of gloves. Trousers managed to reach his ankles. The garb had been supplied on the orders of Lord Lansam, Barnemit wondered if it would pain Lansam's Mistress of the Household to call for the tailor to sew a new set of clothes, what else was the point of the needle and thread wielding bugger escaping the raiders' murder lust?

The lieutenant in his chair was not alone. Across the table were Estka and Rolled, Spell Mistress and Master of Lords Doneg and Anrieslem respectively. On Barnemit's left sat Lezroo Caveclear, a paladin warrior who had passed the gates of Lansam's manor the previous afternoon. It was the sixth night following Barnemit's defeat of the raid on Pank Hit (though Barnemit had to admit Hicussaw's assistance was essential), news of the

vampyre was spreading.

Rollted grew long his pale yellow tresses and beard. An aged face evidenced his years. The elder sorcerer was tall and thin, dwarfing the younger Estka. Dark red robes, a kit belt and a ring on every finger completed his attire. Estka's fashion remained her usual grey garment and array of jewellery. Lezroo had a massive bearskin draped over his head and shoulders, the bear's maw resting easy upon his scalp. His locks and stubble were of the same orangish rust hue, a bright contrast to the black of his Lanish skin. His plate armour was not a full suit; spaulders on his shoulders, an ornately carved breastplate protecting his chest, hands in gauntlets and thighs in cuisses. Visible portions of clothed arms and legs revealed a very common looking tunic and trousers.

The trio were too cautious to wear unenchanted coms, Barnemit assumed. He could count on a single hand the number of occasions he had seen Estka dressed differently. Well, himself, Barnemit saw no reason to sweat in armour while off duty and safe in a baron's manor. His own collection of useful items was not as large as theirs, the professional sorcerers and adventurer accepting him into their planning session. Barnemit would have enjoyed the honour better had Hicussaw not been brewing a quiet gloom on his right. Shabby peasant's clothes avoided describing the bluehead's immense power. Hicussaw Armybringer, folk were naming the demon possessed jinxbait. Should they discover the evil behind the magic, Barnemit knew they would put a new title to the pisswet twerp, 'Demonhost', and stop inviting him for glorious quests.

The topic of the hour was the blood magic the vampyre's hunters expected to combat, a discussion exhausting Barnemit's ears and patience. Estka and Rollted provided most of this conversation. Rollted being a practitioner of the forementioned brand of sorcery offered knowledge which Estka was keen on exploring. Lezroo Caveclear, a hero of established reputation, listened carefully and supplied insights his experience had taught him. Hicussaw matched Barnemit's silence. Barnemit noted the vampyre's vulnerabilities but found the talk slipping beyond his interest and at times his comprehension. Hearing little further of strategic advantage, he allowed his mind to wander. He trusted Estka could later recount to him any important details he missed.

His mind drifted along his gaze, examining the tapestries decorating the four walls of this chamber tucked inside Pank Hit's manor. The hangings displayed scenes from the legends and histories, of foolish mistakes that destroyed kingdoms and clever maneuvers that won conquerors their realms. The band currently plotting the downfall of Blood Lord

Senjdaq was doing so in Baron Lansam's war room. Their table bore lit candles, a bunch of scrolls and an unfurled map of Tarfelm.

Barnemit's sight dropped to the hair and muscle of his forearms, exposed by short sleeves. Senjdaq's gift, the enchantment placed on his blood, was a great aid to a hero and adventurer throwing himself against danger. Despite Draks' lacerate spells rending his flesh deep, Barnemit discerned not a sign of scarring. His eyes moved up his hands, fingers flexed, fists opening and closing. Old scars roughened the skin of his knuckles. Those marks his magicked blood did not bother reforming, they were received before the vampyre's touch. A reminder forever of the first punch he hurt his own fist on, thrashing a full bred man when Barnemit could boast only fourteen years.

Skera must have been, what, three years old? Their father had not yet ceased a gentle treatment of her, light kicks and slaps were the worst he ventured. His entire might was demonstrated frequently upon Barnemit and their mother. He gave the duo daily lessons in pain and the fear pain drove its victims to.

King's law mentioned nothing of how a man may rule his wife and children. The druzhinniks did not care for effort the law did not demand of them. Village folk would not help lest the ill temper of Barnemit and Skera's father became their problem.

The day arrived when fear was pushed over the edge into anger.

"No!" Barnemit boomed, his feet planted firm on the rush mats a step inside the threshold of their home. Behind him, the door stood open. Barnemit had come through, not turning to shut out the night. The low burning hearthfire's illumination crossed the house's interior and touched him faintly. No candles were aflame.

"What did you say?" Father asked, his tone annoyed. Barnemit could not tell whether the man was daring him to repeat or genuinely had not heard. Father swayed a bit in his chair, at the head of a small table, the table unsteady due to a snapped leg tied poorly back together. His hand clutched the handle of a jug resting on the table, drained of the hooch it once held Barnemit would bet.

Jinx the jinxbaits who got Father his wretched drink! The village tavern and brewer had promised they would not sell to him. They 'forgot' on some days, and there were always jinxbaits who would buy alcohol for Father and a profit. Idiot payed more than its fair worth! Sweet unicorn farts! Barnemit had even caught school aged boys bringing

Father ale! Barnemit compelled the twerps to regret their money seeking initiative.

“Barn, don’t upset your father.” Mother spoke up. She was cradling his sister, a little girl quiet and wide eyed. Have faith Skera, Barnemit thought, your big brother can protect you now. Mother and daughter huddled near the hearthfire, occupying the floor where Barnemit and Skera slept every night. Their family abode housed one bed, which Father diddled Mother upon.

A younger Barnemit had not understood. Mother’s love of Father made no sense! Years of receiving Father’s ‘instructions’ cleared his confusion. Brilliance had struck the boy, perhaps as literally as Father’s fists. Barnemit grasped the nature of power. A fact simple and ever present. The strong imposed their will on the weak. The weak, their will meant absolute shit in the world. Father was strong, Mother weak. The baron was strong, his peasants weak. The king was strong, his barons weak. Gods were strong, mortals weak.

“I said no. My money is mine.” Barnemit refused to yield, “Firewood I picked, the copper it fetches I spend. The shoes I earned today, I keep.”

“Earned? Shoes you stole off another boy’s feet!” Father rose to his feet, his hands clumsily weighed down and shook the table. Achieving balance, he said, “Their parents whine until I scare them away!”

Barnemit was infamously unkind with other children. The dolts didn’t know the real world! Their lives weren’t *real*, they were perfect happy stories! Pisswet fantasies! They deserved a moment or few of pain. He showed them the truth! He was strong, they were weak! The spawn of Father or Mother’s siblings were not spared either, their complaints his treacherous Mother often carried to him.

To be fair, the twerps did help Barnemit, their faces were practice...

“Jinx the twerps’ fathers! I endure the druzhinniks, remember?” said Barnemit, “You told the soldiers I wouldn’t obey you and they should beat me how they please.”

“I won’t defend your wretched thievery!”

“But you’re happy selling my loot to quench your jinxed thirst?”

“Barnemit! You’ve bent off your father, are you glad?” Mother sounded her fearful and cowardly self, “You’re late, no dinner awaits you.”

She addressed Father, “My husband. He goes hungry, it’s punishment enough.”

To Barnemit, she said, “My son, give your father what he needs to take care of us.”

“The roof leaks when it rains, we barely eat, the table he’ll break again. Skera’s learnt not to speak since stray words draw his wrath.” Barnemit stated his case and added a sarcastic finish, “He’s caring for us plenty.”

Barnemit ducked. The jug Father hurled his way flew into the darkness of their garden.

“Son!” Father’s roar drowned the jug’s crash. He staggered a path around the table.

“You’ll see me do worse unless you hand me your coin. You don’t want me sober with nothing to do except thrash you proper!”

“You halfwit, who the jinx wants you sozzled? The hooch is the reason your kin hate you.”

Father had drunkenly fought himself out of a farm hand’s job tending his elder brother’s fields. Selling firewood to the manor and the richer folk who worked in the village square was his method of scraping a living. No one would pay a good price for something bored boys collected after their classes.

“Hold your tongue Barn! Or you’ll get your wish!” Father stomped up to Barnemit, who stepped back onto the doorstep.

The routine of their existence never changed. Did you take a moment longer to reply? Wham! Stupid boy! Were you slow to obey his will? Wham! Useless woman! Why was dinner too cold? Wham! Worthless wife! Why was dinner too hot? Wham! Horrible mother! Where were you when he wanted you? Wham! Scoundrel of a son! Did you hesitate to surrender copper you had earned yourself? Wham! Selfish twerp!

“My husband.” Mother put Skera down. She rushed to Father’s side, “I’ll ask my father tomorrow, he’ll grant me the copper.”

Unlike Father, Mother had not distanced her kin, she pleaded her woes and begged money off their pity. Coin she did not hide from father’s thirst. Kryter’s the son! He would order her forth and she would go crying to her relatives!

“My son must learn to respect his father!” Father reacted to Mother’s hand on his

shoulder, his arm batting aside her face.

“My father must learn to suck my wimmy!” Barnemit stared Father eye to eye, the boy wasn’t looking up to the man now. Something Barnemit noticed being able to do for several months.

Father was dumbfounded. Barnemit might have called him stunned. This was an opportunity to catch him intoxicated and unguarded. However, life had a proven history of drunk Father walloping sober Barnemit. Should the boy risk it? No, Barnemit would trust the plan. He had to be sure, couldn’t afford a defeat. Terror grasped his heart, an urge to run Barnemit suppressed, his fingers curling into fists.

Mother scrambled to Skera and took the girl in her arms, “Your sister’s crying.”

No Skera wasn’t, Barnemit would swear. She was a brave girl, and she was no stranger to the violence and rage of her home. Mother turned her back towards her husband and son, concealing the state of her daughter. The shameless coward played her child daughter to subdue her righteous son. Father did not look to check either woman or girl.

Skera’s birth was Mother’s last attempt at the notion of children softening her husband. Often Barnemit saw and heard their parents not quitting the diddling. He was just glad they were using seed wards again. Introducing a fresh life to their crugged family was a wicked deed. Skera’s might have been the sole smile he came home to, but Barnemit dreaded the day Father forgot to be gentle.

Father swung a fist. Barnemit backstepped beyond the blow’s range, putting him outside the house.

“Stay still, you disobedient pup!” Father roared.

“Let’s see you hit me, you rock-brained sozzled old fool.” Barnemit said.

“Pisswet scoundrel!” Father yelled, “You’ll always be a thorn pricking the heel of decent folk! You’re no good, you’re nothing except your stealing hands!”

“Barnemit, please!” Mother spun and beheld the spectacle of her son and husband about to fight.

Mother would not leave or resist Father. Honestly, Barnemit’s family had so little

Barnemit was convinced the trio of mother, son and sister could survive just as well losing the father. The gods weep! The son was gathering the majority of the firewood buying their meals!

Barnemit withdrew a few octets, choosing a spot in the garden to make his stand beneath moon and stars. Father lurched after the son. The heavens were not their sole audience. On either side of Father, Woss and Dafred held position.

“Got your friends Barn?” Father chuckled. Through the haze of alcohol, Father had not failed to note he was encircled.

“I don’t need them. They’re here to witness.” said Barnemit. Such was the boy’s hope, though should he need the assistance, the minions he had been preparing were there. Could he rely on them doing their part? They were afraid, more than he was, and he was the one who knew Father’s rage best.

“Sleep quietly!” Father’s fist came at him, Barnemit dodged.

Father put too much weight into the swing, momentum carried his arm onwards, leaving Father off balance and wide open to a frontal attack. This time Barnemit did not hesitate. His uppercut of a punch smashed Father’s jaw. Father staggered wildly yet did not fall.

Huh? This was easy? Barnemit’s next blow propelled his fist hard against the softness of Father’s belly. Father toppled over, landing on his back, gasping for breath.

“Barnemit! You monster!” Mother screamed from the doorway, the house’s hearthfire illuminating her silhouette. “What are you doing?”

Barnemit had expected her. His thugs were ready, grabbing her by the arms and halting her advance. Mother would not intervene, she may have abandoned Skera but her son would not allow her to save Father.

Barnemit went down, his knees pressing Father’s chest. What had the boy been scared of? This sozzled jinxbait was no challenge. How had he been this foolish to fear the man? Father was WEAK, Barnemit was STRONG. Barnemit laughed. His fists pounding Father’s face, Mother weeping and struggling and screaming in the hands of his buddy boys, Barnemit laughed. Was Father’s strength an illusion? His power a lie a man’s cruelty had impressed on the heart of a child? Each memory of torment Barnemit

pictured clearly in the instant before a punch connected with Father. Old pain was fading, the remembered sting of blows received was vanishing with every strike he dealt now.

Father's rule was ended. This, this was amazing. Not even in his worst nightmares, could he ever forget, the experience of his fists battering the flesh and bone of Father's face. Again and again and again. Wham! Wham! Wham! Sweet unicorn farts! Through a layer of hurt, he barely felt his knuckles, a wet bloody mess, which the night painted shades of dark under starlight and moon beams. He continued raining blows, his own blood and Father's mingled. Through it all, there flowed a sheer savage joy. Sooooooo goooooooooooooood. Barnemit had the CONTROL! Barnemit had the POWER! Barnemit had the STRENGTH!

"Sleep quietly!" Barnemit proclaimed his victory vehemently, bloodied fists raised to glory.

The will of Barnemit alone decided his future, and the future of Skera and Mother. His hands would take days to heal but Barnemit would not need them, not for Father, the man had tasted what he could suffer should he disobey the new head of their family.

The night's tale of conquest would spread on the tongues of Dafred and Woss. Barnemit was the boy who beat the piss out of a grown man.

A life spent honing his strength eventually brought Barnemit to Lord Lansam's war room. The boy was the past, the present was the man. Druzhina trained, alchemically equipped, fae shielded, vampyre touched. Barnemit's thumb rubbed the scarred hide on a knuckle. Today, he wielded the control and the power much as he had during his walloping of Father. His mercy held Hicussaw a rit short of the barons' judgement, very nearly where Hicussaw had left the lieutenant weeks ago with the aid of Knight Maksyer. Hicussaw couldn't displease Barnemit or Barnemit would start talking rather loudly about a certain world threatening demon and its damned host.

Excellent. The demon possessed jinxbait would serve Barnemit's interests. He was weak, Barnemit strong.

Rollted's voice suddenly interrupted Barnemit's happy thoughts, "Barnemit of Pank Hit, I detect the vampyre's magic in you. How did this evil taint a druzhinnik lieutenant of Tarfelm's rana?"

Eh, when did the topic drift to himself? Barnemit asked mentally. Jinx his ears! He

should have been paying attention to the magickers' rambling.

Estka spoke blandly, "I first suspected it a fae enchantment. Master Rollted, your knowledge of blood magic is not deceived. Lieutenant Barnemit told me it was a bribe."

"I fought my captors hard." Barnemit elaborated, "Blood Lord Senjdaq, the vampyre, he desired my combat skills against his foes. Tried persuading me to join him. Said he was giving me a gift."

"A move reckless of our young blood lord, if true." Rollted said.

"I lied. Let the vampyre think I was his loyal servant."

"Lord Lansam took a number of surviving raiders prisoner, they confirm your treachery. You murdered a fellow druzhinnik."

"A traitor who pledged his crossbow to the abomination's cause."

"Oh, he was not lying too?"

"No. I knew his heart."

"Pity your comrade isn't here to speak his account."

"My plan defeated the vampyre's raid. All know whose side I'm on." Barnemit stated.

"The battle was won by your strategy and the mighty spell of a shadow sorcerer." Lezroo Caveclear contributed, his Krit reflecting a Lanish accent.

"Indeed, a feat the storytellers shall love, Hicussaw Armybringer." Rollted said.

Old dolt, Barnemit cussed, Hicussaw lacks the brain to use his power! The dung eater was nothing, Barnemit was the hero who saved Pank Hit!

Hicussaw opened his mouth, "Thank you."

"Hicussaw." Estka said, "Of us three sorcerers, you fought the vampyre's minions. Have you any observations or details of their magic to share?"

"Sorry my mistress. I'm still learning what my shadow magic can do. Wizard craft is beyond me." Hicussaw paused, "You should ask Master Yusser."

"We did." Estka said, "Master Yusser told us of the enemies and powers he faced. Our problem is Lord Lansam will not release his Master of Spells to hunt this Star Prince."

“Hicussaw, I understand your fascinating spells are the gift of an ancient relic. You are not trained in sorcery?” Rolited enquired.

“No my master. I am-I was a stable hand.”

“Big leap from stable hand to hero among professional magickers and adventurers on a vampyre hunt.” Lezroo remarked.

“Which is why I’ll follow the wisdom of you veterans.” Hicussaw said humbly.

“Good thinking.” Rolited praised.

“Shall we return to the challenge we must defeat together then?” Estka asked.

“Pank Hit was the vampyre’s first open assault.” Rolited resumed their original topic, “It shows us Lord Senjdaq possesses the strength and numbers to overthrow the peace of our province.”

“Lieutenant Barnemit marked the abomination’s camp where his minions are gathering.” Estka tapped a wooden peg placed on the map of Tarfelm, “The prisoners we interrogated say the same. Any raiders who escaped Pank Hit may warn their blood lord to shift their base of operations. We must act swiftly should we wish to track and catch the vampyre.”

Barnemit disagreed, “I’ve walked through the enemy camp, seen the numbers fighting for the Star Prince. We ought to wait till our force is prepared to battle their might.”

“Do you believe we can’t defeat the vampyre as we are?” Lezroo asked.

“What do we have?” Barnemit posed his own question, “One paladin warrior, Mistress Estka and her ten men-at-arms, Master Rolited and his twenty chu ko nu, me and a pair of stable hands turned magickers. Lord Lansam is scared of leaving Pank Hit undefended in case there’s another attack, we’ll be lucky if he gives us a handful of druzhinniks.”

Rolited responded, “The chu ko nu are worth their weight in gold, which is less than Lord Anrieslem pays them.”

Lezroo added, “I carry a magical means of messaging the priestess Nesdank Heavenfall. She and forty of her templars are on their way. I’ll tell them our path and they can link with us at the vampyre’s base.”

Barnemit remained unconvinced, “Against how many will they help? I reckoned a small army was dwelling in the camp. We confirmed sixty-nine kills during the raid on Pank

Hit, a few of their champions too; a cold sorcerer Shubmit of Brin Dank, the blood elf Draks, the minotaur Heimanche. Captured eighteen. The centaur Cejora escaped, he has no doubt rejoined the three or four hundred serving the vampyre, perhaps five hundred by this day if villains and outlaws continue uniting under the blood lord's banner. We need more from Anrieslem, Lansam, Doneg...all the nobles of Tarfelm!"

Rollted said, "What you propose is a delay. Time we waste will only see the vampyre grow stronger on virgin blood."

Hicussaw said, "Master Rollted is right, we should march soon. My clones will fill any lack of numbers hindering our victory."

"Conjuring such a horde would be a feat fitting a legend." Lezroo noted, "Are you sure you can, Hicussaw?"

"I'll handle it." Hicussaw answered simply.

"The Armybringer does not need allies to supply the army he teleports." Estka's tone was dry.

"Hicussaw." Barnemit glared. The damned magicker was supposed to support not oppose him! Didn't the dung eater remember Barnemit could unleash the hatred of demon fearing people and ruin Hicussaw's human life? The lieutenant said, "Your unarmed clones won't beat a well equipped army and their blood drinking abomination."

"My clones are our anvil, we are the hammer crushing the enemy upon them." Hicussaw said.

Jinx you Hicussaw! Barnemit fumed. Had the demon magic warped the bluehead's mind into a senseless mess?

This was suicide! Barnemit argued, "Haste to avoid a fully powered vampyre is leading us to ignore his servants' strength."

"Our foes don't have our conviction." Lezroo declared, "Slay the vampyre and they will break. His power is the sole cause they hold common."

"Hicussaw can teleport us past their defences, landing a surprise attack against the abomination himself." Estka suggested.

"For a strike at their head to work, Senjdaq must die quick." Barnemit pointed out, "How

would we end him in a hurry? His flesh mends better than me or the others he gifted magical regeneration.”

“Lieutenant, were you not listening to our discussion earlier?” Rollted enquired, “I am disappointed.”

“You spoke of poison, sunlight and garlic.” Barnemit proved Rollted wrong, “Poison counters the magicked blood and slows regeneration, it may even stop a newborn vampyre’s healing entirely. We envenom our weapons but how do we hit Lord Senjdaq? His blood magic grants him awesome speed.”

“My chu ko nu shoot fast enough.” said Rollted.

“Ancient curses weaken the abominations to sunlight and garlic, though older vampyres who have consumed plenty of virgins can resist the spells.” said Estka, “We attack during the day while the vampyre will be slower and pained.”

“And I have prepared stakes.” Rollted added.

“Stakes?” Barnemit was familiar with the old story about staking a vampyre’s heart to ensure it was dead. Was there fact behind the rumour?

Rollted explained, “A stake of brittle wood should break, no, *shatter* is the right word, when you stab a vampyre in the heart. The healing heart traps the tiny splinters, which the blood drinker cannot hope to pull out easily. This prevents the vital organ from being restored to its original condition. It may no longer do its job of magicking and circulating blood through the abomination’s body. Your gift of regeneration would not survive a stake to the heart either, Lieutenant.”

“Do not forget, Barnemit the Vampyre’s Bane accompanies us, the hero who broke free of a blood lord’s grasp to deny his thirst a whole village.” Lezroo praised, “Lord Senjdaq has much to fear. I have faith you and I can hit the vampyre if the chu ko nu miss.”

Barnemit recognized Vampyre’s Bane was a better title than the monster or traitor he had previously been branded. Nonetheless, he was not happy to assault Lord Senjdaq so outnumbered, though arguing the prospect was futile since he was the single opponent. “Since we’ve decided not to wait, when do we leave?”

“Day after tomorrow, dawn.” Estka declared, “Our route is set. Hicussaw, we can use your shadow walk spell to hasten our journey. You could also pick up Lezroo’s friend and her

fighters.”

“Maybe.” Hicussaw was wary, “I won’t spend an amount of mana travelling that I’ll miss in a battle. It’s risky.”

“Of course.” Rollted acknowledged, “On low mana we shall not make the mistake of attacking the vampyre. We are counting on your clones, Hicussaw the Armybringer.”

“Smart, I won’t fail.” Hicussaw assured, “Mistress Estka, there’s an issue I’d like to raise.”

Estka did not show a trace of surprise, the other participants in their gathering did.

“Speak your mind.” she said.

“An unpracticed apprentice isn’t much help to us.” Hicussaw said, “He should remain here to safeguard Pank Hit.”

“You mean your old friend, Jams of Bart.” Estka said.

“Yes. Of all deadly foes, fighting a vampyre, on his first try at combat magic, he’d be no good.”

“My contract with Lord Doneg grants me the right to choose an apprentice and command him as I please.”

“Jams is not a natural fighter. His instinct is to flee or cower.”

“The swift pace of his learning surpasses both me and the master who trained me. Wielding his spells in battle is exactly the experience he needs to improve.” Estka was unyielding.

“Barnemit, Master Rollted, Lezroo Caveclear. You see how Jams will hinder our strength?”

“I do not.” Rollted answered, “Mistress Estka’s apprentice is her concern alone.”

“Jams’ magic puts him above your clones.” Barnemit stated. He did not voice the joy he would gain from Jams getting killed. The dung eater had demonstrated an unwillingness to obey Barnemit. Unmasking the demon in their midst didn’t benefit Skera’s brother now, Hicussaw’s power was essential to slaying the Star Prince thirsting for Skera’s virgin blood.

“Hicussaw Armybringer, your friend has a choice.” Estka said, “He can quit the job I

offered him.”

“**THUNDER BURST!**” **Jams** yelled. His spell burst bright and loud. Jams did not flinch, the flash and boom were dulled to his senses, he heard the stray noises of the manor over the blast and the scene was obscured for a moment or two instead of whiteness blotting everything out.

The spell’s light cleared, uncovering the area where straw dummies and shadows of Hicussaw suffered his practice. Two Hicussaws had collapsed, two were standing stiff and unmoved. Around them, the civilians and soldiers going about their day’s business scarcely heeded the activity of the sorcerer’s apprentice. The new turned old quickly.

“Thanks for the clones.” Jams addressed the Hicussaw beside him.

“Glad they’re helping you train.” Hicussaw said, “Seems to me an ordinary mortal sorceress teaching you how was the key to controlling your magic.”

“Mistress Estka gave me a bunch of lessons and some free stuff.” Jams’ right hand waved the wand he was clutching, a polished wooden rod a rit and a half long. Dark blue paint ringed the body several times and covered the firing end.

Jams pointed his weapon, “**ELECTROCUTE!**”

Nothing happened. Jams was confused, “Huh?”

Hicussaw began encouragingly, “Well, you’re just starting-”

“Out of range! Jinx me!” Jams hurried forward a few steps, “This talisman spell can strike farther than a Cold Blast but not as far as a Fire Bolt.” Jams paused a breath, “**ELECTROCUTE!**”

The wand’s tip shot a crackling zigzag beam of blue energy connecting to one of the Hicussaws his Thunder Burst did not target. The beam ceased, lasting a couple of moments. Clone Hicussaw shook slightly, his chest smoked a little where the Electrocute spell hit.

“**ELECTROCUTE!**” Jams’ wand fired.

“**ELECTROCUTE!**” Jams’ wand fired.

“Behold, I can spam Electrocute!” Jams explained, “It’s cheap on mana too.”

“Your first shot hit your mark.” Hicussaw moved up to Jams.

“I’ve been practicing Mistress Estka’s tips for aiming spells.”

“Nicely done my buddy boy.”

“I’m careful not to kill the clones. They sure can take a beating though.” Jams spoke of the somewhat fried Hicussaw he had been Electrocuting.

“They’re our soldiers.” Hicussaw’s tone went a bit cold.

“You’ve become more powerful.” Jams cast his gaze upon his friend.

Hicussaw lowered his voice, “We, my demon and I, have grown closer. Had we been this strong when Calgemo was alive...”

“I feel the same.” Jams said.

“You are wise to blame me, my buddy boy.” Hicussaw saddened.

“No!” Jams looked horrified, “I meant my failures crugged Calgemo!”

“You would have died with him.” Hicussaw said, “It wasn’t your fault.”

“If I had mastered my magic earlier, I might have fought off the cold wizard, maybe saved both our lives.”

“Jams, Calgemo died because I got distracted planning the attack on the square. I should have been watching, I should have been there.”

“We lie to our friends now?” Shadow Hicussaw asked.

“After the vampyre, we won’t be seeing a familiar face again. Best to part friends while he doesn’t know we sacrificed Calgemo likely for no good purpose.” Hicussaw told his demon.

Hicussaw spoke to Jams, “Estka promised our crimes breaking the king’s law are forgiven, all of us. You don’t have to be her apprentice.”

“What?” Jams was shocked, “Mistress Estka is the reason my magic can be useful.”

“Your mistress is ordering you to join her in battling a vampyre.” Hicussaw said, “The

peril of her quest is plain to see. You could get killed.”

“I won’t run.” Jams clenched his wand tighter.

“Yes.” Hicussaw said uncertainly, “Stay in Pank Hit, Baron Lansam will keep this place safe.”

“No!” Jams sounded frustrated, “Fleeing danger is my mistake! I always run!”

“Great trick to not die.” Hicussaw cracked a faint smile.

Said Jams, “I accepted Estka’s offer to defend myself and those I love, so others stop risking themselves to save me. I possess magic and I’m the one who’s being protected? How stupid is that?”

“Jams, it doesn’t matter. Your friends aren’t going to abandon you.”

“My friends aren’t the problem, I am!” Jams insisted, “Calgemo was the kind of buddy who’d run to protect his friends, not flee a threat. Twice he wasted a healing pot on my worthless life. He could have saved just one for himself, instead Master Alders’ stitching was in his chest when Calgemo died.”

Hicussaw eyed the picture of determination Jams’ face portrayed. Jams endured his friend’s wordless gaze in an awkward silence. Finally Hicussaw said, “Bless your wimpy Jams. You’re set on redeeming yourself.”

Shadow Hicussaw was not impressed, “Talk is merely breath, his deeds prove his heart. How often do cowards find their courage?”

Jams said, “I’m lucky to get the chance. Hicussaw, we’re the lucky folk. Lucky to live through the trials Calgemo didn’t. I’m lucky to be a magicker,” his voice dropped to a whisper, “you’re lucky a demon is empowering you.”

“Not luck, destiny.” Hicussaw corrected Jams softly, “We living beings are bound to purposes we cannot escape should we yearn to. Destiny will not allow us. The demon and I, we are fated to bond and build a better world.”

“That speech of yours when we left Bart troubled me.” Jams confessed, “I was upset your idea of us doing fine was nearly our entire band of prisoners dying during the escape. Was their destiny to be slain helping just us two survive? Was Calgemo’s?”

“Could be. Nobody gets to decide their fate.” Hicussaw stuck to his perspective firmly.

Jams lifted his eyes, the sun had sauntered past its noon position in the sky. “I’ve not eaten, shall we visit the kitchen for lunch?”

“Not hungry.” Hicussaw sighed, “Mortals eat and drink.”

“Oh.” Jams grasped the implication regarding Hicussaw’s supernatural existence.

“I’ll catch you later Jams, I ought to say goodbye to my brothers.”

“See you Hic.” Jams said to the puff of shadowy smoke marking Hicussaw’s disappearance.

Jams tucked the wand into his belt. The Thunder Bursteds Hicussaws had recovered and were upright awaiting his magic. Jams turned his back to them. He started on the path towards the manor’s kitchen, surprised by a peasant girl in the general direction of his destination. The blackhead hoped he could simply ignore the child and proceed uneventfully. He was discomforted watching her stride very intentionally to block him.

“Jams of Bart.” the brownhead spoke.

“Um, hello.” Jams greeted the girl he had witnessed enjoying the company of Barnemit the Monster.

“Is your hair black with white streaks? Or white with black streaks?”

Jams stared.

“Well?”

“Both?” Jams ventured.

Skera said, “Makes sense.”

What was this? Jams wondered. He spun, his vision searching the world. A trap? An innocent girl the bait to fool him into doing what? Had the monster been waiting for Hicussaw to teleport off? Was the jinxbait hiding?

“You’re the new apprentice of the rana’s wizardess.” Skera stated.

“Mistress Estka is my mistress.” Jams invoked her name on the hope Estka’s reputation could deter any malice Barnemit was plotting.

“You know my big brother Barnemit? You two were at Bart together.”

“We were there.” Jams replied, “We spoke.” Hicussaw shadow walked to the village fields didn’t he? Meeting his brothers who were labouring their day away. Was Jams inside the range of Hicussaw’s shadow sight? Would Hicussaw rescue him from Barnemit’s...‘crug Jams’ attack-plot-thing?

“I heard you were.” Skera said, “My brother didn’t tell me, I had to ask him if it was true.”

“Er, sorry to be rude, but why are you talking to me?” Jams asked. He rested a hand on his wand, his mind forming a Thunder Burst ley.

“You’re training every day here. You’re pretty good.”

“Thank you.” Jams was surprised. He supposed the compliment of a girl not yet in her teens was an improvement on how life usually treated him.

“You’re a powerful magicker. You can make the magic hurt your enemies and spare your friends.”

“I can, I’m just an apprentice though. My friend Hicussaw is a great sorcerer.”

“He’s scary. All the teleporting and those clones. They have dead eyes.”

“Yes.” Jams let reality sink in, “He is a fright.”

“You’re questing to destroy the vampyre. His minions murdered my parents.”

“I’m sorry. I promise you, me and Hicussaw, the barons’ wizards, even your brother, the lot of us will end the vampyre’s evil.”

“My brother won’t take me on this journey. Says it’s dangerous.”

“He’s not wrong.”

“My parents are gone, he’s my blood, he’s the one left.”

Kryter’s the son! Jams wished he was fighting the vampyre right now, a nightmare preferable to the sorrow of a girl whose sole family was Barnemit the Monster.

“I can’t fight, I can’t help him. Unless I do this.”

Here it comes! Jams tensed, his senses alert, his wand and tongue poised to react whichever the route Barnemit’s strike took. Right or left, rear or front. The monster was playing his own sister!

“I beg you, Jams of Bart, protect my brother.”

“What the jinx?” Jams forgot about not spilling abuse into the ears of a child.

“My brother, he’s big and strong and smart. But he can’t cast spells. He’ll be weak against magic. That’s why he needs a magicker keeping an eye on him.”

Jams composed himself, “You’re telling me Barnemit sent his sister to ask for *my* help?”

“Barnemit doesn’t know I’m asking you. He, he isn’t fond of Hicussaw or you. I’m trying to help him, he’d be bent off if he learnt I was saying these things.”

“Obey your big brother. Angering him is not a good idea.”

“I’m not scared of Barn! He’s my big brother! I want him returning safe!”

“You should request Mistress Estka or Master Rollted.”

“Mistress Estka is scary too. She feels mean. Master Rollted, he doesn’t look like he’d care.”

“You think I care?”

“Your face is sort of nasty.” Skera informed him.

Eh, insults were the fare he should expect, Jams reminded himself.

“I’m not deceived. Under it is a gentle heart.” Skera continued, “The target boy Mistress Estka had you practicing magic on, you were kind to him. You couldn’t bear hurting the boy day after day, so you borrowed the Armybringer’s clones.”

A compliment balancing the insult. The girl had been observing Mistress Estka training him, did neither of the adults notice her?

“Please, Jams of Bart!” Skera pleaded, “Barnemit’s a great fighter. Don’t fear you’ll always be defending my brother. I bet a little magical aid is enough.”

Protect her brother? The joke swam around Jams’ head. Save Barnemit? The very notion of Jams saving folk was ridiculous. He ran and deserted his buddy boy to die, yet the girl supposed he would risk his life guarding Barnemit’s?

Chapter XI

Clouds of black had swallowed the sky. Hicussaw looked down upon his army. His form was perched atop the pinnacle of a great tower, shadows wrapping him flapped and billowed in the wind. The soldiers below stood armed and armoured, chanting and howling. Most were mortal yet a number had given their soul and flesh to host the power of lesser demons. They were a roaring sea begging to be unleashed on his foes. Their torches and fires benefited their own vision, not a rit of the land was concealed from Hicussaw's shadow sight.

Hicussaw awoke to a darkness quiet, calm and very incomplete. Light flaunted itself across the sloping walls of thin fabric enclosing him. Campfires burning outside the bluehead's one-man tent were responsible.

"Sweet unicorn farts!" Hicussaw ejaculated, "What was that?"

"A life we lived." Shadow Hicussaw answered.

"Another mortal we possessed?"

"A mortal we became."

"We don't recognize any of the races we saw or the languages we heard."

"We will, given time. They are one of our earliest memories. We dwelled on a different continent, oceans far from Tarfelm and Kritland in Middle Selmarr."

"How are we dreaming this?"

"Our sleeping mind wandered past the borders dividing our mortal and demonic halves. Our bond is reaching the strength to pierce those last barriers. Our soul is merging into one whole, we shall be reborn as ourself of a single mind, knowing the experiences of every life we remember living."

"We were villains, were we not?"

"We became mortals of purposes we would now think evil. In this age, we are Hicussaw the Armybringer, the hero of Pank Hit."

Hicussaw shut his eyes against the faint illumination touching them. The night

presented several octars of forest, seeming naked and bared to the finest detail. A beetle crawling over a leaf, an owl on spread wings swooping down and scooping up a mouse, the antlered head of a jackalope flicking its ears towards the low sounds of the vampyre hunters' camp, and the courageous questers themselves chatting and eating and drinking and readying their equipment. His shadow sight had sharpened considerably.

Hicussaw said, "Our dreamed warriors called us Niltsiar."

"It is ages ancient, a name the world has often bestowed on us. We are surprised it has endured in mortal knowledge."

"Barnemit said nymphs told him. Fae don't die of too many years."

"Even immortals may forget."

"These didn't. Guess thousands of years could not lessen the malore of our deeds. Our worst self inflicted a terror time can't dull."

Shadow Hicussaw shrugged, "Those who we once were sought great conquests. Waging terrible wars was their destiny."

Hicussaw opened his eyes and yawned, "We can survive forsaking food and water but not sleep?"

"We worked a lot of magic today. A weary soul must rest or grow ever weaker. Slumber also recovers our mana faster."

"How do we improve our mana?" Hicussaw asked, "Depleting our reserve early has cost us lives, it's our biggest weakness."

"Our strength has more than doubled since the raid on Pank Hit. Our soul can carry a higher volume of mana."

"Not enough." Hicussaw was unsatisfied, "We feel the size of our reserve. Battling hordes of enemies will still drain us."

"We are not alone. Our mortal allies will share the burden of fighting."

"We won't lose folk because we had no mana to save them!" Hicussaw burst, "We won't repeat our mistake!"

"Perfect decisions saving everyone and risking none is our heart's wish." Shadow

Hicussaw said quietly.

“Yes, we understand.” Hicussaw sounded relieved.

“We should accept the truth.”

“Huh?”

“Thrusting ourself into peril and challenging villains will always bring us hard choices. Achieving our heart’s wish is impossible while we chase a hero’s destiny.”

“If we have the mana, we can!” Hicussaw would not relent.

“Hell.” Shadow Hicussaw whispered.

Hicussaw paused, uncertain he heard correctly. “What did we say?”

“We *are* a demon. We could draw upon the mana of our hell to fuel our spells.”

“Kryter’s the son! *Our* hell? We have a hell?”

“Does not every god have a heaven? The mightiest demons rule their own hell. We count among those ranks.”

“We thought we were damned before, we’re claiming we have to actually, physically, go to hell?”

“We must return there to seal our bond for eternity.”

“And this will give us extra mana?”

“Hell is a realm full of mana. We link ourself to such a source and we could cast spells in the mortal world never worrying about the mana cost.”

“Then hell is our second goal.”

“Second?”

“First is this Star Prince. We can’t abandon Jams on a vampyre hunt. Calgemo, my father, Urchesk’s blood...Pank Hit’s blood we shall avenge.”

“We agree. Finishing the blood lord will boost our hero’s fame in mortal reckoning. For our purposes, the people of this world-”

“What’s he doing?” Hicussaw wondered at the shadow sight of Lezroo Caveclear

approaching the Armybringer's tent.

"Interrupting us." Shadow Hicussaw complained.

"Hicussaw Armybringer, are you awake?" Lezroo called.

"We need not answer." Shadow Hicussaw said, "Leave us be, mortal warrior."

"No, it's fine." Hicussaw addressed his demon. Aloud he said, "I'm up. Give me a moment."

Hicussaw pulled himself together and crawled out to the open air and campfire illuminated night. His human vision received the scenery his demonic sight was already viewing. Trees, bushes, tents and clusters of men (plus a few women) were scattered between the fires. Druzhinniks wore their uniforms marked by the coats of arms of Lords Doneg and Lansam. Chu ko nu were garbed in their plate and skirts and bandoliers, the famous repeater crossbows on their backs. The more numerous templar soldiers displayed a broader choice of armour individually but generally stuck to metal such as chain mail vests and breastplates. Standard among them were garments of white cloth; tunics, capes and skirts, a style not dissimilar to Anrieslem's mercenaries though the templars cared not for trousers. Nesdank Heavenfall's god worshipping warriors included the women fighters present.

Hicussaw stretched and yawned, "Lezroo Caveclear, do the wizards seek to speak with me?"

"Not the barons' sorcerers, I do. I've been checking on you after you got back." Lezroo said, "Hoping to catch you eyes open."

"Why?"

"I wanted to discuss how you won your spells, they truly strike awe in your allies and enemies alike."

"There was no winning. You've heard the story. An heirloom in the rana's family vault gave me this power."

"Incredible to have changed you so. Did you sense it's magic before it worked upon you?"

"Why the curiosity?"

"I am a paladin. Finding arcane artefacts is what I do, part of my duty."

“Your duty?”

“What do you know of my order? The Valorous Peers in Defence of the Realm’s Peace?”

“I know they name themselves the Valorous Peers in Defence of the Realm’s Peace.”

Lezroo chuckled, “Did you eat dinner?”

“Jinx our immortal belly! Why does everyone care about our meals when we can’t eat?”

Hicussaw asked his shadow.

“We may have a taste, we do not need food to live.” Shadow Hicussaw advised.

Hicussaw responded to Lezroo, “Rest comes first, I’ve to be at my full strength in a few hours. We’re spending the night a safe distance from the Star Prince’s camp. Tomorrow I’m the one shadow walking our forces to his face.”

“Hicussaw, you’ve exhausted yourself teleporting us and Nesdank’s band.” Lezroo said, “We owe you the days and nights saved on our journey. You shadow walked alone and confirmed the vampyre’s forces didn’t shift their base. Our strategy of a surprise attack targeting the vampyre would be impossible had we not your shadow magic.”

“Does he think we are unaware of what we have done?” Shadow Hicussaw questioned Lezroo’s intelligence.

“Listening to your account of my deeds tires me further.” Hicussaw said.

“Sorry.” Lezroo grinned.

“He does not look sorry.” Shadow Hicussaw murmured.

Lezroo continued, “You’re right about maintaining your strength, but you’re forgetting, drowsy brains and empty bellies both will slow and weaken you.”

“I’ll grab a bite.” Hicussaw conceded.

The duo headed to a fire where mercenaries and soldiers were bantering comradely around a pot suspended above the flames. Hicussaw rummaged a bit in a pile of utensils near the fire, the heap thankfully dumped on a cloth sheet and not the dirty earth. He picked a bowl and a spoon, the cleanest of the lot, which did not mean they were clean. The druzhinnik cook ladled a beef and potato stew into the bluehead’s bowl and handed him a scrap of bread. Hicussaw ate. Mmmhmm, food did taste *good*. His jaws mashed

together, tongue sifting through the flavours, throat swallowing. Hicussaw realized he was an idiot. How could he not consider eating for pleasure? His gloomy miserable mood had deprived him this long of life's simplest pleasures.

"You are *really* hungry." Lezroo recognized.

"Mmmphf. I didn't understand I was craving a meal. Thank you Caveclear." Hicussaw dipped bread in his stew.

"Glad to help, Armybringer."

"Weren't you explaining the paladin to me?" Hicussaw bit off a soaked shred of the bread.

"The Valorous Peers are an order of warriors dedicated to protecting the common people, delivering them justice against the evils of the world." Lezroo stated.

"So, they're a Druzhina who don't serve the nobles or whatever age and country calls the land's rulers."

"The Druzhina is very young. Paladin have been doing our job for thousands of years, we're a remnant of an ancient empire, Ayogan. Ayogan covered most of Selmarr ages before the winged terror of the harpies."

"We met these paladin in a life or two we lived." Shadow Hicussaw recollected.

"Shouldn't the Peers have died with their empire?" Hicussaw asked Lezroo.

"Ayogan may be gone but paladin continue our honourable and glorious task. We recruit the brave and willing of any mortal race, to join us in our order's Twin Quests."

"Twin Quests?"

"Justice and relics. Aside from defending the defenceless innocent, we scour the world for artefacts, of the Ayogani and of other peoples. We, ah, acquire the items, and store them safely to preserve knowledge of the ancients and their feats."

"A scholarly pursuit? Paladin are guardians of the people and their history."

"We believe the ancient legends can teach us wisdom. Over the course of ages, countless nightmares and dreams have come true. Studying past defeats and victories may reveal the key to winning our present."

"Not a bad idea." Hicussaw said, "But be careful following the past, you might ignore the

chance of a better future.”

“Well said.” Lezroo agreed, “The best of us paladin strive to avoid the mistake you fear us making.” He spent a moment quietly watching Hicussaw eat, “I’d be lying if I claimed there aren’t less scholarly reasons we hunt relics. You never know what powers lie forgotten, some can ease the troubles of today, while some are evils we must lock away. Your shadow magic is proof.”

“I’ve heard stories. Paladin practice a kind of sorcery, don’t you?”

“A paladin’s magic is a skill kept secret from those not one of us. We can conjure copies of weapons and equipment the founders of our order left in our hidden vaults.”

“Paladin spells sound great for combat.” Hicussaw paused to chew, “I see why the stories say paladin are tough fighters.”

“Thank you Hicussaw.” Lezroo said, “The source of your shadow powers isn’t an Ayogani artefact I think, I’ve read not a mention of a rumour of its nature in my order’s archives. Even if it’s not, I’d like to learn more about such a powerful item.”

“After the jinxed thing cast its spell on me, it seemed dead, used up, depleted.”

“A pity, yet interesting. You wouldn’t mind answering a few questions I have. Or are you too tired?”

“You should question Lord Doneg.”

“I’ll visit Tarfelm’s rana once the abomination’s slain. Going to request gold and details of his mysterious shadow heirloom.”

“Gold?”

“Us vampyre hunters will be owed a reward. What else are noble lords for?”

“Lord Lansam should pay, Lords Doneg and Anrieslem have no clue who’s hunting their vampyre. Why would they reward somebody they didn’t hire.”

“It’s traditional, they can’t discourage adventurers and wandering heroes solving their problems. Not paying would risk nobody helping the next time there’s a villain running loose. A hero’s equipment can be very expensive.”

“You speak sense. Forgive me, I’m new to this adventurer business.” Hicussaw uttered

through a mouthful of food.

“Doneg later, tonight you and me share company. The rana may have owned the heirloom but you bear its magic.”

“Yes.” said Hicussaw, “Ask freely.”

“Would we betray the fact the heirloom was our prison?” Shadow Hicussaw worried, “How learned is Lezroo Caveclear? Can he tell the true purpose of the wretched item?”

“Just inform us of what we can or can’t say.” Hicussaw dismissed the demon’s concern.

A few hundred ocs, perhaps half an octar, west of paladin and demon, on the edge of the vampyre hunters’ encampment, was Barnemit sticking wooden stakes into a bandolier strapped across his chain mail clad chest. These stakes were cut to a short length barely exceeding the grasp of his fist, their ends sharpened to a delicate point. He picked them from the variety of equipment spread on the sheet at his feet. Soldiers, mercenaries and the gods’ minions were also partaking. Rolsted had laid the array outside his tent and retired within to rest till dawn. The available items included poisoned blades and vials of garlic oil to smear on skin or weapons. Previously, Barnemit had witnessed fighters bringing their own chunks of garlic, convinced chewing the stuff moments prior to battle would render their blood unappealing to the Star Prince. When Barnemit pressed a query on the matter, Rolsted could not confirm the belief but judged it worth a try. The Spell Master did mention an oil or paste applied on skin was vastly more effective in making a vampyre regret biting a body.

Barnemit’s hauberk remained unclothed, Baron Lansam had no Doneg tabards to dress the Bart Castle lieutenant. Barnemit himself didn’t care. His period of serving the rana was nearing its end. Slaying Lord Senjdaq should ensure a grateful Lord Doneg did not refuse Barnemit’s resignation and deny his adventuring wish. To advance his new hero’s career, Barnemit couldn’t squander his future going only where a Krit baron sent him.

If the lieutenant snatched any rest before the daylight battle, he would be sleeping in armour, shield in his hand, sword in his scabbard. A stiff and uncomfortable slumber, enabling him to fight within a couple of moments of his eyes opening. His stake bandolier and kit belt he would stash under a blanket beside each hand, he didn’t want to risk accidentally breaking brittle stakes by wearing them to bed. The nasal helmet

washed of Woss's blood he would lay at his right hand, easy to scoop up and fit on as he awoke, he could never sleep a wink putting his head in that hot thing.

Satisfied he was properly equipped to destroy a blood drinking abomination, Barnemit turned and strode towards his tent. His journey was not uneventful. Eye and ear were drawn to Nesdank Heavenfall, an audience gathered around her silently receiving her voice.

Templars Barnemit expected, he was surprised to count four druzhinniks and a chu ko nu crossbowman, Spell Mistress Estka and Jams too. Then again, why was he? A famous heroess of a priestess praying to her goddess. No one thought winning the favour of a divine deity would hurt, especially considering their enemy tomorrow. Barnemit moved through the crowd, he deserved a place in the front.

Nesdank stood behind a fire, the flames devouring branches sacrificed to their light, illuminating her sagging skin suggestive of an age close to the elderly Rolsted. She posed an imposing figure. Her arms she held reaching for the heavens, steady and wavering not the slightest. The right hand lifted a slim bronze staff, mounting its tip was a configuration of two gold hoops spinning intertwined and lazily, around a pink crystal hovering in their shared centre space. Black and red hair plaited, hung down her back, tucked under a cape appearing a gold gossamer web shining in the night. Her neck dangled a silver chain sporting a black pendant, whose eight legs and tiny jewelled eyes imitated a spider. Nesdank's elegant blouse and knee length skirt, both white, had exquisite gold patterns embroidered on them. Steel greaves shielded her legs beneath the hem of her skirt.

"We are children, you and I." the priestess was saying, "Mewling infants cowering below the heavens, their beauty and delight would inspire awe in our very souls."

Could the paradise dwelling gods survive a mortal life full of worldly trials? Barnemit would love to test them. He would gladly trade positions with one of the too fortunate divine kind.

"Yet the gods do not scorn us, weak and wretched things we are. We may ask the Mother Of Multitudes to aid us."

Mother? No good came of trusting mothers, Barnemit knew. Nesdank's ugly goddess did not rouse his faith.

“Fei Tah, She Who Loves Us As If We Were Her Own Brood.”

Nesdank’s audience listened solemnly, Barnemit pretended the seriousness.

“Her Eight Eyes Are Ever Watching, that children do not suffer unknown to Her, that the prayers we cry do not go unanswered.”

Nesdank’s audience listened solemnly, Barnemit pretended the seriousness.

“Have not the tales of Her glories convinced you, my fellow children? Hear me now, let another glory amaze your ears and warm your hearts.”

Nesdank’s audience listened solemnly, Barnemit pretended the seriousness.

“The Seventh of the Ten Affections. Of thousands of kindnesses, the Ten best show the depths of motherly favour She bestows upon us unworthy mortals.”

Nesdank’s audience listened solemnly, Barnemit pretended the seriousness.

“The Seventh Affection Fei Tah worked during the Aelsvimorrah. Indeed the Aelsvimorrah is called the First Miracle. A terrible war the gods waged to free mortals of demonic rule, to remake the Endless Catacombs into a world where we could know happiness. Countless were the battles fought and greatest the warriors fighting. Yes, this was an age of glories.

In one of these immortal contests, a mortal family was trapped on the battlefield, powers they could not understand clashing on all sides, even over their heads and under their feet. Foreseeing their destruction, the mortals wailed terror, pleading for the gods to take pity. They begged to be delivered from doom.

Her Eight Eyes Are Ever Watching. Fei Tah beheld the little family’s distress. She did not ignore the tears of the children, She lowered a strand of Her finest silk. The mortals began climbing Her thread to safety. In their relief at rescue, they conceived a hymn praising their saviour goddess. Their singing reached the heavens. But the danger had not passed, their song enraged the demons, who sought to cut the thread and capture the singers. The Mother of Multitudes dispatched a Brood of Guardians, Her own spawn, to defend the worshippers on their ascent. This deed of Fei Tah reveals Her heart treats mortals no different from Her heavenly creations. Her love embraces children of every mother and age.”

Huh? Ale what? Endless Catacombs? When did demons rule the world? Barnemit tried comprehending where Nesdank's tale lay amidst the pieces of history Lady Silverglaze had given him.

"We are children, you and I." the priestess repeated, two glories left to recount. "Mewling infants cowering below the heavens, their beauty and delight would inspire awe in our very souls."

"The war of gods and demons, this was after the deaths of Harnan and Thusa?" Barnemit questioned.

Nesdank paused, "Barnemit the Vampyre's Bane, interrupting a priestess preaching a holy sermon is very rude."

"I merely wish to learn more I can thank the gods for." said Barnemit.

"I have no idea who your Haran and Das Sa are."

"Harnan the First Father, Thusa the Allmother. The lovers who birthed all life, litters of gods and demons too."

"A falsehood! Why do you utter such blasphemy?" Nesdank's tone was angry. Her templar men and women of the audience shifted their standing spears and gripped the handles of their sheathed swords in a visibly threatening manner. Their unfriendly gaze fell upon Barnemit.

"It's no lie." Barnemit feared not the priestess attacking an ally on a vampyre hunting quest. Nesdank would prize the glory of destroying the blood drinking abomination in her goddess's name, risking the quest so she could punish a faithless druzhinnik would earn her no story worth telling. "I was taught our world's beginning."

"By whom?"

"The fae."

"What breed of fae?"

"A nymph."

Nesdank laughed, "A *nymph*? Oh my poor, foolish, seduced man!"

Her fighting fanatics relaxed.

“Did the nymph kiss you?” Nesdank queried.

“No, we talked.” Barnemit replied, “I’m no slave to a nymph’s magic.”

Nesdank continued, “I bet your fae story was a drama packing tragic twists, a struggle of passions run wild. The nymphs *are* entertaining.”

“You say the fae deceived me?” Barnemit’s voice gained an angry edge.

“The fae do not cherish truth, they seek pleasure suiting their tastes.”

“Where did you get your creation story? How can you be sure it’s the real one?”

“Take care your callous manner of questioning does not offend, Barnemit of Pank Hit. Respect would win you answers.”

“I’m sorry, my priestess.” Barnemit adopted a softer, less challenging tone. Obtaining accurate information ranked a higher priority than venting his fouled temper. Had the Queen of Wildsong Woods hidden something advantageous from his knowledge?

His submission satisfied Nesdank. She said, “The Mother of Multitudes treasures my devotion, I received Her visions of the world’s creation. Would you believe fae myth instead of the holy word of a goddess?”

“What’s the truth the mother goddess shared with you?”

“Do you want to understand how our world was created? What we mortals were before the gods came?”

Barnemit pondered a moment, “I do.”

“Before the world, there was the void. The void held many things; the stars, the sun and moon, many things. Gods dwelled in heavens of their own making, protected from the wicked demons lurking in the void. Then a tragedy struck the cosmos, something new even in the memory of the ageless gods. A star died, and its cooling remains became the Yisumfinn to the gods, the Catacombs of Endless Horror to us. Demons infested this newborn world and took it for their playground. In time, they grew weary of inflicting evil on each other. They craved further amusement. By their terrible power, they created thinking and feeling races doomed to mortality, demons were our makers.

To harden the lives of mortals, our demonic masters filled the Endless Catacombs with beasts, fae, and worst monsters. They enslaved us, practiced their torments on our

flesh and minds, drove us to slay our own in mad games.

The gods watched, they could not bear our suffering. Divine beings descended from the heavens to war against our creators. We were the work of evil but the celestial race believed we could be good. They fought for us, through dreadful battles they destroyed the demons' bodies, banishing their spirits to prisons we named the hells. Till this day, demons have no forms to wield their old power. If they desire their strength restored, they must possess other souls capable of enduring their wickedness. They crafted us first, our hearts most akin to their hearts. We mortals are their best hosts.

Having defeated the demons, our divine heroes smashed the Yisumfinn into realms. The gods gifted a domain to every kind of thinking being, that they may dwell apart in peace, the strange ways of one breed not harming another."

While Barnemit conferred his attention on the priestess, he was the object of Jams' troubled gaze. Barnemit was clearly a bad man, a monster, a villain. Jams was obviously good. A hero? Hardly. He was not evil though. This meant he couldn't save a Barnemit facing death, could he? Barnemit's end would be a good thing, right?

The gods weep! Why had he stopped to listen to Barnemit's pisswet sister! He should have ignored her, or pushed her aside. He had shut Skera up, assuring her he would do what he could to protect Barnemit. A lie? Lying to children was fine. His mother had done it frequently. Claiming his father was a hero who had died on an adventure. Her many lovers she insisted were an attempt at finding a new father. It wasn't bad deceiving a child to spare him the pain of reality.

Um, wasn't Barnemit safeguarding a child, his sister? The monster was being gentle, actually caring for an orphaned girl. Sweet unicorn farts! Jams had barely kept his boyhood body fed and clothed in Bart Castle, he could not imagine accepting the burden of rearing a child. The monster was trying to, he was fighting on the righteous side now, and his sister loved him. Anyone a little child loved couldn't be evil, could they? Misunderstood, prone to mistakes, definitely, but malicious? No. No, Barnemit the Monster was no friendly, peaceable bugger. What the jinx was Jams thinking?

Ugh! Forget Skera's nonsense, Barnemit was a jinxbait perfectly skilled to defend himself. Given the opportunity, the monster would probably sacrifice Hicussaw, Jams and everybody else so he wouldn't stub a toe. Jams should be worrying about his own life surviving the next day. Kindly Mistress Estka had outfitted him for battle; new shoes,

new trousers, new sash belting a new tunic, talisman weapon tucked into said sash. It was equipment Estka selected from Lord Lansam's armoury. She even hired Pank Hit's tailor to work enchanted embroidery upon Jams' tunic. The items and labour Estka generously paid through Pank Hit's banker transferring coin of her account to those owed.

The Mistress of Spells had changed her raiment too, donning a scarlet hooded cloak and a fiery orange dress. Her extensive jewellery Estka retained on her person. Jams' thoughts led him to look his mistress's way just as she placed a hand on his taller shoulder. She spoke, "This conversation of priestess and druzhinnik is boring. Come."

Estka departed the circle of Nesdank's audience, Jams followed. She asked, "Did you cast the Detect Magic spell I ordered?"

"Yes my mistress."

Estka walked, "What did you see?"

Jams matched her pace. He recalled a kurn or more earlier, the radiant outline people and objects took on in his sight under the influence of Detect Magic. He answered, "Nesdank Heavenfall. Her staff, pendant, cape, bracelet, rings, the embroidery on her clothes."

"Others."

"Men-at-arms, mercenaries, holy warriors. Most carried no enchanted items, a few had one or two. You my mistress are loaded."

"Continue."

"Barnemit's whole body was aglow." Jams' voice reflected how the spectacle disturbed him, "Hicussaw was the same when I detected his magic."

"Lord Doneg's heirloom magicked Hicussaw. Our vampyre placed a powerful enchantment on the lieutenant's blood." Estka explained, "His blood aside, what else did you sense about Barnemit?"

"Barnemit's sword in its sheath, potions in his belt, the shield on his back."

"Good." Estka did not sound happy. Her unfeeling tone persisted, "Could you recognize the enchantments?"

“Er, no.”

“Experience and study can train you to read such spells.” Estka said, “I am glad your skill with Detect Magic is advancing quickly. It will prove its value, it can show you a known opponent’s arsenal and reveal the unexpected. Knowing the peril is surviving the peril.”

“The Detect Magic spell spends a lot of mana not hurting a foe. Casting it during combat seems...unwise?”

“Your concern is the reason magickers act like ungifted mortals here. We would rather save our mana and use an item. Do not forget you must tune the equipment to ignore you and your allies. Some enchantments are forever alert to the presence of magic, they can be a mana-free always-working Detect Magic, but they are no proper replacement. A sorcerer’s Detect Magic does a better job if you suffer its high mana price.”

“Thank you my mistress,” Jams actually bowed his head, “for teaching me this Detect Magic spell.”

“It was easy. My apprentice, you learn fast.”

“Will you soon teach me new, um, fighting spells?” Jams ventured.

“I told you, you will learn new magic when I no longer need to guide you on the old.”

“I’ve practiced and mastered my Thunder Burst and the wand’s Electrocute. My Detect Magic is going fine. Aren’t I ready? I mean, we’ll rest tonight, after tomorrow’s battle we start.”

“You know why Detect Magic is important. Can you speak of your Thunder Burst? Why not hold your mana and throw a Thunder Orb instead?”

“I don’t have to drag heks of orbs everywhere. A grenade can’t understand the difference between friend or foe, the blast stuns everyone. The ley of my spell I can adapt, my sorcery won’t harm my allies.”

“Your power grows, and your strategy improves.” Estka remarked. Jams had no idea whether she was pleased or not. His mistress said, “Confronting the Blood Lord shall test you, Jams of Bart. Should you stay alive despite the enemy’s efforts, your training will move forward.”

Hicussaw's eyelids rose open, above him was the face of innocence. A small face, topped by curly locks, the face of a boy who could not have been older than eight or maybe ten years. The pale translucence of face and hair shimmered through the dimmed light inside Hicussaw's tent. Eyes were blood red. The face's ghostly appearance would have frightened Hicussaw the stable hand, Hicussaw the demon host was merely surprised.

The boy reacted to Hicussaw's awakening. Lips parted, baring extended fangs set in a bloody maw. The face dove down and teeth sank into the side of Hicussaw's throat. Hicussaw had not had time to complete a thought.

The boy screeched and shrank back, coughing and spitting black fumes.

Demonic vision surveyed the camp. Shadow Hicussaw announced to his mortal half, "The dead are among us!"

The boy fled, his spirit dispersed as if a gust of wind caught it, the vapours were rapidly sucked under the walls of the tent.

Hicussaw said, "They're-the gods weep! Are they drinking blood?"

Hicussaw teleported a few octets out of his fabric shelter. His neck ceased smoking as the bite wound healed. The dawn sun's rays of warmth and light penetrated beneath the trees to their camp but could not end their nightmare. Wispy shapes of dead children were darting from one spot to another, occasionally entering a vampyre hunter's tent. Hicussaw received a shadow picture of the little spirits viciously putting teeth in the occupants. Shouts and screams filled the air, the bluehead distinguished 'Arrggh!', 'Help!', 'Get off me!', 'What the jinx?', 'The vampyre's attacking!' and 'Ghosts!'.

Druzhinniks, templars, chu ko nu, armoured and armed were bursting free of their tents and blankets. Shadow sight perceived Lezroo Caveclear exit his shelter, hammer in hand, view the situation for several moments and promptly retreat within his sleeping enclosure. Some vampyre hunters emerged in the open, fighting the dead thing latched onto their necks. The demon observed their desperate flailing and stabbing, fingers and blades passed through the ghosts' incorporeal bodies hitting nothing. One templar would have impaled his own heart were he not wearing a breastplate.

"Jinx this!" Hicussaw addressed Shadow Hicussaw, "We defend our allies!"

His words became reality. Hicussaw's clones materialized, and immediately chased the bloodthirsty apparitions. They yanked loose the biters, leaving the victims to bleed and crawl or stumble towards comrades. When enduring the children's fangs themselves, the Hicussaws did not regenerate their torn flesh, their shadow blood quickly discouraged chomping attempts however. The ghosts hated being denied a drink. Those who tasted a shadow of Hicussaw now morphed, their childish figures reddening and stretching and twisting until they resembled a blood clot pulled horrendously thin and long, floating creepily, arms sprouting lengthy claws and teeth enlarging further. Their new 'armed' hands proved terribly effective at shredding clones.

Hicussaw heard Estka yell, "Blood wraiths! Do not attack! The dead possess physical immunity!"

The Mistress of Spells performed a gesture with her glittering bejewelled fingers. A roaring fire sprang tall in a straight line parallel to her front, a fence burning carelessly across tents and equipment in its path. Estka cried aloud, "Withdraw behind my Fire Wall! Heat can burn them!"

Jams guarded Estka's rear. The blackhead clutched his wand, his face full of fear, exactly what Hicussaw expected. Jams' missing courage didn't matter, he would be safe sticking to Estka. Good, Hicussaw would not let Jams die. The loss of Calgemo was bad enough.

Lezroo had vacated his tent once more, this time wielding a sword. He advanced upon a clawed monstrosity as it finished destroying a clone. The wraith charged, Lezroo expertly parried the claws and sliced his foe down the middle. His ghostly opponent shrieked, writhed in pain, visibly collapsed and fell back. Lezroo sought fresh targets. Hicussaw conjured additional shadows. Barely lasting moments against the dead, his clones still allowed the vampyre hunters a reprieve. Were there five-eight-over ten of the blood drinking spirits raiding their camp?

Hicussaw spotted Roltd brandishing a zigzag bladed dagger and a buckler shield. The Master of Spells hurried about, checking the wounded victims of the wraiths' thirst, his attention magically stopped their bleeding and started their flesh mending.

"Our blood wizard is brave. His spells cannot harm the bloodless dead yet he risks himself to tend our casualties." Shadow Hicussaw said.

Heaven opened its gates and divinity touched the earth. The white brilliance overwhelmed not mortal eye sight but their very souls. A luminous goddess strode forward amidst the living and the dead, an image of the splendour and power of the celestial realms. The petty conflict with the wraiths was forgotten, what meaning did the survival of mortals have compared to the glory of the divine? Witnesses felt a sacred terror graze their hearts and move on, followed by relief they were not the focus of the gods' rage. The wraiths could not bear such divine fury engulfing their souls, they silently departed the field of surprise battle.

The demon host recognized Nesdank Heavenfall toting her enchanted staff, clad in the magic of light and awe. She certainly did an excellent job playing the role of a mother goddess rushing to the aid of her young. While the old priestess may be called slow, only a fool would think her weak. Her holy warriors welcomed this evidence of their devotion rewarded, quite loudly; 'Praise Fei Tah!' and 'The Mother of Multitudes!' and 'Her Eight Eyes Are Ever Watching!'.

When the last of the wraiths vanished off the edge of the camp, Nesdank halted. Lezroo and Barnemit approached the priestess whose radiance was diminishing unhastily. Barnemit? Helmet on, sword drawn and fae shield held ready. The Monster of Pank Hit had been the vampyre hunters' least impressive champion against the attacking dead. The fact stirred Hicussaw's scorn in a very satisfying manner.

Hicussaw noticed Estka began walking to the end of her Fire Wall, she had to go around it to reach Nesdank. The fiery wizardess was the farthest champion since Rolled healing the scattered casualties left him nearer. The vampyre hunters needed their leaders planning a course of action after the sudden wraith attack, not wasting time on covering distance. Hicussaw teleported himself and both the barons' magickers, placing the trio beside a merely brightened priestess.

Lezroo standing close, Hicussaw's eyes saw the sword that cut spirits of the dead. The blade did not look solid or physical, its substance as transparent as the wraiths' child forms. Ethereal. Hicussaw had heard of weapons ignoring armour and striking a body like the armour wasn't there. Had his shadow sight failed to discern what colourful human vision could?

Shadow Hicussaw cared not, "We knew it was enchanted. Do the details make a difference?"

The priestess of Fei Tah seemed her old and mortal self. She spoke, “I must wait a few kurns before my holy spell can be cast again. If the blood drinking children return too soon, the shadow of Hicussaw is our best hope.”

The Spell Mistress had similarly bad news, “My Fire Wall is also pending its reuse delay. Our spells should not have shared time, casting together was a mistake.”

What Jams found most disconcerting was Estka’s perennially indifferent tone sounding slightly stressed. A trace of emotion, perhaps annoyance or anger. Did any of the others grasp the hint? Apparently they didn’t or didn’t bother mentioning it? The flames of Estka’s Fire Wall were dying in the background.

“Hicussaw’s clones can eat a beating for us but they won’t give us victory. The wraiths were ripping them apart.” Barnemit stated the obvious. He did not enjoy his weakness, he had nothing to defeat the dead, unless he tried a particular potion or two which he wasn’t confident would help.

Rollted stuck his oddly shaped dagger in a loop of his belt, his hand would not relinquish the handle though. He tried questions leading to answers potentially saving his party. “Where is the abomination? Have we been discovered? Did he send these wraiths? They must be the damned souls of the corpses Hicussaw reported.”

Lezroo thought of answering those queries, “Hicussaw, put your clones on defence. You scout the enemy camp.”

“Will do.” Hicussaw agreed.

The Hicussaws took up position on the camp’s borders, facing the known location of the Star Prince’s force. Hicussaw the Armybringer, secretly the Demonhost, stepped onto the shadow roads. His means of teleportation lay through the shade abiding under every rock and leaf, and the shadow every creature cast upon the world. They were paths he could traverse in the darkness of an eye’s blink. The absence of light was a void his power filled. This was his domain, where he belonged, his home. Jinx the daylight limiting his shadow sight. Night would have empowered his senses and spells, and strengthened the vampyre unfortunately. Argh! He would crug the virgin murdering abomination!

An instant later to mortal perception, Hicussaw arrived at the enemy base, himself a slithering shadow. Empty? Griffins shit on our head! Where the jinx were Lord Senjdaq and his minions? The encampment was intact, tents and spits and ashes of fires, carts

and wagons and pack animals tethered in place. A gruesome spectacle of children impaled, possibly the wraiths' source. He had watched the jinxbait right here yesterday night! His sneaking shadow had listened to their talk, there was not a whisper of moving the next day. Where could they have...no.

Hicussaw shadow walked. Leaping between patches of shade, he roved the area separating the camps of vampyre hunters and their prey. The gods weep! Hundreds of foes, men and rarely women, of various breeds, on the march. Their destination could not be clearer. His flitting form's hearing snatched sentences of grumbling and prattling. His enemies hadn't a warning they were doing a morning assault either. Lord Senjdaq had roused them from slumber and commanded them to arms. The wraiths were their vanguard. A battle unplanned till the last hour, a strategy unnecessary unless the Star Prince was aware of spies in his base.

"They're awake and heading our way!" Hicussaw screamed silently, "How the jinx do they know where we're camped? We should have detected their scouts! Did they come when we were sleeping?"

"A mystery, even stealth magic cannot deceive us." Shadow Hicussaw said calmly.

"Master Alders, werewolves, raiders, wraiths. We're a mighty demon, our shadow sight sees all. Why are we always caught off guard!"

"No sign of our vampyre." Shadow Hicussaw noted.

Hicussaw returned to his clones and the allies now in grave danger of feeding a bloodthirsty abomination. The vampyre hunters had not idled awaiting their incredibly strong shadow magicker. Leaving Hicussaw's shadows as their first barrier, the humans were collecting themselves centre of their camp. Druzhinniks and templars formed several blocks, cores of chu ko nu providing ranged support to the melee fighters on the box sides. Any of these tight groups could quickly fit behind a single Fire Wall.

Closer to the clones stood the champions, and Jams. The sorceress's apprentice remained a silent member of their conversing circle. Was their courage a heroic miracle? Jams asked himself. Or were they simply working their job and he a lazy coward? Was he such a worthless waste of manhood? How could they discuss the opposite of abandoning their mission, given its changed circumstances? Upon departing Pank Hit, none had intended combating the dead.

The champions ceased speaking. From the earth below their feet, a shadow sprang to life and flesh in the shape of Hicussaw. The demon host announced, “Lord Senjdaq’s army is near. A few kurns will bring us battle.”

The information shocked Jams into speaking, “Weren’t we supposed to surprise attack them?”

Barnemit reacted, “Hicussaw you pisswet dolt! This wouldn’t be happening if you did your reconnaissance proper! We trusted your word of the enemy’s plans. You failed us and killed us.”

Hicussaw did not dispute the accusation, “Retreat. Me and my clones will hold the vampyre’s servants.”

“Barnemit’s raving mad!” Jams insisted, “We’re not dead. Hicussaw, quit fighting, a hero’s sacrifice isn’t needed. You can teleport the lot of us to safety.”

“Shit Face!” Barnemit spat, “The chance a blood drinker rids us of you *keeps* me fighting!”

“My apprentice, Jams of Bart. Destroying the Star Prince is our quest, not mere survival.” Mistress Estka reminded, “We are to stop the abomination quenching his thirst on the people of Tarfelm.”

Jams was convinced Lord Doneg’s Mistress of Spells had employed an irritated voice. The terror of being the cause instantly quietened the former stable hand of Bart Castle.

“Is the Star Prince leading his army?” Rolited asked.

Said Hicussaw, “I couldn’t pick up a clue of Senjdaq. His fae minions are gone too.”

Barnemit clenched the handles of his sword and Musveryl harder. His fists felt awfully unnatural not smashing the bluehead’s face. The dung eater was begging to be punched. Demon Hicussaw was magic muscle and no brains. The jinxbait’s insistence he could manage an unfair battle had dragged the vampyre hunters to their present predicament, where the fae-brained dolt was crugging them further. Barnemit hated that striking a possessed Hicussaw was a fight he would lose, plus it would reduce his allies while he was confronting a hostile horde. Definitely not a desirable result.

“Where are the wraiths?” Estka demanded.

Hicussaw responded, “Lurking outside our camp. I believe they’ll dare another raid

before the main force hits us.”

Jams felt his heart, no his very soul, shudder. Tremors rolling across his bones. Were his legs shaking? Was his cowardice plain to the eyes of his friends and mistress? Sweet unicorn farts! Who could call him wrong to think fleeing was their smartest option? The vampyre they were risking their lives to slay may have escaped. Why die for no good purpose? This situation was insane! Ice cold Mistress Estka seemed frustrated, something which had appeared impossible not a day ago.

“The enemy base, it is unoccupied?” Lezroo asked.

“Nothing dangerous lingers there.” Hicussaw confirmed, “Say the staked children are the wraiths, their spirits aren’t home.”

Said Estka, “They will come should we summon them. The dead and what remains of their living bodies are still linked. Souls refusing to forget the past are damned to haunt the world.”

“Those poor children spent their last hours in torment.” Nesdank’s tone was sorrowful, “Their memory of pain did not die with death. They remember the abomination’s power over their lives, their fear of his touch must be driving them to obey his will. They do not understand he can no longer hurt them.”

They’re scared of a blood drinker when they lack blood, Jams thought, so they’re taking mine and making me afraid too!

Lezroo voiced the idea the magickers were conceiving, “We teach them the truth. The least we can do is weaken Lord Senjdaq. Free the children’s souls and we deprive the Star Prince of his dead soldiers.”

Barnemit liked where this was going, “Our foes wouldn’t expect us swapping bases. They’re attacking in the wrong direction. Gives us time to exorcize the wraiths and decide our next move.”

Nesdank continued, “Fei Tah bless us, we might turn the wraiths against their murderer. Even if the children tire of fighting, if they will not battle the vampyre, their knowledge would aid us. They may reveal the secret of Senjdaq’s disappearance today, of how he avoided Hicussaw’s spying and discovered our presence.”

“A servant of a goddess and a caster of inferno spells shall try taming the dead.” Rolled

sounded sceptical, “Have either of you studied the sorcery of magicking ghosts?”

“We use no cruel spells binding their spirits.” Nesdank said, “We talk to them, soul to soul. The dead do hear the living.”

“You can summon the wraiths back to their corpses?” Lezroo questioned.

“I have experience helping the dead find peace.” Nesdank answered.

“Great!” Barnemit enthused, “Hicussaw, jump us to the enemy camp!”

Hicussaw hesitated, “Are we agreed?”

“Very well.” Rollted consented, “Wraiths aside, taking the Star Prince’s base puts us in position to attack his minions’ rear. The advantage of surprise is ours again.”

“What about my clones?” Hicussaw asked.

“They are fine here, a distraction costing the enemy a few casualties.” Rollted said.

Lezroo grinned. He shouted, “Men-at-arms! Templars! Chu ko nu! The Armybringer is teleporting us to an enemy base which lies undefended. Might still run into a nasty shock or two.”

Hicussaw carried his army of allies on the shadow roads. Their limited mortal senses could not comprehend what they passed through. They saw only a moment of utter dark, and then the abandoned encampment of their blood drinking prey. While those hunting him had sheltered under the trees, the vampyre had his minions clear a section of the forest to host his ever expanding army. Sunlight bathed the tents, vehicles, beasts, extinguished campfires and unpacked utensils. The horrific arrangement of little human bodies greeted the arrivals with a silence as cold as their bare flesh, skin bleached pale save spots of black. A tranquillity persisted, which, the hunters shared an unspoken sentiment, was absolutely obscene. Barnemit swore sinister magic was resisting the natural decay of the children. He observed the braziers were unlit, and everyone’s noses noted the foul odour.

“The gods weep!” Jams retched, “No one ought to witness the abomination’s evil!”

“Enduring his thirst is a far worse fate.” Rollted said.

Jams did not feel better, the blood wizard’s comment both accused him of feebleness and reminded him the vampyre could be drinking his blood soon.

“Spread!” Lezroo barked, “Check the tents, be sure no foe hides!”

“Tents are empty.” Hicussaw said, “My shadow magic senses no enemy here.”

“Hic, you claimed we had Senjdaq too.” Barnemit pointed out, “Guess who’s vanished beyond your tracking?”

“The Vampyre’s Bane is right, we can’t risk missing something.” Lezroo supported the lieutenant, “Fighters, search and make safe!”

The hunters’ formations broke, their members scattering across the camp. Flaps of tents were pulled back, cautious heads peeked in above the lethal ends of crossbows, spears, swords, halberds, the occasional axe and hammer. Nesdank walked among the stakes and the long dead children impaled upon them. Rollted and Estka accompanied her, Jams tagging along.

“My priestess, you are certain you can convert the wraiths?” Estka spoke, “I have laid to rest a few whispering ghosts and a zombie in Bart Castle’s dungeons. They did not favour reason much.”

“You talked a zombie into not eating you?” Jams could not maintain his mouth shut. Estka had not told him of this fantastic story. Was the feat possible? Would redeeming the damned be easy?

He immediately regretted putting his words between his mistress and Nesdank who she was addressing. Estka granted her apprentice a blank look he considered contempt for his stupidity, “No, I burned the undead monster.”

Rollted chuckled, “You did your job, Mistress Estka.”

How the jinx could the old blood wizard be amused? Jams’ understanding struggled, was he not concerned about the villains threatening their existence?

The priestess halted, confronting the Star Prince’s luxurious affair of a tent. She said, “People pray to the gods to deliver them from many evils. Fei Tah answers.”

“Your goddess sends you.” Rollted remarked.

Nesdank expressed a gentle smile, “I am Her answer.”

“Shall we begin?” Estka asked.

“Yes.” Nesdank grew serious, “Mistress Estka, please reduce this wretched cloth and wood to smoke and ash.”

“Ah, we show the wraiths our meaning.” Rolsted realized, “This tent sheltered the abomination, maybe the children were robbed of their virgin blood and young lives within it.”

Jams sought to avoid imagining the horrible deeds Rolsted had just stated. Puppies, yes, and cake. He pictured a happy puppy eating a warm fresh baked cake.

Estka lifted her right hand, knuckles bent and fist closed. A ring on her finger spat flame missiles, striking the tent walls to ignite them. Her fire raced up and down the sheets of fabric.

“What do we do?” Hicussaw posed the question to Lezroo and Barnemit, the trio viewed the magickers working.

“Won’t you join your fellow sorcerers?” Lezroo enquired.

“We can combat the dead, befriending them is neither our skill nor our interest.” Shadow Hicussaw said.

Hicussaw explained aloud, “My shadows are an anvil the wraiths waste time hammering on. Soothing bloodthirsty wraiths? I haven’t a spell.”

“Are you controlling your clones?” Barnemit wondered, “Do their eyes and ears supply you their vision and hearing?”

Said Hicussaw, “The distance is too great. They will obey my last orders until they are destroyed. Lord Senjdaq’s fighters will get a battle.”

“Don’t reckon we’ll need more of your clones. Our priestess should handle the wraiths. I bet her holy magic scared the naughty children good.” Barnemit laughed.

“Stay sharp, Vampyre’s Bane, Armybringer.” Lezroo warned, “Do not rest your guard. Watch for any sign of the enemy, or even anything strange. Which of us can predict what the Star Prince has plotted?”

Two wrinkled hands gripping her staff firm, Nesdank was murmuring softly. Jams sensibly ensured a safe amount of steps divided him and the wraith summoning priestess. The apprentice wished he could withdraw farther. Unfortunately, leaving the corpse

fenced area would plainly announce his cowardice. Estka and Rolled had no such fear of Nesdank, they stood their feet on either side of her in support. Estka ceased her Fire Bolts pelting Senjdaq's tent, the fire she had started was busy transforming the extravagance into a conflagration puffing smoke. Jams' gaze caught the dead naked children impaled on the line of stakes. Their lifeless white eyes triggered a cold shiver climbing his spine. The gods weep!

Huh? Did he feel a wind? No, no movement of air touched his skin. It was his soul the breeze brushed. What was that? Whispers? Jams spun. Children whispering. The wraiths! His mistress and Master Rolled appeared unperturbed, surely they sensed the dead too. Would Detect Magic uncloak the ghosts? Jams resolved against casting it, why spend mana on a sight he didn't want to see. The eyes of Jams and his mortal comrades were not denied long, gradually visible were indistinct figures of short stature. A circle of incorporeal boys and girls surrounded the priestess. None wore their blood wraith forms. Rolled and Estka patrolled the boundary, ignored by the dead whose attention was locked onto Nesdank. Jams thanked the gods the children were clothed in death, they clung to memories very different from the present shocking state of their bodies. They looked the way they must have prior to an abomination draining their blood, except for the whole being a ghost bit.

"Incoming!" Hicussaw's yell shattered the quiet.

An attack? Jams turned to the source of the alarm. Soldiers, mercenaries and holy warriors were doing the same. Hicussaw was gesturing excitedly on the spot. He was repeating his cry, "Incoming!"

Jams followed the direction of Hicussaw's arms and frantic stare. They streamed from the forest. Jams beheld beings the stories had described to him. Tree men! Leshies? Green plant women! Dryads? Blood elves and redcaps he had seen during the village raid. Bursting out of the trees were a couple of gargoyles, soaring high. Flying monsters of living stone! Pixies glittered and fluttered. Sprites beat their wings. Redcaps and leshies were flaunting weapons forged of metal and cruder arms crafted of stone.

"Fae!" the vampyre hunters called.

"Beware the fae!" Barnemit boomed, "They serve the vampyre!"

Barnemit informed Lezroo and Hicussaw, "The jinxbaits have been hiding in

Wonderwhere! There are paths into their king-forsaken realm near. Jinx me I didn't think of it!"

"Run! I can't teleport a mass of you this soon after I just did!" Hicussaw declared the limitation he had learnt after first shadow walking the vampyre hunters to hasten their journey from Pank Hit.

"A fae ambush!" Lezroo shouted. To Hicussaw and Barnemit he said, using a lower tone, "Were the wraith corpses a trap?"

An irritated Hicussaw demanded, "Are you listening? I'll stay and fight them, you buggers must flee."

Shadow Hicussaw said, "Could the vampyre be in the Changeless Change too? We are walking the mortal world, the Faerie is not open to our shadow sight this moment."

"No retreat, not now." Lezroo rejected the bluehead's fear, "We won't stop Nesdank, we'll defend her. Converting the wraiths gives us the benefit of this battle."

"Close ranks!" Barnemit bellowed, "Hold your ground, don't let the enemy slip past you. They can't be allowed to interrupt our priestess!"

The mass of vampyre hunters began drawing together in a very loose formation. Rushing fae would meet them before they could tighten their spread. Hicussaw spawned clones to fill their gaps.

"Hicussaw, don't squander your mana! Teleporting us cost you!" Lezroo advised, "Our entire force is here. We can battle the fae, they alone do not outnumber us. We can't defeat a united enemy of fae, the Star Prince and his mortal minions. You must save your strength for Lord Senjdaq in case he-"

"There he is." Shadow Hicussaw guessed the name of the creature his and Hicussaw's shadow sight was perceiving ahead of their comrades' vision. A thing of mortal blood and flesh yet monstrously inhuman had entered the woods bordering the camp.

"Yes, I'll deal with the vampyre." Hicussaw cut Lezroo short. The Armybringer disappeared in a flash of shadow.

"Sweet unicorn farts!" Barnemit ejaculated, "Pisswet idiot better have found the abomination."

“Hicussaw will strive his best for us. We ought to think of what *we* can do, not what he isn’t doing.” Lezroo cast one of his paladin powers, soft golden light constructed twin elliptical shields levitating on his flanks. Fading luminescence left the designs solid objects. Elaborate silver grey metalwork thickened the edges of the shields and the bulging boss in the middle of each. Lezroo was the centre of the shields’ unhurried revolution.

“Two versus one!” the lieutenant unsheathed his sword and lifted Musveryl, “Shall we finish her quick, Caveclear?”

Barnemit was referring to a dryad, the first foe to engage them.

“Don’t mistake the enemy’s strength.” Lezroo said.

The green skinned fae seemed a frail thing compared to the duo of armoured champions. Dragging on the ground, clutched in her hands, was a length of the vine wrapped about her person. The green glow of her eyes was impossible to read. Barnemit stepped forward. Her hands twitched, the vine whipped across, Barnemit’s reflexes had Musveryl absorbing the lash harmlessly.

She changed targets. The next lash aimed for Lezroo. His ethereal blade went through the physical whip as if it were a ghost. A shield orbiting Lezroo hastened its pace and stopped the whip striking him. His sword could not touch or block an opponent’s corporeal weapons, a trait which could render combat a challenge.

The dryad’s head exploded, rather her hair foliage did, a flurry of leaves shot straight at Lezroo. A shield of Caveclear took the burst, several leaves embedded in it, a single projectile penetrated and the dark green tip emerged on the side facing Lezroo. Jinx fae magic, Barnemit cursed mentally, piercing sharp leaves!

Could she cast the leaf spell again? Lezroo questioned. Her scalp was sprouting fresh leaves. She had a reuse delay! Caveclear charged. Her vine snapped high, snaked over his shields and clasped around his neck. His ethereal sword slashed the whip to no effect. The vine squeezed, Lezroo wheezed for dear breath. Barnemit dashed between dryad and paladin, his sword severed the whip.

Their foe was whipless and short a full scalp of leaves, the lieutenant seized the opportunity to rush her. The vine reeled back, the pisswet thing was regenerating, growing rapidly to its old length. The dryad lashed Barnemit, her vine entangled his arms.

Ow! The whip stung! Ugh! Couldn't maneuver his sword, couldn't cut free!

Lezroo launched a second assault. The dryad defended herself, her vine released Barnemit, whipped under the revolving shields and grabbed Lezroo's ankle. She tugged, he tripped onto his front, one shield trapped beneath his bulk, the other leaf stabbed shield hovering defensively. Her hair had completed its rejuvenation.

Barnemit dodged the leaf volley she fired, their spread was too wide and his Musveryl could not block them all. Her whip ditched Lezroo, lashing at Barnemit. The lieutenant expected her blow, he timed his counterattack and cut the vine mid-air.

Lezroo's sword, spinning tip over handle, struck the dryad. The handle hit her chest, the incorporeal blade sinking into her face and down her throat. No wound, not a sign of damage marked the forest fae. She fell on her side, her bright green eyes locked in a permanent blank stare.

"Should have brought my hammer, would fight the fae a lot easier." Lezroo complained to Barnemit. He got to his feet, the shield trapped under him resuming its position.

"If you say so." Barnemit was already heeding the approach of a leshy and a redcap.

The battle swelled in size and intensity, fae mingled violently with vampyre hunters and Hicussaw clones. Safe for the moment, beyond the conflict, and behind a fence of staked children were a couple of wizards, a sorcerous apprentice and a priestess. Jams doubted Nesdank had noticed their hostile circumstances. Was his frightened imagination deceiving him or was the very air within her ring of damned souls misted? He felt her lost in a whispering storm of anguish and hatred.

Estka's voice was composed, her choice of words less calm. "We have no time to persuade the wraiths. I can incinerate their corpses, destroying the body often ends a spirit's bond to the living world."

Nesdank remained silent, not quite frozen Jams judged on account of her moving lips and eyes. She was speaking low to the dead.

"Hold your horses, we are short on numbers." Rollted argued, "The wraiths are powerful. Them attacking our enemies could guarantee our victory."

"We do not know Nesdank's progress. Is her effort succeeding or failing? How long do we hold hope? If the fae reach Nesdank and break her focus, the wraiths will be free to

slaughter us. We must prevent this disaster.”

Rollted eyed the clashing warriors not an octar away, “Your concern has merit. Priestess Nesdank, I am sorry we cannot grant you much. Mistress Estka, you may burn the wraiths’ bodies in four kurns.”

Nesdank did not respond.

Rollted produced a mechanical timepiece from a pouch of his kit belt, “I shall keep count on my clock.”

“Thank you.” Estka agreed, “We guard Nesdank till her deadline is up.”

Guard, Jams pondered, so they weren’t going to seek a fight then. They would simply protect their priestess, back where the fae had not penetrated. A short sprint would put him in the thick of fierce battle though. And Jams was not blind, the stretch he would have to run was decreasing, the fighting was actually pushing to his position.

Chu ko nu pumped the trigger levers of their repeaters, against their barrage of bolts the toughest leshies alone could advance. The soldiers of barons and gods halted the fae in hand-to-hand combat, weapons of humans and inhumans thrust and slashed and bashed and whipped. Unarmed Hicussaws charged boldly, attracting attacks the vampyre hunters might have suffered. Enchantments invoked at the right instant turned the course of a fight. Potions were gulped or hurled to either save a life or slay one.

Jams’ heart begged his eyes: Please shut! No more! The gods weep!

Its plea his senses ignored. How could he not look? True, the sights were utter nightmares but the destruction transfixed him. This display of fears he could never have pictured on his own. He watched a sprite vomit a rainbow, the beam’s multiple hues dissolving the face off a templar woman, the colourful slush dripped and drenched her raiment. Pixies were sprinkling a druzhinnik who stood grinning stupidly, his sword and heater shield lowered. A redcap drove dagger and axe up his crotch. Invisible forces cut open men and women screaming while blood elves pranced. Did a pair of ridiculously long arms just surprise and snatch a chu ko nu crossbowman, yanking the mercenary with the speed of two or three blinks inside the tent they sprang from? Was that a boggart? Any moment these horrors could be upon him...no, *would* be...

A pixie buzzed over the impaled corpses. Me? Am I her target? Jams stared. She

shifted direction moment to moment, could her erratic flight lead the fae on top of him...a Fire Bolt slammed her into rolling wild and wide. Mistress Estka! A second and third Fire Bolt made the pixie a tiny plummeting fireball.

Wielding sword and hammer, a redcap raced through a gap in the dead fence. Rollted raised his buckler and an empty right hand, the talisman dagger he left on his belt. Jams didn't see how the buckler posed an effective defence. Rollted's free hand gestured, fingers twisting. The charging foe slowed significantly, grunting his frustration, his every step a struggle forward, his big muscled arms straining. Rollted had to be magically restraining the bugger. The redcap froze entirely, well, not true, his mouth demonstrated it could function, shouting things such as 'get your foul sorcery off me!', 'come close, taste my steel!' and 'your blood will soak my mask!'. Then the blood fae pivoted in a stiff manner, marching back to the confrontation of fae and vampyre hunters he had escaped, he did not cease issuing sounds of protest and rage ultimately futile. Not a simple spell hindering motion, Lord Anrieslem's Spell Master had taken control of the redcap's body!

He was safe! Jams told himself. Hicussaw protected him! Estka and Rollted right there next to him, they protected him! He would certainly surv-no! He had survived the raid on Pank Hit and Calgemo did not! Staying alive was not enough! Jams had to help! Jams not helping, Jams preserving his own life first, was why Calgemo died.

Why was Jams even on this battlefield? *He* was the problem. What idiot daydream convinced him he could do this? Had not his experience taught him he was a coward and a worthless fighter? He was no Calgemo who defied all reason and any enemy, chasing his desires whether they were robbing a rana or saving a buddy.

"The sky!" Estka yelled an alarm.

Jams lifted his gaze. Gargoyle! Stone doing things it had no business doing; flying massive cruel wings, hands flexing claws and feet flexing talons, pale grey eyes blinking and observing the human magickers. Estka's Fire Bolts struck the monster in bright splashes he did not bother dodging. The fae did not dally, he dropped down on Nesdank, crushing her gold and white garbed figure to the earth.

The dead children shrieked, a cry capable of rending souls some would later insist. Many vampyre hunters and fae paused their battle a moment. In a flurry the panicked wraiths scattered, their incorporeal childish forms hurtling among tents and fighters.

Jams was glad the spirits ignored the wizards.

This gargoyle wasn't one of the tamed guardians magic bound to a castle. No armour or helmet concealed his hideous visage. His squashed snout snarled, presenting a view of black rock fangs. Nesdank lay a silent, unmoving, crumpled bloody heap. Her staff was prone useless where it had fallen from her hands. Estka approached the earth fae, walking a fast pace short of a jog. Had the wizardess ever exerted herself physically?

Gargoyle Sudden Death flapped his wings and left the ground, his talons lodged in Nesdank elevated her wrecked body. Achieving a lofty altitude, he bent his knees and folded his legs, so his claws reached Nesdank and wrenched her off his feet. He began biting Nesdank's dead-eyed face, crunching the bones. Jams wondered if Fei Tah had blessed Her priestess with the mercy of being too dead to feel a gargoyle eating her.

Lord Doneg's Mistress of Spells ended her stride. Jams knew Estka's deadliest spell was short ranged, she needed Sudden Death very near her level to try it. Rollted was puppeting his redcap, he appeared blind and deaf to the world. Wait! He wasn't! The redcap had reversed direction, unwillingly stomping to the defence of the wizards. What good was that? A midget sized melee warrior could not threaten a flying gargoyle. Living stone was immune to Rollted's blood magic. Lord Anrieslem's Master of Spells was powerless.

Above the vampyre hunting sorcerers within the corpse fence, Sudden Death was devouring his meal-their comrade. His munching had pauses where he spat Nesdank's bloody chewed meat and tossed the blood speckled mushy brain and organs unappealing to his taste.

The urge to run crept up Jams' legs, and nudged his spine. Terror started kicking the man-sack of his courage. Their heroic priestess Nesdank Heavenfall had been slain. The wraiths unleashed drew the attention of fighters to Nesdank's defeat, a few of them witnessed her brutal fate. Would her templars break and flee? No sign of the real Hicussaw who could teleport the vampyre hunters elsewhere, only his shadow clones dying in black smoke. No new clones were spawning either. Ah, the wraiths were jumping on necks and drinking blood again.

Why was Jams standing and pondering, not escaping?

Kryter's the son! Jinx me! Jams abused himself. He wasn't a hero, Calgemo was.

Bugger always had an answer, a plan, a deed to perform. What would Calgemo do? Calgemo not doing anything anymore had brought Jams to this doomed battlefield.

Jams was the problem. Calgemo had answers. What would Calgemo do?

Calgemo would be brave. He would not hesitate, he would scarcely think. He would not care how stupid not running was, he would fight for what and who he loved!

Don't think, just do! No future, no past, just the present, Jams had this moment, he had an answer to helping his friends!

Jams' legs yielded to instinct, he sprinted.

Had to be sure his target was in range.

"THUNDER BURST!" Jams aimed his spell. The flash of lightning and clap of thunder swatted the gargoyle. Sudden Death howled, shocked into releasing the half eaten remains of Nesdank which plunged earthward. Flailing about the air, he followed his victim's descent.

The gargoyle crashed hard roughly an oct right of Estka. Estka pressed upon her foe, Rollted's redcap and Jams did not move, her eyes were literally aflame. Estka's maw opened wide, the blinded gargoyle saw not the fire welling behind her teeth though he felt the heat. The Mistress of Spells spewed a tide of blue hot flame. Jams was warmed despite his distance to her. The torrent enveloped Sudden Death, he cried his agony only to have his voice cut short.

Estka's spell concluded, light and fire faded to nothing. She had created a red molten mess, an oozing mass vaguely of a gargoyle's shape sunk in a lava pool. Sudden Death stirred and emitted a feeble groan. Pity inspired Jams' hope life would soon abandon the half melted fae. Dragon's Breath indeed!

"My apprentice, we must rid our fighters of the wraiths!" Estka called. Rollted resumed steering his arguing redcap to the main battle.

"How?" Jams asked.

"Help Rollted defend me!" his mistress sent a Fire Wall burning across the dead fence, her flame devouring corpses and stakes.

Rollted's redcap encountered a leshy barging into the resting place of the wraiths'

corporeal bodies. Roltted, or rather his puppet, attacked. The two fae traded blows, the leshy limiting himself to grunts and bellows of annoyance, the redcap expressed himself to a greater extent:

“Not me, slay the old man! Can you hear? Are you a tree or a rock?”

“Wizard! The way you use a blade, a pixie’s arm has better reach!”

“Return my body, worthless mortal! I’ll show you how a redcap fights!”

Resisting his puppet’s demand was effortless to Roltted.

Jams could see one Fire Wall covered a portion of the dead fence, far from the whole grotesque thing. He and Roltted had to provide Estka time for cremating all the children.

What would Calgemo do? Give it to her.

Jams went forth and screamed, “ELECTROCUTE!”

His wand’s beam zapped the forest fae, interrupting a swing of the leshy’s stone axe. Roltted inflicted a good amount of damage, the punishment his redcap received mattered little. The leshy fought on regardless, wobbling on a leg Roltted was hacking and smashing repeatedly.

“ELECTROCUTE!” Jams targeted Roltted’s target limb.

The redcap’s arms paused half through a strike, “What? I’m fre-”

The leshy buried his axe in the redcap’s bagged head, a last wound to finish the blood fae.

“ELECTROCUTE!” Jams cast.

Finally the mangled leg supported the leshy’s weight no longer, it buckled and the forest fae collapsed. The leshy started crawling towards the woods. His moans Jams thought sounded grumbling.

Jams’ sight checked the blood wizard. Roltted had exited his body puppeting trance.

“Wish my spell continued another kurn. I liked my redcap.” Roltted mused, drawing his enchanted dagger.

Jams shuddered. The temperature had dropped! Why? The sun shone! How could

the weather change this fast? A winter wind chilled his mind, not his flesh! Voices were whispering, a faint and confusing clutter, he couldn't distinguish a single word...

"Dead incoming!" Jams warned. The gods weep! Were the wraiths going to bite his neck and suck out every drop of blood he had?

"Jams of Bart! You stop the dead! I shall keep the fae busy!" Rolsted hollered. Not that the wizard had a choice, Jams knew Rolsted's blood magic could not hurt or puppet ghosts.

The cold lifted off Jams as a familiar presence passed him. His ears understood several of the voices drawing near, their whispers included 'what's she doing?' and 'why so hot?' and 'quit it!'. His eyes caught a glimpse of two incorporeal wisps flying by. They were sparing him! Joy! Joy grew to horror! Skipping him and Rolsted meant their target was his Mistress Estka.

Jams saw Estka had sensed their arrival. Her back to her raging Fire Wall, she awaited her fate, her right hand and its Fire Bolt ring held ready to shoot. One versus two was not a fair contest. He should intervene, the prospect of battling blood wraiths had fear squeezing Jams' heart. No, he couldn't save her! Relief released him from the grasp of dread. He wasn't a coward, the children were far ahead, out of his Electrocute range, his Thunder Burst was on its reuse delay. Matching the wraiths' speed and distance in time to aid Estka was a feat impossible. In a couple of moments, she would be fighting for her life while he watched idle.

What would Calgemo do?

Calgemo would not let her die. Calgemo would-

"RUN!" Jams thundered.

He perceived himself a tingle in the air, a vibration of energies not physical matter, rushing through the briefest instant, a fleeting experience he wasn't certain was real. Except, he was now standing directly in front of Mistress Estka, not stuck helpless at several ocs' length.

"Wh-wha-what?" Jams shook, "What happened?"

"The Bolt spell, a ley of storm magic." said Estka, her voice sounded incredulous, her face wore an expression Jams recognized to be awestruck. Her apprentice had never

witnessed his mistress exhibiting genuine perfectly obvious emotion.

Jams spun around, his gaze revealed the child spirits had altered their course. They had split their flight, retreating from where Jams had feared them impassable mere moments earlier, currently spread out and floating wary. Electric blue crackled on their ghostly reddening...the gods weep! They were switching to their big bad, clawed wraith forms.

“This is the second time you cast on pure instinct a ley you have not studied.” Estka explained, her voice and face regaining her normal composure. “Travelling to me, you pierced the dead, your electric passage pained them.”

Jams began, “I di-”

Estka’s left hand grabbed Jams’ arm and tugged her apprentice aside. Her right hand shot a Fire Bolt. The darting flame hit a fully transformed blood wraith, who squealed its pain and advanced determined.

“Later we will speak of your talent, my apprentice.” Estka said, “There is a battle to win here.”

“Sorry my mistress.” Jams acknowledged, “Um, I think the wraiths are changing again.”

The blackhead neglected to mention the little voice in his head, screaming its concern the dead would adopt a shape worse than their blood wraith nastiness.

The monstrous ghosts abandoned their hostile focus on the sorcerers. They twisted and turned, Jams might have sworn they were puzzled and disoriented. Their horrific forms appeared to sprout holes, widening patches where their ghostly substance faded and human sight saw through them clear of a spirit’s visual ‘fog’.

“No. Their link to life is breaking.” Estka pronounced, “They forget why they thirst for blood. Their souls no longer resist the slumber of death.”

A slightly meaty cooking smell suggested to Jams the skin and bones of the children drained dry had ignited. Jams threw his gaze upon the fence, he beheld the blazing figures once children naked and impaled. Estka’s Fire Wall spell had died, the stakes and corpses were fuelling their own flames. The two wraiths he had Bolted disappeared entirely.

“My plan works.” Estka was saying, “Four bodies are burning, two of the dead tried attacking me.”

Thank Calgemo, he helped me learn the Bolt spell, thought Jams.

“Not every wraith cared to rescue their flesh. The few who do, I can manage.” Estka declared.

Eh, didn’t I just save you, my mistress? Jams dared not speak.

Estka counted the unburnt corpses and calculated, “In three Fire Walls and their reuse delays, the dead will drink our blood no more. Less if I cast a few Fire Bolts.”

“Rolled!” she shouted, “You and Jams join our fighters against the fae! Do not waste your time and mana guarding me!”

Lezroo Caveclear’s revolving shields were gone. He had pushed them to the limit of the damage they could endure. Under their protection, he had fought on the offensive. The paladin would have to give up charging blindly, pending the reuse delay of his chief defensive spell.

His newest foe should be easy, his Shields of Amas unnecessary. The leshy was surrounded, a druzhinnik and two templars and Lezroo closing in on him. Some meddling mortal had supplied the forest fae a bardiche polearm, and Lezroo was stuck wielding his ethereal blade lacking range and parrying ability. Yet Lezroo was not worried, the leshy could not defeat enemies on every side. The key was they all had to engage the fae simultaneously.

“Man-at-arms, slower!” Lezroo warned, “Do not fight him alone!”

The druzhinnik halted his legs, unfortunately so did the templars while the leshy did not. Lezroo increased his pace, an inadequate effort since the leshy reached the druzhinnik before him. Jinx me, Lezroo cursed, it’s perfect positioning for the usual trick.

The leshy stamped the ground forcefully, his strength shoving left foot into the earth then right. Gnarled roots erupted from the soil beneath druzhinnik, templars and paladin. The roots wrapped the humans’ feet and lower legs, holding them firm. Lezroo was aware this spell immobilized both enemies and the caster. The forest fae was not escaping, he had isolated one soldier to combat, the entangled others could not interfere

with their melee weapons.

The druzhinnik's halberd versus the leshy's bardiche was a decent match. But the fae was stronger, the bardiche's axe blade bigger, the man-at-arms panicked that the roots were preventing any retreat on his part. Human and fae were trapped swinging polearms at an uncomfortably close range for their long weapons. Who would fail first? Mortal or immortal? Halberd or bardiche? Tree wood or chain mail?

Lezroo sighed, he missed his hammer stashed back in his tent. Would the vampyre's mortal minions loot it? Fool! These thoughts were useless when it came to surviving the present peril. One templar tried his spear stabbing the leshy's roots, the second was smarter and drew his cutting sword. Lezroo knew the roots grew quicker, thicker and tighter to counter such a direct attack.

The bardiche struck the druzhinnik's shoulder, he cried out. His armour stopped the blade taking his arm off, still the bardiche's weight certainly crushed the bone. Could the man move his arm? Had he lost his battle and life? Lezroo could not simply watch a comrade fall. Too many fae and their nature magic were battering his allies. Imposing a balance was worth suffering the high mana cost and terribly long reuse delay of his greatest spell. Hicussaw better not require its aid to defeat the vampyre.

The leshy's deep voice rumbled, "Die, human!"

The forest fae hoisted his bardiche to deliver a killing blow. Lezroo's sword rose straight and tall, the tip pointing to the heavens. The paladin called in his accented Lolbol, "Leshy! The Rain of Origata!"

Lezroo's words seized the fae's attention. Rain? The leshy's gaze searched the sky, he found the falling streaks of gold but his rooted feet stranded him below them. Descending, the gold bolts became black arrows the length of a human's arm. The leshy was not the sole target, arrows rained down on the battlefield. Magically, no vampyre hunter had an arrow aiming for their head. The fae however were showered. Lezroo's spell conjured several waves of arrows over a broad area, much to the relief of the vampyre hunters.

The leshy whose actions triggered Lezroo's cast, an arrow thudding into his head compelled him to release his bardiche. He groaned. Did a tree being possess a brain? Lezroo was curious. A second arrow landed almost atop the first, the forest fae slumped,

his torso bent over his posterior, arms hung limp, his ensnaring roots slackened. Still he groaned. Perhaps the answer was something in between, Lezroo deduced.

Pisswet flier! Barnemit kept Musveryl up and facing the pixie hovering above him beyond his sword's range. He had spotted the forest fae with her stem spear stalking him. The instant a second foe attacked, the pixie could dust him defenceless. Probably the little jinxbait's plan. Barnemit would not supply her the opportunity, he distanced himself from the main battle and its abundance of fae.

Jinx you! Either try me or leave! Barnemit had enemies of greater importance to fight. Enough wasting my da-she twirled, put her diminutive hands to her tiny mouth, and blew. A shower of glitter descended upon Musveryl. He hoped Musveryl would reflect the pixie dust, but he had experienced its ability not affecting projectiles or physical objects like dryad leaves, just raw magic. Ugh! The sparkles settled unopposed on Musveryl's surface, his shield did not consider dust a spell.

Wait, why had she struck this moment? Barnemit spun himself and Musveryl, showing his armoured back to the pixie who could not immediately recast her dust. Kryter's the son! A sprite had been approaching his rear which his turning made his front. Sneaky jinxbait! The sprite had no visible mouth or facial features, it 'spat' a vitriolic rainbow. His shield met the deadly colourful beam which bounced off and onto the source. The forest fae produced a high pitched note of distress when it felt its own rainbow.

Ow! What the jinx pricked his shoulder...Barnemit swung his sword around, narrowly missing the spear wielding pixie who swiftly reclaimed her safe altitude. Griffins shit on my head! Two enemies and his strategy to handle the pixie had led him far from helpful allies. Barnemit began retreating to where the fighting was concentrated, careful his eyes and shield were covering the potential attacks of both fae.

The reflected rainbow had definitely hurt the sprite or it wouldn't have expressed pain. Barnemit could not judge the exact damage done, to him the fae looked the same misshapen cloud of varied colour its kind always did. The sprite fired again, Musveryl endured the rainbow and did nothing else.

Why hadn't Musveryl returned the spell? Of course! The enchantment must have a reuse delay to recharge its mana.

The blood elf's condition was poor, parts of him were blackened from electric damage, a couple of black arrows and five crossbow bolts stuck out of his small form. He flicked his fingers in the direction of one of his opponents. Estka's apprentice knew the casting of a Lacerate spell.

What would Calgemo do? Calgemo would dodge!

Jams sidestepped. The absence of flesh rending pain confirmed he had evaded the blood elf's spell.

"ELECTROCUTE!" Jams' crooked electric blue beam zapped the blood fae.

The weakened elf did not or could not avoid the Electrocute spell. His jumpy friskiness had been beaten out of him. He trembled and gurgled as the surge of electricity rippled through his wounded body. The fae crumpled.

Whew! Jinxbait nearly got me. Jams looked to Rollted and perhaps share a word of victory, but the blood wizard was already bent over a fallen templar, his magic healing the ruptured chest under the breastplate leaking blood at the waist, soothing the man's sputtering gasps. Rollted did not squander a moment resting.

Jams and Rollted had fought to the edges of the conflict. Jams had surprised himself, leading their charge. What would Calgemo do? Help the next bugger on our side! So Jams pressed onwards, his and Rollted's spells saving mortal lives while either destroying immortals or ungently persuading them to withdraw.

Jams' gaze surveyed their section of the camp, seeking an enemy to battle and an ally to rescue. He spied Barnemit afar, a lone human striding backwards amidst the tents. Barnemit could see behind him neither Jams, Rollted and the battle nor a dead little girl drifting his way. Oh, a sprite and a pixie were binding his attention to his front. He had his sword and shield posed against the two fae, would he notice the blood wraith before he felt her fangs?

Jams looked to the fenced area he had recently departed. Many of the corpses and stakes were aflame. Mistress Estka was Fire Bolting a sprite. Though the wraiths were being quelled, his mistress might be late cremating this particular ghost's corporeal remains, or not. There was a chance the monster of Pank Hit was doomed.

In mere moments, Barnemit was likely to lose his blood and the wicked life he

enjoyed, if Jams turned his gaze away and pointed Rolld to a worthier fight. Vengeance for the months a bullying Barnemit had afflicted the stable hands, Calgemo and Hicussaw and Jams, when the three were together and simply friends. No robbing the rana, no demonic possession, no electric magic. Just three buddy boys working their half decent job, sharing laughs and hooch, safe and alive. Barnemit ambushing Jams and friends in the vaults was the reason Hicussaw's demon got released and the stable hands were chained in Bart's dungeons.

"I beg you, Jams of Bart, protect my brother." Jams heard her. Memory dragged Skera's voice, wavy brown locks and innocent young face to the senses of his imagination.

Kryter's the son! This wasn't supposed to happen, he should not have to make this decision. No. Calgemo would not reject such an opportunity, he would gladly watch an enemy die. Jams literally had to do nothing, he would bear no guilt of killing Skera's big brother himself. The vampyre's minions were the real murderers. Calgemo had always been too crude and mean...

Argh! Hadn't Mistress Estka torched this wraith yet? Couldn't she spare him the choice?

Hicussaw was better at these difficult questions of picking the righteous path.

What would Hicussaw do?

Hicussaw would save everyone. He would not care about their history of villainy, he would not ask for reward, he would do it because it was the good and heroic deed to do. In fact, he had rescued Barnemit and his sister when the Star Prince's jinxed servants were raiding Pank Hit.

Rolld straightened his back, "Jams, where to?"

The Master of Spells lent a hand to the healed templar, pulling to full height the man and the spear he never stopped gripping.

"To save Barnemit." Jams could not believe the sentence his tongue crafted. He shouted, "BOLT!"

Jams' body became a bolt of electricity, dashing across the stretch of encampment parting him from Barnemit, covering in an instant what his feet could have traversed only in a period of time fatal for Skera's big brother.

“THUNDER BURST!”

Barnemit’s vision flashed white, thunder blasted his ears. The gods weep! Not this again! What? His vision cleared and hearing was free of tinnitus. Jams’ king-forsaken spell! Mistress Estka had taught the twerp how to not harm friends, and Barnemit remembered he wasn’t Jams’ enemy this battle.

The Thunder Burst had overwhelmed his pixie and sprite. Wings fluttering frantically, they careened out of control and dipped low, well within Barnemit’s range. A quick slash of his sword split the pixie, still flapping wings tumbled her halves earthward.

“ELECTROCUTE!”

Behind him! Jams was casting magic! First the sprite!

Barnemit’s sword impaled the descending sprite and pinned it to the ground. The forest fae thrashed desperately. Barnemit used his weight, pushing his blade down, and he placed a booted foot on the ‘head’ of the magical being. The sprite’s appearance was gaseous, the feel of the fae beneath his pressing boot was like squishing jelly. His foe ceased its struggling. When he removed his foot, slimy strands of many hues clung to the Druzhina standard issue boot. More gelatinous colour smeared the soil and Barnemit’s blade. Violet, blue, green, yellow, orange, red.

Barnemit turned to see who the jinx Jams was fighting. There stood the skunkhead, maintaining his wand’s line of fire on the ugly disgusting clotted shape of a blood wraith. Shit Face Jams had rescued Barnemit his tormentor? The wraith wailed and sprang forward. Barnemit backstepped, his sword could not cut a ghost. Would Musveryl block the malice of the dead?

“ELECTROCUTE!”

Jams zapped the ghost. It halted in shock.

“ELECTROCUTE!”

The wraith dodged Jams’ undulating beam! It charged! It was upon Jams. Sweet unicorn farts! Did Jams just duck a swipe of those ghostly claws?

“ELECTROCUTE!”

The ghost shook with the spell’s electric energy, buying the shit face a moment or

two. Jams flung himself right and rolled a bit, gaining distance from his foe. Barnemit was impressed. Shit Face did not die at the first strike of a one on one duel. Suddenly the wraith faced Barnemit. No, was the wretched dead thing going for him now? Barnemit was prepared to run and evade, but the wraith did not rush him. It switched direction to Jams, then to the conflict where the rest of the vampyre hunters and vampyre minions were battling. Huh? Was it confused? Its incorporeal form began fading.

“Did you destroy the wraith?” Barnemit asked. Was Jams this powerful? Not even a demon could kill a ghost!

“No.” Jams denied, “Mistress Estka is performing a cremation, she’s burning their tortured bodies to free their souls of pain.”

Barnemit spotted Rollted, a templar and a druzhinnik quite busy combating a vine whipping, leaf shooting dryad. “Jams, you came to my aid and Rollted didn’t?”

“Eh?” Jams realized Barnemit spoke true, he had done what the absent Hicussaw would have. “Your sis-” he could not mention Skera’s plea, he did not want to invite Barnemit’s anger on the poor girl. No one chose their family, not Jams his mother and not Skera her big brother. “I thought Master Rollted was following me.”

“Are we losing the battle?” Jams initiated a new topic to distract Barnemit.

Barnemit replied, “If the vampyre’s mortal minions return, we’re finished.”

The Star Prince erupted rather noisily out of the trees, bounding and crashing between the tents and on them. Crimson clothed, steel armoured, pale skinned Lord Senjdaq was entangled in a seething mass of great black serpents. No, not snakes, tentacles, wait, shadows, shadows resembling tentacles thick and wide.

Jams’ expression described his fear, “I think we ought to trade the abomination for his mortal fighters.”

“Where’s Hicussaw?” Barnemit’s tone was the opposite of happy, “Jinxbait said he was handling the vampyre.”

“Um, isn’t that him?” Jams said, “The shadow tentacle monster.”

“The gods weep!” Barnemit ejaculated. Had Hicussaw surrendered his human nature to a fully demonic body? How dangerous was the demon possessing the shit eater?

The entire battlefield of the Star Prince's camp went quiet. Peace settled as humans and fae lowered weapons, abandoning their assaults and relaxing their defence, in order to gawk properly. Their attention was captured by the spectacle of the blood drinking abomination duelling a cluster of shadowy arms. Lord Senjdaq's fanged maw was biting the shadow, his right hand clutched a dagger, a tentacle wrapping his arm restrained him from stabbing.

Rollted broke the calm. He hollered, "Chu ko nu, rally to me!"

Barnemit addressed Jams, "Let's get the fae off our crossbows!"

Senjdaq's leaping propelled both himself and a shadow tentacled Hicussaw who was trying to hold the vampyre down. The duo's struggle slammed them on ground or tent and launched them airborne, repeatedly.

One such landing saw Senjdaq call, "My fae servants! Ignore the mortals, attack this demon!"

Jams froze. Oh no. The revelation of Hicussaw's secret could convert Hicussaw's allies into enemies.

Had he heard correctly? Barnemit wondered. The Star Prince was telling the whole jinxed world Hicussaw was a demon! No! Barnemit had wanted to betray Hicussaw when a profitable moment presented itself! Jinx you vampyre!

Demon? Mortal lips murmured the word, eyes exchanged looks of horror. They were putting their lives in peril to end a vampyre's threat, and now a demon had emerged. What had brought forth this evil bereft of an army, yet capable of challenging a vampyre drunk on virgin blood? A shadow demon while their own shadow magicker was nowhere to be seen. The good news was the fae were leaving the humans to assist their blood lord. A few vampyre hunters, exploiting the fae's reluctance to continue fighting, pressed the attack and delayed or prevented their foes' obedience of Senjdaq's command. The majority of vampyre hunters were uncertain what action to take against vampyre and demon. They milled about hesitantly, hoping their champions' orders would renew their purpose. The mercenaries already had theirs', free of fae interference, they were hurrying to Rollted's side.

"Jinx this!" Barnemit barked, "Jams! We rejoin our force!"

The lieutenant and apprentice wizard ran to the band of chu ko nu gathering around the blood wizard. Sixteen of the original twenty remained.

“Jams! How is your mana?” Rolled enquired.

“Al-alright, er, kind of, kind of low.” Jams answered.

Rolled extracted a corked vial of chunky pink fluid from his kit belt. He tossed it to Jams, “A Cantrip Potion will restore a fair portion of your mana within moments of imbibing it.”

Jams regarded the vial grasped in his left hand’s fingers. There floated matter of indeterminate shape and questionable solidity. Ew! He had to taste this? Worse. He had to swallow the nasty thing?

Rolled asked, “Senjdaq’s foe is a fiend of shadow magic. Could Hicussaw have summoned the demon?”

They don’t know it’s Hicussaw! Jams realized, “Maybe-”

“Hicussaw is hosting the demon! I saw him shift his shape!” Barnemit half lied.

Jinx you Barnemit! Jams was dismayed. I saved you because of Hicussaw and you repay me by unmasking him?

“Lieutenant Barnemit, your report of Wildsong Woods did not mention a demon was the source of Hicussaw’s magic.” Rolled accused.

“Lady Silverglaze must have deceived me.” Barnemit said, “These are her fae serving the vampyre.”

“The artefact the Armybringer broke to gain his powers, I suspected it was a demon prison.” Lezroo entered their presence and conversation, “Hicussaw is possessed.”

“Hicussaw is our friend! He’s been helping us this whole time!” Jams argued.

“We can’t trust a demon host.” said Lezroo, “Evil beyond our imagining is twisting his purpose. Which of us mortal minds can understand a demon’s will?”

“Captain Ekmud! Shoot them both, vampyre and demon!” Rolled spoke to the chu ko nu.

“Yes my master.” confirmed a grim faced officer of the mercenary crossbowmen.

“No! Hicussaw is my buddy boy!” Jams was vehement, “He won’t hurt us!”

“Perhaps we need not strike.” Lezroo proposed, “We can watch, Senjdaq and Hicussaw might kill each other.”

“Hicussaw of Pank Hit is the demon host, is he not?” Mistress Estka had arrived, her task of subduing the wraiths complete.

Rollted answered her, “Our shadow magicker is no mortal sorcerer.”

“Explains the might of his shadow spells.” Estka agreed.

The fae were converging on the hopping twosome of Star Prince and the Armybringer. A gargoyle caught the duo mid-air, when the three of them landed he helped Senjdaq wrestle Hicussaw. This time Senjdaq did not try to escape, the terms of their conflict had been reversed, Hicussaw was the one being contained. Upon the tentacled shadow, pixies blew their dust and sprites puked their rainbows. Senjdaq broke free of the demonic shadow arms.

Senjdaq laughed, Hicussaw’s limbs tackling the gargoyle pummelling his shadow. The Star Prince spoke, “The flaw of this monstrous form of yours, demon, if your shadow is hard enough to touch us, we can grab it back!”

A tentacled Hicussaw could offer no reply, he fought in silent frustration and a shower of pixie glitter and coloured beams.

“Where are your clones, demon? Your shadow has no blood but plenty of mana for me to drink.” Senjdaq grinned and licked his teeth. “You did not expect I could. No mana left to do it all, is there demon? Cast your clones or stay in the only form you can survive me. Teleporting away allows the fae and I to slaughter your allies. Choose.”

Redcaps, elves, leshies and dryads brought their viciousness to bear on Hicussaw. His tentacles retaliated and defended against their storm of weapons and magic. Despite the beating Hicussaw was taking, his shadow suffered no visible damage, though his actions seemed slow...almost lazy.

“Even a demon cannot resist this much pixie dust. I was prepared!” Senjdaq’s bare fist pounded the steel cuirass he wore over a red tunic, its faulds protecting his hips and groin. Trousers of a darker red were seen below the faulds and above the greaves encasing his shins and calves. The toes of his naked feet clenched, feeling the earth.

Senjdaq said, “After I learnt the fate of my raid on Pank Hit, I remembered a rumour among the fae. I paid a visit to the Queen of Wildsong Woods myself. She warned me of your growing shadow.”

The Star Prince ordered his minions, “Keep striking the demon! Once he is weakened, this gift of Lady Silverglaze will imprison his power in his host.” Senjdaq hefted the dagger.

Senjdaq’s gaze swept towards the humans observing him. They were speaking, did their discussion centre on his conquest of the demon the fools thought they had tamed? Or were they debating a plan to combat himself? His eyes recognized a big man-at-arms wearing chain mail tabardless and a bandolier of stakes, wielding a one-handed sword and a medium sized round wooden shield. Blood did not mark the helmet. Traitor! The vampyre returned his demon binding dagger to a sheath strapped to his thigh.

“These vampyre hunters shall quench my thirst!” Senjdaq charged. He was nearly flying, whether his feet sprinted or jumped, the swift smooth motion convinced mortal sight he might never have brushed the ground. Grappling with Hicussaw had been making him clumsy.

“Incoming!” several druzhinniks and templars yelled.

What would Calgemo do? Whatever was necessary to wallop the abomination. Jams uncorked the vial Rolsted had given him, he gulped down the Cantrip Potion. Ehyuck! Jams’ face scrunched in disgust. Felt like thick snot and tasted warm! What would Hicussaw do? Save the host of a demon he was sure wasn’t evil. First defeat the vampyre then the fae attacking his last living buddy, damned or not didn’t matter.

“Chu ko nu, hold your fire till the enemy is in range!” Captain Ekmud instructed.

Thick grainy grey mush glinted inside an opened vial Barnemit’s right hand pressed to his lips. An item of the troll alchemist’s stock. Barnemit did not drink, not yet. Consuming the vial’s contents required the absolute final moment before battling the vampyre, to not waste any of the Steel Potion’s duration. The enarmes of Musveryl were tight around his left forearm. The instant he drank, his right hand would drop the vial and snap to the handle of his sheathed sword. Barnemit tensed.

“Druzhinniks! Templars! We can’t match his speed! Let him come to us!” Lezroo cast his Shields of Amas.

The groups the paladin was commanding had already bunched together, positioned between mercenaries and vampyre, careful they were not blocking the crossbowmen's line of shooting sight. Lezroo and Barnemit moved in front of their melee fighters, their champion status conferred upon them the duty of taking the lead.

The chu ko nu pushed and pulled their levers, their crossbows tracking the racing vampyre, ejecting a stream of bolts that chased and hammered their prey. They shot such a great number, the fact many rounds were avoided did not stop a deadly amount hitting their target. Senjdaq's face, arms and thighs caught over ten bolts. The rapid fired moderately powered bolts could not pierce his armoured torso and lower legs, especially not at the limits of a repeater's range. The crossbowmen paused their shooting only to dump spent magazines and reload from their bandoliers.

Senjdaq was too fast for anything less than the spam of a repeater. Mistress Estka tried a couple of Fire Bolts, she missed the vampyre broadly.

"My Thunder Burst will soon be off its reuse delay! I can end his dodging!" Jams informed his mistress and Master Rollted.

Rollted dissuaded him, "Do not squander your Thunder Burst. A vampyre will not be slain this easy."

Senjdaq fled the circle of chu ko nu range, which was shorter compared to an ordinary war crossbow without the repeating mechanism. The Star Prince halted, panting, sweat threatening to drip into his eyes. His hand wiped his brow, how was he sweating? He was the greatest power blood magic could claim! The idea this level of physical exertion had exhausted his body was ridiculous! The weather was not hot either! His gaze met the humans, they stood their ground, not daring to venture after him. Senjdaq angrily tugged loose the bolts stuck in himself and discarded them. The broadheads left his flesh rent, blackened and mending unusually slow...poison! Would also be the cause of his sweat. The wretched mercenaries had envenomed their ammunition.

Watching their bolt-holes start to heal close, the chu ko nu did not appreciate the little effect their poison was having, the same substance froze the regeneration of blood elves.

"I thought sunlight would give us the advantage." Barnemit complained.

“Guess he’s resisting.” said Lezroo, “The virgins he drank strengthened him.”

“Incoming!” a druzhinnik raised the alarm.

Senjdaq rushed the collected body of the vampyre hunting force. He did not bother with evasion apart from what speed granted him. Chu ko nu fire he simply endured, his arms shielding his face. Bands of melee equipped vampyre hunters spread a frontline ahead of their crossbows, intending to bar Senjdaq’s path.

“Lezroo, now!” Rollted shouted.

The paladin acted immediately. Gold light materialized steel bands shackling each of the vampyre’s feet and a chain linking the two. The diminishing luminescence revealed faintly glowing runes inscribed on the metal. Senjdaq jerked violently to a stop, his arms yanked off his head. He was rooted to the ground though the runed trammels did not touch the earth. Magic.

Senjdaq was given more troubling things to worry about. Bursting into flame was one, followed by being the target of successive Fire Bolts. Lezroo had arrested the vampyre’s progress within range of crossbowmen and magickers. The chu ko nu enthusiastically emptied another batch of magazines upon the Star Prince.

“ELECTROCUTE!” Jams was casting his offensive magic.

It surprised Barnemit to see Jams, Estka and Rollted had pushed to the frontline. Rollted was vigorously slashing the zigzag blade of his dagger through sheer air. Senjdaq’s arms had resumed covering his face. The deluge of crossbow bolts, fire and electricity drowned any visible sign of a blood magic attack. Rollted’s gestures reminded the lieutenant of Draks’ lacerating spell, which could ignore armour...

“Rollted!” Barnemit called, his Steel Potion ready near his mouth. “Can you get his eyes? Or his heart?”

Rollted spoke, “I am not aiming a sword. Besides, his heart is buried too deep behind flesh and bone.”

We’re doing no damage the jinxbait can’t heal! Barnemit suppressed the urge to scream. Their efforts were not bringing the vampyre hunters a sniff of victory.

Master Rollted abandoned the cutting of air and vampyres. The tip of his dagger

angled down and started tracing a circular pattern. Barnemit beheld a familiar sphere of partially clotted and dripping blood rotating and expanding from nothingness.

Gold flashed, the paladin conjured trammels vanished, their duration having expired. Rolsted had anticipated this moment, his undodgable Blood Ball smashed the Star Prince back some octets. Did Rolsted's Blood Ball possess the sticky property Draks' had?

"Melee! Defend our ranged comrades!" Lezroo cast his gold glowing magic again. This time he manifested a curved sword levitating beside him on its own power.

Barnemit was to be tested, a moment of reckoning would decide his life or his death. Could he beat a sunned, poisoned, electrocuted and currently blazing vampyre hand to hand? Barnemit drained the vial of its Steel Potion. In the act of descending to his sword handle, his hand flung the depleted glass vessel poorly aimed towards the vampyre. The vial shattered harmlessly on the ground, Barnemit drew his sword. Barnemit's dark skin and hair adopted a metallic grey hardness and sheen, his raw strength was improved far beyond a human's natural ability.

Senjdaq shot to the cluster of vampyre hunters. Mistress Estka sprang her Fire Wall a step before the melee line, a barricade of high flame deterring those who preferred not burning alive. The vampyre passed over her Fire Wall, a leap performed an instant prior to contact with magical flame, and landed among the chu ko nu.

An unlucky crossbowman stared into the dark brown eyes of a blood drinking child murdering abomination. Not for long however, the vampyre's bolt studded pale smooth hand grabbed the man's face. The mercenary exploded; the force of a bomb propelled his bone, meat, armour and ammunition as shrapnel tearing through his fellows. Chu ko nu absorbing the blast saved Barnemit, many of the melee fighters and the sorcerers. Barnemit witnessed a mercenary lurch back and turn, what looked like a piece of breastplate mashing his face deeper in his skull. The bugger collapsed to his knees and keeled over 'plate face' down. The gods weep! Where the jinx was Senjdaq? The mass of crossbowmen was blocking Barnemit's view.

Barnemit's line of sight cleared as vampyre hunters desperately retreated and gave their prey room to not catch them instantly. Senjdaq was merely beginning his rampage. Chu ko nu and templars and druzhinniks were being ripped limb from limb screaming. Heads and arms and legs, hearts and intestines and lungs, whole broken bodies were

hurled about.

Worst of all, the vampyre's regeneration rendered him practically invincible. No trace of the injuries inflicted on him earlier had lingered except the burning tatters of his tunic sleeves and trouser legs. He had already removed much of the forest of repeater bolts the chu ko nu had planted in him. Whatever explosive spell the jinxbait had cast probably didn't hurt him, jinxed magic. Griffins shit on my head! Barnemit cursed to himself. Was defeating the vampyre possible?

He heard Estka shriek, "Jams!"

Her apprentice responded, "THUNDER BURST!"

Flash and bang. The burst of lightning and thunder paused the carnage. Senjdaq was staggering blind and deaf, Shit Face had stunned the Star Prince. Lezroo stormed forth, his Shields of Amas guarding him. The paladin assaulted the vampyre's left flank, ethereal sword and hovering sword swinging, battering the arms Senjdaq had lifted to protect his head. The vampyre's armour deflected several of the conjured weapon's wilder blows.

"Break his armour! Expose his heart!" Rolsted boomed.

"With *this* weapon?" Lezroo shook his ethereal sword incapable of damaging the non-living.

The vampyre leapt away from Lezroo, landing with his rear to Barnemit. How the jinx was Senjdaq maintaining his balance? Senjdaq's quick recovery of his senses after a Thunder Burst might have shocked Barnemit had the lieutenant not accepted the vampyre's awesome durability.

Dog wag a tail! The vampyre seemed unaware of Skera's alchemically empowered big brother behind him. Barnemit gritted his teeth. He had an opportunity to seize.

Barnemit invoked his weapon's Cantrip Silence, a precaution if the abomination's bomb spell had a short reuse delay or Musveryl did not block the vampyre's touch.

Barnemit's enhanced strength punched his sword through the backplate of Senjdaq's cuirass. He twisted the blade against the resistance of steel armour and drove it further up, widening the breach and searching for the heart of a vampyre.

Senjdaq's head pivoting on his torso to face Barnemit nearly scared the piss out of Hicussaw's bully. The vampyre's arms spun around in a similar fashion, legs too Barnemit would bet. But Barnemit was vulked for combat, instinct and a strong arm slammed Musveryl upon Senjdaq's fanged maw eager to bite.

The vampyre was stunned, winning Barnemit an extra moment. While his shield arm was moving Musveryl, his weapon hand released the handle of his sword and drew a stake from his bandolier. Barnemit put the earned moment to use. He plunged his fist and its stake under his sword, into the gap cut in Senjdaq's armour. Jagged edges of ruptured plate and abused blade scraped his hand, mangling his leather glove and spawning sparks off steel skin and chain mail sleeve. Barnemit's fist shoved past the broken ends of ribs his sword had penetrated, and encountered a particular lump of throbbing squishiness he hoped was a beating heart. The lieutenant thrust the stake forward, the fragile weapon smashed itself, stabbing the Star Prince's vital organ with half a stake and plenty of splinters.

"Die quietly!" Barnemit's cold voice commanded.

"No!" screamed Senjdaq. His bare hands, coated by his victims' blood and gore, batted Musveryl aside and closed on Barnemit's neck. Barnemit listened to himself make choking sounds, felt his steel skin buckling beneath Senjdaq's fingers. The pressure the abomination exerted was immense, surely he could crush Barnemit's neck entirely. The gods weep! Would Senjdaq snap his head off?

"Barnemit the Traitor!" Senjdaq condemned him.

The vampyre's face full of angry pain was a furious contortion perhaps a magicked bone structure alone could portray. Part of Barnemit's forearm was stuck inside Senjdaq.

"Die quietly." Barnemit repeated, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"ELECTROCUTE!" Jams zapped the vampyre. Skera's big brother, who was intimately touching the vampyre, did not suffer any ill effect of Jams' spell. His nose did detect two smells, the charring of Senjdaq's meat plus a distinct odour. Was the second the electricity itself?

Barnemit sensed the grip of Senjdaq's fingers easing, the strength going out of them. Veins and arteries darkened across the Star Prince's face and the rest of his body. Skera's big brother struggled a moment, from Senjdaq's torso he pulled his bloody fist. Barnemit

abruptly threw up his shield and freshly extracted limb between the vampyre's arms, bashing them apart, breaking Senjdaq's deadly hold on his neck. The lieutenant, gasping for precious breath, delivered a blow of his formerly stake clutching fist to the vampyre's jaw, sending Senjdaq reeling.

"Barnemit!" Lezroo laughed his relief. "Truly you are the Vampyre's Bane!"

Senjdaq fell onto his back or front, whichever was the side not having a wound the size of Barnemit's hand. Gurgling his dying breath, he weakly attempted to lift himself but slumped down again. Rotting black blood vessels befouled and webbed his pale flesh. His stake hole and orifices began gushing black blood; mouth, eyes, ears, nose and others. A vile stench permeated the air. Blood Lord Senjdaq lay twitching, Barnemit's sword in his torso, a couple of repeater bolts in his legs, below him his stinking body fluids soaked the soil.

"Dead!" Rolled pronounced, "The Star Prince is dead!"

Barnemit did try to speak, he couldn't get his mauled throat to work.

The vampyre hunters echoed Rolled's cry, their cheering voices reached the fae busy thrashing a demonic Hicussaw. The gargoyle was first to take notice. Shadow tentacles slipped off the fae as he ascended on his flapping wings. The gargoyle roared at the view of devastated vampyre hunters and slain vampyre, he unhurriedly reversed his course and headed for the woods.

Hmm, where was the gargoyle going? To be honest, Hicussaw didn't care to hold the earth fae. Too much...effort...why should he? Had he a mouth, the demon host would be wearing the widest smile. Shadow Hicussaw's expression was in contrast, bewildered, perhaps a little upset. Hicussaw was happy. This was perfect, the fae doing things around him were hardly a tickle. He was swatting them, they were annoying but he was content lying...huh? Pangs of fear and concern prodded his mind. Why? Why would he disturb himself about such unimportant things...why did they suddenly feel of significant interest? The sparkles of pixie dust were dwindling. Yes, his shadow sight had observed the slaying of the vampyre, what did it matter? The vampyre hunters, their survival meant what to him exactly? The fog of serenity clouding his senses was lifting. Shadow Hicussaw's face displayed shock. The Star Prince was Hicussaw's foe...the vampyre hunters his allies...Jams his buddy! The gods weep!

Pixies and sprites had ceased pouring their dust and rainbows on Hicussaw's shadow. The fae battling him so fervently not a kurn ago, they sort of, simply exchanged glances and gave up the fight. Hicussaw's tentacles did not continue attacking them either, his goal to prevent his allies being hurt was accomplished, further fighting had no purpose. In ones and twos and threes, a tide of fae proceeded to the trees, whispering in Wonderword their disappointment. Their battle was over, the sole reason fae of such different breeds were working together had just died.

Barnemit bent low. His hand, covered in gore and shredded glove, grasped the handle of the dagger sheathed on dead Senjdaq's thigh. He drew the weapon, the handle was wood, its texture smooth except the green leafy twine woven around it. The narrow blade was a fragment of white stone, sharpened to a thin cutting edge. The whole affair appeared to be something Wildsong Woods had crafted. Senjdaq had been seeking to jab the knife in demon possessed Hicussaw, hadn't he?

Rollted hung his zigzag dagger and buckler on his belt. He heeded the moaning of the wounded, "Check our fallen! Find the living, I may keep them from death! Your unused potions can save lives!"

The blood wizard knelt at the shoulder of a prone and groaning mercenary. He yanked out the severed stump of a boot clad foot (leather and flesh torn off the bony tip and rear) puncturing the armoured chest of the chu ko nu. Rollted's sorcery commenced the bleeding pit knitting shut in the man's breast. Vampyre hunters scrambled to inspect the bodies and discover which of their comrades clung to life. Some casualties were approaching their end noisily, some were awaiting their fate quietly. Those Senjdaq had laid hands upon were most certainly dead. Victims of the fae and Senjdaq's Living Bomb spell might have survived.

To Barnemit's kit belt was added Senjdaq's dagger and its surprisingly durable, possibly enchanted, sheath. The lieutenant switched his gaze to the sword impaling Senjdaq's cuirass, his rough treatment had rendered the blade a tortured and deformed shard of metal. Oh well, he reckoned it was nothing coin and a blacksmith couldn't fix. The weapon he had selected from Bart Castle's armoury for silencing fae had now slain a vampyre and preserved his existence. Barnemit's hand grabbed the handle to wrench his sword free of Senjdaq's armour.

His face began changing, steely hard hide darkening and softening to brown flesh.

Filaments of grey metal were restored to black curls and stubble. The Steel Potion had expired, taking his boosted strength. Terribly annoying. Retrieving his sword would now cost him a challenging amount of effort. Hmm? Hey, ow...the ache of his neck was worsening! Crumpled steel skin became a bloody pulpy mess. His pain didn't last, fingers on his neck felt the flesh regenerate. Thank you Woss and Senjdaq for the gift of self-healing! Haha!

"What of the demon?" a templar asked, "The fae are retreating."

"We are weary." said Mistress Estka, "We have maybe half of yesterday's men and women fighting fit. Most of our potions and ammunition is spent, our best spells and enchantments are on their reuse delays."

The flames of Estka's Fire Wall were shrinking to a smouldering line. Lezroo's flying sword disintegrated in a golden glimmer.

"The demon isn't any better." Barnemit said, his throat functioning again. "Our vampyre and his minions thrashed the jinxbait good and proper."

"The demon is Hicussaw the Armybringer." Jams loudened his voice, "We owe our lives and victory to his shadow magic. Had he not been here, we'd be fighting the vampyre *and* his mortal army."

"We did exactly what Senjdaq desired." Lezroo contributed, "The wraiths were the bait, his mortal servants marched to convince us their camp was unoccupied and safe. He set a trap Hicussaw teleported us right into."

This discussion of continuing the battle weighed heavy on the ears of the vampyre hunters. They looked at each other and the far demonic foe who might be killing them very soon. They were exhausted, they did not want to fight yet duty and the glory of their goddess or their contract with a city baron demanded it of them.

"Hicussaw never hurt us. Everything he did was a hero's deed. Tell me what villainy has he done?" Jams insisted.

"What if the vampyre's mortal minions return?" a rare living chu ko nu spoke, "They may attack when we're bending off the demon. Our numbers are crugged, we can't endure their assault and demonic shadow magic."

"Once they learn their vampyre is gone, his servants won't risk themselves." Barnemit

said, “The benefit of his power was the cause uniting them.”

“Now might be our one chance to destroy the demon host.” Rolsted arose from healing an injured vampyre hunter, “His strength and mana must be low. Mercy we grant him today we could regret forever.”

Sweet unicorn farts! Jams’ comrades were considering the murder of Hicussaw! Jams wondered whether he would have to defend Hicussaw with more than words. The courageous folk who had fought and died alongside him, could he call them enemy to protect Hicussaw? Could he actually attack and kill them?

What would Calgemo do? Safeguard his buddy boy. What would Hicussaw do? Not abide the injustice of sentencing to death a man who did not deserve it. Jams understood his future had been decided.

Hicussaw was reluctant to relinquish his shadow monster form in favour of his human shape. How would the vampyre hunters react? How were they reacting this moment? The vampyre hunters were talking, even Jams. The gaze of many was directed his way. They had to be arguing about what attitude they would show the shadow demon. Hostile? Friendly? Neutral?

“They didn’t see us change.” Hicussaw said to his demon, “Do they know it’s us?”

“I doubt they haven’t guessed our truth.” Shadow Hicussaw replied.

“Barnemit will not spare us.” Shadow Hicussaw warned, demonic vision did not miss Barnemit picking up Senjdaq’s demon binding dagger.

“What shall we do?”

“Shadow walk alone. We are not needed or welcome here.”

Hicussaw considered the option, “Jams has changed. He can take care of himself. When he can’t, the wizardess teaching him will.”

“Us staying endangers our friend.” Shadow Hicussaw acknowledged, “If the vampyre hunters attack us, and he does not join them, he could be sacrificing his new life and allies on our account.”

“No!” Hicussaw shouted silently, “We have cost the people we love enough!”

His voice calmed, “Where do we go, after all this?”

“Our hell.” Hicussaw and Shadow Hicussaw spoke the words simultaneously, they could have been one voice.

“How?” Hicussaw asked.

Shadow Hicussaw’s answer was a memory of a vista unfolding in their mind’s vision.

“What are we seeing?” Hicussaw enquired.

“A door to the hells. We can travel to our realm, the shadow kingdom the elder half of us knew. We may grow to our full strength there, complete our bonding. We can renew our rule and rally our armies.”

“Armies?”

Shadow Hicussaw described them, “Legions of lesser demons serving our pleasures and our plans.”

“This gateway will take us where we belong then? To our new home.” said Hicussaw.

Hicussaw and Shadow Hicussaw said, “Yes.”

A puff of smoke enveloped the tentacled shadow. The black vapours dispersed, the shadow was gone, Hicussaw had teleported. Relief broke the tension in Jams’ legs, he could have fallen on his arse. He quit squeezing his wand and pouring his mana into a Thunder Burst ley. Jams perceived the mana flowing back to his soul’s clutches. Hicussaw was safe. Jams wouldn’t have to battle his mistress, Master Rolled, Lezroo Caveclear, Barnemit the Vampyre’s Bane...

“The moment we could have struck has passed.” Mistress Estka declared, “The demon we leave for another quest.”

“The barons would have to pay us triple to hunt both a demon and a vampyre.” Lezroo commented, the crowd awarded him a few laughs.

“Will the Blood Lord’s minions sack our camp?” a druzhinnik reminded.

A comrade of his groaned loudly, “We’ll have to walk back to ours after we’re done looting theirs.”

“Why couldn’t Hicussaw hide his demonic nature a bit longer? His teleport would save us the octars and kurns!” the joke prompted murmurs and chuckles of agreement.

The paladin treaded slowly around the vampyre's corpse, his eyes examining the filth of the abomination and the leaking blood.

"Enjoying the sight?" Barnemit ventured.

"Help me get the Star Prince's armour off him." Lezroo said, "We'll unstick your sword too."

"You're looting his cuirass?" Barnemit asked, "It's a wreck. Do you suppose the thing's enchanted? Didn't seem to be when I pierced it."

"If any vampyre blood remains unspoilt, a drop of the stuff has purposes, high priced purposes." Lezroo explained, "Vampyre blood, red and fresh. Heart too. The heart is the wellspring of a vampyre's power, a damaged one might still sell. Replacing my equipment Senjdaq's fighters steal from our camp may cost me lots of coin."

Healing a casualty, Rolited called, "Lezroo! Are you gathering the vampyre's blood?"

"I am!" Lezroo shouted, "Trying to recover some red!"

"Need a vessel to store the blood?"

"Stashed one in my pocket." Lezroo held up an empty vial.

"Divide the profit?"

"We can negotiate a fair split. Mistress Estka?"

"I wish a share." she stated.

"If we're selling, I'm due a portion!" Barnemit demanded.

"Barnemit, you took the dagger." Lezroo pointed out, "You can't have every prize. Would you rather have the blood or the sole weapon a vampyre thought would be useful to him?"

Jinx you! Barnemit was unwilling to lose a weapon potentially countering Hicussaw.

"Fine. The vampyre blood is not mine."

Jams was alive! The former stable hand of Bart Castle could have shouted his joy. Hicussaw was alive! The vampyre hunters had won! Jams had magicked his first battle and his party slew the vampyre! Do they...is there...a celebration of victory to do? Er, he noted the people not assisting the wounded were patting corpses and picking their

unclaimed items. Um, should he be robbing the dead?

“Jams of Bart, my apprentice.” Estka walked to Jams, her tone devoid of emotion. “You did well, proved yourself a champion worthy of Lord Doneg and Tarfelm.”

He was a champion? Jams thought her sentence sounded a joke. A leader of the brave and daring? Defending people and principles in a perilous world?

Aloud he said, “Thank you my mistress. I have a lot to learn.”

“You do.” Estka agreed, “The greatest lesson of all.”

“My mistress, what is it?” Jams hadn’t heard her speak of this before.

Were the corners of her mouth curving? Was Estka smiling? She said, “I shall teach you to be more powerful than you ever could be.”

Huh? Jams pondered. What did she mean? No power could increase beyond its own height. She wasn’t making sense!

*Beyond this point lies the truth of our imperfection.
If you wish a happy-ish ending, do not read the final chapter.*

Chapter XII

“This is the place.” Urchesk asserted, his feet and stout wooden staff halting their stride.

“The woods north of Lone Oak Hill.” Tellyn said.

“Irpeck’s Hollow. A man could sleep inside, hidden from the world.” Urchesk was speaking of the tree spreading its bulk, root and stem and branch, before the duo. The broad middle of its gnarled trunk sank into a gaping darkness.

Urchesk and Tellyn had found this particular landmark nestled between the more intact trees and shrubbery growing thick and close. The foliage of branches thinned the sunlight reaching the peasants, the man dressed a bit richer compared to the woman. Soft chatter of birds and various grounded critters evidenced their presence, though they largely stayed out of the humans’ sight.

“Is he in there?” Tellyn asked.

Urchesk approached the named tree and stuck the end of his staff into the hollow.

“Empty. Barnemit isn’t the kind to hide.”

Said Tellyn, “Maybe, I don’t know, the reason he chose Irpeck’s Hollow to meet is a mystery.”

“It’s not late. We can return to the village.” suggested Urchesk, “We’ll be back in Pank Hit by sunset.”

“Pank Hit is not my home, Hicussaw’s family are not my blood.” Tellyn said. Hicussaw had striven to be certain she understood that.

“Go to yours, to Dos Agg.”

“What life does Dos Agg offer me? I won’t burden my aging father.” Tellyn said, “The story of me loving a demon host...folk hear it and they’ll fear me an octar near them. No hope of paying work. Forget a husband and children.”

“Barnemit’s a monster.”

“Which is why I requested your company, Urchesk. The idea of being alone with Barnemit...I’m grateful you came.”

“A sweetheart of Hicussaw is a friend of mine.” Urchesk assured her. He took on a serious tone, “I don’t think Barnemit can deliver what he’s promising you.”

“If there’s a chance Lord Doneg will forgive my mistakes and hire me again, I have to try. I’d be glad to see my chummy girl Argetch.”

“Charms my heart, you chasing your dreams.” Barnemit’s voice sent a shiver of terror down the spines of man and woman, down to their feet, anchoring them to the earth. They could not flee, the idea of escape was a fantasy. If the monster wanted you, you were his. The gods weep! Is this the hold a predator of the wilds can have over prey? Urchesk contemplated.

The lieutenant strode into their view, flaunting nasal helmet and chain mail. He bore Musveryl and a one-handed sword on his back, a sheathed short sword suspended from his kit belt.

“Meeting you is against my deepest instincts.” Tellyn was honest.

“And my wisdom.” Urchesk added.

Barnemit grinned, “Good instincts Tellyn. And you brought me Urchesk. How have you been, Ur? My fist hasn’t touched you in years.”

Urchesk flinched at the memory, both hands tightened their grip on his staff.

“Your message the hussar gave me,” Tellyn spoke up, “you wrote I could earn my old job in Bart Castle.”

“I did.” Barnemit affirmed.

“I’m interested.” Tellyn said, “But you mentioned a price I wouldn’t like.”

“Tellyn, you travelled days with Hicussaw, and his demon.” said Barnemit.

“You’re searching for knowledge of Hicussaw’s demonic possession.” Tellyn said, “Did Lord Doneg give you a quest to hunt the demon? Will the rana permit my return to Bart Castle on your request? I must admit, I don’t have a clue whether the things I saw and heard would help you.”

“You ready to betray Hicussaw?” Barnemit asked.

Tellyn clenched her fists. She wasn’t a traitor, spilling her lover’s secrets to his

hated enemy. Yet she could not deny the feeling of backstabbing a man she once cherished. Jinx me! Following the impassioned desires of her heart had led her onto a path of sorrow, this time she would heed the worried whispers of her head. Even Hicussaw had not wanted her loving him blindly in the end.

She said, “Hicussaw wouldn’t stop me. He’d beg me to use him if it could fix my life. He’s the quality of man who’d do that, a hero.”

“Fickle is the loyalty of whores.” Barnemit grinned.

“Tellyn, we didn’t come to endure Barnemit’s insults.” Urchesk said, “Barnemit, you picked the forest because you don’t wish villagers seeing you interrogate Tellyn. Your quest is secret, afraid a servant of demons or a villain hoping to be one might track you. Aren’t I right? Quit the insults or we’ll spill your business loud in the tavern.”

“I expected Tellyn’s treason. You Ur I thought would love Hicussaw more.” Barnemit advanced on Urchesk.

“Hicussaw can take care of himself.” Urchesk stood his ground, “His friends can’t depend on him to save them. They need to take care of themselves too.”

“Barnemit, I’ll answer your questions.” Tellyn sought to take Barnemit’s mind off taunting Urchesk. “I doubt my words will matter. There’s nothing I can tell you to hurt him. Hicussaw Armybringer has no weaknesses.”

Barnemit stared Urchesk in the eye, barely a couple of rits separating the two. “What do you say, Urchesk? Your buddy boy Hic can’t be killed?”

“Barn-” Urchesk was cut short and shoved back. He lowered his horrified gaze to Barnemit’s hand on the hilt of a short sword, stuck through his gut, pinning him to the trunk of a tree. A moment or two and a half was all Barnemit had spent drawing and stabbing. Urchesk gasped his disbelief, “Di-did you just...why would...”

“Nice.” Barnemit remarked, “This redcap blade works quite well. It’ll do till I repair my silencing sword.”

“Urchesk!” Tellyn screamed.

“You’re a fool Tellyn.” Barnemit let go of the sword, “You never matched Hic’s fear of me, did you?”

Urchesk remembered his staff was a weapon, he attempted striking Barnemit. The monster of Pank Hit grabbed Urchesk's staff and pulled it from the brownhead's hands. Barnemit threw the staff aside, "To be fair, wise Urchesk also made the mistake of not beating sense into you."

"Ru-run!" Urchesk begged Tellyn weakly.

She did. She went three steps and the giant of a man branded the Vampyre's Bane scooped her up in his arms. He rebuked her, "Did you truly believe Bart Castle would welcome a kitchen maid who helped a demon host escape Bart's dungeons. The same woman who was diddling the possessed jinxbait?"

Tellyn fought, she kicked and beat her arms upon Barnemit. She might have been caressing the monster given the effect she was having. Barnemit encouraged her, "I love you wiggling in my arms."

"Possessed, Hicussaw was more human than you!" Tellyn spat. She dared a crotch kick, Barnemit's hand blocked her leg easily.

Barnemit laughed, "Try convincing the rana."

"B-Barn, yo-you can't just murder, a pair of in-innocent commoners!" Urchesk stuttered sputtered.

"Murder?" Barnemit proceeded to explain the situation, "The two of you, the diddle mate and the childhood friend of a demon host. Hicussaw could have kidnapped you, maybe you joined him. Hicussaw's whore did when he fled Bart Castle."

"Hicussaw will slay you!" Tellyn cried.

"Hic disappeared." Barnemit's embrace squeezed her, "Likely wandering a hell. I'm not afraid of his damned self."

"Jams is Mistress Estka's apprentice! He'll bring justice down on your evil!"

"First, Jams isn't here to save you now." Barnemit winked, "Second, he will never learn of our fun today. Who else cares and can do something about it?"

Barnemit noticed Urchesk struggling to free the sword of his torso. His dying arms could not complete the task. Barnemit addressed Hicussaw's buddy boy, "Don't bother, Ur. You're finished. You'll live a bit to watch me enjoy Hic's whore. I'd prefer Hicussaw

see this but you'll serve me fine in his stead."

"Tellyn, my letter didn't say a quest from Doneg, a written lie about the rana, and on my name would be trouble." Skera's big brother knelt down, pushing Tellyn onto the ground, bending over her. "Of your own will, you reasoned how I'd fulfil my deal, what you'd do to get it. You thought to betray Hicussaw and it's you who's betrayed. *This* is justice. *I* am justice!"

"Let's see if you're pretty enough to harden me again after I've had you once." Barnemit's fingers held her chin up, granting him a better view of Tellyn's tear and terror ravaged face.

His cold lazy gaze observed the fury die in her eyes, replaced by the speechless dread of the nightmare she could not avoid. There was no escaping what Barnemit intended her to experience. He held his weight short of crushing her, keeping her aware of her utter helplessness before his invincible strength.

"I saved the village," Barnemit the Vampyre's Bane roared, "I defeated the blood drinking villain, I punished the traitors, I got the girl! I'm the hero of this story!"

Nobody's Phonetic Script

1. Nobody's Phonetic Script (NPS) is a system of writing that can be read with nearly accurate sounds across many languages in Nobody's Creation. It is a system of broad phonetic transcription conveying how a word sounds or is pronounced as accurately as possible while retaining simplicity. A reader using the NPS can at a single glance pronounce names in different languages of Nobody's Creation.
2. These symbols of the NPS presented here are Human Compatible 1 (HC1), based on and producible by the native vocalization capabilities of Homo Sapiens Sapiens. The NPS-HC1 is derived from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). NPS-HC1 is significantly simpler and easier to learn than the IPA.
3. The NPS-HC1 is not concerned with the precise method or mechanics of producing sounds i.e. the techniques of pronunciation such as whether a sound is labial, dental, etc.
4. Subtleties and details such as stress accents and tones are ignored in NPS-HC1. However, NPS does include syllabic breaks (|) to distinguish different syllables within the same word.

Speech Sound	NPS	English Examples for Reference
Vowel	a	Army, mArch, bArn, stAr
Vowel	æ	At, cAt, pAn, rAck, trAp
Vowel	i	sEE, citY, mEAt, kEY
Vowel	ɛ	gEm, sEt, confEss, tEn, AIr, bEAR
Vowel	ʌ	pUrse, cUt, fErn, eldEr, cUp, rUn, wOn, tUmble, tOn
Vowel	e	rAY, hEY, nEIGH, mAKE, nAIl, tAlE
Vowel	ɪ	If, hIt, mIlL, kIck, pIn, natiOn
Vowel	o	boAt, mOre, alOne, rOW, dOUGH, go
Vowel	ɒ	AWE, Oil, dAWn, cAUGht, COUGh, wAll, cOst, pOt, bOy, lAW

Vowel	u	rOOt, chEW, dO, pUt, wOman
Consonant	b	Beg, Butter, flaB, graB
Consonant	ç	CHair, paTCH, tortUre
Consonant	d	Dog, maiD, greNade
Consonant	f	Famous, cough, PHysical, PHilosophy
Consonant	g	Gem, baG
Consonant	h	High, aHead, tHink, breath, motHer
Consonant	3	Judge, caGE, Giant, baDGE, viSion, treaSUrE
Consonant	k	Cost, Kiss, sKy, paCK
Consonant	l	Little, sLide, puLL
Consonant	m	Man, sMile, caMera
Consonant	n	Night, piN, caN
Consonant	p	Pin, steP, PrePare
Consonant	r	Red, staRt, veRy
Consonant	s	Sick, aCid, fiSt, kiSS
Consonant	t	Tea, caT, right
Consonant	v	Very, Wet, Won, haVe, sWing, sVelte
Consonant	j	Yes, coIn, boY
Consonant	z	Zoo, piZZa, roomS, haS
Joint Example	aj	EYE, lIKed, pIE, mY, rIGHt
Joint Example	au	cOW, scOWl, pOWder
Joint Example	oj	OIl, cOIn, lOIn
Joint Example	ju	YOU, cUte, beauty
Joint Example	dh	THis, moTHer, THose
Joint Example	sh	SHe, caSH, naTion
Joint Example	th	THink, boTH, breaTH
Joint Example	kv	QUiet, QUick, QUantity, QUarter

Example Sentence:

English (British/Received Pronunciation): Let us all go dance on the playground to the tune of electronic dance music.

NPS: lɛt ʌs ɒl go dɑns ɒn dhʌ ple|graund tu dhʌ tjun ɒf
i|lɛk|trɒn|ɪk dɑns mju|zɪk.

GLOSSARY OF PRONUNCIATION

1. This glossary attempts to provide either the exact sound as spoken by the inhabitants of Nobody's World or the experience of their sound as the author has chosen to convey.
2. English references for pronunciations are not always accurate to the intended sound. More accurate references are supplied inside the square brackets and written in Nobody's Phonetic Script (NPS).
3. Stress accents and other subtleties and details have been omitted as these can vary in the same language from province to province or even village to village.
4. Names and terms are listed here in the order of their first occurrence in the story.

CHAPTER I:

Gronks [grɒnks]

GRONKS as in GRand-ON-parKS.

Krit [krɪt]

KRIT as in CRITical.

Lansam [læn|səm]

LANSAM as in LANd-SAMple.

Hicussaw [hɪk|ʌs|sɒ]

HICUSSAW as in HICcough-discUSS-SAW.

Urchesk [ʌɾ|çɛsk]

URCHESK as in cURse-CHESt-inK.

Oreed [ɒr|ɪd]

OREED as in AWE-REED.

Terik [tɛɾ|ɪk]

TERIK as in sTAIR-pRICK.

Nolb [nɒlb]

NOLB as in No-ALL-Boast.

druzhinnik [druz|hɪn|nik]

DRUZHINNIK as in DREW-iS-HINT-Not-sEE-kICK.

Romfer [rɒm|fʌɹ]

ROMFER as in FROM-suffer.

Glag [glæg]

GLAG as in GLAd-laG.

Maksyer [mæk|sjʌɹ]

MAKSYER as in sMACK-kisS-YEAR.

Kipbo [kɪp|bo]

KIPBO as in sKIP-BOast.

Hoip [hɔjp]

HOIP as in HOIst-toP.

unicorn [ju|ni|kɔrn]

UNICORN as in UNIverse-CORN.

Barnemit [barn|ʌ|mɪt]

BARNEMIT as in BARN-UH-MITten.

Mednib [med|nɪb]

MEDNIB as in MEDicine-NIBble.

Dafred [da|frɛd]

DAFRED as in DArk-FRED.

Woss [wɒs]

WOSS as in West-cOSt.

CHAPTER II:

Bart [bart]

BART as in Boast-ART.

Doneg [dɒn|ɛg]

DONEG as in DON-EGG.

ballista [bʌ|lɪs|tə]

BALLISTA as in BUt-LISt-TARget.

gargoyle [gɑr|ɡɔɪl]

GARGOYLE as in GARGle-OIL.

Iksub [ɪk|sʌb]

IKSUB as in tICKle-SUBject.

Ples Leek [plɛs lɪk]

PLES LEEK as in Put-LESS bLEAK.

Calgemo [kæl|ɡɛ|mo]

CALGEMO as in CAT-tell-GEt-MOle.

Ristiff [rɪst|ɪf]

RISTIFF as in RISk-STIFF.

Mid Syher [mɪd sɑj|hɑr]

MID SYHER as in MIDdle SIGH-HER.

doubloon [dʌ|blun]

DOUBLOON as in DUB-Let-gOON.

hussar [hu|zɑr]

HUSSAR as in WHO-Zoo-ARmy.

Tarfelm [tɑr|fɛlm]

TARFELM as in TAR-FELl-Mitten.

rana [rɑ|nɑ]

RANA as in Ran-Army-Not-Army.

Mos Wren [mɒs vrɛn]

MOS WREN as in MOSS When-RENT.

Pank Hit [pænk hɪt]

PANK HIT as in sPANK HIT.

Tellyn [tɛl|lɪn]

TELLYN as in TELL-cLINic.

Dakashian [dæk|ash|i|ɪn|]

DAKASHIAN as in Dam-pACK-Army-aSH-indIAN.

Selmarr [sɛl|mar]

SELMARR as in SELL-MARk.

Bowlykd [bo|lajkt]

BOWLYKD as in BOast-LIKED.

Jams [ʒæms]

JAMS as in JAM-kisS.

kurn [kʌɾn]

KURN as in Kick-URN.

Keant [ki|ɛnt]

KEANTH as in KEY-tENT.

wimmy [vɪm|mi]

WIMMY as in sWIM-ME.

Fam Say [fæm se]

FAM SAY as in FAMily SAY.

Druzhina [druz|hɪn|a]

DRUZHINA as in DREW-iS-HINT-Army.

knight [najt]

KNIGHT as in NIGHT.

griffin [grɪf|ɪn]

GRIFFIN as in GRIP-FINish.

Sod Tin [sɒd tɪn]

SOD TIN as in Sad-rOD TIN.

Zalifinaki [zal|ɪf|ɪn|ʌk|i]

ZALIFINAKI as in pizZA-paL-IF-IN-tUCK-kEY.

Dos Agg [dɒs æg]

DOS AGG as in Dog-cOST bAG.

crug [krʌg]

CRUG as in CRack-tUG.

Hillmit [hɪl|mɪt]

HILLMIT as in HILL-MITten.

Lanish [lan|ɪʃ]

LANISH as in LArge-teN-fISH.

goblin [ɡɒb|lɪn]

GOBLIN as in GOBble-LINK.

Lolbol [lɒl|bɒl]

LOLBOL as in LOW-tell-BOast-tell.

dwarf [dvɔːrf]

DWARF as in Dog-WAR-stuff.

boro [bɒr|o]

BORO as in BORE-OH.

satyr [se|tʌr]

SATYR as in SAY-parTnER.

fae [fe]

FAE as in Fan-rAY.

Snah [snah]

SNAH as in SNicker-AH.

rit [rɪt]

RIT as in cRITical.

Zlusch [zlʊʃ]

ZLUSCH as in Zoo-LOOt-smaSH.

Resiak [ɾɛz|iæk]

RESIAK as in RESurrect-sEE-pACK.

troll [tɾol]

TROLL as in TRy-OLd.

homunculus [hʌ|mʌn|kju|lɪs]

HOMUNCULUS as in HUM-mONK-cUte-LISt.

cent [sɛnt]

CENT as in SENT.

reale [ɾe|al]

REALE as in RAY-Army-aLL.

CHAPTER III:

Kryter [kɾaj|tʌɾ]

KRYTER as in CRY-winTER.

Sicper [sɪk|pʌɾ]

SICPER as in SICK-PERson.

Wilup [wɪl|ʌp]

WILUP as in WILL-cUP.

Chu Ko Nu [çu ko nu]

CHU KO NU as in CHOOse COat Not-zOO.

Anrieslem [æn|ɾi|slɛm]

ANRIESLEM as in ANd-REEl-Sit-LEMon.

Brin Dank [brɪn dænk]

BRIN DANK as in BRINK DANK.

Festo [fɛs|to]

FEST as in FESTival-OH.

vampyre [væm|paj|ʌɾ]

VAMPYRE as in Van-AM-PIE-eldER.

Rollted [rɒl|tɛd]

ROLLTED as in ROLL-Tell-EDit.

Estka [ɛst|ka]

ESTKA as in wEST-bazooKA.

Umfeb [ʌm|fɛb]

UMFEB as in UM-FEBruary.

ley [le]

LEY as in LAY.

Hame [hem]

HAME as in Hey-AIM.

thaumaturgary [thɒ|mʌ|tʌɹʒ|ɛɹ|i]

THAUMATURGARY as in THAW-MUst-TURn-caGE-vERY.

octar [ɒkt|ɑɹ]

OCTAR as in OCTopus-cAR.

CHAPTER IV:

Lisit [lɪs|ɪt]

LISIT as in LISt-sIT.

rune [ɹun]

RUNE as in ROOt-ruN.

Argetch [ɑɹ|gɛç]

ARGETCH as in ARMy-GEt-CHair.

Giberl [ɡɪb|ʌɹl]

GIBERL as in GIve-BURLy.

paplon [pæp|lɒn]

PAPLON as in PAck-taP-LAWN.

Goglas [gɒg|las]

GOGLAS as in GO-doG-LAST.

doppelganger [dɒp|ɪl|gæŋg|ʌr]

DOPPELGANGER as in aDOpt-pILL-GANG-partnER.

Alders [æɪ|dʌrs]

ALDERS as in ALtitude-consiDER-kisS.

elf [ɛlf]

ELF as in sELL-stufF.

mana [ma|na]

MANA as in MARsh-Nag-Army.

CHAPTER V:

oct [ɒkt]

OCT as in OCTopus.

Coswil [kɒs|vɪl]

COSWIL as in COSt-WILL.

octet [ɒkt|ɛt]

OCTET as in OCTopus-gET.

zombie [zɒm|bi]

ZOMBIE as in Zoo-AWE-daM-BEE.

Lorrick [lɒr|rɪk]

LORRICK as in expLORE-pRICK.

Jorwyd [ʒɔr|vɪd]

JORWYD as in JOke-caR-WIDow.

Stoff [stɒf]

STOFF as in STOp-OFF.

phantom [fæn|tʌm]

PHANTOM as in FAN-TUMble.

spectre [spɛk|tʌr]

SPECTRE as in SPEctacle-eldER.

wraith [reθ]

WRAITH as in RAY-boTH.

Potch [pɒtʃ]

POTCH as in POT-CHair.

Osmer [ɒs|mɛr]

OSMER as in cOSt-hamMER.

Mickmit [mɪk|mɪt]

MICKMIT as in gimMICK-MITten.

CHAPTER VI:

Dragoon [drʌ|ɡʊn]

DRAGOON as in DRUG-GOON.

Petardier [pɪ|tɑrd|iɛr]

PETARDIER as in PIT-hARD-EAR.

harpy [hɑr|pi]

HARPY as in HARP-sEE.

Skoss [skɒs]

SKOSS as in SCOtch-kisS.

nymph [nɪmf]

NYMPH as in NIMble-stufF.

jackalope [ʒæk|ʌ|ləp]

JACKALOPE as in JACK-pUrse-anteLOPE.

Rigwick [rɪɡ|vɪk]

RIGWICK as in RIG-WICKed.

Daw [dɒ]

DAW as in DAWn.

Narf [nɑrf]

NARF as in No-scARF.

Fabsmit [fæbs|mit]

FABSMIT as in FABulouS-MITten.

pixie [pɪk|si]

PIXIE as in PICture-SEE.

Apner [æp|nʌr]

APNER as in APple-partNER.

Faerie [fe|ri]

FAE as in Fan-rAY-REEl.

haggis [hæg|ɪs]

HAGGIS as in HAGgle-lISt.

Eryn [ɛr|ɪn]

ERYN as in AIR-IN.

Estar Bunny [is|tʌr bʌn|i]

ESTAR BUNNY as in EAST-elder BUNNY.

Tsujiura Panya [su|ʒi|u|ra pan|ja]

TSUJIURA PANYA as in SUE-GEE-bUsh-Red-Art Pan-Art-paN-Yes-Art.

Mithai Ganj [mi|tha|i ɡʌnʒ]

MITHAI GANJ as in ME-THink-Army-sEE GUN-caGE.

schokotier [shɒ|ko|tiʌr]

SCHOKOTIER as in SHOt-COat-TIER.

boggart [bɒɡ|ʌrt]

BOGGART as in BOG-cURT.

cobold [ko|bɒld]

COBOLD as in COat-BALD.

minotaur [mɪn|o|tɔr]

MINOTAUR as in MINimal-OH-TAUght-eldeR.

cantrip [kan|trɪp]

CANTRIP as in CAr-caN-TRIP.

Klaxie [klæk|si]

KLAXIE as in CLAp-paCK-SEE.

leshy [lɛsh|i]

LESHY as in LEt-SHE.

sprite [sprajt]

SPRITE as in SPRing-kITE.

Faen [fen]

FAEN as in Fan-rAY-iN.

dryad [draj|æd]

DRYAD as in DRY-ADd.

ritet [rit|ɛt]

RITET as in cRITical-gET.

Thusa [dhʌ|sa]

THUSA as in THUS-AH.

Harnan [har|nan]

HARNAN as in HARm-No-Army-teN.

Ensir [ɛn|sɪr]

ENSIR as in rENt-SYRup.

Ensar [ɛn|sar]

ENSAR as in rENt-Sap-ARmy.

Ensuf [ɛn|sʊr]

ENSUR as in rENt-SOOt-faR.

Inubrien [ɪnu|brɪɪn]

INUBRIEN as in IN-BREEd-IN.

Systarch [sɪs|tarç]

SYSTARCH as in SIsTer-sTARCH.

Sysbrien [sɪs|brɪɪn]

SYSBRIEN as in SISTER-BREEd-IN.

Lorran [lɒr|ræn]

LORRAN as in LORE-RAN.

Niltsiar [nɪlt|sɪər]

NILTSIAR as in Nick-tILT-SEE-ARmy.

Deradera [dɛ|rɑ|dɛ|rɑ]

DERADERA as in eLDER-AH-eLDER-AH.

Musveryl [mus|vɛ|rɪl]

MUSVERYL as in MOOSE-WHERE-ILL.

centaur [sɛn|tɔr]

CENTAUR as in SENd-TAUght-eldeR.

Fohl [fɒl]

FOHL as in FOLd.

Draks [dræks]

DRAKS as in DRAG-paCKS.

Senjdaq [sɛnz|dak]

SENJDAQ as in SENd-raGE-DARk.

tauric [tɔr|ɪk]

TAURIC as in TAUght-eldeR-kICK.

CHAPTER VII:

Pralee [prɑl|i]

PRALEE as in PRALine-bLEEd.

Pak [pæk]

PAK as in PACK.

Mir [mɪr]

MIR as in MIRage.

Massaw [mas|sɒ]

MASSAW as in MArch-SAW.

Tog [tɒg]

TOG as in Tumble-dOG.

Osis Granem [osis græ|nɛm]

OSIS GRANEM as in OH-SISter GRAND-EMissary.

cuirassier [kvi|raɪs|iər]

CUIRASSIER as in QUick-sEE-RIde-kisS-EAR.

Duss [dʌs]

DUSS as in DUSSt.

hek [hɛk]

HEK as in HECKle.

Nyphy [naɪ|faɪ]

NYPHY as in deNY-FIght.

Edane [ɛd|en]

EDANE as in Embrace-DANger.

Eswol [ɛs|vɒl]

ESWOL as in Embrace-SWOLlen.

quinch [kvɪnʃ]

QUINCH as in QUIt-piNCH.

Jepkel [ʒɛp|kɛl]

JEPKEL as in reJEct-toP-sKELeTon.

Belo [bɛ|lɒ]

BELo as in BELL-LOW.

Tumpil [tʌm|pɪl]

TUMPIL as in TUMble-PILL.

werewolf [vɛr|vʊlf]

WEREWOLF as in WHERE-WOLF.

lycanthrope [ləj|kɪn|θrɒp]

LYCANTHROPE as in LIE-KIN-THought-ROPE.

shaitan [ʃaɪ|tæn]

SHAITAN as in SHy-cUt-boY-TARget-teN.

pret [prɛt]

PRET as in PREY-fisT.

CHAPTER VIII:

Cupber [kʌp|bʌɹ]

CUPBER as in CUP-BIRth.

Jenka [ʒɛn|kɑ]

JENKA as in GENerator-bazooKA.

Cejora [sɛ|ʒo|ɹɑ]

CEJORA as in SEt-JOke-Rat-Army.

Gest [ɡɛst]

GEST as in GUEST.

Ifona [ɪf|onɑ]

IFONA as in IF-nO-oN-Army.

Krat [kræt]

KRAT as in Cat-RAT.

Yardonk [jɑɹ|dɒnk]

YARDONK as in Yes- ARmy-DONKey.

Lyt [ləjt]

LYT as in LIGHT.

Nikoff [nɪk|ɒf]

NIKOFF as in NICK-OFF.

Pulner [pʌl|nʌɹ]

PULNER as in PURse-huLL-partNER.

Lasmenler [las|men|lʌr]

LASMENLER as in LAsT-MEN-butLER.

Shwets [shvɛts]

SHWETS as in SHe-WET-kisS.

Ackwil [æk|vɪl]

ACKWIL as in hACK-WILL.

Huck [hʌk]

HUCK as in Hey-chUCK.

Hittel [hit|tɛl]

HITTEL as in HIT-TELL.

Nams [næms]

NAMS as in NATural-MasS.

Idwiller [ɪd|vɪl|lʌr]

IDWILLER as in IDiot-WILL-considER.

Dussopo [dʌs|o|po]

DUSSOPO as in DUsT-OH-POke.

CHAPTER IX:

Skera [skɛ|ɾa]

SKERA as in SCARE-AH.

Yusser [jʌs|sʌr]

YUSSER as in Yes-jUsTice-SIR.

cataphract [kæt|a|frækt]

CATAPHRACT as in CAT-Army-FRom-ACT.

CHAPTER X:

talisman [tæl|ɪz|mʌn]

TALISMAN as in TAnk-talL-IS-MONk.

Nug Fentuck [nʌg fɛn|tʌk]

NUG FENTUCK as in NUGget FENce-TUCK.

Derwyn [dʌr|vɪn]

DERWYN as in consiDER-WIN.

Lezroo [lɛz|rʊ]

LEZROO as in LEt-roomS-ROOt.

paladin [pa|la|din|]

PALADIN as in PARk-LARge-DEER-iN.

Nesdank [nɛs|dænk]

NESDANK as in NEST-DANK.

templar [tɛm|plɑr]

TEMPLAR as in TEMPlE-LARge.

Heimanche [he|manʃ]

HEIMANCHE as in HEY-MAN-CHair.

Shubmit [ʃʌb|mɪt]

SHUBMIT as in SHe-bUBble-MITten.

CHAPTER XI:

Ayogan [aʃog|an]

AYOGAN as in AH-YOLk-Gap-Army-teN.

Fei Tah [faj ta]

FEI TAH as in FINE TArget.

Aelsvimorrah [ɛlz|vɪm|ɔr|rɑ]

AELSVIMORRAH as in gALE-blaZE-WIMP-ORE-AH.

Yisumfinn [jɪs|ʌm|fɪn]

YISUMFINN as in Yes-sISter-UM-FINish.

dragon [dræg|ɪn]

DRAGON as in DRAG-IN.

Amas [ʌm|az]

AMAS as in About-MArch-roomS.

Origata [orig|ata]

ORIGATA as in OH-REEl-Gap-Army-Tap-Army.

Ekmud [ɛk|mʌd]

EKMUD as in Embrace-Cat-MUD.

CHAPTER XII:

Irpeck [ɪr|pɛk]

IRPECK as in mIRage-PECK.

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